

7. Strange Kinds, Familiar Kinds, and the Charge of Arbitrariness*

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1. PRELUDE

A snowdiscall is something made of snow that has any shape between being round and being disc-shaped *and* which has the following strange persistence conditions: it can survive taking on all and only shapes in that range. So a round snowdiscall can survive being flattened into a disc but cannot survive being packed into the shape of a brick. Ernest Sosa observes that one can avoid commitment to snowdiscalls, and a plenitude of other strange kinds, by embracing either some form of eliminativism on which there are neither snowballs nor snowdiscalls or else some form of relativism on which material objects do not exist *simpliciter* but only relative to some conceptual scheme or other.¹ Curiously, the natural view that there are no snowdiscalls, that there are snowballs, and that snowballs exist *simpliciter* is not among the options that Sosa considers.

2. PARTICULARISM

Particularism about a given domain of inquiry is the view that our intuitive judgments about cases in the domain are largely correct and that, when intuitive judgments about cases conflict with compelling general principles, the cases should in general

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¹ See his (1987, 178–9), (1993, 620–2), or (1999, 133–4).

be treated as counterexamples to those principles.² The distinction between particularists and nonparticularists cuts little ice in most domains. For instance, apart from skeptics, virtually all parties to the debates about empirical knowledge and justification are particularists—reliabilists and evidentialists, foundationalists and coherentists, internalists and externalists, contextualists and invariance-antists—never straying far from the bulk of our intuitive judgments about cases, even if they cannot accommodate all of them.

The distinction does, however, cut ice in material-object metaphysics, in which many of the dominant views flout wide swathes of our intuitive judgments about cases. Here I especially have in mind views on which there are far more or far fewer things than we intuitively judge there to be: universalist views on which composition is unrestricted at a time or even across time, plenitudinous views on which familiar objects exactly coincide with countless other objects with slightly or wildly different modal profiles, and eliminativist views on which virtually none of the things that we intuitively judge to exist in fact exist.³ This constitutes a dramatic departure from standard philosophical methodology.

What accounts for this departure? One possible explanation is that metaphysicians have become convinced—for instance, by familiar strategies for reconciling revisionary ontologies with ordinary discourse—that the relevant intuitive judgments are based on intuitions whose contents do not support those judgments and do not entail the falsity of their revisionary ontological theses.⁴ But these strategies have little *prima facie* plausibility, and it is difficult to believe that anyone who was not antecedently convinced that

² By ‘intuitive judgments’, I mean the judgments that one is inclined to make on the basis of one’s intuitions together with either perceived details of actual cases or stipulated details of counterfactual cases when theoretical qualms are set to the side. See Bealer (2004, 14–15) on the primacy of judgments about cases.

³ See, among a great many others, Cartwright 1975, Unger 1979, Lewis 1986, van Cleve 1986, Yablo 1987, Heller 1990, van Inwagen 1990, Rea 1998, Sosa 1999, Horgan and Potr 2000, Hudson 2001, Merricks 2001, Sider 2001, Rosen and Dorr 2002, Hawthorne 2006, and Thomasson 2007.

⁴ Here I have in mind, e.g., the contention that the true content of apparently anti-eliminativist intuitions is only that there are mereological simples arranged thus-and-so (*à la* van Inwagen 1990) or that the contents of apparently anti-universalist or anti-plenitude intuitions are suitably—and perhaps inscrutably—restricted in such a way as to exclude strange kinds (*à la* Lewis 1986).

the intuitive judgments were mistaken would be moved by the suggestion that these intuitions are being misreported.⁵

The explanation is rather that they have been convinced by some argument against particularism in material-object metaphysics. These arguments fall into two broad categories: rebutting arguments and undercutting arguments. Rebutting arguments are arguments for conclusions that directly contradict some specific range of intuitive judgments about cases, the most prominent being the argument from vagueness, causal exclusion arguments, and arguments from the impossibility of distinct coincident items. Undercutting arguments are arguments for the conclusion that our intuitive judgments about cases are (probably) unreliable, but that do not purport to demonstrate the falsity of any specific range of intuitive judgments. Although the rebutting arguments are by far the more widely discussed of the two, it is difficult to believe that these arguments are primarily responsible for the widespread aversion to particularism in material-object metaphysics. After all, every philosophical domain has its share of powerful rebutting arguments, yet it is only in material-object metaphysics that such arguments do not typically inspire a Moorean confidence that at least one of the principles that drives the argument must be false.

I suspect that it is rather the undercutting arguments that lie at the root of the aversion to particularism in material-object metaphysics. In what follows, I address one sort of undercutting argument, which turns on the claim that the particularist's differential treatment of strange and familiar kinds is intolerably arbitrary. The literature is now replete with examples of such kinds—apeans, bligers, bonangles, carples, cdogs, cpeople, cupcups, dwods, gollyswoggles, incars, klables, monewments, shmees, shmrees, trables, trout-turkeys, wakers—and the charge of arbitrariness has been leveled (in one form or another) by numerous authors.⁶ But, despite how influential the charge has been, there has been virtually no discussion of how particularists might respond to the charge.

⁵ See Merricks (2001, 162–70), Hirsch (2002a, 109–12), and my (2008 and forthcoming) for critical discussion of these reconciliatory strategies.

⁶ See, e.g., Cartwright (1975, 158), Quine (1981, 13), van Cleve (1986, 145), Yablo (1987, 307), van Inwagen (1990, 126), Hirsch (1993, 690), Hudson (2001, 108–11), Sider (2001, 156–7 and 165), Sidelle (2002, 119–20), Hawthorne (2006, 109), Johnston (2006, 696–8), and Schaffer (forthcoming, §2.1).

There are at least two other sorts of undercutting arguments worth mentioning (setting aside those that generalize to intuitions in all domains). First, there are a variety of arguments having to do with the subject matter of material-object metaphysics; for instance, that questions in material-object metaphysics concern substantive facts about the world and therefore cannot be settled by (anything like) conceptual analysis.⁷ Second, there are a variety of arguments having to do with the apparent impossibility of subsuming our intuitive judgments about cases under interesting general principles.⁸

My ambitions in this chapter are modest in one respect, immodest in another. The modesty lies in its scope. I do not argue for particularism or against revisionary ontologies. I argue only that particularists have the resources to resist the argument from arbitrariness, and I have done my best to disentangle this argument from the others. The immodesty lies in the background metaontology. I will show that the argument from arbitrariness can be resisted without retreating to any sort of deflationary view of ontology. Particularists need not embrace any form of relativism about ordinary material objects, nor need they accept the deflationary doctrine of quantifier variance according to which there are counterparts of our quantifiers that are on a par with ours and that range over things that do not exist (but rather, e.g., *shmexist*).⁹ Let us then distinguish between *deflationary particularists*, who couple their particularist ontology with a deflationary metaontology, and *robust particularists*, who opt for a nondeflationary metaontology. I suspect that the argument from arbitrariness owes at least some of its influence to the presumption (implicit in Sosa's trilemma) that robust particularism is a nonstarter and that the only viable alternative to a revisionary ontology is some form of deflationary particularism—or, in the words of John Hawthorne, “a kind of anti-realism that none of us should tolerate.”¹⁰

For ease of exposition, I sometimes refer to “what particularists will say” about a given case. But no less than in other domains, particularism in material-object metaphysics is a matter of degree

⁷ See Hirsch (2002a, 107) for a statement of one version of this argument, and see Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002, 217) on appeals to intuition in metaphysics generally.

⁸ See, e.g., van Inwagen (1990, 66–8), Horgan (1993, 695), and Hudson (2001, 109).

⁹ See Hirsch (2002b). ¹⁰ Hawthorne (2006, 109).

and can come in endless varieties. Some particularists in epistemology and philosophy of language are willing to bite bullets in at least some cases (fake barn cases, seemingly informative identities, etc.), and particularists in material-object metaphysics may do the same. There also is endless room for disagreement among particularists about which kinds of things there are, about the persistence conditions of various familiar kinds, about whether it is at least possible for various strange kinds to have instances, about what it would take for various strange kinds to have instances, and so forth.

Although particularism possibly deserves the label ‘folk ontology’ or ‘common-sense ontology’, I hesitate to use these labels for two reasons. First, particularists can be expected to reject highly intuitive general principles (e.g., about material coincidence) which the folk will assent to and which seem equally deserving of the label ‘common sense’. Second, the label may be misleading in the following respect. I wish to understand ‘intuitive judgments about cases’ not in terms of how the folk respond to philosophical interrogation or surveys, but rather in terms of how things seem to philosophers, who are alert to relevant distinctions and who know the difference between reporting their intuitions and reporting their considered judgments. However important the folk’s intuitions may or may not be, they are too likely to misreport or misrepresent their intuitions for their responses to be of much use to philosophers.¹¹

3. THE ARGUMENT FROM ARBITRARINESS

The argument from arbitrariness turns on the claim that there is no difference between certain of the familiar kinds that we intuitively judge to exist and certain of the strange kinds that we intuitively judge not to exist that could account for the former’s but not the latter’s having instances. In short, there is no *ontologically significant difference* between the relevant strange and familiar kinds. Arguments from arbitrariness will have the following form:

¹¹ Cf. Williamson (2007, 191): “Although the philosophically innocent may be free of various forms of theoretical bias, just as the scientifically innocent are, that is not enough to confer special authority on innocent judgment, given its characteristic sloppiness.”

- (P1) There is no ontologically significant difference between Ks and K's.
- (P2) If there is no ontologically significant difference between Ks and K's, then it is objectionably arbitrary to countenance things of kind K but not things of kind K'.
- (C) So it is objectionably arbitrary to countenance things of kind K but not things of kind K'.

Deflationary particularists will typically deny P2. Countenancing familiar kinds but not strange kinds is objectionably arbitrary only if one thereby privileges the familiar kinds. But deflationary particularists will deny that existent kinds enjoy a privileged status. According to relativists, snowballs exist and snowdiscalls do not exist—relative to our scheme, that is—but, relative to other schemes, snowdiscalls exist and snowballs do not exist.¹² According to quantifier variantists, snowballs exist but do not shmexist, and snowdiscalls shmexist but do not exist. So at bottom there is a uniform treatment of strange and familiar kinds.

This sort of strategy is available only to deflationary particularists and, as indicated above, my goal is to show how robust particularists can resist the charge of arbitrariness. I know of no way for robust particularists to address all instances of the argument *en masse*; we will have to take them case by case. Before turning to the cases, however, let me make three preliminary remarks.

First, in what follows I will identify what seem to be ontologically significant differences between various strange and familiar kinds without taking the further step of attempting to establish that the differences are indeed ontologically significant. I do not consider this a shortcoming of my response to the argument from arbitrariness. Consider this analogy. In explaining why a certain justified true belief counts as knowledge in one case but not in another, one might appeal to some feature F (e.g., having a defeater) that is present in the one case and absent in the other. There is an interesting question—which may or may not have an answer—of why F is epistemically significant, but it would be a mistake to insist that

¹² Then again, relativists may be better understood as denying P1: the difference between snowballs and snowdiscalls that explains why the former but not the latter exist—relative to our scheme, that is—is that the concept *snowball* is part of our conceptual scheme and the concept *snowdiscall* is not.

answering this question is a prerequisite to explaining why there is knowledge in one case but not the other. Furthermore, having an account of F's epistemic significance is not required for having a reason to believe that F is epistemically significant: the reason would simply be that the presence of F *seems* to be making a difference both in the case at hand and across a wide range of cases. Analogously, there can be good reason to accept that a certain feature marks an ontologically significant difference between two kinds—that it explains why one kind has instances while another does not—even in the absence of an account of what makes that feature ontologically significant.¹³ I will therefore take myself to have defended the particularist against the charge of arbitrariness if I can achieve the more modest goal of identifying differences between strange and familiar kinds that do at least *seem* ontologically significant and that do not simply amount to the former's being unfamiliar, or uninteresting, or intuitively nonexistent, or failing to fall under any of our sortals.

Second, uncovering the metaphysics of familiar kinds is often quite complicated, and I suspect that part of the force of the charge of arbitrariness comes, illegitimately, from the intricacy of these issues and an impatience for long digressions into the metaphysics of snowballs, statues, solar systems, and so forth. If one finds one's intuitions about familiar kinds unmanageable at times, one should bear in mind that this may be because metaphysics is difficult, not because the questions or our intuitions are somehow defective.¹⁴

Third, although I follow anti-particularists in characterizing these as cases of arbitrariness, this characterization is highly tendentious. Arbitrary judgments are those based on random choice or personal whim. The characterization is apt in other familiar charges of

¹³ Of course, the mere appearance of ontological significance will not be enough to convince some committed anti-particularists, but in that case their aversion to particularism presumably does not rest primarily on the absence of plausible candidates for ontologically significant differences and, therefore, lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

¹⁴ Moreover, difficulty in specifying a relevant distinction between two cases is not obviously evidence that there is no relevant distinction between them. Cf. Sider: "There are, one must admit, analogies between these cases [of genuine causes and epiphenomena], and it is no trivial philosophical enterprise to say exactly what distinguishes them. But setbacks or even failure at this task in philosophical analysis should not persuade us that there is no distinction to be made, since failure at philosophical analysis should *never* persuade anyone, on its own anyway, that there is no distinction to be made" (2003, 772). The italics are his.

arbitrariness in metaphysics, for instance, that it is arbitrary to identify the number two with $\{\{\emptyset\}\}$ rather than $\{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}$.¹⁵ Here, not only can we find no difference between the two sets that could account for the one but not the other's being the number two, there also is not even *prima facie* reason to believe that the one but not the other is the number two. By contrast, we do have at least *prima facie* reason for taking there to be snowballs but no snowdiscalls, for this view has strong intuitive support. Our reasons for the differential treatment of snowballs and snowdiscalls are therefore no different in kind from our reasons for the differential treatment of Gettier cases and paradigm cases of knowledge, and are hardly a matter of whim or random choice.¹⁶

4. TODDLERS AND TODDLESCENTS

A toddlescent is a material object that comes into existence whenever a child reaches the age of two, ceases to exist when the child reaches the age of fourteen, and is exactly co-located with the child at all times in between. Particularists will deny that there are toddlescents. Yet particularists will accept that there are toddlers. Is this differential treatment of toddlers and toddlescents arbitrary?

Not at all, for there is an important difference between toddlers and toddlescents. Unlike toddlers, toddlescents would have to be things that cease to exist without any of their constitutive matter undergoing any intrinsic change. Toddlers, by contrast, do not cease to exist when they grow up; they merely cease to be toddlers. A separate question is whether there are toddlescent*s, where a toddlescent* is a child between the ages of two and fourteen. Particularists will of course agree that there are toddlescent*s. Some of them are toddlers, others are adolescents—things that we intuitively judge to exist. Toddescents, however, cannot be either of these things on account of their strange persistence conditions.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Benacerraf (1965), as well as Armstrong (1986, 87) on ordered pairs, Bealer (1998, 6–7) on propositions, and Merricks (2003, 532–6) on counterpart theory.

¹⁶ Furthermore, we plausibly have reason to treat Gettier cases and paradigm cases of knowledge differently even before we manage to pin down the epistemically significant difference between the cases.

¹⁷ Here and elsewhere, I assume that individuals that can survive a given change cannot be identified with individuals that cannot survive that change.

One must therefore take care to distinguish between strange phased kinds, like toddlescent*s, and strange individuating kinds, like toddlescents and snowdiscalls, when consulting one's intuitions about strange kinds.¹⁸ Phased kinds are kinds whose instances can cease to belong to that kind without ceasing to exist. Individuating kinds are kinds whose instances cannot cease to belong without ceasing to exist: they are of that kind as a matter of *de re* necessity. Things belonging to strange phased kinds are often perfectly familiar things with perfectly ordinary persistence conditions; it is the things belonging to strange individuating kinds to which particularists take exception. I have found that those who cannot even see the *pretheoretical* reason for refusing to countenance the strange kinds discussed in the literature are often conflating phased and individuating kinds.

5. ISLANDS AND INCARS

A full-sized incar is like a car in nearly all respects. The main difference is that, unlike a car, it is metaphysically impossible for an incar to leave a garage. As the incar inches toward the great outdoors, it begins to shrink at the threshold of the garage, at which time an outcar springs into existence and begins growing. What it looks like for an incar to shrink and gradually be replaced by an outcar is exactly the same as what it looks like for a car to leave a garage. But an incar is not a car (or even a part of a car) that is inside a garage, for a (part of a) car that is inside a garage can later be outside the garage.

Hawthorne maintains that "none but the most insular metaphysician should countenance islands while repudiating incars."¹⁹ The suggestion, I take it, is that there is no ontologically significant difference between islands and incars. Hawthorne evidently believes that islands shrink and ultimately cease to exist as their constitutive matter comes to be fully submerged, just as incars shrink and ultimately cease to exist as their constitutive matter leaves the garage.

Particularists should reject this characterization of islands. Suppose that an island is entirely submerged every day at high tide.

¹⁸ Cf. Wiggins (2001, 29–33).

¹⁹ Hawthorne (2006, vii).

Intuitively, it is still there at high tide—under the water—and when it re-emerges at low tide it has not suffered interrupted existence.²⁰ Incars, by contrast, cease to exist when their constitutive matter leaves the garage, and without any of their constitutive matter undergoing any intrinsic change. This would seem to be an ontologically significant difference between islands and incars.²¹

It may be that those who were initially moved by Hawthorne's objection were confusing incars with *incar*s*, where an *incar** is a car that is inside a garage. There is no ontologically significant difference between islands and *incar*s*, but particularists will not deny that there are *incar*s*. Alternatively, it may be that they were confusing the question of whether the island ceases to exist when entirely submerged with the separate (and less pressing) question of whether an island ceases to be *an island* when it is entirely submerged. Some will be inclined to say that nothing that is entirely submerged, even momentarily, is at that time an island; others will say that islands continue to be islands when entirely submerged. I am inclined to say that an island ceases to be an island only when permanently submerged, or else when the waters recede and it comes to be part of a peninsula. Nothing hangs on this question of classification. For however one answers it, one can agree that all islands have perfectly ordinary persistence conditions and, in particular, that they do not cease to exist when submerged.

6. PAGES AND MONEWMENTS

A monewment is like a monument insofar as it is a material object that has the function of commemorating a certain person or event.

²⁰ Nor, for that matter, do islands shrink when the water levels rise. Islands are like icebergs: part of the island is above water and the rest of the island is underwater. (Submarines sometimes crash into islands.) And, like icebergs, they shrink by eroding. To the extent that we are ever inclined to say that the island is shrinking when the water levels rise, it seems plausible on reflection that all that is shrinking is the part of the island that is above water, not the island itself. And even this is evidently a *façon de parler*. Nothing really becomes smaller when the part of the island that is above water gets smaller any more than something really becomes longer as the part of this sentence that you have read thus far gets longer.

²¹ I am grateful to Chad Carmichael here. E. J. Lowe raises similar points about islands in his (2007).

But monements have more permissive persistence conditions than monuments: if the constitutive matter of the monement is annihilated, and a qualitatively identical material object is erected at the location of the original monement, that material object is numerically identical to the original monement. Particularists will deny that there are such things as monements.

Carl Ginet contends that we already countenance material objects of just this sort; for instance, pages of a typescript:

Suppose that *this* typescript's 18th page were now constituted of wholly different matter from that which constituted it yesterday, because I spilled coffee over it and had to retype it. The 18th page of this typescript (*this* page, I might say, holding it up) ceased to exist altogether for a while but now it exists again in a new embodiment.²²

The suggestion is that pages, like monements, are material objects that can survive undergoing a complete change of matter in a nonpiecemeal fashion. If so, then it may seem that there is no ontologically significant difference between the two.

Particularists should deny that there is a single material object answering to 'the 18th page' that once had coffee spilled on it and is now in Ginet's hand. Obviously, the mere fact that 'the 18th page' once referred to the coffee-stained page and now refers to the page in Ginet's hand does not suffice to show that there is a single material object that was the 18th page at both times, any more than the fact that 'the president' once referred to Clinton and now refers to Obama suffices to show that there is a single individual who was the president at both times. There presumably is a *type* answering to 'the 18th page' which, once the typescript goes to press, will have multiple tokens; and perhaps this is a thing that ceases to exist and comes back into existence in the case that Ginet describes.²³ But this is an abstract object, not a material object. There is a sheet of paper in Ginet's hand, but that sheet never had coffee spilled on it; when the coffee was spilled, that sheet was across the room on top of a stack of other blank sheets. And even those who take the page to be a material object that is distinct from the sheet will insist

²² Ginet (1985, 220–1).

²³ Though, far more plausibly, this abstractum does not cease to exist when the original copy of the 18th page is destroyed, any more than there ceases to be an 18th letter of the alphabet when all of the tokens of that letter are destroyed.

that the page in Ginet's hand is something that began to exist—not something that came back into existence—when the words were retyped on the new sheet.²⁴

So, unlike a monewment, neither the 18th page nor any of its tokens is a material object that can survive a complete and non-piecemeal replacement of its constitutive matter. This would seem to be an ontologically significant difference between monewments and manuscript pages.

7. STATUES AND GOLLYSWOGGLES

You have absent-mindedly kneaded a piece of clay into an unusual shape. Let us say that anything with exactly that shape is gollyswoggle-shaped. Something is a gollyswoggle just in case it is essentially gollyswoggle-shaped. Particularists will agree that there are statues but deny that there are gollyswoggles: some things are gollyswoggle-shaped, but nothing is essentially gollyswoggle-shaped.

Van Inwagen find this unacceptable: "I should think that if our sculptor brought a statue into existence, then you brought a gollyswoggle into existence."²⁵ Van Inwagen evidently thinks that there is no ontologically significant difference between statues and gollyswoggles, including the presence of creative intentions in the one case and their absence in the other: "our sculptor intended to produce something statue-shaped while you, presumably, did not intend to produce anything gollyswoggle-shaped. But these facts would seem to be irrelevant to any questions about the existence of the thing produced."²⁶

Yet our intuitive judgments about cases suggest that creative intentions are indeed relevant to what kinds of things there are. Suppose that a meteoroid, as a result of random collisions with space junk, temporarily comes to be a qualitative duplicate of some actual statue. Intuitively, nothing new comes into existence which, unlike the meteoroid, cannot survive further collisions that deprive

²⁴ This is perhaps easiest to see if one imagines that this page is only one of several back-up copies of the 18th page that were produced after the spill.

²⁵ Van Inwagen (1990, 126). ²⁶ *Ibid.*

the meteoroid of its statuesque form.²⁷ Likewise, unintentionally and momentarily kneading some clay into the shape of a gollyswoggle does not suffice for the creation of something that has that shape essentially. When a piece of clay comes to be, and moments later ceases to be, gollyswoggle-shaped, this does not involve the generation of new objects, any more than a two-year-old's becoming a three-year-old involves the generation of any new object. The particularist should therefore contend that the fact that many have set out to make statues, while no one has ever set out to make a gollyswoggle, is an ontologically significant difference between statues and gollyswoggles, in which case the differential treatment is not arbitrary.²⁸

Does this view of artifacts as mind-dependent constitute a departure from the full-blooded ontological realism promised at the outset? Perhaps. But it is important to appreciate just how benign the needed degree of mind-dependence is. The artifacts cannot have begun to exist without us but, once created, they do not depend on us for their continued existence. Moreover, once created, their modal features remain entirely independent of how we later come to use them or conceive of them. This opens the door for community-wide error, for instance, of unearthing ancient cooking utensils and mistaking them for religious relics, or finding the statue-shaped meteoroid and mistakenly taking it to be an artifact and to have its form essentially. This is about as realist as one can get about artifacts.²⁹

²⁷ Cf. Baker (2008, 211). I leave it open whether this meteoroid is a statue. If so, then it turns out that, while most statues are essentially statues, others are only contingently statues, are identical with pieces of stuff, and share the persistence conditions of the piece of stuff. What matters for our purposes is that nothing with the persistence conditions normally associated with statues (and thus distinct from the meteoroid) comes into existence in the absence of the relevant creative intentions. Thanks to Reid Blackman and Josh Dever for helpful discussion here.

²⁸ Particularists may hold that gollyswoggles' inability to survive even minimal changes in shape is yet another an ontologically significant difference between statues and gollyswoggles.

²⁹ Cf. Thomasson (2003). Some may object even to this minimal degree of mind-dependence and insist that the existence of a certain sort of object is always independent of human intentions and desires. See, e.g., van Cleve (1986, 149), Rea (1998, 353–4), Olson (2001, 347), Sider (2001, 157), and, for a dissenting voice, Baker (2008, 46–7). It is precisely their willingness to reject such intuitive principles in the face of what look to be clear counterexamples that distinguishes particularists from revisionary ontologists.

There are a number of other questions that one might be tempted to ask at this point about the metaphysics of artifacts. Can one bring a new object into existence simply by placing a piece of driftwood in one's living room and using it as a coffee table? Or by signing one's name on a urinal and placing it in a museum? Or by pointing at some stuff, specifying some persistence conditions (however strange), and declaring that that stuff constitutes something with those persistence conditions? Is it possible to *intentionally* make a gollyswoggle (or incar, or snowdiscall)? If not, what are the constraints on our creative powers?

I do not deny that these are difficult questions. There presumably are constraints on the creation of artifacts, and the nature of those constraints has been studied in some detail.³⁰ But even those particularists who hold that creative powers are radically unconstrained may still insist that there are statues but no gollyswoggles and cite the absence of the relevant creative intentions as an ontologically significant difference between the two. In any event, answering the argument from arbitrariness is one thing, supplying a theory of artifacts is another, and I am here concerned only with the former.

8. SNOWBALLS AND SNOWDISCALLS

Particularists will insist that the presence or absence of the relevant creative intentions is an ontologically significant difference between statues and gollyswoggles. It is open to particularists to account for the difference between snowballs and Sosa's snowdiscalls along similar lines: clumps of snow sometimes constitute snowballs but never snowdiscalls because people have intended to make snowballs but (to my knowledge) no one has ever intended to make a snowdiscall.

³⁰ See, e.g., Thomasson (2003, §3) and Baker (2008, 43–66). Some particularists are more liberal than others. Baker (2008, 53) allows that a wine rack can be brought into existence by brushing off a piece of unaltered driftwood and using it as a wine rack, so long as appropriate conventions and practices are in place. I am inclined to agree with Dean Zimmerman (2002, 335) that "changes in our ways of talking about things, even coupled with simple changes in some of our nonverbal reactions to things, could [not] by themselves bring any concrete physical object into existence" and to accept a more conservative view on which at least some alteration is required in order to bring a wine rack into existence (which is not yet to deny that the piece of driftwood is a wine rack; see n. 27).

For what it is worth, I suspect that (pace Sosa) snowballs are not an individuating kind at all but rather a phased kind. Snowballs are identical to round clumps of snow, and they cease to be snowballs when flattened but do not cease to exist. That snowballs are just clumps of snow, while snowdiscalls are meant to be constituted by (and modally different from) clumps of snow, is itself an ontologically significant difference between snowballs and snowdiscalls. And, as should by now be clear, particularists will have no objection to instances of the associated phased kind, snowdiscall*, where a snowdiscall* is a clump of snow that has any shape between being round and being disc-shaped.

9. SCATTERED OBJECTS

It is often alleged that there is no ontologically significant difference between the scattered objects that we do countenance and those that we do not.³¹ In some cases, there are obvious differences: for instance, the disjoint microscopic parts of the table together exhibit a kind of unity, continuity, and causal covariance that is altogether lacking in the case of the alleged fusion of my nose and the Eiffel Tower.³² In other cases, the grounds for differential treatment are less obvious. I will discuss various strategies available to particularists for explaining away the apparent arbitrariness in such cases.

As we have already seen, creative intentions do seem relevant to the existence of artifacts, and scattered artifacts are no exception. Whether a steel ball and steel rod arranged letter-'i'-wise compose something will depend upon whether they came to be so arranged by accident or as a result of someone intending to make a lower-case letter 'i'. Likewise, the ontologically significant difference between a work of art consisting of several disconnected parts and the alleged fusion of my nose and the Eiffel Tower is the presence of relevant creative intentions in the one case and their absence in the other. This account may also be extended to scattered institutional entities, like the Supreme Court, and scattered geopolitical entities, like the

³¹ See, e.g., Cartwright (1975, 158), Quine (1981, 13), van Cleve (1986, 145), and Hudson (2001, 108–12).

³² There is then the further question of how (and whether) such factors combine to yield necessary and sufficient conditions for composition, a question which lies outside the scope of this chapter.

state of Michigan.³³ In those cases, something is created without the sort of hands-on labor that is usually involved in bringing an artifact into existence. This is not to say that one can stipulate things into existence willy-nilly; as with ordinary artifacts, there presumably are constraints on the creation of such entities.³⁴ Some may still feel that if this sort of “spooky action at a distance” is what is needed to vindicate our intuitive judgments about cases, then it is not worth the cost.³⁵ Such is the difference between them and particularists. The charge of arbitrariness should move only those who already embrace a certain stringent view of what sort of factors are relevant to composition.

Now let us now turn to scattered nonartifacts, taking the solar system as a representative example. Despite being a scattered object, the solar system exhibits a degree of unity altogether lacking in the universalist’s strange fusions. The solar system has boundaries demarcated by natural properties: the objects in the solar system are the smallest collection of objects containing the sun, each of whose primary gravitational influences are only the others in the collection. Furthermore, the solar system, not unlike an organism, is self-sustaining: it retains its form by means of forces internal to the system. So there do look to be ontologically significant differences between solar systems and the universalist’s strange fusions; though, as indicated in §3, the task of supplying an argument that these differences are ontologically significant lies outside the scope of this chapter.³⁶

This, however, is not the only response available to particularists. The particularist *could* simply concede that there is no

³³ The state of Michigan is not identical to the land that it now occupies. The land is a quantity of matter, and particularists need have no objection to arbitrary scattered quantities. There is some land some of which is on one side of Lake Michigan and some of which is on the other. There is even some flesh and metal, some of which is in Paris and some of which is on my face. And what, according to particularists, is the ontologically significant difference between this scattered quantity and the alleged individual whose parts are my nose and the Eiffel Tower? Their ontological category: one is some stuff, the other is an individual.

³⁴ See, e.g., Thomasson (2003, §2). And even were our creative powers radically unconstrained, the fact that no one has directed such creative intentions at my nose and the Eiffel Tower would be ontologically significant, from the perspective of particularists, to their not composing anything.

³⁵ See, e.g., van Inwagen (1990, 12–13), Rea (1998, 352), and Hudson (2001, 111).

³⁶ I am grateful here to Kenny Easwaran.

ontologically significant difference between the solar system and the strange fusion and to admit that the latter exists. Perhaps the strange fusion is not so strange after all: it too is a system (whose parts exert certain forces on one another) and, when we intuitively judged there to be nothing whose parts are my nose and the Eiffel Tower, it was because we had neglected to consider the system whose parts are my nose and the Eiffel Tower.³⁷ Particularists who takes this line will still deny that there are such modally strange things as incars, monewments, gollyswoggles, and snowdiscalls. But they evidently must (on pain of arbitrariness) admit that composition is unrestricted, at least when it comes to items that exert some force on one another, thereby comprising a system. This response may seem to be in tension with particularism. But in a way, this would simply be a case of particularism in action: our concrete-case intuitive judgment that there is a system that has them as parts takes precedence over our intuitive judgment about the generalization that there is nothing that has them as parts.

Alternatively, particularists might contend that the ontologically significant difference between the fusion of my nose and the Eiffel Tower and the solar system is that the former, but not the latter, is a single individual.³⁸ The solar system is not a single individual; it is many individuals. 'The solar system' may be syntactically singular but, on the present account, it is nevertheless semantically plural: it refers, not to a set of heavenly bodies or to a fusion of heavenly bodies, but to some heavenly bodies.³⁹ One problem with this account is that solar systems do not seem to have the right sort of modal profile to be pluralities. Pluralities presumably have exactly the parts that they do essentially, whereas solar systems can

³⁷ It is precisely their immunity to this sort of error—having overlooked nonobvious exceptions—that makes concrete-case intuitions a more secure starting point.

³⁸ Some may insist that strange fusions are mere pluralities and, therefore, "ontologically innocent." If indeed the fusion of my nose and the Eiffel Tower just is my nose and the Eiffel Tower, then universalists and particularists have no disagreement, for they agree that my nose and the Eiffel Tower exist. That said, it is controversial (even among universalists) whether strange fusions are ontologically innocent in this way.

³⁹ See Simons (1987, 142–3) for a related discussion. For what it is worth, the most common dictionary definitions of 'the solar system' are something along the lines of: the sun and the various heavenly bodies that orbit it.

survive gaining and losing parts.⁴⁰ However, particularists might take a page from the revisionary ontologist's playbook here and insist that 'solar systems can survive gaining and losing parts' is true only in a loose and misleading sense.⁴¹ Just as no one thing actually becomes longer as the part of this sentence that you have read thus far gets longer, no one thing needs to get bigger or change parts in order for the solar system to grow or change parts; it is sufficient that one plurality of heavenly bodies is larger than a suitably related, earlier plurality of heavenly bodies. The things that are now (identical to) the solar system may be distinct from the things that had previously been the solar system.⁴²

10. DISASSEMBLED OBJECTS

Let us turn now to a somewhat different way in which our treatment of cases may appear arbitrary. Thus far, we have been considering pairs of cases that allegedly do not differ in any ontologically significant respects. Now let us consider a single case that seems to admit of multiple permissible, but mutually incompatible descriptions. Suppose that a watch is disassembled and later reassembled. It seems equally permissible to describe the watch as coming back into existence upon reassembly as it is to describe the watch as having been scattered across the workbench prior to reassembly. But these descriptions are incompatible: the watch either did or did not exist after disassembly and prior to reassembly. So if the descriptions are equally permissible, it may seem that (on pain of arbitrarily favoring one over the other) one must either take them to be true of temporarily coincident things—only one of which

⁴⁰ Furthermore, the solar system, unlike a mere plurality, would plausibly cease to exist if its parts were scattered across the universe.

⁴¹ An alternative would be to contend that some pluralities are mereologically flexible. For instance, Peter Simons (1997, 91–2) maintains that an orchestra is an "empirical collective," which like a mere plurality is many things, not one thing, but unlike a mere plurality can survive gaining and losing parts. Whatever the merits of this view, it cannot (by itself) defuse the charge of arbitrariness, for one would still have to identify an ontologically significant difference between the solar system—understood as an empirical collective—and various strange empirical collectives of my nose and the Eiffel Tower.

⁴² I am grateful to Derek Ball, John Hawthorne, Dave Liebesman, and Peter Simons for valuable discussions of the points in this section.

survived disassembly—or else true only relative to some convention or context.⁴³

There is, however, more than one way of being permissible, and being true is only one of them. Another way of being permissible is by conveying something true despite being literally false. The police are looking for Carl, find a heap of bone and meat by the wood chipper, and one says to the other, “I think this is Carl.” She certainly does not think that this stuff is (the same thing as) Carl or that Carl still exists. She is speaking loosely. What she meant is that this heap of bone and meat is Carl’s remains. She takes herself to have been deliberately misunderstood when her partner replies: “How can this be *Carl*? Carl could not have survived *that!*” We react similarly when someone points to the disassembled parts and says, “You really think *this* is a watch? It is not *shaped* like a watch!” So it is plausible that we are likewise speaking loosely when we refer to the scattered parts as ‘a watch’. This could then serve as nonarbitrary grounds for favoring the description of the watch as coming back into existence upon reassembly.⁴⁴

Yet another way of being permissible is by being penumbral. One mark of something’s being a borderline case that either verdict is permissible.⁴⁵ It may well be that our ambivalence toward the two descriptions of the watch, and the permissibility of each description, is the result of its being vague whether the watch exists after disassembly. In that case, no more machinery is needed to account for the permissibility of these two descriptions of the watch than is needed to account for the permissibility of describing a borderline bald man as bald or as nonbald.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Hawthorne and Cortens (1995, 158–60) or Hawthorne (2006, 53–4) for discussion of a related case.

⁴⁴ Some contend that *all* ordinary talk about nonliving composites (van Inwagen 1990) or mereologically flexible entities (Chisholm 1976) is loose talk about no such things and may go on to insist that there is no principled reason to take apparent reference to some but not other nonliving composites at face value. But there are principled reasons for the differential treatment. For the current appeal to loose talk is plausible and can be (and has just been) independently motivated, whereas these other appeals to loose talk are not plausible and cannot be independently motivated. Cf. Merricks (2001, 164–7), Hirsch (2002a, 109–11), and my (2007, §3).

⁴⁵ See Sainsbury (1996, 259), Shapiro (2003, 43–4), and Wright (2003, 92–4).

⁴⁶ It may well be that more needs to be said in accounting for the *vagueness* in the present case, but that is another matter; we are here concerned with the argument from arbitrariness, and the argument from vagueness will have to wait its turn.

11. STRANGE COMMUNITIES

I have thus far made no mention of strange linguistic communities, though it is common for discussions of strange kinds to be carried out in terms of such communities. So, before concluding, I will make some remarks about communities that employ strange conceptual schemes and their relevance to particularism.

One might think that the mere possibility of communities who make different intuitive judgments about strange and familiar kinds is enough by itself to cause trouble for the particularist. John Hawthorne seems to be suggesting something along these lines when he says:

Barring a kind of anti-realism that none of us should tolerate, would it not be remarkable if the lines of reality matched the lines that we have words for? The simplest exercises of sociological imagination ought to convince us that the assumption of such a harmony is altogether untoward, since such exercises convince us that it is something of a biological and/or cultural accident that we draw the lines that we do.⁴⁷

Hawthorne seems have in mind an argument along the following lines: we cannot expect intuitive judgments about which kinds of things there are to be correct because (1) we cannot expect intuitive judgments that are largely the result of biocultural accidents to be correct and (2) the intuitive judgments that lead us to draw the lines that we do are largely the result of biocultural accidents. We are meant to be convinced of the second premise by “the simplest exercises of sociological imagination.”

Certainly Hawthorne is not suggesting that the mere fact that we are able to imagine strange communities is reason enough to accept (2). After all, just as easily as we can imagine perfectly functional communities who (say) take there to be snowdiscalls but no snowballs, we can imagine perfectly functional communities, no worse off than our own at satisfying their various needs and desires, with different intuitive judgments about the multiple-realizability of mental properties, the moral impermissibility of torturing babies for fun, the supervenience of moral facts on natural facts, the indiscernibility of identicals, the premises of the revisionary ontologists’

⁴⁷ Hawthorne (2006, 109). Cf. Hudson (2001, 107), Sider (2001, 156–7), and Rea (2002, ch. 8).

favorite anti-particularist arguments, and so on for virtually all other intuitive judgments. Whatever reasons there may be for global skepticism about intuitive judgments, the mere imaginability of communities with different intuitive judgments is not one of them.

Perhaps what Hawthorne has in mind is only that, when we imagine such communities, we see that there is no ontologically significant difference between the relevant strange and familiar kinds. But this would render the argument from strange imaginary communities parasitic on P1 of the argument from arbitrariness (§3), and the detour into strange communities superfluous.

Alternatively, perhaps what Hawthorne has in mind is that we can easily imagine the sorts of circumstances that might have led us to draw the lines differently and that, since these circumstances could easily have obtained, we could easily have come to draw the lines differently. To a certain extent, this is right but poses no threat to the particularist. For instance, in other (easily imaginable) circumstances, we would have had reason to make different kinds of artifacts and, accordingly, would have taken there to be different kinds of artifacts. To that extent it is indeed a biocultural accident that we countenance the kinds of artifacts that we do. But given the way in which the kinds of artifacts there are depends upon the kinds of artifacts people have intended to make, our ability to judge correctly which kinds of artifacts there are is no more remarkable than our ability to know what kinds of artifacts people have intended to make.

We can likewise easily imagine conditions under which we would have found it convenient to employ strange phased-kind concepts, like *toddlescent** or *incar**. But this would not be a case in which we would have made different intuitive judgments, for (as indicated in §§4–5) we do intuitively judge there to be such things as *toddlescent*s* and *incar*s*. So while it is almost certainly a biocultural accident that we employ the phased-kind concepts that we do, this is no indication that it is a biocultural accident that we intuitively judge there to be things answering to the relevant phased kinds.

The real problem cases would be those involving strange nonartifactual individuating kinds, like *toddlescents*. However, I find it difficult to believe that there could easily have been communities that intuitively judged there to be *toddlescents*—just as I find it

difficult to believe that there could easily have been communities with different intuitive judgments about the indiscernibility of identicals, multiple realizability, moral supervenience, and so forth. Why this could not easily have happened is a difficult question, but one which lies beyond the scope of this chapter.⁴⁸

What would be more worrisome is if there turned out to be *actual* communities whose intuitive judgments about which kinds of things there are differed from ours, for one could hardly ask for better evidence that this could easily have happened than that it has happened. Suppose, for instance, that anthropologists or experimental philosophers discover an actual community that apparently takes there to be toddlers. What then?

Given that this is an actual case, whose details must be discovered (not stipulated), it will be open to debate whether they indeed intuitively judge there to be toddlers. There will, in such cases, be at least two alternative explanations of whatever linguistic behavior it is that leads one to suspect that they intuitively judge there to be toddlers. The first and most straightforward is that they have been misinterpreted: they do not take there to be toddlers but, rather, toddler*s. Particularists do not deny that there are toddler*s, nor do they deny that there are things answering to countless other strange phased kinds. Consequently, the extensive anthropological literature on strange ways of categorizing has little if any bearing on particularism about material-object metaphysics.

A further possibility is that they do judge there to be toddlers but do not *intuitively* judge there to be toddlers. Communities may come to form strange judgments about kinds or persistence conditions for reasons having nothing at all to do with their intuitions. Eli Hirsch discusses a case in which the Rabbis came to the counterintuitive conclusion that a sandal cannot survive the replacement of its straps, more than anything out of a practical need for a manageable criterion of persistence.⁴⁹ Even if this judgment came to

⁴⁸ Perhaps the case could be made that the correct explanation of why we could not easily have had different intuitive judgments about the indiscernibility of identicals, multiple realizability, moral supervenience (etcetera etcetera) does not carry over to our intuitive judgments about strange and familiar kinds. But I do not see how it would go.

⁴⁹ Hirsch (1999). Objects that had become impure were not allowed into the temple, so the Rabbis needed principled ways of deciding whether a given object was the same object that at an earlier time had acquired the impurity.

be shared by the entire religious community, this is not necessarily any indication of a difference in their intuitions about persistence, for they may have come to believe this on authority and *despite* finding it counterintuitive.⁵⁰

Suppose, however, that (for one reason or another) these alternative explanations are untenable. What, according to robust particularists, should we do in that case? The same thing that we would do if we discovered an actual community whose scientists were running the same experiments but consistently obtaining radically different data. We would not throw out our equipment and burn all of our data, nor would we glibly ignore this other community. Rather, we would investigate, looking for possible sources of error on both sides. Likewise, for moral disagreement. Upon encountering communities with different ethical beliefs, we (realists, anyway) do not throw up our hands and conclude that there are no ethical truths or that we are both right relative to our respective standards. Rather we look for potential sources of error or bias. (Perhaps centuries of tyrannical rule have distorted their moral sense; perhaps centuries of overemphasis of the value of autonomy has distorted ours.) I see no reason to think that cross-cultural ontological disagreements need be or should be treated any differently.⁵¹

12. CONCLUSION

I have examined numerous strategies for explaining away the apparent arbitrariness of our treatment of various cases: distinguishing between phased and individuating kinds, loose and strict talk, vagueness and arbitrariness, types and tokens, masses and individuals, intentional and unintentional activities, syntactic and semantic singularity, and simply thinking more carefully about the metaphysics of familiar kinds. I have not addressed every sort of case that has been, or might be, claimed to be indicative of arbitrariness (some will think I have gone on long enough already). But our

⁵⁰ Similarly, differences in judgments about unobservables (e.g., “tree spirits”) presumably have nothing at all to do with differences in intuitions. See Bealer (2004, 12–13) on the difference between intuition and belief.

⁵¹ I am grateful to George Bealer, Adam Elga, Marc Moffett, Bryan Pickel, and Chris Tillman for helpful discussion of points in this section.

success above is at least some grounds for optimism that there will be a way of handling new problems as they arise.

This has been only a partial defense of robust particularism. Consequently, I do not expect the foregoing to have won many converts. For one, I have not supplied any argument that the apparent ontologically significant differences (in particular, the presence of relevant creative intentions) are indeed ontologically significant. Nor have I shown that, all told, the costs of deeply revisionary ontologies are greater than the costs of robust particularism. This would require (among other things) examining strategies for—and costs associated with—blocking the rebutting arguments and the other undercutting arguments mentioned in §2, as well as assessing various strategies for mitigating the apparent costs of revisionary ontological theories. Nevertheless, I do hope to have emboldened fence-sitters and closet particularists, and to have shown that the particularist's treatment of strange and familiar kinds is not as intolerably arbitrary as it is so often taken to be.

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