

## ABSOLUTISM VS. RELATIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY ONTOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I examine Ernest Sosa's defense of Conceptual Relativism: the view that what exists is a function of human thought. My examination reveals that his defense entails an ontology that is indistinguishable from that of the alternative he labels less "sensible," viz., Absolutism: the view that reality exists independently of our thinking. I conclude by defending Absolutism against Sosa's objections.

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Ernest Sosa examines contemporary ontology in "Putnam's Pragmatic Realism."<sup>1</sup> The focus of his discussion is Hilary Putnam's ontology, which Sosa renames "conceptual relativism." This view has it that the world is not "ready made . . . with in-itself categories," that, instead, the mind and the world are constitutive of each other (605).<sup>2</sup> Sosa rejects three of Putnam's four arguments supporting conceptual relativism, but believes that the fourth—"the argument from the non-absoluteness of objecthood and existence"—can be reformulated so as to yield the intended result (619).<sup>3</sup>

My primary concern in what follows is to show that Sosa's reformulation of this argument winds up conflating Putnam's ontology with one of its rivals. According to this alternative, which Sosa calls "absolutism," the world exists independently of human thinking, *i.e.*, reality is not determined by what we take to exist or even would take to exist under circumstances different than our own (624). Sosa's objections to absolutism, I argue further, can be met.<sup>4</sup> I first discuss

### PUTNAM'S INSIGHT

Sosa credits Putnam with the "valuable insight" that the truth-value of an existence claim is partially determined by the language in which it was made (615, 619). Following this insight, Putnam would say that if one is using the language of mereology, then one's claim that a box containing three marbles includes seven entities is true (614-15).<sup>5</sup> But if one is not using the language of mereology, then for one to say of this box that it holds seven entities is for one to speak falsely. One's claim is, thus, neither absolutely true nor absolutely false; it is true or false, as the case may be, only relative to the language one is speaking.

Putnam would not accept, according to Sosa, the response that there is something besides one's interests and needs that dictates which of the above languages one ought to use, so that a claim true relative to the assumptions of one those languages could really be false (614-15). Thus, Sosa suggests that Putnam has adopted the Carnapian view that 'is true' means 'is assertible as true in a language' (616), thereby avoiding even the hint of absolutism.

Sosa does not accept Putnam's argument for this view, based as it is upon the thesis that science will never deliver "one final (correct) ontology" (617-18). This skeptical thesis, according to Sosa, is compatible with absolutism at least as a view concerning "observable reality," if not the entities of "theoretical science" (618). Thus, he proposes an alternative strategy for defending Putnam's insight.

Sosa's strategy consists in recommending conceptual relativism as providing the "least disastrous" answer to the question 'what supervenient entities exist?'. He argues that absolutism's answer is absurd or at least invites an unanswerable question. Let us now examine

### SOSA'S DEFENSE OF CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

Sosa begins by defining "a supervenient, constituted entity" as an entity whose existence is dependent upon the stuff or matter of which it composed being formed in a specific way (619).<sup>6</sup> The existence of such an entity supervenes upon its constituent matter being formed in the way that entities of its sort are formed. For each sort of supervenient entity, then, there are "criteria of existence" that make up the "concept" thereof (hereafter CE). In each case, these would specify the requisite stuff and form for being one of its instances. A snowball, *e.g.*, exists because of the roundness of the snow of which it is composed; necessarily, something is a snowball if and only if it is a rounded piece of snow (619).

Having stated what the CE for supervenient entities are, Sosa goes on to ask: 'by which principle should we determine which supervenient entities, out of all those that satisfy the CE for entities of some sort or other, really

exist?’ (620-621). He doubts that the following application of absolutism gives the true ontology of supervenient objects (621-622, 624):

Necessarily, supervenient entities of the sort *S* exist iff there are things satisfying the CE of *S* (*A*).

Is there more, Sosa asks, to existing as a supervenient entity than the “in-itself satisfaction of certain conditions by certain chunks of matter?” Sosa’s answer is that *A* must be modified along the lines suggested by conceptual relativism (621-24). Thus:

Necessarily, a supervenient entity *x* of the sort *S* exists iff *x* satisfies the CE of *S* and those CE are incorporated into the “conceptual scheme” of human beings (*CR*).

That is to say, things of the sort *S* do not exist—despite there being *x*s that in-themselves satisfy the CE of *S*—unless persons have decided that the constituent form of *S* is an “appropriate way” for the constituent matter of *S* to be formed. It is only relative to the conceptual scheme into which the CE of *S* have been incorporated that instances of *S* exist. Sosa seems to be saying that relative to a conceptual scheme whose framers have not acknowledged the CE of *S*, *S* has no instances, *even if there are things that satisfy its CE*. No supervenient entity exists absolutely, that is, simply by satisfying the CE of a sort of supervenient entity, regardless of whether or not persons consider the sort’s matter to be appropriately formed.

It might be charged that my formulation of *CR* involves question begging, since in-itself *satisfaction* of a set of unaccepted CE seems to entail the existence of the things meeting them, which is what the relativist’s denies. The problem, I submit, lies with Sosa’s presentation or, perhaps, the doctrine itself: first he speaks of the requisite form and matter as the CE (619, “. . . necessarily an entity of sort (*S*) exists iff its CE. are satisfied. . .”). Later on it is *satisfaction* of a form by stuff of an appropriate kind that may or may not be a CE (622, 623). Perhaps what he means is that the criteria in question are criteria for *being* of a certain type, if things of that type exist, leaving open the question of whether or not *satisfying* a given set of these criteria is a further criterion for the existence of anything? Thus, one could say that *CR* entails that there are no instances of certain types despite the fact that there are things falling under the forms associated with those types. Thus, “snowdiscalls” (as defined below) do not exist even though every snowball has the form of a snowdiscall. I am sure that this formulation is not any less illegitimate than the one I started with, but this just points up a difficulty in making coherent just what it is that *CR* denies: it seems that its defenders must acknowledge that there is participation in forms whose instances do not exist.

A question also arises concerning *CR*’s use of the verb ‘to be’. If it is to be understood along the lines suggested by *CR*, the view is circular. If, on the

other hand, its sense is that entailed by A, CR refutes itself. I see no way of solving these problems. But let us set them aside on the assumption that there is a non-circular, coherent formulation of CR. The necessary modifications to the view would not make it any less vulnerable to the objections raised below, since it would still have the same troublesome entailments.

Sosa is motivated to accept CR by reflecting upon what might be called “unacknowledged” CE, *e.g.*, the CE of what he calls “snowdiscalls.” An entity is a snowdiscall just in case it is “constituted by a piece of snow as matter and (has as its) form any shape between being rounded and being disc-shaped” (p. 620). If such things exist, as A dictates, then one who holds a snowball also holds a snowdiscall. Moreover, given that there are infinitely many shapes  $S_1, S_2, \dots$  between being rounded and being flat that a piece of snow may assume, and that with each shape  $S_i$  there is associated the form of having a shape between being flat and having shape  $S_i$ , one would be holding an infinite number of entities. Under A, reality, in Sosa’s words, “explodes” (p. 620). Its defenders must at least explain away the intuition that snowdiscalls *inter alia* do not exist since no one speaks of them. Pointing out that they are like water in being reductively explicable in terms of entities whose existence is acknowledged *viz.*,  $H_2O$  molecules, will not suffice, since water is spoken of and is thus something for which a reductive explanation is commonly expected.

It is to avoid the need for such an explanation that Sosa adopts CR: it rules out the existence of unconventional entities such as snowdiscalls, since our conceptual scheme does not include their form (p. 621). This ruling out is done despite the fact that there are things that satisfy the CE of snowdiscalls. The resulting ontological parsimoniousness makes CR, Sosa reasons, preferable to A.

At this point, though, one wonders if CR’s ontology is sparser than A’s. It all depends on how we individuate conceptual schemes. Do we lack the concept of a snowdiscall simply because, at least in the vernacular, there is no term to which it corresponds?<sup>7</sup> Or do we possess it, despite this omission, given our employment of its constituents and skillfulness at combining? As with the previous set of concerns, I shall set this issue aside, assuming that CR’s defenders can provide satisfactory reasons for answering the second question in the negative. Presently, other considerations will emerge that reveal CR’s ontology to involve the same posits as A’s.

Sosa defends CR against several objections. First, he asks, how is it possible that persons, who are themselves supervenient entities, exist only relative to the conceptual scheme of which they are the developers? (621). If the existence of persons is dependent upon their accepting their own CE, then how is it that their conceptual scheme is developed? One would think that those who are responsible for the development of a conceptual scheme must exist prior to, and, thus, independently of its development. How could persons develop the conceptual scheme that includes their form if they do not exist until

the time at which they acknowledge that that form is “an appropriate way for a separate sort of entity to be (formed)?”

Sosa’s response here is that, while persons do exist only relative to their conceptual scheme, they do not exist “in virtue of” it (621). Persons exist in virtue of their satisfaction of the CE of persons.

This move, Sosa believes, is an effective rebuttal to the charge that CR’s account of how it is that persons exist is viciously circular (621). It carries, though, a heavy price. For Sosa seems to be conceding that in some sense persons *do* exist prior to the time at which they incorporate their form into their conceptual scheme. Persons, he seems to be saying, existed as unrecognized entities, as things that did not “stand out” amongst all of the things satisfying some CE or other until the time at which this incorporation occurred. Our present conceptual scheme itself forces us to concede as much to explain its development.

This view of the matter, however is compatible with the truth of A; its defenders would agree that it is possible for the existence of a supervenient entity to be unacknowledged. It is by taking seriously this possibility that they arrive at the position that the existence of a supervenient entity is not dependent upon our acceptance of its CE. Thus, unless there is a reading of the locution ‘existing in virtue of’ that does not allow for the possibility of a supervenient entity existing unacknowledged by anyone, it is not possible to square Sosa’s response to this objection to CR with his rejection of A.<sup>8</sup>

Even if such a reading were forthcoming, however, the defenders of CR would still face difficulties. For those who adopt this doctrine will find it hard, if not impossible, to explain our development of concepts of supervenient entities (621-22). They will be unable to avail themselves of the plausible, empiricist doctrine that we form new concepts in order to categorize supervenient entities of whose existence we had failed to take notice, entities, which, according to CR, do not exist. If the only entities that currently exist are those whose CE have been incorporated into our conceptual scheme, then we would seem to have no reason to develop additional concepts, since there would be no supervenient entities whose existence we would be failing to acknowledge if we did not.

This objection to CR is based upon the assumption that it would be “pressure” from supervenient entities of a sort whose CE had yet to be acknowledged that would serve as the impetus for the development of a concept. But, if CR were true, such motivation would be lacking. Thus, if our forming of a concept is not initiated by our realization that there exists entities of a sort of which we had failed to take notice, why would we ever make additions to our conceptual scheme?

Sosa does not offer an answer to this question. Instead, he raises, to those who would adopt the empiricist explanation of concept development, the specter of exploding reality (622). To adopt this explanation, one must concede that there is a “plethora” of entities existing unnoticed and in the same places

as those with which we are familiar. What Sosa says in response to the following objection, however, can be extended so as to provide an alternative explanation for concept acquisition (albeit at the price of conflating CR with A).

The objection is that CR rules out the existence of “artifacts and particles” that have yet to be discovered (623). We believe that such things currently exist, despite the fact that our conceptual scheme does not yet include their CE. To accommodate this intuition, Sosa proposes the following modification of CR (623):

Necessarily, supervenient entities of sort S exist just in case we would under “appropriate circumstances” accept the CE of S and there are things satisfying those CE (MCR).

According to MCR, undiscovered particles and artifacts do exist, despite our current failure to acknowledge their CE, since we would incorporate their CE into our conceptual scheme if we were situated in a suitably different way.

Sosa foregoes spelling out what ‘appropriate circumstances’ means in MCR (p. 623); but the following, I submit, is the most plausible explication: the circumstances appropriate to our acceptance of as yet to be incorporated CE would be a situation in which our beliefs and/or interests dictated that we add them to our conceptual scheme. To say that under appropriate circumstances we would come to recognize the existence of entities of a yet to be acknowledged sort is to say that there is a doxastic/conative shift the occurrence of which would require us to believe that these entities existed. Thus, according to MCR, entities meeting the CE of a given sort exist just in case we have been or could become compelled by our beliefs or interests to accept their existence.

This modification of CR would allow its defenders to meet the foregoing criticism concerning concept development. They could respond that we develop new concepts so as to accommodate additional beliefs or interests. The occurrence of a doxastic/conative shift, they could say, would be the impetus behind the expansion of our conceptual scheme, an expansion that would involve the incorporation of the CE of entities that had existed all along, albeit unrecognized by us. Persons, Sosa could contend, fell into this category prior to the time at which they accepted their own CE, thus also handling the first objection to CR he posed.

The problem with MCR, however, is that it yields a world of supervenient objects that is indistinguishable from the one entailed by A. For it is doubtful that there are any entities whose existence is entailed by A whose CE we would not be motivated to acknowledge under any circumstances. For the posits of MCR to be fewer than those of A, there must be CE we could never become forced to acknowledge. But it seems that for any unconventional entities, whose existence is entailed by A, it would be possible to describe circumstances in which additional beliefs or interests would compel us to acknowledge their

CE. If this is so, one gains nothing in terms of ontological parsimoniousness by adopting MCR rather than A. (Although it must be conceded that were MCR's defenders able to solve the coherency and circularity problems presented above, their doctrine would lack a feature had by A: ipso facto entailing the existence of *scheme-independent* entities.)

For example, it turns out that MCR entails the existence of snowdiscalls, since were the stacking of snowdiscalls to become the object of a popular game (the required shape being that of a snowdiscall so that the players need not be overly precise) we would be compelled to acknowledge the CE of snowdiscalls. Thus, by adopting MCR Sosa would deprive himself of his reason for rejecting A.

Let me clarify the form of my argument. I am not inferring that all of the *infinite* objects entailed by A are also entailed by MCR from the claim that each one is such that there circumstances under which we would accept its CE. To make this argument work, one would have to defend a premise concerning an infinite number of objects, some of which might be unknowable—a daunting task to be sure! Moreover, one would need to establish an “omega” rule according to which the possession of a feature by *each* one of the objects in an infinite domain entails its possession by *all* such objects, no mean feat in-itself. These are definitely tasks for another day.

Still less would I care to ground the required generalization on the basis of the premise that any *arbitrary* object in the infinite domain of objects entailed by A is such that there is a doxastic/conative shift compelling recognition of its CE. This premise would be impossible to justify: one could not know what is true of an object without being able to individuate it.

My argument is inductive. Let the defender of MCR describe the CE of entities in whose existence she does not believe. I shall proceed to detail circumstances under which those CE are accepted. Repeated success at this would make it reasonable to believe that MCR has the same ontological commitments as A.

One might then object that MCR is an uncharitable gloss of Sosa, given that we would become compelled to believe in the Tooth Fairy were conquering aliens to threaten genocide unless we did so. To avoid this problem, the objection would continue, would require circumscribing the beliefs and interests referred to in MCR to those of explanation and prediction. Such a revision must be resisted, however, given the importance we place upon our extrascientific concerns. Surely we have reasons besides those having to do with our need to explain and predict scientifically interesting phenomena to modify our conceptual scheme. To believe otherwise is to countenance eliminativism regarding most of the entities of our current ontology, pace the conceptual relativist's original proposal. If we are going to expand our conceptual scheme only to suit the needs of science, consistency demands that we jettison all but fermions from our current ontology, since presently they are the only posits essential to scientific descriptions of reality. Moreover, the

suggested circumscription has not been shown to be necessary: we would only be compelled *to act* as if we believed in the Tooth Fairy were the above threat issued.

Thus, faced with the conflation of A and MCR, an ontologist who is unwilling to adopt an eliminativist's stance must formulate

### A DEFENSE OF A

The first challenge Sosa presents is that of explaining why we recognize only some of the "plethora" of supervenient entities that exist according to A. The obvious response is: we recognize the entities it is to our advantage to acknowledge. That is, we will acknowledge the existence of entities of a sort S just in case we have an interest in doing so. Most supervenient entities go unacknowledged, because of the limited range of our concerns. When our beliefs and/or interests change so does our world view: we begin to acknowledge the CE of entities of whose existence we had been unaware.

As for Sosa's charge that under A "ordinary reality suffers a sort of explosion," there is the response that he has misidentified the site of the detonation. If A is true, reality is much richer in supervenient entities than we unreflectively think it is. Which is to say that it is one's *world view* that explodes upon acceptance of A, not reality.

Assuming that there are non-supervenient objects, the world is replete with simples upon which supervenes a plethora of entities, some of which we acknowledge, the vast majority of which go unnoticed. That such is the case is no more puzzling than the possibility of a person simultaneously filling the roles of husband, father, teacher, and inhabitant of the only planet in our solar system whose name begins with 'E'.

Explaining how it is that a supervenient entity and its base, if they are not identical, can simultaneously occupy the same space is difficult. But, it should be noted, one cannot avoid this problem by adopting MCR. For its defenders must still account for how it is that two conventional objects, such as a statue and a lump of clay, can inhabit the same spatiotemporal region.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as David Oderberg has shown, it is not co-location *per se* that violates common sense; rather is the simultaneous sharing of a place by distinct entities *of the same substantial kind*.<sup>10</sup> On reflection, that co-location occurs seems unproblematic, given the possibility of an entity satisfying more than one set of CE.

Were A to entail that co-located entities are identical, as Sosa maintains,<sup>11</sup> its defenders would face a serious problem, since Saul Kripke has convincingly argued that identities hold of necessity<sup>12</sup> whereas a lump of clay, *e.g.*, may exist without being the statue it composes. But A does not carry this consequence. To the contrary, its plentitudinarian ontology is generated only if one assumes that the difference between the persistence conditions of a constituting and a supervenient entity suffices to distinguish them by Leibniz's Law, which is what defenders of "contingent identity" deny.



To avoid having co-located entities, should we jettison CE from our understanding of supervenient entities, reducing them to being nothing over and above their bases? Appealing to the "common sense" practice of disregarding the forms of things when counting them only invites the charge that ontology is not ordinary inventorying.<sup>13</sup> Counting any "unified hunk of matter as one" may satisfy common sense at the price of overlooking ontologically significant distinctions. Moreover, if CE are not a part of our understanding of what it is for a supervenient entity to exist, we are left with the problem mentioned earlier of explaining how a thing may fail to exist as a C while instantiating the concept of C-ness. Ontological parsimoniousness is not worth either one of these costs.

### CONCLUSION

Having examined Sosa's "menu of ontological possibilities," we have found no Ockhamistic justification for selecting MCR over A. Further, we have seen that his objections to A can be met. Thus, we are left with no reason to shrink from the view that reality is not a function of our thinking. In only a limited sense is CR true: those aspects of reality we are capable of understanding are, of course, conceptualizable by us. But God's world, as one might put it, transcends even our clearest view of it.<sup>14</sup>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Journal of Philosophy*, XC (1993): 605-626. All page numbers in the text refer to this work.

<sup>2</sup>Putnam develops this view in *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) chs. 5 and 11 and *Realism and Reason* (New York: Cambridge, 1983) pp. 205-228.

<sup>3</sup>Though he professes agnosticism, I shall consider Sosa an advocate of CR, given that he defends this view without offering a brief for either one of its rivals.

<sup>4</sup>In this paper I shall not consider the third option that Sosa proposes, "eliminativism." This view has it that the correct response to the problems posed by both A and CR is to deny the existence of supervenient entities, such as tables, chairs and persons. For a defense of eliminativism see Mark Heller's *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four Dimensional Hunks of Matter*, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990) and Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>Mereology is the view that any group of two or more objects is constitutive of another object.

<sup>6</sup>In an earlier paper, "Subjects Among Other Things," (*Philosophical Perspectives 1, Metaphysics*, 1987, pp. 168-169), Sosa denies that there are any non-supervenient entities, that

is, entities whose existence is not dependent upon the arrangement of other entities. My own inclination is to posit "simples" as well, but I shall put aside the issue as nothing below turns on it.

Mitchell Green points out (in correspondence) that Sosa's reductive analysis of supervenient entities runs contrary to the standard use of the notion of supervenience, *viz.*, to help account for that which can not be reductively analyzed. Green suggests that Sosa's criteria of exist be thought of as only sufficient conditions. Were Sosa's position thus modified, it would still be open to the criticism offered below.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Eli Hirsch, *Dividing Reality* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) for a discussion of why ordinary terms such as 'snowball' are preferable to strange ones such as 'snowdiscall.'

<sup>8</sup>Sosa's response to the following objections could get him off the hook here as well. But it, as we shall see, faces problems of its own.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of the problem of coincident entities that is in line with the views presented here see Steven Yablo, "Identity, Essence, and Indiscernibility," *Journal of Philosophy* (1987): pp. 293-314. Cf. also Greg Ray's appraisal of Yablo's account, "Identity and Cumulative Essence," presented at the 1994 meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association.

<sup>10</sup>David Oderberg, "Coincidence under a Sortal," *Philosophical Review* (1996): pp. 145-172.

<sup>11</sup>In personal correspondence.

<sup>12</sup>Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980) pp. 97-105.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Michael Rea, "An Aristotelian Solution to the Problem of Material Constitution," presented at the 1995 Eastern Division Meeting of the APA.

<sup>14</sup>Other discussions of a plenitudinarian approach to ontology are found in W. V. O. Quine, "On Multiplying Entities," in *Ways of Paradox* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 259-264, Richard Sharvy, "Individuation, Essence, and Plenitude," *Philosophical Studies* 44, pp. 61-70, David Lewis, *On The Plurality of Worlds*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), Richard Cartwright, "Scattered Objects," in his *Philosophical Papers*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 171-86, James Van Cleve, "Mereological Essentialism, Mereological Conjunctivism, and Identity through Time," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XI, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press), pp. 141-56, and Roderick Chisolm, "Scattered Objects," in *Being and Saying: Essays for Richard Cartwright*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) pp. 167-174.

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