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Conservatism, Counterexamples and Debunking

By Daniel Z. Korman

Many thanks to my critics – Meg Wallace, Louis deRosset and Chris Tillman and Joshua Spencer – for their probing questions about *Objects*.[1] Conversations with each of them over the years already had a profound impact on the book, and I am grateful to them for continuing to push me to revisit and rethink key aspects of my defence of conservatism.

Wallace contends that my arguments from counterexamples against universalism and nihilism are question-begging and cannot be expected to change anyone's mind. She challenges my comparison of the arguments to other widely accepted arguments from counterexamples, and she maintains that a better comparison is to Moore's response to the sceptic. In §1, I attempt to clarify the dialectical and epistemic role that my arguments from counterexamples are meant to play, I provide a limited defence of the comparison to the Gettier examples and I embrace the comparison to Moore.

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1 Thanks also to Thomas Barrett, Chad Carmichael and Chris Weaver for helpful discussion.

deRosset argues that my characterization of conservatism offers little to no guidance as to which objects conservatism is and is not committed to, that natural ways of developing the view are unpromising and that conservatism ought to give way to a liberalism on which common sense is aided and at times corrected by scientific investigation. In §2, I provide a clearer formulation of conservatism, explain how a conservative should think about the interaction between intuition and science and discuss what conservatives should say about scattered territories, clonal colonies and arbitrary systems.

Tillman and Spencer challenged my contention that object debunking arguments can be blocked only by appeal to what I call 'apprehension' and questioned why they cannot be blocked by a straightforward appeal to causal connections between ordinary objects and our beliefs about them, particularly given my construal of the arguments as explanatory challenges. In §3, I try to clarify why, even while trees (if they exist) are paradigmatically causal, conservatives are rationally obstructed from believing that it is trees that are causing our tree beliefs. Unless, that is, they join me in invoking apprehension.

1. Wallace on counterexamples

In Ch. 4 of *Objects*, I advance arguments from counterexamples against a variety of revisionary views. Here was a representative example (where a trog is an object composed of a dog and a tree trunk):

The Trog Argument

(CX1) If universalism is true, then there are trogs.

(CX2) There are no trogs.

(CX3) So, universalism is false.

I took the principal motivation for CX2 to be an intuition to the effect that dogs and tree trunks in arbitrary arrangements do not compose anything. I said that arguments such as these are my main reason for rejecting universalism, and I likened them to other arguments from counterexamples, like Gettier's arguments against the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief and Kripke's Gödel-Schmidt argument against descriptivism. I acknowledged that the trog argument, unlike these others, begs the question against the universalist, but I maintained that that does not stop it from being a perfectly good reason for rejecting universalism.

Wallace wonders: who exactly is it that I expect to change their minds about universalism as a result of hearing the trog argument? Not universalists, since it begs the question against them. Not fellow conservatives, since they already oppose universalism. But neither can it be expected to change

the minds of the uncommitted. Anyone who understands the questions at issue well enough to be decidedly agnostic about universalism is already well aware that universalists are committed to such extraordinary objects, and there is nothing about the example of trogs in particular that is going to make them rethink their agnosticism. Finding no relevant audience for the arguments, she concludes that 'we should be about as optimistic about the dialectical effectiveness of Korman's arguments from counterexample as we are about the dialectical effectiveness of Moorean [arguments] against the radical sceptic.'

I agree with all of this. I do not expect anyone to change their mind about universalism merely as a result of hearing the trog argument.[2] My main contention vis-à-vis the trog argument is just that it is a perfectly good reason for a conservative to reject universalism.[3] You do not need a non-question-begging argument. Nor do you need some complicated theoretical argument. Nor, for that matter, do you need any complicated theoretical reasons for accepting CX2. You do not need Hirsch's argument from meta-semantic charity, for instance or Thomasson's arguments from analytic entailments.[4] Your intuition that CX2 is true is reason enough for you to accept CX2.

I say I do not expect anyone to change their mind about universalism *merely* as a result of hearing the trog argument. I am, however, guardedly optimistic that some will change their minds about universalism as a result of hearing my *defence* of the trog argument. Universalists are pretty clear about their reasons for being unpersuaded by such arguments, and I spend a good deal of time (in Chs. 5–9) addressing attempts to dismiss the trog argument as resting on an equivocation, attempts to debunk anti-trog intuitions and attempts to establish the falsity of CX2 by appeal to the vagueness or arbitrariness of a trogless ontology.

These auxiliary arguments of mine are not at all question-begging, and there is every possibility that universalists, upon hearing them, will become convinced that their own stated reasons for resisting the trog argument are unconvincing. And if I can convince them of *that* – that they have no good reason to think that the trog argument fails – then they may well embrace the trog argument and reject universalism on that basis. After all, the

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2   Though I can see how someone might get the wrong idea, since I do say: 'some will find my [trog argument] just as persuasive as the Gettier arguments' (29). But one can find an argument persuasive even if one is not, in that moment, being persuaded for the first time of its conclusion. I find Gettier's argument persuasive every time I hear it, but I am not changing my mind about the JTB analysis in those moments.

3   Compare Pryor on Moore's argument (2004: 362): 'I agree that there are *some* respects in which [Moorean] arguments are persuasively crippled, and so can fail to satisfy … In terms of their justificatory structure, though, I think these arguments have nothing to be ashamed of.'

4   See Ch. 4.4 for my discussion of Hirsch (2005) and Thomasson (2007).

philosophers in question (analytic metaphysicians) do not tend to have a blanket hostility to intuition-driven arguments. It is just that they thought there was some localized problem with relying on these intuitions in particular.

Wallace's comparison of my trog argument to a Moorean anti-sceptical argument is certainly apt:

The Moorean Argument

(MR1) If scepticism is true, then I don't know that I have hands.

(MR2) I know that I have hands.

(MR3) So scepticism is false.

But the comparison should not be to a Moore who advances this argument, drops the mic and promptly leaves the room declaring victory. Rather, it is to a Moore who takes up Stroud's challenge (quoted by Wallace) of accounting for 'the considerations which have traditionally been thought to lead to a negative answer' and tries to convince the sceptic – or at least the uncommitted – that there is less to the case against MR2 than meets the eye. And once all the most serious challenges to MR2 have been addressed, and all the reasons for embracing scepticism have been undermined, Moore's argument is waiting with open arms to serve as a reason to reject scepticism.

I am not entirely sure what this implies about whether the trog argument – or the Moorean argument, for that matter – is (in Wallace's words) 'inescapably question-begging'. If an inescapably question-begging argument for p is supposed to be an argument that cannot rationally persuade anyone to change their mind about whether p, then no, my trog argument is not inescapably question-begging. A universalist who has just been convinced that her arguments for universalism all fail can be rationally persuaded by the trog argument to reject universalism – as opposed to, say, remaining agnostic or clinging to universalism even absent positive reason to accept it. If, instead, an inescapably question-begging argument is supposed to be an argument that cannot rationally persuade anyone *without being supplemented by other arguments*, then yes the trog argument is inescapably question-begging. But in that case 'inescapably question-begging' is something of a misnomer, since some inescapably question-begging arguments, as we just saw, have the potential to change people's minds.

Finally, let me say something about my comparison of the trog argument to the Gettier and Gödel-Schmidt arguments. I take them to be analogous insofar as their main premise is (or need be) backed by nothing more than an intuition. The point of the analogy was to show that the trog argument is on a firm epistemic foundation, as firm as these other celebrated arguments from counterexamples. This seemed worth emphasizing because, when universalists address the allure of conservatism, they often write as if the principal

reason for accepting CX2 is that undergraduates or 'the folk' are inclined to assent to it. I agree with universalists that it counts for little if anything that the philosophically uninformed are inclined to accept CX2 (in part because they can so easily be brought around to denying it).[5] We who accept CX2 accept it for the same perfectly good reason that we think characters in Gettier cases lack knowledge: because it seems true, and not because of speculations about what 'the folk' would say if we asked them.

The analogy ends there. I agree with Wallace that the arguments differ starkly in their dialectical effectiveness, that Gettier's argument unlike mine brings something new to the table and that my argument unlike Gettier's begs the question against its targets. I also agree with Wallace that universalists should not be moved by the Moorean suggestion that the intuitive plausibility of CX2 outweighs the intuitive plausibility of the premises of their pro-universalist arguments. After all, intuitive support is defeasible and universalists have their reasons for thinking that anti-trog intuitions are misleading or untrustworthy.

That said, universalists had better not take the mere fact that intuition is *fallible* as sufficient reason to disregard the intuitions backing CX2, lest they undermine the Gettier argument as well. But more targeted attacks on anti-trog intuitions, like the compatibilist strategies and debunking arguments, are on point and render a mere 'Moorean invitation' to appreciate the comparative strength of the intuitions ineffective. This is why I devote a good chunk of the book to defending CX2 against such attacks.

2. deRosset on conservatism

In *Objects*, I characterize conservative views as those on which there are such ordinary objects as dogs, tree trunks and statues and no such extraordinary objects as trogs, incars or gollyswoggles.[6] I do not provide an account of what it is to be ordinary or extraordinary. But, as deRosset observes, without some such account, there is no telling what conservatism entails about objects beyond the specific examples already appearing on the list.

One might naturally try to explicate ordinariness in terms of what the philosophically innocent believe or intuit there to be, or what they *would*, with this or that additional education, believe or intuit there to be. But I agree with deRosset (§§1–2) that it would be a mistake to try to characterize conservatism in terms of anyone's actual or hypothetical attitudes. Actual attitudes (e.g. failure to believe in some misanthropic insect) may just be the result of lacking relevant evidence, and, as for what people would say after

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5 One might naturally think of *Objects* as a defence of 'folk ontology', but in truth I have a somewhat strained relationship with the folk. See Ch. 5.6 of *Objects* and Korman and Carmichael (2017: §4).

6 See the précis for an explanation of what incars and gollyswoggles are.

seeing all the relevant evidence, I agree with deRosset that it is 'unclear why we should take such dispositions as our guide, rather than more directly considering the evidence' (§1). Moreover, conservatism is meant to be a thesis about what there is, and not about what this or that person would take there to be for this or that reason.

What I propose, instead, is simply to drop the reference to ordinariness and extraordinariness and understand conservatism as follows:

> Bare Conservatism: There are dogs, tree trunks, and statues, and no trogs, incars, or gollyswoggles.

Anyone who accepts bare conservatism will now count as a conservative, regardless of motivation or methodology, and regardless of how they extend the lists of existents and non-existents.

While bare conservatism leaves a great many questions unanswered, it is more than adequate for my purposes in the book. For, despite saying and implying relatively little about what there is and what there is not, bare conservatism says more than enough to be wildly controversial, widely rejected by metaphysicians and to be a proper target of all of the arguments I address in *Objects*, including arguments from arbitrariness, vagueness, overdetermination, constitution and anthropocentricity. Conservatives may wish to specify general principles of composition, constitution and persistence that yield the bare conservative ontology and that tell us how to extend the lists of existents and non-existents.[7] That is a valuable project. It is just not my project. My project is to address the problems that arise for *any* view with the commitments of bare conservatism, thereby showing that the former project is not doomed from the outset.

Having now answered deRosset's titular question – though perhaps not in the way he had hoped – let us turn to the question of what conservatives should say about some of the examples he considers: scattered territories, clonal colonies and arbitrary physical systems. Conservatism (understood from here on as bare conservatism) is not committed to the existence of any of these things. Nor is it committed to their non-existence. Yet even if there is nothing a conservative *must* say about these items, there is still the question of what a conservative *should* say and, indeed, whether there is anything sensible that a conservative *can* say. If it turns out that there is nothing sensible for conservatives to say, then these items pose a serious if not fatal dilemma for conservatism.

Let us take each of his examples in turn, starting with the territory of Russia, that is the land occupied by Russia. If conservatives affirm its existence, then, owing to the islands within the territory, they would evidently be committed to the existence of a scattered object, which would open them up

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7 See, for example Carmichael (2015) for a conservative friendly answer to the special composition question.

to the objection that it is intolerably arbitrary to believe in territories but not trogs. But denying that there is such a thing as the land that Russia occupies is dangerously close to denying the obvious, which threatens to leave the conservative in a precarious epistemic position. For if they are willing to deny the existence of some things that seem obviously to exist, then this would seem to undercut any reasons they might have for believing in dogs, trunks and statues. So there may seem to be no good options for conservatives for resisting the argument from the existence of territories to the existence of trogs.

There is no one way that conservatives *must* respond to this dilemma. But I think conservatives are best advised to take the first horn, affirm the existence of the territory (i.e. land) occupied by Russia, but deny that it is a single object composed of the various mountains, steppes, icecaps, islands and so on. Rather, 'the territory occupied by Russia' is a disguised plural, referring plurally to the mountains and other landforms. Accordingly, an arbitrariness argument from the territory of Russia to trogs is easily blocked: whereas a trog is meant to be a single object, the territory of Russia is a plurality of objects, and the difference between being one and being many is an ontologically significant difference. deRosset attempts to head off this line of response by contending that my own diagnostics for disguised plurals (in Ch. 8.3) fail to deliver the verdict that 'the territory of Russia' is a disguised plural. I agree that it fails the diagnostics, but I do not think that is because it is not plural referring. Rather, it is because it is a mass term, and even mass terms that plainly refer plurally – like 'the furniture' or 'the jewellery' – fail the diagnostics.[8] Even without the help of the diagnostics, however, I find it highly plausible that 'the territory occupied by Russia' refers to a variety of landforms. Indeed, it is plausible that *all* mass terms refer to pluralities, or at least to something other than a single object (e.g. a set or some stuff).[9]

Before turning to clonal colonies and arbitrary systems, I want to address deRosset's suggestion that conservatism should give way to 'liberalism', according to which judgements about which objects there are should be 'guided by common sense and initial plausibility, aided and corrected by the sciences' (§5).[10] Understood as bare conservatism, there is no tension

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8   These are what Steen (2012: §1.1) calls 'concrete quasi-mass nouns'. I mention this shortcoming of the diagnostics in *Objects* (147), but in fairness I hid that concession in a footnote.

9   Having just denied the existence of an object composed of those disconnected landforms, one might wonder whether I accept the 'communitarian' thesis that no single object has disconnected parts. The answer is *no*, for reasons I give in *Objects* (154).

10 I shall resist the urge to demand from deRosset a more precise formulation of ontological liberalism that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions under which science is meant to overturn common sense.

between conservatism and liberalism, and thankfully so since the view deRosset describes commands strong bipartisan support.

Indeed, it is easy to think of cases in which initially plausible beliefs about objects should be revised in light of scientific investigation. Suppose we have been seeing (always from a distance) what appears to be a large panther-sized animal, which we have dubbed 'the bliger'.[11] A field biologist decides to investigate. She examines the footprints and droppings and recordings of its hoots and concludes that what we have been seeing is really just some monkeys, a sloth and an owl traveling in a pack and that we were not in fact seeing a single panther-sized object. We should take her word for it that we were seeing a pack of small animals and should revise our earlier judgement that there was a single large animal there.

We should take her word for it that there was no panther-sized *animal* there. Should we also take her word for it that there was no panther-sized *object* there, and may I now (finally) declare victory over universalists, according to whom there *is* a panther-sized object composed of those smaller animals? Of course not. Not even if her colleagues all join her in denying that there is a single object composed of those animals. Not even if we can get her to confirm that she really did mean to say that there is no *object*, not just that there is no *animal*. What matters is not what biologists say but what their evidence supports. And while it would not be our place as metaphysicians to challenge their assessment of what produced those hoots and droppings,[12] there is no need to be shy about challenging their assessment of whether animals so-arranged compose something. Not every step in a scientist's reasoning is a reflection of some expertise that philosophers do not share.

Conservatives should adopt this same attitude towards field biologist Michael Grant's remarks about those tens of thousands of Utahn aspens, in the passage quoted by deRosset (§1). Grant tells us that they (i) are genetically identical, (ii) have interconnected roots and (iii) compose a single organism (Pando). In that same passage, Grant tells us that (iv) 'a group of thousands of aspens can actually be a single organism', which seems to entail (*contra* metaphysical orthodoxy) that a single object is sometimes identical to many objects. His evidence for all this evidently consists of genetic or morphological analysis, together with digging up some roots and looking at them. And while it would be imprudent for metaphysicians to challenge a biologist's assessment of whether the evidence supports (i) and (ii), there is no reason to think that biologists are better positioned than metaphysicians to assess whether it supports (iii) and (iv).

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11 The example is from van Inwagen (1990: 104).

12 Even this may be an overstatement. Metaphysicians need not be shy about insisting that her evidence falls short of establishing that it was owls, as opposed to atoms arranged owlwise, producing those hoots. See Korman (forthcoming: §5) for further discussion.

So what *should* a conservative say about (iii)?[13] My intuitions (like deRosset's) are silent on the matter. Certainly, though, the absence of intuition is at least partly due to a lack of empirical information regarding the extent of the interconnectedness of these roots. Are the root systems of the different trees mostly distinct, connected only by thin tendrils running between them? If so, then intuitively the individual trees do not compose anything and the conservative should deny the existence of Pando. Or do the individual trees converge underground in a massive shared trunk giving way to five enormous roots spanning the whole hundred acres? In that case, there intuitively is a single gigantic tree that has all the individual aspens as parts and the conservative should affirm the existence of Pando.[14]

In all likelihood, what is going on underground is somewhere in between those two extremes. In that case, the conservative should let the matter be settled by further scientific investigation (e.g. excavation) together with intuitions about whether composition occurs in light of what is going on underground. Perhaps even full knowledge of what is going on underground would not result in a clear intuition about whether those aspens compose a single object. In that case, conservatives should view this as an indication that it is *indeterminate* whether the trees and roots compose something and take this to be a borderline case of composition (see Ch. 9 of *Objects* for a defence of borderline composition).

In answering the question of whether Pando exists, conservatives should be guided, not by what non-philosophers are inclined to say or believe (be they folk or scientists), but simply by what the evidence supports. With some propositions, assessing whether some evidence supports them – not to mention collecting the evidence – requires the expertise of a trained scientist. With others, it requires the expertise of a trained metaphysician, trained among other things to mark and appreciate the significance of key distinctions. In some cases, including the case at hand, it will have to be a joint effort. But if the empirical evidence, once clearly in view, seems not to support the biologist's contention that there is a single object composed of (or identical to!) those trees, metaphysicians should not be shy about saying so.

With this in mind, let us turn to arbitrary physical systems. Take some particular dog and trunk and let us ask: is there a physical system comprising the atoms arranged dogwise and the atoms arranged trunkwise? A dilemma looms. If the conservative agrees that this system exists, then that is tantamount to accepting that trogs exist. Yet denying that there is such a system, deRosset tells us, 'is implausible in light of the results of settled science' (§4).

There are ways for conservatives to embrace the first horn without being saddled with trogs, but I do not find them especially tempting. One might, for

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13 Regarding (iv), I think Grant is just mistaken: a group is a plurality (see Ch. 8.3) and no plurality is identical to a single object.

14 Caring about intuitions is not compulsory for conservatives. But it is advisable.

instance, insist that 'the system' refers to something other than a single object (e.g. a plurality or mass) and, therefore, is not a trog. However, I agree with deRosset that that is not what is happening here; if there is a system, then it is a single object.[15] Alternatively, just as some think the statue-shaped lump of clay does not have the statue's nose as a part despite having all of the nose's atomic parts as parts (cf. Baker 2000: 181), one could say that the system does not have the dog and trunk as parts despite having all their atomic parts as parts and, therefore, is not strictly speaking a trog. But such hair-splitters would still be committed to there being a single object filling the region filled by the dog and the trunk, which strikes me as no less objectionable than there being an object composed of the dog and trunk.

Conservatives should instead take the second horn and deny the existence of the system. What, then, are these 'results of settled science' that are supposed to make this denial so implausible? If deRosset just means that scientific investigation has resulted in a consensus among practitioners that there are such systems, this in itself carries no more weight than a consensus among biologists that Pando exists and is a single object that is identical to some aspens. Not even if we can get scientists to clarify that they really do think of a system as a single composite object and that they do not regard 'systems'-talk as a round-about way of talking about pluralities. What matters is whether they have produced any evidence in support of the metaphysically loaded conclusions they draw, and which tells against less-metaphysically loaded counterparts.[16]

In the case of Pando, biologists brought new evidence to the table that does plausibly have some bearing on the question of composition, namely the surprising discovery of interconnected roots. Are there any comparable surprising empirical findings that bear on the question of whether the atoms arranged dogwise and trunkwise compose something? It cannot simply be that we are able to calculate a centre of mass for those atoms. Our ability to perform that calculation no more requires us to postulate a single object whose centre of mass it is than our ability to calculate the average height of some people requires us to postulate a person whose height it is.

Perhaps, then, there is some phenomenon that cannot be explained by the atoms alone and the properties they collectively instantiate, but only by a single object composed of the atoms arranged dogwise and trunkwise. Or perhaps there is some physical law that makes indispensable reference to arbitrary systems. If indeed arbitrary physical systems, *construed specifically*

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15 Though see Nolan (2017: 82) for the intriguing suggestion that systems are not material objects but rather something more like events or states of affairs.

16 deRosset hints (in footnote 27) that any attempt to paraphrase away systems in terms of pluralities will face the very objections that I myself wield in Ch. 5 against nihilist attempts to paraphrase away statues. Not so. Those objections apply only to 'hermeneutic' paraphrases, not the sort of 'revolutionary' paraphrase I hint at here, on which 'there is a system composed of the atoms arranged dogwise and trunkwise' is not being claimed to have a true reading.

as composite material objects, do turn out to be indispensable to (not merely referenced by) scientific explanations, that would constitute a new and powerful indispensability argument for permissivism, and it would be interesting to see it worked out in detail. When that time comes, I will be eager to take a close look at the argument.

One might think that this response will come back to bite the conservative, for there likewise is nothing for statues to explain that is not equally well explained by atoms arranged statue-wise. I am inclined to agree (and say as much in Ch. 10): there is no good indispensability argument for the existence of statues. But since we have immediate perceptual and intuitive justification for belief in statues, they do not have to earn their keep by doing indispensable explanatory work. By contrast, there is no immediate perceptual or intuitive reason to believe in arbitrary physical systems. So, absent an indispensability argument for the existence of such objects, there would seem to be no reason at all to believe in them.

3. Tillman and Spencer on debunking

Ch. 7 of *Objects* was meant to address remarks like the following, which can be found throughout the objects literature:

> On [conservative views] the entities that exist correspond exactly with the categories for continuants in *our* conceptual scheme: trees, aggregates, statues, lumps, persons, bodies, and so on. How convenient! It would be nothing short of a miracle if reality just happened to match our conceptual scheme in this way (Sider 2001: 156).

> [W]ouldn't it 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 (Hawthorne 2006: 109).[17]

The problem is that no one was developing such remarks into a proper argument, with clearly articulated and independently motivated premises. Nevertheless, there is clearly *something* to these remarks, so I took it upon myself to extract an argument that I could engage with.

The talk of coincidence and irrelevant influences led me to model my reconstruction of the latent argument on explanatory challenges in meta-ethics (e.g. Harman 1977, Street 2006). There, the idea is that, by realist lights, the objects of moral belief do not figure into the explanation of those

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17 Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018: §4) disavow any reading of this passage as endorsing a debunking argument.

beliefs, leaving us with no conceivable explanation for how we would have ended up with accurate beliefs. This, in turn, is meant to convince us to abandon either the beliefs themselves or the realist assumptions that gave rise to the explanatory problems in the first place.

One might naturally suspect that those arguments are a terrible model for whatever is going on in those passages. After all, unlike mind-independent moral facts, there would seem to be nothing to prevent facts about concrete objects like trees from figuring straightforwardly into *causal* explanations of our beliefs. Even so, I tried to argue – on behalf of my opponent, the object debunker – that without a further, heavy-duty explanatory commitment to what I call 'apprehension', the conservative is forced to concede that the envisaged causal connection would be 'deviant'. And this concession, I argued, forces one to suspend belief that it is trees out there causing our tree experiences.

I tried to define deviance as a certain sort of independence between the features of a distal stimulus and the factors responsible for its being represented as having those features. My Colourization case (106) was meant to play a dual role of illuminating the sort of independence that makes for deviance and motivating the idea that initially justified causal beliefs can be undermined by the recognized presence of this sort of independence. Here is the case (with minor modifications):

Colourization

Maria sees an image of a red ball, and believes it was caused by a red ball. She then learns some things about the production of the image. A digital camera snapped a black and white image of a ball. The image was then opened in a computer program designed to colourize the image. Some colours, like red and blue, produce indistinguishable shades of grey, and in such cases the program selects among the candidate colours on the basis of the ink levels of the attached printer. In this case, the program coloured the ball in the image red rather than blue because there was more red ink than blue ink available in the attached printer.

Tillman and Spencer are unconvinced. They agree that Maria cannot rationally retain her belief that it was a red ball that caused the image of the red ball. They also agree that any causal connection between (say) tree facts and our tree beliefs would be mediated by perceptual and cognitive processes that are shaped by biological or cultural contingencies. But they were unable to find (and not for lack of trying) any convincing argument that tree beliefs exhibit the same type or same degree of independence from the tree facts that was supposed to be epistemically damning in Colourization. Moreover, they identify some differences between the cases which suggest that object beliefs do not in fact exhibit the same degree of independence. They conclude that ordinary perceptual beliefs about objects

can be saved from debunking by straightforward appeal to causal explanations, and with no need for apprehension.

I hope they are right. After all, if the object debunking arguments can be so easily resisted, that is a win for conservatives, and it should be the *anti*conservative's job (not mine) to convince them otherwise – perhaps by extracting a more promising argument from the passages quoted above. That said, I continue to think that there is a powerful explanatory challenge here and that the Colourization case is getting at something important. So let me try to do better.

My new strategy will be to recast Colourization by putting it to work in an argument from analogy. The case was not originally intended to play that role, nor is it especially well suited to do so in its present form. However, as we will see, with some modifications it can underwrite a formidable challenge for conservatives, and without any elusive appeal to the (admittedly) ill-defined notion of deviance.

Let an *informed conservative* be a conservative who has been presented with the explanatory revelations that are meant to drive the debunking arguments, for instance that there is a complete and completely satisfying explanation of our tree beliefs in terms of the activities of atoms arranged treewise and the adaptive value of perceptually and conceptually representing such arrangements as making up a single object. Here, then, is the new and improved Colourization argument:

The Colourization Argument

(CL1) Maria should withhold from believing that her belief in a red ball was caused by a red ball.

(CL2) If Maria should withhold from believing that her belief in a red ball was caused by a red ball, then informed conservatives should withhold from believing that their belief in trees is caused by trees.

(CL3) So, informed conservatives should withhold from believing that their belief in trees is caused by trees.

The debunker could then argue from CL3 to her ultimate conclusion that informed conservatives should withhold belief in trees. (However, debunkers should not underestimate the difficulty of this last step. There are a variety of strategies in the moral debunking literature for showing that one's moral beliefs are not undermined by the concession that they are not explained by moral facts, and such strategies – if successful in the moral domain – can be adapted to block the object debunking arguments).[18]

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18 See Korman (2019: §7) and Korman and Locke (forthcoming) for why I am reluctant to embrace such strategies in either domain. See Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018: §§2–3) for more on the uphill battle facing the object debunker.

CL1 is supposed to be intuitively obvious. Given what she learns, it would be irrational for Maria to stand by what she initially believed and to insist that it is a red ball causing her red-ball belief (albeit through a more convoluted process than she had originally imagined). Crucially, this is not because she learns that the redness of the ball (if it really is red) *could not* have caused her belief. Nor does she learn that the colours of the ball have *nothing* to do with why it appears red; red is one of only two colours with that grayscale signature, and the programme would not have presented the ball as red had it been (say) yellow or green. Even so, she is rationally required to stop believing that it is a red ball that caused the image.

CL2 draws support from the striking parallels between the cases. The informed conservative does not learn anything that should convince her that trees (if they exist) cannot be what is causing her tree beliefs, but the same is true for Maria and redness. Both learn that the mechanism responsible for generating the representations that initially justified their beliefs is working with sparse inputs: all the programme has to work with is a grayscale pattern, and all the eye has to work with is a distribution of sensible properties. Both learn that those sparse inputs are compatible with competing distal causes: red vs. blue in Maria's case, trees vs. branches stuck to part of a trog vs. atoms arranged treewise composing nothing in the other. And both learn that which of the candidate causes the mechanism ends up representing is determined by factors that have some aim other than ensuring the accuracy of the representations (viz. ink levels or reproductive success).[19]

Those wanting to resist CL2 need to identify some difference between Maria's epistemic situation and that of the informed conservative that could plausibly account for why the one but not the other must suspend their initially justified causal beliefs. And Tillman and Spencer do put their finger on some key differences between the cases.

They point out, for instance that, in Colourization, one can expect to find the same stimulus yielding different representations for different observers – the same ball will produce blue images for observers with different printers – and yet there is no evidence of any such interpersonal variation when it comes to tree beliefs (§4). In addition, Maria knows that there are plenty of blue things around that her programme will misrepresent as red, whereas by conservative lights there are no non-trees around (e.g. mere atoms arranged treewise that compose nothing at all) that their perceptual system is prone to misrepresenting as trees. This all points to Maria, but not the conservative, having positive reason to think that the mechanism behind her colour beliefs is unreliable. And this would seem to be precisely the sort of epistemically significant difference needed for resisting CL2.

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19 Elsewhere (2019: §§3–4), I argue that ordinary objects have no indispensable role to play in explaining the adaptive value of perceptual representations as of those objects.

The fix is to modify Colourization so as to remove this disanalogy. Consider the following updated case:

Colourization Redux

Maria is looking at a close-up image of a distant planet, depicting a number of unidentifiable objects on its surface, some of which appear red and none of which appear blue. She then learns some things about the production of the image. A digital camera snapped a black and white image, later opened in a computer programme designed to colourize the image. When different colours produce indistinguishable shades of grey, which colour gets displayed is determined by the price of the different inks at the time and place at which the programme was created. Since red ink was less expensive than blue ink when and where the programme was created, all existing copies of the programme always display both red and blue items as red.

Colourization Redux eliminates variability across programmes while still holding fixed the irrelevance of the influences. Moreover, because she is looking at a distant planet, Maria has no positive reason to believe that there are lots of blue items there that the programme would misrepresent as red. Accordingly, she has no positive reason to think that the programme is unreliable in such contexts, meaning that CL2 is safe from the envisaged objection.[20] And CL1 remains plausible: Maria must withhold belief, despite lacking positive reason to think that the programme is liable to misrepresent the colours of things on that planet.

Tillman and Spencer also say the following in the defence of their object beliefs (§4): 'Our perceptual experiences of trees and dogs (and not trogs) are so *immediate* and *powerful* that mere ruminations on biological and cultural contingencies alone cannot epistemically unseat them.' Perhaps this could serve as an epistemically significant difference and grounds for challenging CL2. For the presentation of a red ball in the image does not present the depicted object as being immediately before one's eyes, nor does an image of a red-ball 'command belief' as powerfully as a visual representation of a tree.

With some further modifications to the case, we can sidestep this objection to CL2 as well. We can suppose that Maria is directly gazing upon the planet with her own eyes. She then learns that her new bionic retinal implants are running that same accursed programme, registering the grayscale signatures of perceived objects and invariably converting the ambiguous red/blue grayscale signature into red experiences only because red ink was cheaper than blue when and where the programme was made. Her perceptual experiences as of a planet full of red objects are no less 'immediate and powerful' than

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20 For those worried that ink prices could easily have been different, let us just build into the case that it is no accident that red ink is cheaper: blue ink is incredibly expensive to manufacture on Maria's home planet.

our experiences as of trees. Yet CL1 remains as plausible as ever. Even phenomenal conservatives like Tillman and Spencer should therefore concede that explanatory revelations can defeat beliefs that are prima facie justified by immediate and powerful seemings.

Why exactly are Maria's antecedent causal beliefs undermined in these fortified Colourization cases? I am not entirely sure. Nor am I sure where the burden ultimately lies: on the conservative to provide a diagnosis that does not generalize to our tree beliefs, or on the debunker to provide a diagnosis that does. I continue to suspect that the diagnosis will turn on an explanatory deficit: the ball's *being red* is exposed as not playing the right type of role in the explanation of why Maria's source (the programme) converts its sparse inputs (the grayscale signature) into representations of redness (rather than blueness).[21] If that is right, then, by parity, absent some more substantial role for the atoms' *composing a tree and a dog* to play in the explanation of why our source (vision) converts its sparse inputs (the retinal image) into representations of trees (rather than trogs) – in other words, absent what I am calling apprehension of CCK facts – there is reason to suspect that our tree beliefs exhibit the same defect as Maria's colour beliefs.

What exactly is this role that they must play? It is a good question, one that I did not adequately answer in *Objects*, and it is fair for Tillman and Spencer to demand more from the debunker, and from me as an unlikely spokesperson for the debunker. But neither side, I think, is in a position to be complacent, absent a satisfying account of why Maria's initially justified causal beliefs are undermined in the Colourization cases.

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21 Though see Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018: 54–55) for a word of caution about contrastive explanations.

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