Why Care About What There Is?

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There's the question of what there is, and then there's the question of what *ultimately* exists. Many contend that, once we have this distinction clearly in mind, we can see that there is no sensible debate to be had about whether there are such things as properties or tables or numbers, and that the only ontological question worth debating is whether such things are (in one or another sense) ultimate. I argue that this is a mistake. Taking debates about ordinary objects as a case study, I show that the arguments that animate these debates bear directly on the question of which objects there are and cannot plausibly be recast as arguments about what's ultimate. I then address the objection that, because they are easily answerable, questions about what there is cannot be a proper subject of ontological debate.

1. Why eliminate when you can demote?

Metaphysicians have taken a keen interest in the question of which if any ordinary macroscopic objects there are, with a number of brave souls defending the surprising answer that there are none—or at least, not as many as you would think.[1] There has also been increasing interest in a further range of questions about ordinary objects: whether they are fundamental (Schaffer 2009), are in the domain of the most fundamental quantifier (Sider 2011), enjoy a fundamental mode of being (McDaniel 2017), 'ultimately' exist (Dorr 2005), are 'worldly' (Azzouni 2017), are truthmakers for sentences about ordinary objects (Cameron 2008), or are referenced in the most perspicuous account of reality (Hawthorne and Cortens 1995), or whether the existence of such things is 'constitutive of reality' (Fine 2009). I'll refer to these further questions as questions about the *ultimacy* of ordinary objects.

One can think of these questions as pointing to two different ways of 'doing without' ordinary objects: doing without them in one's account of what there is and doing without them in one's account of what's ultimate. *Eliminativists* do without ordinary objects by denying that there

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[1] See, for example, Unger (1979, 1980), van Inwagen (1981, 1990), Heller (1990), Horgan (1993), Olson (1995, 2007), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997), Hossack (2000), Merricks (2001, 2016), Dorr (2002), Horgan and Potrč (2008), and Benovsky (2015, 2018).

are ordinary objects of this or that kind.[2] *Demotionists* (as I'll call them) do without ultimate ordinary objects, acknowledging that there are ordinary objects but 'demoting' them to some non-ultimate status.

The question of whether to eliminate ordinary objects and the question of whether to demote ordinary objects both strike me as perfectly good ontological questions. My aim here, though, is not to defend any particular answers to those questions. Indeed, I'm simply going to assume that the correct answers are *yes* there are ordinary objects and *no* they are not ultimate. My aim, rather, is to assess a (nowadays) oft-repeated complaint that the former question should never have been at issue: those who have been denying that (or debating whether) there are ordinary objects should only ever have been denying (or debating) their ultimacy. Some examples:

> It is not important that the ontological nihilist assent to the claim 'Strictly speaking, there are no objects'. What is crucial instead is that the ontological nihilist insist that object talk and the concept of an object have no place in a perspicuous account of reality. (Hawthorne and Cortens 1995, p. 157)

> The debate over [composite objects] should not be pursued … by trying to work out what sentences [about which composites there are] are true. The debate should be pursued by trying to work out whether there is any truthmaking work to be done by complex objects that cannot be done solely by collections of simples. (Cameron 2008, p. 17)

> It is usually supposed that the answers to ontological questions are non-trivial. Thus whatever the answer to the ontological question of whether numbers exist, it is neither trivially true nor trivially false; and similarly for the existence of chairs and tables or the like. However, the answer to the corresponding quantificational questions *are* trivial. Thus given the evident fact that there is a prime number greater than 2, it trivially follows that there is a number (an x such that x is a number); and, similarly, given the evident fact that I am sitting on a chair, it trivially follows that there is a chair. (Fine 2009, p. 158)[3]

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[2] The qualification 'of this or that kind'—which I omit in what follows—is needed in order to cover eliminativists like van Inwagen, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, Merricks, and Olson who do think that there are *some* ordinary objects (for example, animals).

[3] See Fine (2009, pp. 165-174) on what he sees as the difference between (quantificational) questions about what there is and (ontological) questions about what exists. The details won't

> Ontology isn't concerned with what there is—or at least it shouldn't be… [T]he ontologist's concern should be: what must the quantificational structure of the world be like to ground the true English claims we make? (Cameron 2010b, pp. 16-17)

> [W]e should reformulate nihilism as the view that in the fundamental sense, there are no composite entities. (Sider 2013a, p. 253)

> Instead of arguing about whether or not tables exist … metaphysicians ought to argue about whether simples make true sentences about tables. (Rettler 2016, pp. 1413-1414)

> Once we recognize that [ordinary objects] might be beings by courtesy [that is, things that don't enjoy a fundamental mode of being], should we shift focus away from the questions of whether these entities exist and focus instead on the question of how they exist? Yes. (McDaniel 2017, p. 162)

The common thread running through these passages is the normative thesis that it is only demotionism, and not eliminativism, that should be advanced by ontologists inclined to do without ordinary objects and that is a proper subject of ontological inquiry.[4] Let's call this normative thesis *retreatism*, since it calls on eliminativists to retreat to demotionism, and calls upon those of us who have been engaged in the debate over whether there are ordinary objects to retreat to a debate about the ultimacy of ordinary objects.

Retreatism should not be confused with the contextualist thesis that 'there are no tables' has all along meant different things inside and outside the ontology room and that, when uttered inside the ontology room, what it means is that tables aren't ultimate. This contextualist thesis is in tension with retreatism, insofar as it takes eliminativists to be already advancing the very view that, according to retreatists, they *should instead* be advancing. There is reason to prefer retreatism to contextualism, at least insofar as it avoids venturing the controversial linguistic hypothesis that 'there is' has all along had an idiosyncratic meaning in ontological discussions.[5]

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matter in what follows. What matters, for our purposes, is that Fine takes the existence of Fs but not there being Fs to be sufficient for the ultimacy of Fs (or, in his terminology, to its being 'constitutive of reality' that there are Fs).

[4] See also Schaffer (2009, p. 361), Williams (2012, pp. 169-171), and Dershowitz (2022, §2).

[5] See Dorr (2005, §7, 2008, §1) and Chalmers (2009) in defence of contextualism, and see Fine (2009, pp. 162-165), Korman (2015, ch.5), and Daly and Liggins (2016) for criticism.

In saying that eliminativists should stop denying that there are ordinary objects and should instead deny only their ultimacy, I understand retreatists to be saying something more substantive than just that eliminativists should believe true things (like demotionism) instead of false things (like eliminativism). Rather, the idea is that *given their very reasons* for wanting to do without ordinary objects, eliminativists should only ever have been embracing demotionism.

By way of analogy, imagine an old-fashioned analytic utilitarian who, in pursuit of a naturalistically respectable reduction of moral facts, identifies the concept of rightness with the concept of maximizing utility. Once the distinction between identifying the *concepts* and identifying the associated *properties* comes clearly into view, however, it would be perverse for this utilitarian to persist in identifying the concepts. After all, merely identifying the properties gives her everything she wants—a naturalistic reduction on which rightness is just a matter of maximizing utility—while at the same time sidestepping the objections that arise specifically for those who identify the concepts, for instance that it is blindingly obvious that these are two different concepts. Because it's so obvious that the concepts are different and because there is no longer any good reason to affirm their identity, there is just no sensible debate to be had about whether they are identical. All parties to the debate should happily grant the distinctness of the concepts, and carry on with their debate more or less as before but recast in terms of property identity.

The envisaged ethical retreatist isn't merely saying that we should stop embracing or discussing analytic utilitarianism because there are better views around. She's saying that the analytic utilitarian's own motivations provide no reason to embrace or even discuss this needlessly strong view once the availability of the property identity view comes into focus. Likewise for the ontological retreatist: the eliminativist's own motivations, the idea goes, provide no reason to embrace or even discuss the needlessly strong view that there are no ordinary objects once the demotionist option is on the table.

I will be defending a more ecumenical view about ontological questions. There are importantly different reasons for wanting to do without ordinary objects. Those gripped by the concerns that typically animate demotionists, for instance securing a maximally parsimonious ontology, are right to be advancing and debating views about the ultimacy of ordinary objects. Those gripped by the quite different concerns that permeate the traditional debates about eliminativism, for instance avoiding certain sorts of indeterminacy and arbitrariness, are right to be

advancing or debating views about whether there are ordinary objects. If 'the question of ontology' is the question properly at issue when we are wondering whether to do without such and such entities, then nothing is *the* question of ontology. One question of ontology addresses what there is, and one addresses what's ultimate.

2. Why not eliminate?

Retreatism is meant to be motivated, at least in part, by the idea that demotionism gives the eliminativist everything she wants (a way to do without ordinary objects) without any of the disadvantages of eliminativism.[6] The supposed disadvantage is that denying that there are ordinary objects seems to fly in the face of common sense. Happily, common sense has little if anything to say against the demotionist's esoteric claims about the non-ultimacy of ordinary objects. Demotionism would seem to be an offer they can't refuse.

It's true that *some* eliminativists care deeply about respecting common sense and are loath to cross it.[7] But it's at least as common for eliminativists to address the conflict with common sense by advancing 'debunking arguments', arguments meant to undermine the common-sense beliefs about objects by revealing them to have a disreputable source. These, to my mind, are some of the strongest arguments in the eliminativist's arsenal.[8]

The debunking arguments tend to come in one of two varieties. First there are those that turn on the insensitivity of the perceptual source of our object beliefs. We seem to see tables only because we are hard-wired to experience regions filled by atoms arranged tablewise *as* being filled by a single macroscopic object. Accordingly, the idea goes, we would have had table experiences in the presence of atoms so arranged regardless of whether they composed a table. This realization is meant to undermine your perceptual belief in tables, in just the way that realizing

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[6] See, for example, Cameron (2008), Schaffer (2009), Williams (2012), and Rettler (2016).

[7] See, for example, van Inwagen (1990, chs. 10-11); though, for van Inwagen, what's to be avoided is conflict with 'universal belief', not 'common sense' (1990, p. 103).

[8] See Heller (1990, §2.6), Merricks (2001, pp. 72-76, 2003, §3), Dorr (2002, ch.2), Daly and Liggins (2010, pp. 224-225), and Benovsky (2015, 2018, ch. 1.4 and ch. 2); cf. Sider (2013a, §§2, 5) and Azzouni (2017, pp. 152-153). Even van Inwagen himself, in earlier work (1981, p. 127), advances a sort of debunking argument against our affinity for undetached body parts like legs. See Korman (2015, ch. 7, 2019, Korman 2020, §3), Hofweber (2016, ch. 7.3, 2017, §3), Sattig (2017), Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018, §§2-3), Barker (2020), and Tillman and Spencer (2020) for further discussion of such debunking arguments.

you're wearing green-tinted lenses would undermine your belief that you're surrounded by green things (Merricks 2003, p. 739).

Second, there are those that turn on imaginative exercises involving communities who are naturally inclined to conceptually divide up the world into strange kinds of objects. The point of these exercises is to convince us that which conceptual scheme we ended up with is just a reflection of our peculiar interests or hardwiring, not a reflection of which arrangements of atoms do in fact compose objects or this or that kind. And once we realize that we believe what we do about which objects there are for reasons having nothing to do with which objects there in fact are, that serves as a defeater for our beliefs.[9]

It would be incoherent for eliminativists who advance these debunking arguments to retreat to demotionism on the grounds that they would thereby avoid conflict with common sense. Once it has been debunked, there is no reason (even *ceteris paribus* or *pro tanto*) to prefer views that respect the deliverances of common sense, just as there is no reason to prefer views that respect the verdicts of a magic eight-ball toy.[10] The apparent advantage of demotionism would be merely apparent, and a retreat to demotionism would be at best a lateral move for the eliminativist—hardly an 'offer they can't refuse'.

3. Why eliminate?

We have been examining eliminativists' reasons for being unfazed by conflicts with common sense, and found that (by their lights) there is little if anything to be gained by retreating to demotionism. Worse, once we examine eliminativists' reasons for wanting to do without tables, what we find is that their hands are tied: whatever advantage there may be to merely demoting and not eliminating, their reasons prevent them from retreating to demotionism. Far from being an offer they can't refuse, demotionism is an offer they can't accept.

Let's remind ourselves, then, of the arguments for eliminativism. I present them here as arguments for eliminating a certain table.

> ARBITRARINESS: When the army bulldozes some sand in the desert to barricade their caravan, no new object comes to be as a result. Yet there is no difference between arranging some pieces of wood

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[9] See, for example, Heller (1990, §2.6).

[10] Cf. Sider (2013a, pp. 259-260) on how perceptual justification is not merely 'outweighed', but rather 'vanishes' altogether, in the face of undercutting defeaters.

'tablewise' and arranging some sand 'barricadewise' that could account for a new object being created in the one case but not the other. So, by parity of reason, nothing comes to be as a result of arranging some wood tablewise. But if there is a table here, it's something that came to be as a result of arranging some wood tablewise.[11]

COINCIDENCE: Suppose that there is a wooden table here. If so, then there is also a hunk of wood here that coincides with the table and yet differs from it modally. But it is impossible for there to be coinciding objects that differ modally.[12]

EXISTENTIAL INDETERMINACY: If there is a table here, then there is at least one composite object. But if composition ever occurs, then it will sometimes be vague whether some things compose something, in which case it will sometimes be vague what there is. But it is impossible for there to be vagueness with respect to what there is.[13]

OVERDETERMINATION: If there is a table here, there must be some events that it causes; certainly it's not a mere epiphenomenon. But there is nothing for it to cause that isn't already caused by atoms arranged tablewise. So, on pain of overdetermination, nothing that happens is caused by any table here.[14]

PROBLEM OF THE MANY: If there is a table here, then for each of the trillions of atomic parts of the table there is an object composed of all of the table's parts but that one. Each of these ever-so-slightly smaller objects would have everything it takes to be a table, and must therefore itself be a table. But certainly there aren't trillions of tables here.[15]

SORITES: Suppose that there is a table composed of the atoms arranged tablewise here. If so, then the object that results from removing just one favourably selected atom would likewise be a table. More generally, whenever there is any table, the result of removing

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[11] See van Inwagen (1990, pp. 124-126), Horgan (1993), Olson (1995, §1), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997, pp. 177-178), and Benovsky (2018, p. 15) for arguments in the vicinity.

[12] See Heller (1990, §2.7), van Inwagen (1990, pp. 125-127), Merricks (2001, §2.3), and Benovsky (2018, pp. 20-22). Cf. van Inwagen (1981), Olson (1995), and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997, §5.2) for a related coincidence-based argument for eliminativism.

[13] The type of argument is usually advanced as an argument for unrestricted composition, but as Sider (2013a, p. 244) observes it can also be marshalled against composite objects.

[14] See Merricks (2001, ch.3, 2016), Dorr (2002, ch.2), and Benovsky (2018, pp. 22-23).

[15] See Unger (1980), Heller (1990, p. 38), Horgan (1993, §2), Horgan and Potrč (2008, §2.4.4), and Benovsky (2018, pp. 9-10).

one such atom is itself a table. But this entails, absurdly, that there is a table even when we are left with only one atom.[16]

VAGUE IDENTITY: If there is a table here, then it is possible for there to be cases in which a table at some later time neither definitely is nor definitely is not identical to it—cases involving, for instance, replacing all the parts of the table one by one. But it is impossible for there to be things that are indeterminately identical.[17]

Call these 'the usual arguments'. I cannot think of any eliminativist who doesn't advance at least one of these arguments, in some form or other. And the conclusion of these arguments isn't merely that the table isn't ultimate; it's that there is no table here at all. Denying only the ultimacy of the table, and stopping short of concluding that there is no table here, just isn't an option for those who embrace these lines of reasoning.

Retreatists might suggest that eliminativists abandon the usual arguments as well, thereby liberating them from the conclusion that there are no tables. But then eliminativists would have to join the rest of us in finding some premise in each one to deny. And, as eliminativists will be the first to tell you, denying the premises of any one of these arguments almost invariably has one of three unpalatable consequences: first, *overpopulating* the world with things that seem not to be there, be it too many tables, too many things in one place, too many causes of the same events, or a plenitude of objects with extraordinary mereological or modal profiles; second, unpalatable *arbitrariness*, be it arbitrariness concerning which kinds of objects there are, which objects do and don't belong to a given kind, which modal profiles are instantiated by which objects, or which objects together compose a further object; third, unpalatable *indeterminacies*, be it indeterminate truth values, indeterminate identities, non-linguistic vagueness, or existential indeterminacy.

To stop short of denying that there are tables is to be saddled with an overpopulated, arbitrary, and/or indeterminacy-ridden metaphysic—exactly what eliminativists want to avoid.[18] Those who wish to do without tables for any of the usual reasons have no choice but to draw the stronger conclusion that there are no tables. Their hands are tied. Thus, far from being an offer they can't refuse that gives them everything they

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[16] See Unger (1979), Heller (1990, ch. 3), Merricks (2001, §2.2), Horgan and Potrč (2008, §2.4), and Benovsky (2018, pp. 10-14).

[17] See van Inwagen (1990, pp. 128-135), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997, §5.4), and Hossack (2000, p. 428).

[18] See Korman (2015) for my own preferred blend of arbitrariness, indeterminacy, and overpopulation.

want, the retreatist is offering them something they can't have and none of what they want.

4. Why not renounce the arguments?

As we just saw, the usual arguments are arguments for elimination, not demotion. A retreat from eliminating to demoting would therefore require eliminativists to renounce the very arguments that led to them to eliminativism in the first place. Those who are calling on eliminativists to retreat must therefore explain why and how they should renounce those arguments.

Of course, the retreatist can always enter the fray and try to expose some flaw in the arguments. She may, for instance, suggest responding to Coincidence by allowing coincident objects to differ modally; she might advance some solution to the grounding problem for modal differences among coincidents; she might offer rebuttals to known problems for such solutions. But notice that the retreatist is now doing exactly what she said we shouldn't be doing: debating whether there are tables. (If advancing responses to arguments that there are no tables and defending them against the eliminativist's rebuttals doesn't count as debating whether there are tables, I don't know what does.)

Perhaps retreatists will say that eliminativists should renounce the arguments because the conclusion is so obviously false that the only rational conclusion to draw is that they've gone wrong somewhere. But in the present context of assessing whether demotionism is an offer the eliminativist can't refuse, this suggestion is problematic for a number of reasons. First, those moved by the debunking arguments from §2 won't see the affront to common sense as any reason to think that something has gone wrong in the arguments. Second, one does not simply 'renounce' an argument; one must find some premise to deny. But denying any one of the premises will likely saddle the eliminativist with the sorts of overpopulation, arbitrariness, or indeterminacy she wants so badly to avoid. Third, unless mere demotion can somehow be shown to serve their argumentative goals (avoiding objectionable arbitrariness, indeterminacy, or overpopulation), suggesting that eliminativists instead be demotionists is just as much a *non sequitur* as suggesting that they instead be utilitarians or ornithologists.

What's needed from the retreatist is some rationale for renouncing the arguments that does justice to the eliminativist's reasons

for wanting to eliminate. The way to do this would be to expand retreatism to apply to the *premises* of the arguments: those too, the idea goes, should be renounced and recast as premises about what's ultimate, so as to establish only the non-ultimacy of ordinary objects.

In certain cases, the proposed retreat to an argument for demotionism makes perfect sense. Some eliminativists, for instance Horgan and Potrč (2008, p. 95), argue that there are no ordinary objects on grounds of parsimony. But the parsimony of a theory is arguably measured by what it takes (or is committed to taking) to be ultimate; non-ultimate entities don't count against the parsimony of a theory except to the extent that postulating them adds complexity to one's account of how things ultimately are.[19] So they should retreat to an argument from a suitably revised principle of parsimony to the conclusion that ordinary objects aren't ultimate. If this were Horgan and Potrč's *only* reason for wanting to do without ordinary objects, then the retreatist would arguably at least be right about them, that demotionism gives them everything they want (parsimony) at none of the cost (flouting common sense).[20]

I cannot hope to show that no such 'recasting' strategy will be successful when applied to any of the usual arguments (enumerated in §3). After all, there are endless permutations of the strategy, targeting different arguments, recasting different premises, and invoking different varieties of ultimacy. What I can do is examine some representative examples of recasting strategies, to illustrate the sorts of problems that can arise. The challenge for the retreatist will be to develop recasting strategies that avoid these problems.

Let's start with COINCIDENCE, and imagine a retreatist who recommends that the eliminativist instead endorse COINCIDENCE_F:

> COINCIDENCE_F: Suppose that there is a fundamental wooden table here. If so, then there is also a fundamental hunk of wood here that coincides with the table and yet differs from it modally. But it is impossible for there to be coinciding fundamental objects that differ modally.

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[19] See Schaffer (2009, p. 361, 2015), Cameron (2010a, p. 262), and Bennett (2017, §8.2); though see Daly and Liggins (2014, pp. 474-476), Baron and Tallant (2018), and Saenz (forthcoming) for criticism.

[20] It isn't their only reason. As Horgan and Potrč immediately go on to say, 'quite apart from considerations of comparative parsimony, this proffered position [on which there are tables] is decisively precluded by the impossibility of ontological vagueness' (2008, p. 95), alluding to their primary argument for eliminativism, a version of SORITES.

Now, as desired, all that follows is that there is no fundamental table here. So if it's true that the eliminativist should retreat to Coincidence$_F$, then retreatists are right: she should demote rather than eliminate.

The eliminativist who likes Coincidence need have no objection to Coincidence$_F$. But there are two problems for the suggestion that she should *renounce* the former and retreat to the latter. The first is a problem of prior plausibility. The call to retreat from the conclusion of Coincidence seems reasonable since it's a retreat from the implausible claim that there are no tables to the plausible claim that tables aren't ultimate. The premise of Coincidence that prohibits coinciding objects from differing modally, by contrast, already seems plausible (albeit controversial) as it stands. And certainly there is no plausibility in the suggestion that we only ever had the intuition that coinciding *fundamental* things cannot differ modally, as evidenced by the very fact that statues and lumps—which virtually no one takes to be fundamental[21]—are the go-to examples of objects whose coincidence is supposed to be intolerable. So the rationale for retreat is unclear; the eliminativist who was bothered by this kind of overpopulation has been given no reason to think she should be bothered only by coinciding fundamentalia.

The second problem for the suggestion that eliminativists retreat from Coincidence to Coincidence$_F$ is a problem of auxiliary arguments. Just as her endorsement of Coincidence obliges the eliminativist to eliminate and not merely demote, the auxiliary arguments she deploys in defence of the anti-coincidence constraint oblige her to endorse the unqualified version of the constraint that appears in Coincidence. Why think there can't be modal differences between coincidents? Because, the idea goes, modal differences between two objects cannot be brute (on pain of arbitrariness), yet if there were coinciding modally differing objects, there could be no explanation for their modal differences. Here again, the reasoning yields the stronger anti-coincidence constraint that underwrites Coincidence. A retreat to the premises of Coincidence$_F$ would be unmotivated and unintelligible for someone who is attracted to anti-coincidence constraints for anything like the usual reasons.

Next, consider the suggestion that Existential Indeterminacy—an argument from the impossibility of vague existence to the conclusion that there are no tables—be recast as an argument from the impossibility of vague fundamental existence to the non-ultimacy of tables. Ross Cameron tells us that 'if vague existence is bad, it is only bad if it infects fundamental ontology' (2008, p. 16) and that mere vagueness in whether

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[21] Though see Fiocco (2019).

some thing exists 'does not seem like the allegedly objectionable kind of ontic vagueness that people were objecting to concerning vague existence' ([2010a](#), p. 263). To see whether Cameron is right that eliminativists should find mere existential indeterminacy unproblematic, let's check whether the usual reasons for opposing existential indeterminacy fall short of establishing that there is no existential indeterminacy at all (even at non-ultimate levels). And what we find is that some do and some don't.

One reason for opposing existential indeterminacy is that the very possibility of metaphysics requires that there be some natural, and therefore non-vague, candidate meaning for quantificational expressions (see [Sider 2003](#), §3). If this is one's reason, then the envisaged recasting of EXISTENTIAL INDETERMINACY would make sense. For in order for there to be *some* quantifier meaning for metaphysical discussions that's natural and non-vague, it needn't be the actual meaning of the existential quantifier. One could happily grant that the existential quantifier is vague—with a domain that definitely includes some ordinary objects and admits of some borderline cases as well—but then insist that the natural non-vague quantifier has no ordinary objects in its domain.[22]

There are, however, other reasons for opposing existential indeterminacy. Here's one: for there to be any existential indeterminacy, there would have to be some thing such that 'it sort of is so and sort of isn't that there is any such thing', which is manifestly incoherent ([Lewis 1986](#), p. 213). Here's another: existential indeterminacy gives rise to vague identity, which has been shown to be impossible ([Hershenov 2014](#)). Here's another: it is a category mistake to ascribe vagueness or precision to things themselves, and not just to thoughts, words, and other such representational entities; but existential indeterminacy can never be accounted for in terms of vague representations.[23]

If *these* are the eliminativist's reasons for opposing existential indeterminacy, then we again face the problem of auxiliary arguments. Retreating to a prohibition only on fundamental existential indeterminacy is not an option for such an eliminativist, for these concerns apply equally to existential indeterminacy at non-fundamental levels. Her hands are tied. Of course, the retreatist may find these reasons for opposing existential indeterminacy wanting, and may wish to challenge

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[22] Indeed, Sider himself ([2013a](#), p. 244) retreats from his earlier argument against existential indeterminacy in just this way.

[23] See [Russell (1923](#), pp. 84-85) against non-representational vagueness and [Sider (2001](#), §4.9.3, [2003](#)) on why existential indeterminacy is supposed to require non-representational vagueness.

the eliminativist's arguments against existential indeterminacy. But the retreatist would then be doing exactly what she said we shouldn't be doing: engaging with the eliminativist's arguments that there are no tables or other ordinary objects.

This is hardly an exhaustive survey of possible recasting strategies and is only meant to illustrate problems that are likely to arise for such strategies.[24] I hereby challenge the retreatist to identify a recasting strategy for each of the usual arguments that is not beset by the problem of prior plausibility or the problem of auxiliary arguments. I don't think it can be done.

5.   Why can't what there is be what's at issue?

We have examined one potential motivation for retreatism, namely that demotionism gives the eliminativist everything she wants with none of the costs. We turn now to a different sort of reason for accepting retreatism, namely that the question of whether there are ordinary objects *just can't* be what's properly at issue in these ontological debates. I consider four putative reasons that ontological questions cannot be questions about what there is: that ontological questions are supposed to be hard to answer (§5.1), that they are supposed to be philosophical (§5.2), that they are supposed to be autonomous (§5.3), and that they are supposed to be about things that 'really' exist (§5.4).

5.1 The argument from easy answerability
Ontological debates about ordinary objects are meant to be deep and serious debates, debates that can be settled only by sustained philosophical reflection. This, in turn, may seem to suggest that the ontological questions about ordinary objects cannot simply be 'quantificational questions', that is, questions about whether there are any. Fine (2009, p. 158) puts the worry as follows:

> It is usually supposed that the answers to ontological questions are non-trivial. However, the answer to the corresponding quantificational questions are trivial…. given the evident fact that I am sitting on a chair, it trivially follows that there is a chair.[25]

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[24] See also Schaffer (2007, p. 189) on recasting Overdetermination, and see Korman (2015, pp. 194-195) on how a version of the problem of auxiliary arguments arises there as well.
[25] Cf. Schaffer (2009, §2.1).

Fine doesn't elaborate on what it means for an answer to a question to be 'trivial', but presumably the idea is that the question is *easily answerable*, that is, there is a way of knowing the answer that doesn't rely on any complicated line of reasoning. For instance, the correct answer ('yes') to the quantificational question ('are there chairs?') is supposed to be trivial insofar as it can easily be known by inferring it from the evident fact that I'm sitting on a chair. Indeed, it can presumably be known even more easily simply by non-inferentially forming the belief that there is a chair on the basis of one's chair experience. The argument can then be rendered as follows:

(A1)   Questions about whether there are ordinary objects are easily answerable.
(A2)   Ontological questions about ordinary objects are not easily answerable.
(A3)   So, questions about whether there are ordinary objects are not ontological questions.

As indicated at the outset, I am assuming that eliminativism is false and that there are such things as chairs. Moreover, I agree that it is easily (perceptually) knowable that there are chairs. (A1) is true.[26] But why accept (A2)?

Perhaps the idea behind (A2) is meant to be something like this:

(B1)   There can be no sensible debate about easily answerable questions.
(B2)   Ontological questions about ordinary objects can be sensibly debated.
(A2)   So, ontological questions about ordinary objects are not easily answerable.

Certainly (B2) is true, as evidenced by the sprawling literature on the usual arguments. But (B1) is open to obvious counterexamples like the following:

> ENROLMENT: Professor Smith wants to know whether a certain student dropped her class, so she checks the class roster on eGrades, and finds that it shows him as still enrolled. Along comes Jones from

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[26] The eliminativist of course will deny A1, insisting that, despite (debunked) appearances to the contrary, the answer to the question of whether there are chairs is that there are none, and that this can be known only through philosophical investigation. Fine's 'evident fact that I am sitting on a chair' is, by her lights, no fact at all, let alone an easily knowable one.

the staff office, who tells Smith that eGrades doesn't immediately report drops and that there's a five-day lag. Smith (correctly) insists that Jones is confused and that it's a different online roster that has the lag. Jones stands his ground and even produces some (misleading) evidence that the student has dropped the class. They continue to debate whether he dropped the class.

How are they able to have a sensible debate about whether he dropped the class, despite the fact that they have available to them an easy way of knowing the correct answer: checking eGrades? The answer is that Jones has introduced putative defeaters for Smith's belief that the student dropped the class: a rebutting defeater (the evidence that he dropped the class) as well as an undercutting defeater (the lag hypothesis). Those defeaters, and attempts to address them, can then be scrutinized and debated.

Likewise for the question of whether there are chairs. There *is* an easy way of knowing the answer: open your eyes, have a chair experience, and believe on that basis that there is a chair. But there is nonetheless a sensible debate to be had about it because the eliminativist offers rebutting defeaters (the usual arguments) and undercutting defeaters (the debunking arguments) for the belief that there are chairs, and one can sensibly debate whether these defeaters—and attempts to deflect them—are successful.

Alternatively, perhaps the idea behind (A2) is that easily answerable questions are of no philosophical interest and therefore can't be the questions ontologists mean to be asking:

(C1)   Easily answerable questions aren't philosophically interesting.
(C2)   Ontological questions about ordinary objects are philosophically interesting.
(A2)   So, ontological questions about ordinary objects are not easily answerable.

Again, the problem is the first premise. What's true is that, like the question of whether anyone knows anything, the question of whether there are ordinary objects *would* be philosophically uninteresting if there were no interesting philosophical arguments for the opposite conclusion. But there are such arguments (see §3), and if those arguments are successful then they reveal a deep fissure between appearance and reality—a perennial philosophical concern if anything is. And there is philosophically interesting work to be done: identifying where the arguments go wrong and defending the overpopulated, indeterminate, and/ or arbitrary worldview we are left with after resisting them.

5.2 The argument from philosophy

A second line of argument has it that the ontological questions about ordinary objects can't be questions about whether there are any because the former are supposed to be *philosophical* questions. Here again is Fine (2009, p. 158):

> It is also usually supposed that ontological questions are philosophical. They arise from within philosophy, rather than from within science or everyday life, and they are to be answered on the basis of philosophical enquiry. But… the question of whether there are chairs or tables is an everyday matter that is to be settled on the basis of common observation.

What exactly is the argument here? Certainly the suggestion isn't that no question that arises from within philosophy can be settled by anything other than philosophical inquiry, or that nothing other than philosophical inquiry can have any bearing on questions that arise from within philosophy. A mathematical proof that there are more reals than naturals can settle a philosophical debate about whether infinite sets come in different sizes, and a scientific study of Molyneux's problem (which arose from within philosophy) would have clear evidential bearing upon the question of whether there are innate ideas (which arose from within philosophy).

Perhaps the idea is just that no ontological question that arises from within philosophy can be settled by mere common observation—where 'common observation' is understood to exclude observation supplemented by scientific or mathematical reasoning. Why accept even this more restricted claim? Perhaps the idea is that a question whose answer can be known so easily cannot possibly be what ontologists are debating. But in that case we have just circled back to the argument from (B1), dispensed with above.

Retreatists might propose a twist on the Finean argument, suggesting that because the questions about ordinary objects arise from within *metaphysics*, which (the idea goes) is the study of how things ultimately are, they therefore cannot be questions about the non-ultimate matter of whether there merely are any. Never mind whether this is the right view of the subject matter of metaphysics. (It isn't.[27]) As we saw in §3, the usual arguments for eliminativism—even if they were originally

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[27] Cf. Merricks (2013, §1), Barnes (2014), Bennett (2016, §4, 2017, §8.3), Mikkola (2017), Fine (2017), and Mason and Ritchie (2020, §2) against Sider (2011), who has since conceded the point (2017).

intended by metaphysicians *qua* metaphysicians to address metaphysical questions narrowly construed—are, whether they like it or not, arguments for a conclusion about what there is.

5.3 *The argument from autonomy*

Let's turn now to a third reason Fine presents for thinking that the ontological questions cannot be about what there is. Here the idea is that ontological questions are supposed to be autonomous, in that one is supposed to be able to answer them however one likes without thereby taking a stand on mathematical or scientific discoveries. In his own words:

> Suppose we answer the quantificational question in the affirmative. We go along with the mathematician in asserting that there are prime numbers between 7 and 17, for example, or go along with the scientist in asserting that this chair is partly composed of electrons. Then surely the ontological questions of interest to philosophy will still arise. The philosopher may perhaps be misguided in so readily agreeing with his mathematical or scientific colleagues. But surely his willingness to go along with what they say, of accepting the established conclusions of mathematics or science, should not thereby prevent him from adopting an anti-realist position. (2009, p. 159)

What's true is that going along with the scientist in agreeing that there are chairs partly composed of electrons doesn't prevent the ontologist from adopting *certain* anti-realist positions, for instance that chairs are mind-dependent. It may, however, prevent her from accepting the anti-realist position that she actually argued for—if, for instance, the conclusion of that argument is that there are no chairs and, *a fortiori*, no chairs partly composed of electrons. Ontologists are permitted to accept only what their arguments permit them to accept. It would be wishful thinking to suppose that one can never end up with serious reasons for doubting something that seems obviously true or for disagreeing with someone to whom one would really rather be able to defer.

I find that, when one keeps the arguments for eliminativism clearly in mind, these three initially plausible Finean arguments start to lose their grip. This is especially clear when we turn our attention from debates about tables and chairs to, for instance, debates about motion. Yes, the answer to the question of whether things move is easily known on the basis of common observation; no, Zeno evidently doesn't take the question he's answering to be settled by common observation (since he

presumably thinks that our experiences are misleading in this regard); yes, his arguments arise from within philosophy; and sure, those moved by his arguments would likely rather not have to deny that objects move towards the earth at 9.8 m/s². None of this gives us any reason to think that Zeno's question cannot be properly construed as a question of whether things move, as is clear when one looks at his arguments and finds that they're arguments whose initially plausible premises together entail that nothing moves. This is even easier to see if we imagine, anachronistically, that he supplements his arguments against motion with a debunking argument (à la Paul 2010, pp. 347-353 and Benovsky 2015, §3) that we are hardwired to experience motion even where there is none.

5.4 *The argument from real existence*

Let's consider one last argument that ontological questions can't properly be about what there is. Here the idea is that it would be senseless to have ontological scruples about things one takes to be non-ultimate, since these are things that don't really exist and to which one isn't even ontologically committed. Cameron (2008, p. 16), for instance, maintains that mere existential indeterminacy couldn't possibly be objectionable:

> After all, this wouldn't be a case of it being indeterminate whether there is some thing in our ontology. We can suppose that it's determinate that every thing in our ontology is precise and that there's no X such that it is indeterminate whether or not we are ontologically committed to X.

Admittedly, it does seem puzzling how existential indeterminacy can be bad if nothing *in your ontology* or that you're *ontologically committed to* indeterminately exists. But Cameron is here exploiting an equivocation between the usual understanding of these italicized phrases and his own idiosyncratic use. On the usual understanding, what's in your ontology or what you're ontologically committed to is what you believe (or are committed to believing) there to be. So understood, his explanation of why mere existential indeterminacy is unobjectionable amounts to the incoherent assertion that indeterminacy in what you take there to be doesn't amount to any indeterminacy in what you take there to be. On his idiosyncratic use, by contrast, what's 'in your ontology' and your 'ontological commitments' consist not of everything you take there to be but only the special subset of things that you take to exist fundamentally (2008, p. 4). So understood, his protests amount to the unilluminating suggestion that non-fundamental indeterminacy can't be bad because it wouldn't be a case of fundamental indeterminacy.

Nor should one be taken in by retreatist rhetoric to the effect that overpopulation, arbitrariness, and indeterminacy at non-ultimate levels are unobjectionable because non-ultimate objects don't *really* exist. This too exploits an equivocation between a natural and idiosyncratic use of 'really'.[28] As Barry Stroud (1984, p. 36) puts it in a related context:

> When we ask whether we really know something we are simply asking whether we know that thing. The 'really' signifies that we have had second thoughts on the matter, or that we are subjecting it to more careful scrutiny, or that knowledge is being contrasted with something else, but not that we believe in something called 'real knowledge' which is different from or more elevated than the ordinary knowledge we are interested in.[29]

Likewise, when an eliminativist says that there aren't *really* any tables, the 'really' signifies that she has given the question of whether there are tables unusually careful scrutiny, or is meant to emphasize that the view that there are tables is being contrasted with the view that there are merely atoms arranged tablewise or table-shaped hunks of wood. On this understanding of 'really', even the demotionist thinks there really are tables. The rhetoric must therefore involve an idiosyncratic, technical use of 'really', signifying what's ultimate.[30] But now, again, the explanation of why we are supposed to be unconcerned about counterintuitive views about what there is is unilluminating. For it now just amounts to the claim that overpopulation, arbitrariness, and indeterminacy at non-ultimate levels are unobjectionable because objects at non-ultimate levels aren't ultimate.

One last epicycle. Cameron might object that I've missed the point, by thinking of non-ultimate indeterminacy or arbitrariness or overpopulation as something exhibited by entities that are genuinely *out there in the world*. As he puts it (2008, p. 7): 'Do not think of the distinction [between what exists and what really exists] as dividing the entities in the world into the privileged real existents and the impoverished unreal existents. All there is in the world are the real existents'. Obviously, by 'all there is in the world' he cannot just mean 'all there is', since he does think there are things (for example, tables) that are not 'real' existents. 'In the world' must therefore be making some non-trivial contribution,

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[28] Cf. Sider (2013b, pp. 751-752).

[29] This is just one of many parallels between my response to retreatism and Stroud's (1984, pp. 34-37) response to the idea that external world sceptics have shown only that we lack knowledge 'of some exotic, hither-to-unheard-of domain' which they call 'reality'.

[30] Cf. Cameron (2008, p. 7).

presumably restricting the quantifier to real (that is, ultimate) existents. But then 'all there is in the world are real existents' is just the trivial claim that among the real existents there are only real existents, and the explanation is again unilluminating.

6. Conclusion

I have addressed two different motivations for retreatism. The first was that demotionism looks to be an offer eliminativists can't refuse: it gives them everything they want (a way to do without ordinary objects) with none of the costs. The second was that the question of whether there are ordinary objects is too easily answerable or insufficiently philosophical to be the question that's properly at issue in discussions of ontology. We have seen that neither motivation is compelling.

What has emerged is what we might call a *moderate Moorean* approach to metaontology, on which ontological questions are indeed easily answerable, but can be sensibly debated nonetheless. It's Moorean in that it regards seeing that one has hands and believing on that basis that there are hands as a perfectly good way of knowing that one has hands and that eliminativism is mistaken. But it is moderate in its Mooreanism, in that it rejects the characteristic Moorean thesis that the *only* sensible response to an argument against a 'Moorean fact' (for example, that there are hands, or that there are even numbers) is to conclude that something has gone wrong in the argument—though it does regard this as *one* sensible response to such arguments.[31]

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