DEFENDING SUBSTANTIVISM ABOUT DISPUTES

IN THE METAPHYSICS OF COMPOSITION[[1]](#footnote-2)\*

This paper defends substantivism about disputes in the metaphysics of composition. That is, it defends the view that disputes about the metaphysics of composition are substantial: they are neither merely apparent disputes in which disputants are talking past one another in virtue of disagreeing about the truth conditions for certain sentences; nor are they disputes in which there is no fact of the matter in the world in virtue of which one party to the dispute is right and the other(s) wrong.

While those working in first-order metaphysics labor at the coalface, building theories and responding to objections, a number of those working in meta-metaphysics are skeptical whether some of the debates in first-order metaphysics are in good standing.[[2]](#footnote-3) I call the view that a debate is substantive *substantivism* and the view that it is not substantive *non-substantivism*. As I use these terms a debate is non-substantive if and only if (a) the facts that would need to obtain to render one, as opposed to the other, disputant correct are not facts of the kind that could (or at least, do) obtain[[3]](#footnote-4)—call this *nonfactualism* or (b) parties to the apparent dispute disagree about the truth conditions for certain sentences, such that when those parties appear to utter sentences that contradict one another they are each speaking truly because they assign different meanings to the quantifier, the predicates, or the other logical operators—call this *semanticism*.[[4]](#footnote-5) A dispute is substantive if and only if semanticism and nonfactualism (about that dispute) are false.

It is sometimes supposed that if a dispute is non-substantive then the dispute is trivial, defective, or that one’s proper attitude towards the dispute is to be dismissive of it. Indeed Bennett[[5]](#footnote-6) takes semanticism and nonfactualism to be kinds of dissmissivism. I make no such assumption. Some non-substantive debates might be important, interesting, and non-trivial.[[6]](#footnote-7) And perhaps some substantive debates are uninteresting, unimportant, and trivial. In this paper I argue that we should be substantivists about the debate over the metaphysics of composition. Whether we should think this debate is interesting, important, and non-trivial is another matter entirely.

Here is a methodological assumption I make: substantivism about any dispute should be the default position. We should take at face value what well-meaning, thoughtful people say about what they mean; therefore we should think that parties who claim to be disagreeing are disagreeing. This assumption is defeasible: we could come to have reason to hold that parties who appear to be disagreeing really are not. We should also assume that when parties disagree there are facts about which they are disagreeing. Again, this assumption is defeasible: we could come to have reason to suppose that there are no such facts. Why make these (defeasible) assumptions? Because it is methodologically beneficial to do so. By doing so we make it more likely we will make interesting discoveries. If we begin with the assumption that a dispute is substantive we will be motivated to discover which party is right. If we begin with the assumption that a dispute is non-substantive then (in many cases) no further investigation is required. We can expect to discover more truths if we begin by assuming that debates are substantive until we have reason to think they are not. So that is what we should do.

Is there any need, then, to defend substantivism about the metaphysics of composition if one already accepts that the default position with respect to any dispute ought to be substantivist? Hasn’t the substantivist already, and perhaps illicitly, won the argument? No. For that default position is defeasible and there are many who think that in the case of the metaphysics of composition it has been shown to be defeated. Indeed, one might accept the methodological claim but nevertheless be quite sure that with respect to this particular dispute (the metaphysics of composition) substantivism is false.

The aim of this paper, then, is to defend substantivism about the metaphysics of composition by undermining some of the more prominent purported defeaters of the default presumption in favor of substantivism. Thus the paper defends substantivism about the metaphysics of composition by undermining the two non-substantivist views mentioned at the beginning—semanticism and nonfactualism (either of which would, if accepted, suffice to reject substantivism).

The first part of the paper focuses on two key arguments in favor of semanticism and attempts to undermine these arguments. The second part of the paper focuses on one key argument in favor of nonfactualism and attempts to undermine this argument. If the paper succeeds it shows that what we might have thought were powerful reasons to reject substantivism are not so. To fully vindicate substantivism it remains to be shown that there are no other good reasons to reject the view. Nevertheless, in the absence of a full accounting of reasons one way or the other it is reasonable to accept substantivism—at least as a working hypothesis—if we think it plausible that it is the default view and if we are convinced that the most powerful arguments for semanticism and nonfactualism fail.

PART I

Two important questions arise in the debate about the metaphysics of composition. The first, (known as the special composition question), is the question of under what circumstances composition occurs. You could think of this as the ‘when’ question: when does composition occur. The second is the question, given that there is some composition, what sort of thing is composition (the general composition question).[[7]](#footnote-8) You could think of this as the ‘what’ question: what is composition? There are five competing views about the metaphysics of composition that are the result of differently answering each of these questions:

(i) *Generative universalism:* the view according to which for any set of particulars there exists something that is composed of those particulars such that the composite is not identical to any one of its parts or to its parts considered collectively.[[8]](#footnote-9) This view answers the special composition question by noting that any conditions at all are sufficient for composition to occur. On this view there exist *generative composites*:[[9]](#footnote-10) composite objects that are non-identical to their parts taken severally or collectively. Any view according to which composites are *generative* is one that answers the general composition question (in its most abstract) by noting that composites are things that are generated by their collection of parts and are non-identical to their parts taken severally and collectively.

(ii) *Non-generative universalism*: the view that for any set of particulars there is an object composed of those particulars, and either (a) that composite object is identical to its parts taken collectively or (b) that composite object is identical to its parts, in that arrangement, taken collectively.[[10]](#footnote-11) According to this view there are *non-generative composites*: composite objects that are identical to the totality of their parts or to the totality of their parts arranged in a certain way.[[11]](#footnote-12) Views according to which composites are *non-generative* answer the general composition question by noting that composition is identity.

(iii) *Compositional nihilism*: the view that there is no set of particulars such that those particulars compose an object. Compositional nihilists reject the existence of both generative and non-generative composites and so reject the need to answer either the special or general composition questions.[[12]](#footnote-13)

(iv) *Generative restrictivism:* the view that for any set of particulars, those particulars compose a generative composite if and only if they are arranged in way W.[[13]](#footnote-14)

(v) *Non-generative restrictivism*: the view that for any set of particulars, those particulars compose a non-generative composite if and only if they are arranged in way W.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Substantivism about the metaphysics of composition is the view that a dispute over which of these views is correct is a substantive dispute.

*1. Arguments for Semanticism.* This part of the paper attempts to undermine what I take to be the two most compelling arguments in favor of semanticism—the semantic intuition argument and the hermeneutic argument—and thus seeks *ipso facto* to undermine the arguments against substantivism. I consider each in turn.

*1.1. The Semantic Intuition Argument.*[[15]](#footnote-16) Here is the semantic intuition argument in a nutshell. There is an intuition—I call it the semantic intuition—that must be accommodated by any meta-metaphysical account of composition. Substantivism is unable to accommodate the semantic intuition. Semanticism is able to accommodate the semantic intuition. Therefore we have reason to accept semanticism.

The semantic intuition is the intuition that it is *obvious* that claims such as ‘there are tables’ and ‘there are dogs’ are true, and that mere reflection on our language coupled with its being the case that the world is roughly the way we perceive it to be (at the macro level) tells us this is so.[[16]](#footnote-17) The semantic intuition seems plausible. I don’t need to engage in deep metaphysical reflection and debate before I can answer the question “are there tables?”. I take it to be obvious that there are tables and my confidence is based on my knowledge of the English language and my having visually perceived various regions of the world.

But if substantivism were true it would be a *weighty* metaphysical matter whether or not there are composite objects. If it were a weighty metaphysical matter whether or not there are composite objects, then I could only know that ‘there are tables’ is true by first knowing that there are composite objects, some of which are tables. Thus substantivism cannot accommodate the semantic intuition. Call this Part A of the Semantic Intuition Argument.

Semanticism, however, is able to accommodate the semantic intuition. For there is an idiolect in which ‘there are tables’ comes out true and we know that this idiolect is closer to natural language than any idiolect in which it comes out false. Moreover, in idiolects in which ‘there are tables’ comes out as false, this sentence does not express a proposition that contradicts the proposition expressed by ‘there are tables’ in natural language (or in idiolects relevantly close). In effect, since the dispute about whether or not there are tables is a merely verbal one, and since we know which language we are speaking when we speak natural language, we can know that ‘there are tables’ is true in that language. Thus semanticism can accommodate the semantic intuition. Call this Part B of the Semantic Intuition Argument. Since semanticism can, but substantivism cannot, accommodate the semantic intuition, we have good reason to accept semanticism.

In what follows I grant Part B of the argument and focus on part A. Here is Part A laid out in more detail.

*Semantic Intuition Argument, Part A*

(SI1) For any of us, if we know that our visual perception of a region is roughly veridical and we have ordinary linguistic competence then we know, of some ordinary claim such as ‘there are tables’, whether or not it is true (premise).

(SI2) Some of us do not know which account of composition is the correct one (premise).

(SI3) So some of us know whether ‘there are tables’ is true without knowing which account of composition is the correct one (from 1, 2).

(SI4) If substantivism is true then whether an assertion of an ordinary claim such as ‘there are tables’ is true would depend on which account of composition is the correct one (premise).

(SI5) If substantivism is true then we could only know that an ordinary claim such as ‘there are tables is true if we knew which account of composition is the correct one (from 4).

(SI6) Therefore substantivism is false (from 3, 5).

There are three ways to resist Part A of the Semantic Intuition Argument. First, one might deny the Semantic Intuition. Those we could call naïve nihilists think that ‘there are tables’ is false so, at least on the face of it, they deny the semantic intuition.[[17]](#footnote-18) Second, one might contend that there is no connection between the natural language sentence ‘there are tables’ and sentences in Ontologese uttered by metaphysicians. We need to know the metaphysical truths to know which sentences uttered in Ontologese are true, but we do not need to know them in order to know which sentences in natural language are true.[[18]](#footnote-19) Third, one might argue that (SI5) does not follow from (SI4). Typically it is held that it does not follow from the fact that (a) I know that I have hands and (b) I have hands only if the external world exists that (c) I know the external world exists. That is because warrant for (a) does not transmit to warrant for (c). (SI5) follows from (SI4) only if an absence of warrant transmits. Namely, it must follow from the fact that (a) I do not know some metaphysical fact about composition, F, and (b) F is the truthmaker of some ordinary claim, C, that (c) I do not know that C is true. Here, my absence of warrant for (a) needs to transmit to my absence of warrant for (c).

Rather than arguing in the abstract that this is the kind of case in which we should expect the absence of warrant to fail to transmit, I instead offer an account of how we can know that the ordinary claim, C, is true even if we do not know the metaphysical fact, F, that makes it true. If the account succeeds it is straightforward to see how substantivism can accommodate the semantic intuition.

*1.1.1. Accommodating the Semantic Intuition.* If sound, Part A of the Semantic Intuition Argument shows that two claims are inconsistent. The first is that we know whether or not, say, ‘there are tables’ is true just by knowing some linguistic facts and knowing that our visual perception of the relevant region is roughly veridical. The second is that substantivism is true.

These two claims are not, however, inconsistent. Our absence of knowledge about the metaphysical facts does not undermine our warrant for believing certain ordinary claims to be true (or false) on the basis of (veridical) perceptual evidence and linguistic competence. One way to explain *why* said warrant is not undermined is by focusing on a constraint on the meaning of (apparently) singular referring terms. The simplest version of this constraint is the following Disjunctive Thesis:

DT Apparently singular referring terms (like ‘table’) either refer to generative composite objects or to non-generative composite objects or to pluralities of simples.

However, given that more than one of the disjuncts might exist and thus compete to be the referent of our terms there are reasons to prefer a more sophisticated version of DT that takes a stand on which of the three disjuncts is the better deserver. Thus consider the following Better Deserver thesis:

BD Apparently singular referring terms (like ‘table’) pick out generative composite objects if there are any; otherwise they pick out non-generative composite objects if there are any; otherwise they pick out pluralities of particulars.[[19]](#footnote-20)

BD is plausible. Regardless of their view about composition, substantivists are likely to grant that *if there are* generative composite objects then they attract the reference of our terms: these are the best deservers. Likewise, they are likely to grant that if there are no generative composites, but there are non-generative composites, then the latter are sufficiently good deservers to attract the reference of our singular referring terms. Finally, if there are no generative or non-generative composites, then simples arranged table-wise are good enough deservers to make true our ordinary sentences.

Either DT or BD will do the work we want. Since (almost) everyone agrees that there are pluralities of simples everyone agrees that, if DT or BD is true, *some* good enough deserver exists. Indeed, one’s tablish perceptions are veridical only if there is some such deserver. Thus however the world turns out to be, metaphysically speaking, as long as one’s relevant perceptions are veridical one will be justified in believing that, say, there are tables, for there will be a sufficiently good deserver to be the referent of ‘table’. One need not know *which* deserver exists.

Another way to put a very similar point, but without appealing to constraints on meaning, is in terms of the following set of conditional claims. If it is a necessary condition for there being tables that there are generative composites, then there are generative composites. If it is a necessary condition for there being tables that there are non-generative composites, then there are non-generative composites. If it is a necessary condition for the existence of tables that there are simples arranged table-wise, then there are simples arranged table-wise. Thus the contrapositive of each conditional is also true: if there are no non-generative composites, then it is not a necessary condition for there being tables that there are non-generative composites and *mutatis mutandis* for the other conditionals. More generally we can say:

CC For any X, if X is a necessary condition for the existence of tables then X obtains.

From this it follows that for any X, if X does not obtain then X is not a necessary condition for the existence of tables. If conditionals such as CC are true then we are justified, on the basis of veridical perception and linguistic competence, in believing that there are tables. For however the world turns out to be, metaphysically speaking, if our perceptions are veridical the necessary conditions for the existence of tables obtain. We do not need to know *which* conditions are necessary and thus know *what* the truthmakers are for our belief that there are tables to be justified.[[20]](#footnote-21)

What allows the substantivist to accommodate the semantic intuition is that it turns out not to be a substantive matter whether or not claims such as ‘there are tables’ are true or false. Rather, it is a substantive matter which of a number of possible candidate truth-makers for such claims is the actual truth-maker. Answering the metaphysical question tells us *in virtue of what* ‘there are tables’ is true rather than telling us *whether* *or not* it is true.

If this is right then Part A of the semantic intuition argument is unsound and it provides us no reason to accept semanticism. So let us move on to consider the second argument for semanticism.

*1.2 The Hermeneutic Argument.* The motivating thought behind the hermeneutic argument is that we ought, in general, to interpret well-meaning, rational, well-informed folk in such a way that we do not take them to be uttering widespread falsehoods. From the perspective of each party to the dispute about composition the other parties utter widespread falsehoods. If it is a constraint on good interpretation that this is not so, then there is pressure on each party to interpret the other party in such a way that the other party’s claims do not come out as systematically false. To do this each party must attribute somewhat different truth conditions to certain sentences uttered by the other party, such that once these truth conditions are attributed the parties no longer really disagree.[[21]](#footnote-22)

According to the hermeneutic argument there is a plausible hermeneutic principle, and when we apply that principle to disputes in the debate about composition we find we ought conclude that semanticism is true. Here is the argument schema:

(1) There is a plausible hermeneutic principle, H (premise).

(2) If we ought to interpret disputants in the debate about the metaphysics of composition such that what appear to be contradictory claims made by each party are not contradictory at all then semanticism is true of that debate (definition of semanticism).

(3) Given H, we ought to interpret the disputants in the debate about the metaphysics of composition such that what appear to be contradictory claims made by each party are not contradictory at all (premise).

(4) Therefore semanticism is true of the debate about the metaphysics of composition.

Which principle is H meant to be? In what follows I consider two competitor principles: H1 and H2. It will be assumed that if H1 is more plausible than H2 then we have reason to think that H1, rather than H2, is H and *vice versa*. Here are the two principles:

H1 Where S1 and S2 are two speakers who disagree about the truth of a sentence, , if S1 takes S2 to be rational, well-meaning, to be in agreement with S1 about empirical matters of fact, and to be metaphysically well-informed then S1 ought to interpret the truth conditions of  for S2 as being different than the truth conditions for  for S1, such that S2’s -assertions come out as true given those truth conditions, as long as there is a systematic interpretation of S’s idiolect that allows S1 to attribute said truth-conditions to  in S2’s idiolect.

H2 Where S1 and S2 are two speakers who disagree about the truth of a sentence, , if S1 takes S2 to be rational, well-meaning, to be agreement with S1 about empirical maters of fact, and to be metaphysically well-informed, then S1 ought to interpret the truth conditions of  for S2 as being different than the truth conditions for  for S1, such that S2’s -assertions come out as true given those truth conditions as long as there is a systematic interpretation of S’s idiolect that allows S1 to attribute said truth-conditions to  in S2’s idiolect and either (i) S2, upon hearing these alternative truth conditions for  is inclined, after due reflection, to assent to these truth conditions being the correct ones or (ii) there is some good explanation for why, upon hearing these alternative truth conditions for , S2 remains mistaken in his view about the truth conditions for  in his own idiolect.

If H1 is principle H then premise (3) is plausible. Disputants about composition agree about the empirical facts; they are (one supposes) rational and well-meaning, and they are metaphysically well-informed. Moreover, although this is more controversial, there seems to be a systematic interpretation of the idiolect of one party that allows a disputing party to attribute different truth conditions to some  (and *vice versa*).[[22]](#footnote-23)

I will argue that H2 is a more reasonable interpretive principle than H1. And if H2 is principle H, then premise (3) is much less plausible. Participants in the debate about composition strenuously resist the claim that there is a , such that the truth conditions for  differ in each of their idiolects. So (i) is not met. Is (ii) met? There has been little attempt to explain why, if disputants are systematically talking past one another, they do not recognize this when it is pointed out. The semanticist might argue that we should be skeptical of the idea that speakers have access to the truth conditions of their utterances. She might then attempt to explain speakers’ mistakes when they reject the truth conditions proffered by the semanticist in terms of this absence of access to the relevant truth conditions.

This would not, however, be a good explanation. There are disputes in which semanticism is the right diagnosis. One reason we are confident that a dispute is like this is that when parties are made aware of the different truth conditions associated with  in each of their idiolects they accept that these are the right truth conditions. But if speakers have no access to the truth conditions for their utterances then we have no explanation for why sometimes speakers assent to the truth conditions proffered by the semanticist and sometimes they reject them.

Alternatively, semanticists might try to explain why speakers are mistaken about the truth conditions for  by pointing to features of the sentences expressing those truth conditions. Consider two idiolects, I1 and I2. Consider sentence S1, which, according to speakers of I1, expresses the truth conditions for  in I1. Consider S2, which, according to speakers of I2, expresses the truth conditions for  in I2. If S1 is the same sentence as S2 speakers of I1 and I2 might be inclined to conclude that they attribute the same truth conditions to . But if I1 and I2 are different idiolects then, given some sort of meaning holism, this is a mistake. Instead S1 and S2 express different propositions in each idiolect. Since speakers of the two idiolects assert the *same sentence* to express the truth conditions for  it is unsurprising that they resist the semanticist’s claim that they are attributing different truth conditions to .

By contrast, when the semanticist offers truth conditions for  in I1 and I2 she does so by asserting a pair of sentences (S3 expresses the truth conditions for  in I1, and S4 expresses the truth conditions for  in I2) in some *third* idiolect such that in that idiolect S3 and S4 express different propositions. Thus the semanticist successfully attributes to  in I1, different truth conditions than the truth conditions she attributes to  in I2. But if the speakers of I1 and I2 interpret the truth conditions the semanticist offers (by way of S3 and S4) as sentences in their own idiolect they may reject those as truth conditions for . For quite likely S3 in I1 expresses a proposition that is false, and S4 in I2 expresses a proposition that is false. Consequently speakers of I1 and I2 quite rightly reject S3 and S4 as capturing the truth conditions for . But while each is right to reject those sentences given what they expresses in *their own idiolect*, they are wrong to reject them given what they express in the idiolect in which the semanticist proffers them.

Thus, it seems, the semanticist has an explanation for why disputants fail to see that the truth conditions she offers are correct. But now suppose that semanticism is true of two disputes D1 and D2. Disputants in D1 are inclined to accept the semanticist’s proffered pair of truth conditions for , while disputants in D2 are inclined to reject those truth conditions. The explanation just offered for why disputants might (mistakenly) reject the proffered truth conditions does not explain this difference. If some sort of holism about meaning is right then any sentence will express somewhat different propositions in different idiolects. But if so, disputants ought never to accept the truth conditions proffered by the semanticist because the sentence the semanticist uses the express those truth conditions will express different truth conditions in the idiolects of the disputants than in her own idiolect. We would need an account of why, in some situations, the sentence, S, offered by the semanticist as expressing the truth conditions for  in I1 expresses a proposition in the semanticist’s idiolect that is close enough to the proposition it expresses in I1 that disputants who speak I1 will grant that it expresses the truth conditions for , while in other cases some sentence, S\*, offered by the semanticist as expressing the truth conditions for \* in I1 expresses a proposition in the semanticist’s idiolect that is sufficiently far from the proposition it expresses in I1 that disputants who speak I1 will deny that S\* expresses the truth conditions for \*. So far we have no such account so we have no reason to think that clause (ii) has been met.

Thus if H2 is principle H then neither clause (i) nor (ii) is met and premise (3) is false. Moreover, *prima facie* H2 is a more plausible interpretive principle. It demands only that *if* disputants fail to accept the semanticist’s diagnosis of their dispute there is some explanation to be offered for why we should think the disputants are mistaken about the truth conditions for their own utterances. One might worry, however, that this requirement, though *prima facie* plausible, requires an implausible view about speaker’s access to the meaning of their own terms. If so, we would have reason to prefer H1 to H2.

In fact though H2 does not require that speakers have complete, infallible access to their meanings. All that is required is that parties have access to something like referencing-fixing descriptions and that they agree about the empirical matters of fact. Consider the following case. There are two speakers who disagree. One says ‘water *could* *not* be brown and thick’ the other says ‘water *could* be brown and thick’. Neither knows that it is H20 in the lakes and rivers. Suppose one speaker has a reference fixing description for ‘water’ that is as follows ‘water is whatever watery stuff plays a certain functional role’. The other speaker has a reference fixing description for ‘water’ that is as follows ‘water is whatever it is that actually plays a certain functional role and necessarily so’. Notice that even though neither knows that their term ‘water’ actually picks out H20, so long as they have access to these reference fixing descriptions they can come to know that their disagreement about whether water *could* be brown and thick is merely verbal.

Matters are more difficult if we think that at least some of our terms are attracted to reference magnets. Then perhaps we do not know the truth conditions for some sentences in which those terms are embedded. An appeal to reference magnetism, however, sits uneasily with appealing to a hermeneutic principle. The latter tells us what truth conditions to attribute to sentences given the behavior (linguistic and otherwise) of speakers. This does not fit well with the idea that what we mean by some utterances is determined directly by reference magnets rather than by any feature of our linguistic practice. The semanticist project sits most naturally within a view of language that affords us enough access to our meanings to render H2 more plausible than H1 as an interpretive principle.

But if H2 is principle H we should reject premise (3) of the hermeneutic argument, which thus fails as an argument for semanticism.

Where does that leave us? This part of the paper defends substantivism by undermining two of the major arguments for semanticism. Perhaps there are other, better, arguments for semanticism and thus better reasons to reject substantivism. Until such arguments are proffered, however, we should reject semanticism in favor of substantivism given that substantivism is, on methodological grounds, the default view. The next part of the paper defends substantivism by undermining a major argument for nonfactualism. It is to this argument that I now turn.

PART II

*2. Nonfactualism.* Nonfactualism about a dispute, D, is the thesis that (a) parties to dispute D are genuinely disagreeing: there is an expression, , such that one party to the dispute holds that  is true, and the other party holds that  is false and each party attributes to  the same truth conditions and (b) there is no fact of the matter in the world that makes  true or makes  false. Nonfactualists about composition hold that there are no facts that make true any first-order metaphysical view about the conditions under which composition occurs and that can settle the debate about in what composition consists.

This part of the paper attempts to undermine one recent powerful argument for nonfactualism about composition. In section 2.1 I outline this argument. In section 2.2 I attempt to show that if the nonfactualist argument of 2.1 were sound, then analogous nonfactualist arguments would also be sound. But said analogous nonfactualist arguments cannot be sound because they lead us to demonstrable falsehoods. Therefore we should reject all of these nonfactualist arguments including the argument for compositional nonfactualism presented in 2.1.

*2.1 Argument for compositional nonfactualism*. Let us call C-factualism the thesis that for some plurality of simples arranged a certain way there is a fact of the matter whether those simples compose something. The argument for compositional nonfactualism concludes that C-factualism is not true. This argument follows the following very general form. For some relevant set, S, of competitor claims, factualists are committed to one member of S being true. However, whichever member of S is true is either necessarily true or contingently true. Call *necessitarianism* the view that the member of S that is true, is true of necessity. Call *contingentism* the view that the member of S that is true, is contingently true. The argument proceeds to show, for each member of S, that both necessitarianism and contingentism are false. Since necessitarianism and contingentism are exhaustive, if neither is true then factualism (about the claims in S) is not true and nonfactualism is true.[[23]](#footnote-24) When I say that an argument is analogous to the argument for compositional nonfactualism I mean that the argument takes the form just described.

Now consider some plurality of simples arranged a certain way—X-wise. There are three possible views one might have about some actual set of simples, namely:

(a) *Anti X-ism*: the simples arranged X-wise do not compose anything.

(b) *Generative X-ism*: the simples arranged X-wise compose a generative composite.

(c) *Non-generative X-ism*: the simples arranged X-wise compose a non-generative composite.

We can then define the following:

C-Necessitarianism: one of (a), b), or (c) is necessarily true.

C-Contingentism: one of (a), (b), or (c) is contingently true.

C-factualists hold that (a), (b) or (c) is true. The argument for compositional nonfactualism proceeds as follows:

*The Argument for compositional nonfactualism*:

(1\*) If C-factualism is true, then either C-necessitarianism is true or C-contingentism is true.

(2\*) C-Necessitarianism is false.

(3\*) C-Contingentism is false.

(4\*) Therefore C-factualism is not true.

If the argument for compositional nonfactualism is sound then C-factualism is not true. If C-factualism is not true then, for any plurality of simples arranged a certain way, there is no fact of the matter whether those simples compose anything. Thus if C-factualism is not true there is no fact of the matter whether nihilism, non-generative universalism, generative universalism, non-generative restrictivism, or generative restrictivism, is true. Thus substantivism is false.

Let us consider each premise in turn. Anyone who is not a modal error theorist or an actualist will accept (1\*). So, for now, I will assume that the key premises the nonfactualist needs to defend are (2\*) and (3\*). Let us begin with (2\*).

The argument for (2\*) begins by stating that there are only three sources, or kinds, of necessity. These are:

N1 Analyticity—necessity in virtue of meaning alone.

N2 *A posteriori* necessity—necessity in virtue of co-reference or the discovery of essences.

N3 Logical necessity—necessity in virtue of logic alone.

Then here is the argument for (2\*): C-Necessitarianism is false.

(A\*) If C-necessitarianism is true, then one of (a) to (c) is true and necessarily so (by definition of C-necessitarianism).

(B\*) There are only three sources of necessity; analyticity, *a posteriori* necessity, and logical necessity (premise).

(C\*) If one of (a) to (c) is necessarily true it is either analytically true, *a posteriori necessary*, or logically necessary (from B\*).

(D\*) None of (a) to (c) is analytically true, *a posteriori* necessary, or logically necessary (premise).

(E\*) Therefore none of (a) thorough (c) is necessarily true (from D\*, C\*, modus tollens).

(F\*) Therefore C-necessitarianism is false (from E\*, A\*).

For now let us grant (B\*). The other controversial premise is (D\*). Here is the nonfactualist defense of (D\*). That defense first argues that none of the views is analytically true, then that none are *a posteriori* necessary, and finally that none are logically necessary.

Here is the nonfactualist defense of (D\*). Consider, first, whether (a), (b), or (c) is analytically true. It is not altogether implausible to suppose that one of these claims is true in virtue of meaning alone. Indeed, that is what some semanticists suppose: that is why they think the debate between the views is non-substantive. So some semanticists can reject (D\*) and thus embrace necessitarianism. Dialectically, however, we are considering this as an argument put forth against the substantivist. Substantivists, however, cannot think that it is a matter of meaning alone whether or not (a), (b), or (c) is true. After all, substantivists think it is a weighty ontological matter whether or not some simples compose something. Substantivists think that disagreements about which of (a), (b), and (c) is true are not disagreements about what words mean. But if it is a matter of meaning alone that, say, (b), is true then when parties dispute about whether (a) or (b) is true it seems likely that this is really a dispute about meaning.

Thus we can think of the argument for compositional nonfactualism as tacitly pushing the substantivist into a dilemma. If semanticism is true then (D\*) can be resisted, but at the cost of denying substantivism. If semanticism is false then (D\*) is true, the argument goes through, and we must deny substantivism. In either case we must deny substantivism.

Since the aim is to defend substantivism let us assume throughout this section that semanticism is false. Then it is *prima facie* implausible that (a), (b), or (c) is analytically true. Still, we might wonder if it is analytically true that ‘there are simples arranged X-wise’ entails ‘there is an X’ in virtue of meaning alone. Thus we might wonder if (a) is analytically false. But even if there is an analytic entailment between ‘there are simples arranged X-wise’ and ‘there is an X’ this does not entail the falsity of (a) (let alone the truth of, for instance, (b)). The analytic entailment is consistent with the truth of (a) since for all we know ‘there is an X’ is true just in case there are simples arranged X-wise. (Then ‘X’ turns out to be a disguised plural referring expression). It certainly does not seem plausible that (a) is analytically true. Nor it is plausible that (b) is analytically true. According to (b), the simples arranged X-wise compose a generative composite. But it cannot be a matter of meaning alone that when a plurality of simples exists so too does a numerically distinct object. Nor does it seem plausible that (c) is analytically true. Those who deny that there are any non-generative composites are not making an analytic error in their understanding of the meaning of ‘simples arranged X-wise’, ‘composite’, or ‘identity’. Perhaps (c) is analytically false. One might think so if one thinks that it is part of the meaning of ‘=’ that it takes a single thing on each side as its relata. (c) requires that identity holds between the many, on one side, and the one, on the other. Even if this were so it would not secure the conclusion that either (a) or (b) is analytically true. Thus we should conclude that none of (a), (b), or (c) is analytically true.

Could (a), (b), or (c) be *a posteriori* necessities? Suppose that if ‘x is y’ is an *a posteriori* necessity, this is either because ‘x’ and ‘y’ are rigid designators that actually co-refer (and we discover their actual co-reference *a posteriori*) or because it is the essential nature of x to be y (and we discover this essence *a posteriori*). If (a) is true it cannot be because we discover that ‘composite’ and ‘simples arranged X-wise’ are names for actual things that *fail* to co-refer. Nor it is plausible that we discover that it is the essential nature of simples to fail to compose anything. So (a) is not an *a posteriori* necessity. Is (b)? No. If (b) is true then the name for the plurality of simples and the name for the composite that the simples compose do not even *actually* co-refer (they are numerically distinct). Nor does there seem any reason to think it is part of the essential nature of simples that, when arranged a certain way, they bring into existence some further numerically distinct object.

This is not to say that there might not be *a posteriori* necessities in the vicinity. Suppose that actually composite objects are generative composites. Perhaps in discovering this we discover composite objects’ essential nature. Then it is an *a posteriori* necessity that composite objects are generative composites. Even if that were so, however, for obvious reasons it would not follow that (b) is an *a* *posteriori* necessity.

Could the truth of (c) be an *a posteriori* necessity? Well, it does not seem plausible that it is part of the essential nature of the simples arranged X-wise that they compose a non-generative composite. However, the phrase ‘simples arranged X-wise’ picks out the very same thing as the phrase ‘the composite, X’. If each phrase designates rigidly, then ‘simples arranged X-wise’ and ‘composite X’ necessarily co-refer and (c) is an *a posteriori* necessity. It is, however, not plausible that both phrases designate rigidly. Suppose that the simples are arranged chair-wise and the non-generative composite they compose is a chair. Then the phrase ‘the simples arranged chair-wise’ and ‘the chair’ actually co-refer. But if they co-refer of necessity the chair could not have been composed of slightly different simples. Since we typically think that the chair could have been composed of somewhat different simples we should conclude that one of the phrases does not designate rigidly. Perhaps the phrase ‘the simples arrange chair-wise’ and the phrase ‘the chair’ are associated with different counterpart relations so there are worlds in which ‘the chair’ picks out a counterpart of the chair, which is not also a counterpart of the simples arranged chair-wise. If so, (c) is not an *a posteriori* necessity.

Could the truth of (a), (b), or (c) be logically necessary? If logical necessity is distinct from analytic necessity (perhaps one thinks that the truths of logic just are analytic truths) then the logical necessities are the theorems of logic. But it is very hard to see how (a), (b), or (c) could be a theorem of logic. All the more so if one is a substantivist and supposes that the debate between (a), (b), and (c) is a weighty ontological debate.

Thus none of (a), (b), or (c) is necessarily true. (2\*) is true: C-Necessitarianism is false. That brings us to (3\*): C-contingentism is false. The argument for (3\*) is as follows:

(i\*) If C-Contingentism is true, then one of (a), (b), and (c) is contingently true (definition of C-contingentism).

(ii\*) If one of (a), (b), or (c) is contingently true then there exists a pair of worlds, w1 and w2, such that (i) in w1 there exists a plurality of simples arranged X-wise, and those simples compose something and (ii) in w2 there exists a plurality of simples arranged X-wise, such that that plurality is an intrinsic duplicate of the plurality in w1,[[24]](#footnote-25) and such that in w2 the simples in that plurality fail to compose anything (premise).

(iii\*) It is not the case that there exists w1 and w2 (premise).

(iv\*) Therefore C-contingentism is false (from (ii\*), (iii\*), modus tollens).

Premises (i\*) and (ii\*) are uncontroversial. C-contingentists agree that there exists {w1, w2}: they merely disagree about which is actual and which counterfactual. The key premise is (iii\*). What could make for the difference between *w*1 and *w2*? One difference might lie in the extrinsic properties and relations that the simples in each plurality bear to one another and to other simples in their respective worlds. Consider *w*3 in which there exists an intrinsic duplicate of the plurality of simples in *w*1. Suppose the simples in *w*3 compose something. It is plausible that what they compose might be different from what the simples in *w*1 compose. If the simples in *w*1 are arranged by an artist and those in *w*3 are arranged by quantum fluke then arguably those in *w*1 compose a work of art and those in *w*3 do not. Extrinsic properties and relations matter; that is clear. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that whether or not some plurality of simples composes *something* should be a function of the internal relations between, and intrinsic properties of, those simples. If so *w*1 and *w*2 are not both possible. Thus C-contingentism is false. Since both C-necessitarianism and C-contingentism are false it follows that C-factualism is not true.

This is the argument for compositional nonfactualism. In the following section I argue that we should reject this argument.

*2.2 A slippery slope: rejecting nonfactualism about composition*. There are three ways to resist the argument for compositional nonfactualism. The first is to reject (1\*): If C-factualism is true, then either C-necessitarianism is true or C-contingentism is true. Modal error theorists and actualists can take this route. The second is to reject (2\*). The substantivist’s best option here is to claim that there is a fourth kind of necessity: metaphysical necessity. For some, metaphysical possibility is a restriction on logical space the way nomologically possibility is such a restriction. On this view there are possible worlds that are metaphysically impossible. Call this *weak metaphysical necessity*. Weak metaphysical necessity is clearly not the kind of necessity intended in (2\*) since weakly metaphysically necessary claims are also contingent (albeit not metaphysically contingent) and thus it would not be true that necessitarianism and contingentism exhaustively and exclusively partition logical space. The fourth kind of necessity must be *strong metaphysical necessity*. On this view of metaphysical necessity the metaphysically possible worlds are co-extensive with the possible worlds. The sphere of possible worlds is simply smaller than we might have thought. Perhaps strong metaphysical necessity is a brute necessity; perhaps not (though strong metaphysical necessities must, if this is to be a fourth view, be distinct from *a posteriori* necessities). If there is such a fourth kind of necessity then the nonfactualist has not, as yet, shown that C-necessitarianism is false. Finally, one could reject (3\*): the claim that C-contingentism is false. One might employ the notion of weak metaphysical necessity in this role. Perhaps the sphere of metaphysically possible worlds is the sphere of worlds that share the same metaphysical laws. Perhaps simples arranged X-wise, in conjunction with a certain set of metaphysical laws, compose something, but in worlds with different metaphysical laws they fail to compose anything. The difference maker between the two worlds is the metaphysical laws: both *w1* and *w2* are possible and C-contingentism is true.

There are, then, three options: endorse actualism (reject 1\*), endorse strong metaphysical necessity (reject 2\*,) or endorse weak metaphysical necessity and ground contingentism in a difference in metaphysical laws (reject 3\*).

Sadly, I do not find any of these options very appealing. Hence in this section I attempt to show that the compositional nonfactualist’s argument must go awry somewhere. If sound my argument undermines the argument for compositional nonfactualism without arguing for the falsity of any particular premise of the argument. I call this the slippery slope argument since it attempts to show that if we accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism then, by analogous arguments, we ought also to accept what I call sweeping nonfactualism. Sweeping nonfactualism is the thesis that for any term, ‘T’, there is no fact of the matter whether ‘T’ has an actual extension. Sweeping nonfactualism entails that there is no fact of the matter whether anything exists. I assume that sweeping nonfactualism is demonstrably false. Since the argument for compositional nonfactualism is strictly analogous to the argument for sweeping nonfactualism and since the premises of the latter are plausible if the premises of the former are, I argue that we should reject both arguments and, hence, both conclusions. Here is the argument I defend:

*The Slippery Slope Argument*

(S1) If one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about objects (premise).

(S2) If one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about stuff (premise).

(S3) If one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about events (premise).

(S4) If one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about properties (premise).

(S5) Therefore if one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism one ought to accept nonfactualism about objects, nonfactualism about properties, nonfactualism about stuff and nonfactualism about events (from 1, 2, 3, 4).

(S6) If nonfactualism about objects, events, stuff and properties is true, then there is no fact of the matter whether there exist any objects, properties, stuff or events (from definition of nonfactualism about objects, events, stuff, and properties).

(S7) If there is no fact of the matter whether there exist any objects, properties, stuff or events there is no fact of the matter whether there exists anything (premise).

(S8) There is a fact of the matter whether there exists anything (premise).

(S9) Therefore there is a fact of the matter whether there exist any objects, properties, stuff or events (from 8, 7, modus tollens).

(S10) Therefore one ought not accept nonfactualism about objects, events, properties, or stuff (from 9 and definition of nonfactualism).

(S11) Therefore one ought not to accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism (from 10, 5, modus tollens).

To clarify matters let us define some important notions. Nonfactualism about stuff is the thesis that there is no fact of the matter whether there exists any stuff. Nonfactualism about properties is the thesis that there is no fact of the matter whether there are any properties. Nonfactualism about events is the thesis that there is no fact of the matter whether there exist any events. Nonfactualism about objects is the thesis that there is no fact of the matter whether there exist any objects. With these definitions in hand the argument is very straightforward. The idea is that if we accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism then we ought also to accept analogous arguments that lead us to accept nonfactualism about objects, stuff, events, and properties (S1)—(S4). But if there is no fact of the matter whether there exist any objects, events, stuff, or properties, then there is no fact of the matter whether there exists anything at all—sweeping nonfactualism is true (S7). (S5) follows from (S1)—(S4), and (S6) is true by definition. (S7) is very plausible given the truth of (S5). (S8) is, I think, obviously true (i.e. sweeping nonfactualism is false), and (S9)—(S11) are lemmas. So the premises in need of defending are (S1)—(S4). I cannot hope to defend all four in detail. Instead I focus on defending (S1) and briefly outline the arguments for (S2), (S3), and (S4). The hope is that because the arguments for (S2), (S3) and (S4) are strictly analogous to the argument for compositional nonfactualism, if the premises of the latter are plausible then so too are the premises of the former.

First I argue for (S1): If one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about objects. This will take some time, as the case for (S1) is rather complex. I will then attend to (S2)–(S4) whose defense is more straightforward.

(S1) is a conditional claim.[[25]](#footnote-26) To establish it I need to show that there is an argument that is an analogue of the argument for compositional nonfactualism whose conclusion is object nonfactualism. Below is that analogue argument for object nonfactualism. My contention is that if one finds the argument for compositional nonfactualism plausible one ought to find the argument for object nonfactualism plausible.

*Argument for object nonfactualism*

(O1) Compositional nonfactualism is true (premise).

(O2) Decompositional nonfactualism is true (premise).

(O3) If O-factualism is true and compositional and decompositional nonfactualism are true then either (A) smallism is true or (B) bigism is true of (C) mediumism is true (premise).

(O4) If one of smallism, bigism, or mediumism is true then it is either necessarily true—SBM-necessitarianism is true—or it is contingently true—SBM-contingentism is true (premise).

(O5) SBM-necessitarianism is false (premise).

(O6) SBM-contingentism is false (premise).

(O7) None of smallism, bigism, or mediumism is true (from 4, 5, 6, and modus tollens).

(O8) Therefore it is not the case that O-factualism is true and compositional and decompositional nonfactualism are true (from 7, 3, and modus tollens).

(O9) Therefore O-factualism is not true (from 1, 2, 8, and conjunction).

The compositional nonfactualist already accepts (O1). Here is the argument for (O2). It is strictly analogous to the argument for compositional nonfactualism.

D-factualism is the thesis that for any extended concrete object, O there is a fact of the matter whether O decomposes into proper parts; decompositional nonfactualism is its negation.

*The argument for decompositional nonfactualism*.[[26]](#footnote-27)

(D1) If D-factualism is true, then either D-necessitarianism is true or D-contingentism is true.

(D2) D-Necessitarianism is false.

(D3) D-Contingentism is false.

(D4) Therefore D-factualism is not true.

In what follows I assume that the extended concrete object in question is the whole universe. But nothing hangs on this assumption—we could rework the arguments, below, if instead there exist some number of extended objects. Then if D-factualism is true then either (i), (ii), or (iii) is true.

(i) *Anti D-ism*: for any proper sub-region of the region occupied by the universe, there is no proper part of the universe that exactly occupies that sub-region.

(ii) *Generative D-ism*: for some proper sub-region of the region occupied by the universe, there is a generative proper part of the universe that exactly occupies that sub-region.

(iii) *Non-generative D-ism*: for some proper sub-region of the region occupied by the universe, there is a non-generative proper part of the universe that exactly occupies that sub-region.

A generative proper part, P, of composite, C, is a proper part such that, when the set of all C’s non-overlapping proper parts that includes P are taken jointly they are not, jointly, identical with C. A non-generative proper part, P, of composite C, is a proper part such that, when the set of all C’s non-overlapping proper parts that includes P are taken jointly, they are, jointly, identical with C.

Combined with the claim that there are only three sources of necessity—analytic, logical, and *a posteriori*—(D2) will be defended by showing that (assuming semanticism is false) none of (i), (ii), or (iii) is an analytic truth, a logical necessity, or an *a posteriori* necessity. If the analogue arguments that support the premise (2\*) (C-necessitarianism is false) of the argument for compositional nonfactualism are plausible (if none of (a), (b), or (c) is analytic, logically, or *a posteriori* necessary) then it is plausible that none of (i), (ii), or (iii) is analytic, logically, or *a posteriori* necessary. For (i), (ii), and (iii) are the inverse of (a), (b), and (c). Likewise, (D3) will be defended analogously to (3\*) (the premise that C-contingentism is false) by showing that there is no pair of worlds, w1 and w2, such that in each there is a duplicate of universe U, and in one (w1) U has a proper part and in w2 U does not have a proper part. If we think the argument against C-contingentism is plausible we should think the analogous argument against D-contingentism is plausible. Thus if we accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism we should accept the argument for decompositional nonfactualism: we should accept (O2).

Now consider (O3). If (O1) and (O2) are true then there are only three ways our world could be. It could be one in which there are non-extended simples and there is no fact of the matter whether they compose anything (compositional nonfactualism is true and decompositional nonfactualism is trivially true since there are no extended objects). Call this view *smallism*. Or there exists the universe, and there is no fact of the matter whether it decomposes into proper parts (decompositional nonfactualism is true and compositional nonfactualism is trivially true since there is, determinately, only one thing). Call this view *bigism*. Or there exists some number of extended objects such that there is no fact of the matter whether they compose anything or decompose into anything. Call this view *mediumism*. Smallism, bigism, and mediumism are exhaustive. So if O-factualism is true then one of them is true. Thus (O3) is true. But if one of these is true it must be either necessarily true or contingently true (O4). But none of smallism, bigism, and mediumism are either necessarily or contingently true (O5 and O6). Why think these last two claims are true? For reasons analogous to those we have already met.

(O5) says that none of smallism, bigism, or mediumism is necessarily true. I will not go through this argument in detail. Familiarly, the defense of (O5) will be that (semanticism aside) none of these three claims is an analytic, a logical, or an *a posteriori* necessity. If the analogue claim, in the case of the argument for compositional nonfactualism, is plausible then the claim here is also plausible.

(O6) says that neither smallism, bigism, nor mediumism is contingently true. The analogue premise is (3\*): C-Contingentism is false. The argument for that premise was that there is no pair of worlds {w1, w2} such that in w1 the simples arranged X-wise compose and in w2 the simples arranged X-wise fail to compose. In effect the anti-contingentist argument asks us to hold fixed the distribution of simples (at least the X-wise ones) and to notice that it is implausible that the facts about the presence (or absence) of composition varies when the distribution of simples does not. The analogue claim in this case is that if we hold fixed the distribution of matter (and perhaps properties) we thereby hold fixed whether smallism, bigism, or mediumism is true. There is no pair of worlds, {w1\*, w2\*] with the same distribution of matter, such that in one smallism is true and in the other bigism (say) is true. While this claim is plausible, its falsity does not entail the falsity of SBM-contingentism. SBM-contingentism is true if and only if there is a possible world in which smallism is true and another in which smallism is false. It need not be that those worlds are exactly alike in their distribution of matter and properties. Suppose smallism is actually true. Consider a world where there is nothing but a giant homogeneous sphere made of continuous matter: call it the GHS world. One might be inclined to say that bigism is true in the GHS world. If so, SBM-Contingentism is true. Thus while (3\*) is plausible (O6) seems much less so. That’s bad news for the slippery slope argument and therefore for the substantivist.

But we need to be careful. Are we ideally positively conceiving that bigism is true in the GHS world? Or are we merely ideally positively conceiving of the relevant distribution of matter in that world and then stipulating, or labeling, the world as one in which bigism is true without, as it were, the truth of bigism being part of our ideal positive conception of the world? If the fact that we can conceive of such a world is to serve as evidence that SBM-contingentism is true we need to be careful that our conceivings really are evidence. To be sure I can ideally positive conceive of a world that has a particular distribution of matter—namely the GHS distribution—and it seems consistent with what I have conceived that said world is one in which bigism is true. Equally, though, my ideal positive conceiving of that distribution of matter and properties does not seem to rule out said world being one in which smallism or mediumism is true. If so, I ought to conclude that I cannot determine, from my ideal positive conception of the GHS distribution of matter, whether smallism, mediumism, or bigism is true at that world. But either the fact that the world has the GHS distribution of matter and properties fixes whether smallism, mediumism, or bigism is true at that world or it does not. Suppose it does fix the metaphysical facts. Then when I claim to be conceiving of world with a GHS distribution of matter in which bigism is true I cannot be ideally positively conceiving that world. For if ideally positively conceiving of a world with the GHS distribution of matter and properties fixes the metaphysical facts about that world I would not also be able to conceive that a world with that distribution of matter is one in which smallism (or mediumism) is true (lest I have ideally positively conceived of three worlds, only one of which is possible). So either ideal positive conceiving is no guide to possibility or I am not ideally positively conceiving that the GHS world is one in which bigism is true. Either way my conceivings of a bigist world are not evidence that SBM-contingentism is true.

On the other hand, suppose that in fixing the distribution of matter and properties the metaphysical facts are not thereby fixed. So ideally positively conceiving of the GHS distribution of matter does not fix whether smallism, bigism, or mediumism is true in that world. Then if SBM-contingentism is true there is a pair of worlds, alike in their distribution of matters of fact and properties, such that that pair of worlds differs with respect to whether smallism, mediumism, or bigism is true. But now an argument strictly analogous to the one the nonfactualist offered to support (3\*) goes through: namely there is no such pair of possible worlds. Thus we should reject SBM-contingentism. Hence (O6) is true.

This concludes the defense of (S1) of the slippery slope argument. I have argued that if we accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism we should also accept the argument for decompositional nonfactualism. From there we should accept analogous arguments that take us to the conclusion that there is no fact of the matter whether smallism, bigism, or mediumism is true. But if that is right then O-factualism is not true. Thus (S1) is true: if we think that the argument for compositional nonfactualism is good we should accept an analogous argument whose conclusion is object nonfactualism.

It should be relatively straightforward to defend (S2) of the slippery slope argument. (S2) states: if one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about stuff. Why so? There is not space to go into detail. But notice that we can ask the same questions about stuff as we asked about objects. We can whether stuff decomposition occurs. If stuff decomposition does occur we can ask under what conditions a portion of stuff has proper sub-portions. We can ask whether stuff composition occurs. If stuff composition does occur we can ask under what conditions some portions of stuff compose a further portion. We can ask whether, if there are composite portions of stuff, they are identical to their sub-portions, taken collectively or not. That is, we can ask whether composite portions non-generative or generative.

Given the possible views we can see that the arguments for compositional and decompositional nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to portions of stuff. Finally, an argument analogous to the argument for object nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis,* to portions of stuff. Thus if we find the argument for compositional nonfactualism plausible we should think find the argument for stuff nonfactualism plausible. Hence (S2) is true.

Now consider (S3): if one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about events. Everything we just asked about stuff can be asked, *mutatis mutandis*, about events. Events are sufficiently object-like (if they are not objects - and if they are then see (S1)) that we can ask under what conditions an event has event-parts. We can ask whether event decomposition occurs. If it does occur we can ask under what conditions an event decomposes into event-parts. We can also ask whether event composition occurs. If it does, we can ask under what conditions two events compose a further event. We can also ask whether, if there are composite events, these events are identical to their event parts, taken collectively. That is, we can ask whether composite events are generative or non-generative.

Given the possible views the arguments for compositional and decompositional nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to events. Finally, an argument analogous to the argument for object nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis,* to portions of stuff. Thus if we find the argument for compositional nonfactualism plausible we should find the argument for event nonfactualism plausible. Hence (S3) is true.

Finally, consider (S4): if one accepts the argument for compositional nonfactualism then one ought to accept analogous arguments whose conclusion is nonfactualism about properties. Consider some set of point-sized property instances. We can ask whether property composition occurs: that is, we can ask whether property instances ever ‘compose’ a further property—a higher-order property. We can also ask whether extended properties (i.e. one whose instances are non-point sized) have proper property parts. That is, we can ask whether property decomposition occurs and, if it does, under what conditions a property decomposes into property-parts. Further, we can ask whether, if there are composite properties, these are identical to their property parts, taken collectively, or not. That is, we can ask whether composite properties are generative or non-generative.

Given the possible views the arguments for compositional and decompositional nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to properties. Finally, an argument analogous to the argument for object nonfactualism will apply, *mutatis mutandis,* to properties. Thus if we find the argument for compositional nonfactualism plausible we should find the argument for property nonfactualism plausible. Hence (S4) is true.

To sum up: I have defended the slippery slope argument. This argument attempts to show that if we accept the argument for compositional nonfactualism then we ought also to accept a range of analogous arguments. These analogous arguments yield the conclusion that we should embrace object nonfactualism, event nonfactualism, stuff nonfactualism, and property nonfactualism. But if we accept all four nonfactualisms we are committed to the thesis that there is no fact of the matter whether anything exists. Since that is absurd we should reject the argument for compositional nonfactualism. Moreover, we have reason to reject the argument even if we are unsure which premise ought to be rejected. We can reject the argument without antecedently committing ourselves to any of actualism, a fourth kind of necessity, or contingentism. For some of us, at least, this is a decided advantage.

CONCLUSION

This paper has not shown that there are no reasons to accept either semanticism or nonfactualism about composition. It does, however, undermine a number of important arguments in favor of these views. Since I, at least, find it plausible that substantivism is the default view I am content that neither the semanticist nor the nonfactualist have given me arguments that undermine my default presumption in favor of substantivism.

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2. See for instance Stephen Yablo, “Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, lxxii (1998): 229–61; Amie Thomasson, “Answerable and Unanswerable Questions,” in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, and R. Wasserman, eds., *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), pp. 444–71; David Chalmers, “Ontological Anti-Realism,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 77–130; Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987); Eli Hirsch, “Quantifier Variance and Realism,” *Philosophical Issues*, xii (2002): 51–73; Thomas Hofweber, “A Puzzle about Ontology,” *Noûs*, xxxix (2005): 256–83; and Rudolph Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, iv (1950): 20–40, revised and reprinted in his *Meaning and Necessity,* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Mark Balaguer defends this view in “Why the Debate over Composition Is Factually Empty” (unpublished), as does Alan Sidelle in “Is There a True Metaphysics of Material Objects?,” *Philosophical Issues*, xii (2002): 118–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Defenders of semanticism include Eli Hirsch (*op. cit.*; “Ontology and Alternative Languages”, in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 231–58; “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lxx (2005): 67–97) and Amie Thomasson (*op. cit.*). I take what has also become known as conceptual relativity to be a kind of semanticism. Conceptual relativity has been defended by Putnam and Carnap as cited in note 1 as well as by Ernest Sosa (“Existential Relativity,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, xxiii (1999): 132–43) and Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons (“Conceptual Relativity and Metaphysical Realism,” *Philosophical Issues*, xxii (2002)*:* 74–96). Indeed, Putnam’s example of Carnap and the Polish logician (*op. cit.*, pp. 18–20) is an example of conceptual relativity about composition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Karen Bennett, “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 38–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See e.g. David Plunkett and Timothy Sundell, “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms,” *Philosophers’ Imprint*, xiii (2013): 1–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. See Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Defenders of this view include Michael Rea ([“In Defense of Mereological Universalism](http://philpapers.org/rec/REAUA),” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lviii (1998): 347–60), Ted Sider (“Against Vague Existence,” *Philosophical Studies*, cxiv (2003): 135–146), and James van Cleve (“The Moon and Sixpence: A Defense of Mereological Universalism,” in T. Sider, J. Hawthorne, and D. W. Zimmerman, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 321–40). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See Karen Bennett, “Construction Area (No Hard Hat Required),” *Philosophical Studies*, cliv (2011): 79–104, for a useful discussion of the idea of generation in this sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Defenders of this view include Megan Wallace (“Composition as Identity: Part 1,” *Philosophy Compass*, vi (2011): 804–16) and Einar Bohn (“From Hume’s Dictum via Submergence to Composition as Identity or Mereological Nihilism,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, xcv (2014): 336–55). The view is also defended, in part, by Joshua Spencer (“Strong Composition as Identity and Simplicity,” *Erkenntnis*, lxxviii (2013): 1177–84). Not everyone, of course, will accept that generative universalism is a coherent view. Those who think that the thesis that composition is identity is incoherent will certainly reject it. For arguments against composition as identity, see Kris McDaniel, “Against Composition as Identity,” *Analysis*, lxviii (2008): 128–33. Others may reject non-generative universalism on the grounds that universalism entails extensionalism. Achille Varzi argues for this position in his “Universalism Entails Extensionalism,” *Analysis*, lxix (2009): 599–604. On the face of it, however, the friend of generative universalism might be able to accept an analog of extensionality by arguing that if x is composed of the ys, (and thus the ys are identical to x) there is no z such that z is composed of the ys, and z is identical to the ys (and to z). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Henceforth for simplicity I will simply talk about non-generative composites as objects that are identical to their totality of parts. It does not make any difference to the arguments that follow which view one endorses. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Defenders of this view include Gabriele Contessa (“One’s a Crowd: Mereological Nihilism Without Ordinary-Object Eliminativism,” *Analytic Philosophy*, liv (2014): 199–221) and Ted Sider (“Against Part­hood,” *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, viii (2013): 236–93). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Defenders of this view include Peter van Inwagen (*op. cit.*), Ned Markosian (“Restricted Composition,” in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, pp. 341–63), and Trenton Merricks (*Objects and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. There is some dispute about whether composition as identity (i.e. the view that composites are non-generative) entails non-generative universalism. I will assume throughout that it does not. For a defense of this view, see Kris McDaniel, “Composition as Identity Does Not Entail Universalism,” *Erkenntnis*, lxxiii (2010): 97–100, and Nikk Effingham, “Debunking a Mereological Myth: If Composition as Identity Is True, Universalism Need Not Be” (unpublished). For a contrary view, see Einar Bohn, “Unrestricted Composition as Identity,” in D. L. M. Baxter and A. J. Cotnoir, eds., *Composition as Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 143–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. To my knowledge nobody has framed the argument in exactly this way but I take it that something in this vicinity motivates semanticists. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See Hofweber, Hirsch, and Thomasson as cited in note 1. See also Dan Korman, “Eliminativism and the Challenge from Folk Belief,” *Noûs*, xliii (2009): 242–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Josh Parsons, “Conceptual Conservatism and Contingent Composition,” *Inquiry*, lvi (2013): 327–39, contrasts naïve nihilists with sophisticated nihilists. Naïve nihilists hold that there exist no composite objects and, consequently, ordinary claims such as ‘there are tables’ are strictly speaking false. Sophisticated nihilists hold that there exist no composite objects and that ordinary claims such as ‘there are tables’ are true, and are made true by simples arranged table-wise. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See Ted Sider, “Ontological Realism,” in *Metametaphysics*, pp. 384–424. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. In form this constraint on meaning is very like so-called conditional analyses of concepts. See David Braddon, “Qualia and Analytical Conditionals,” this Journal, c (2003): 111–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The substantivist could go one better and suggest that we tacitly know, *a priori,* these conditionals. This would provide additional justification for our belief that there are tables. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See Hirsch as cited in notes 1 and 3 and in “Charity to Charity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lxxxvi (2013): 435–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. For arguments to the effect that we do attribute different truth conditions, see Hirsch, “Physical-Object Ontology, Verbal Disputes, and Common Sense,” and Cian Dorr “What We Disagree about When We Disagree about Ontology,” in M. E. Kalderon, ed., *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 234–87. For an argument to the effect that we do not, see Kathryn Koslicki, “On the Substantive Nature of Disagreements in Ontology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, lxxi (2005): 85–105. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Balaguer, *op. cit.*, offers this argument but does not include discussion of non-generative composites. His argument and the ones presented here diverge at various points but share a common core. Versions of this argument (directed at other targets), or components thereof, can also be found in Ross Cameron, “The Contingency of Composition,” *Philosophical Studies*, cxxxvi (2007): 99–121, in Parsons, “Conceptual Conservatism and Contingent Composition,” and in Kristie Miller, “Defending Contingentism in Metaphysics,” *Dialectica*, lxii (2009): 23–29, “Properties in a Contingentist’s Domain,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, xciv (2013): 225–45, “Mathematical Contingentism,” *Erkenntnis*, lxxvii (2012): 335–59, and “Three Routes to Contingentism in Metaphysics,” *Philosophy Compass*, v (2010): 965–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Where plurality, x, is an intrinsic duplicate of plurality, y, if and only if every one of the xs has an intrinsic duplicate in y, and no one of the ys fails to have an intrinsic duplicate in the xs, and the arrangement of the ys is the same as the arrangement of the xs (i.e. the internal relations that obtain between the xs are duplicated in the internal relations that obtain between the ys). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Balaguer, *op. cit*., defends the conditional claim but accepts the antecedent. His defense of the claim is similar to, but not the same as, my defense of (S1). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. A somewhat different version of an argument to this conclusion appears in Balaguer, *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)