OBJECTS

nothing out of the ordinary

DANIEL Z. KORMAN
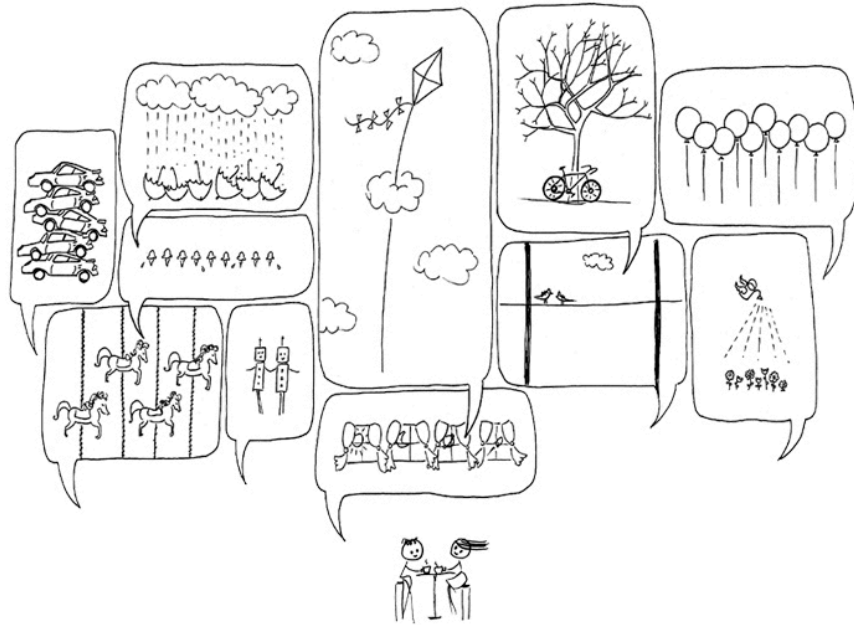
OXFORD

Comp. by: Jaganathan   Stage : Proof   ChapterID: 0002568929   Date:25/7/15   Time:17:38:51
Filepath:d:/womat-filecopy/0002568929.3D
Dictionary : OUP_UKdictionary   3

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 25/7/2015, SPi

Objects

Nothing Out of the Ordinary

Daniel Z. Korman

illustrated by dana zemack

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Comp. by: Jaganathan   Stage : Proof   ChapterID: 0002568929   Date:25/7/15   Time:17:38:52
Filepath:d:/womat-filecopy/0002568929.3D
Dictionary : OUP_UKdictionary   8

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – FIRST PROOF, 25/7/2015, SPi

1

Introduction

I look around my office and seem to see a table, a lamp, some books, and a variety of other objects. I look out the window and seem to see a dog, a fence, a tree, and of course the various things that together compose the tree: the trunk, the branches, the leaves, and the partially visible roots. And when I think about which other things out there together make up a single object, it seems that there is nothing at all composed of the trunk and the dog—no one object that's right where they are, and that's partly furry and partly wooden.

My aim in this book is to defend the view that, when it comes to which highly visible objects there are right before our eyes, things are more or less the way they seem. There are tables, trees, trunks, dogs, and all manner of other ordinary objects, and there are no dog–trunk composites or other such extraordinary objects. I call this a *conservative* view about which objects there are.

Outsiders to the debates over the metaphysics of material objects will likely find my view so obvious as to hardly be worth stating. Let alone defending. Let alone spending a whole book defending. Insiders, though, will likely find it astounding and almost certainly indefensible. These insiders tend to fall into

one of two broad categories. First, there are the *eliminativists*, who deny the existence of wide swathes of ordinary objects: there are no tables or stones, and perhaps no trees or dogs either. Next, there are the *permissivists*, according to whom there are countless highly visible macroscopic objects that are right before our eyes but nevertheless escape our notice. For instance, they will say that there is a *trog* in my yard, an object composed of the dog and the tree trunk.

Here is what it's going to take to change their minds. First, they need to be convinced that eliminativism and permissivism are at odds with our ordinary beliefs and intuitions about which objects there are, something that (you may be surprised to hear) is widely denied. Second, they need to be convinced that it is not simply a biological or cultural accident that we wind up dividing up the world into objects the way we do. Third, they need to be shown how to resist the arguments for eliminativism and permissivism—chief among them, arguments that our way of dividing up the world into objects is objectionably arbitrary. And this is what I propose to do.

The book is arranged into roughly three parts. The first is a guided tour of the positions and arguments that define material-object metaphysics. In chapter 2, I present the arguments that have driven so many philosophers away from conservatism and towards eliminativism and permissivism. In chapter 3, I survey the different forms that eliminativism, permissivism, and conservatism can take, and I clarify the sort of conservative view that I plan to defend.

In the second part, I articulate and defend my main argument against revisionary views like permissivism and eliminativism: an argument from counterexamples. Eliminativist views entail that there aren't any tables. But there are. Counterexample. Permissivist views entail that there is something composed of the dog and the trunk in my yard. But there isn't. Counterexample. In chapter 4, I explain why the premises of these arguments are at least prima facie justified, and I address the complaint that the arguments are question-begging. I then turn to the various reasons that revisionists have given for being untroubled by the alleged counterexamples. Some are untroubled because they think that the revisionary views are actually entirely compatible with ordinary belief (and that 'revisionary' is a misnomer). In chapter 5, I argue that they are genuinely incompatible. Others are untroubled because they take themselves to have adopted a new way of talking—a "language of ontology room"—in which revisionary-sounding claims like 'there are no tables' can be uttered without fear of running afoul of ordinary belief. In chapter 6, I argue that we (and they) have no way of telling what is and isn't true in this newfangled language and, accordingly, we all ought to take a skeptical attitude towards the claims being uttered in that language. Still others are untroubled because they take themselves

to have "debunked" our ordinary beliefs about which objects there are by showing them to have a dubious source. In chapter 7, I show how conservatives can answer these debunking arguments, and I argue that permissivists are in no position to be advancing these debunking arguments.

In the third part, I turn to the arguments against conservatism. In chapter 8, I examine a range of arbitrariness arguments, according to which there is no ontologically significant difference between the ordinary objects that conservatives let into their ontology and certain of the extraordinary objects to which they refuse entry. In chapter 9, I address the argument from vagueness, which purports to show that the sort of restriction that conservatives want to impose on which composites there are is bound to give rise to vagueness about what exists, something that is ruled out by widely accepted theories of vagueness. Finally, in chapters 10–12, I address the overdetermination argument, the argument from material constitution, and the problem of the many, all of which are meant to motivate eliminativism by showing that accepting ordinary objects commits one to one or another absurdity.

The chapters are largely self-standing, so readers familiar with these debates can skip around freely to whichever chapters strike their interest. Those unfamiliar with the debates should probably start with chapters 2 and 3.

My own view is that there are very serious threats to conservatism, particularly the aforementioned debunking arguments, which threaten to undermine the only reasons one might have for being a conservative in the first place, and the arbitrariness arguments, which make the conservative ontology look intolerably arbitrary (or, at least, embarrassingly messy). At the same time, I think this is a battle worth fighting. Ontologists have been too quick to abandon the natural, conservative account in the face of these problems, and rumors of its untenability have been greatly exaggerated. Or so I hope to show.

2

The Arguments
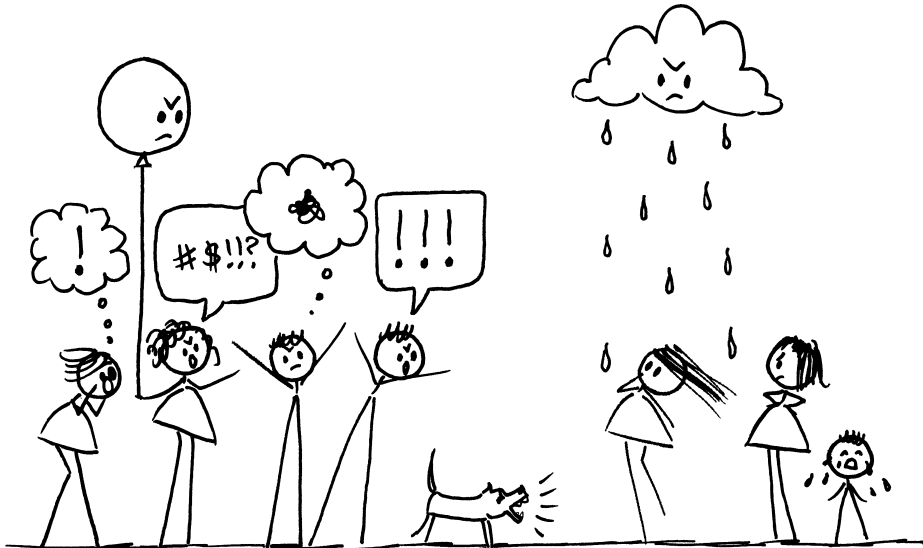
Let's begin with an overview of the arguments that have led so many to reject conservatism in favor of one or another revisionary thesis. This will help us to see what's at stake in these debates.

1. Debunking Arguments

Conservatism is often claimed to be objectionably *anthropocentric*, on the grounds that our beliefs about which objects exist are largely the result of arbitrary biological and cultural influences. We are naturally inclined to believe that there are trees rather than trogs because prevailing conventions in the communities we were born into generally prohibit treating some things as the parts of a single object unless they are connected or in some other way unified. These conventions themselves likely trace back to an innate tendency to

perceive some arrays of qualities but not others as being coinstantiated by a single object and to its being adaptive for creatures like us to so perceive the world (e.g., because it is too cognitively taxing to track objects under the sortal *trog*).

One way of putting the upshot here is that there is no appropriate explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are and the facts about which objects there are. This, in turn, serves as the key premise of a debunking argument against our belief in such ordinary objects as trees:

(DK1)   There is no explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts.

(DK2)   If so, then we shouldn't believe that there are trees.

(DK3)   So, we shouldn't believe that there are trees.

DK2 can be motivated by the observation that if there truly is this sort of disconnect between the object facts and the factors that lead us to our object beliefs, then it could only be a lucky coincidence if those factors led us to beliefs that lined up with the object facts; and since we have no rational grounds for believing that we got lucky, we shouldn't believe that we did, in which case we should suspend our beliefs about which objects there are and, in particular, our belief in the existence of trees.

These arguments fall short of establishing that eliminativism is *correct*, since they purport to establish only that we ought to abandon our anti-eliminativist beliefs, not that we should take up pro-eliminativist beliefs. They can, however, serve as a powerful supplement to other arguments for eliminativism. For even if there are ways of resisting those arguments, the debunking arguments threaten to neutralize any reasons we might have for wanting to resist them. There is always some bullet one can bite, but why bite it if our affection for ordinary objects is a groundless prejudice, as the debunking arguments purport to show?

The debunking arguments also provide indirect support for permissivism. For permissivists appear to be in an especially good position to deny DK2. If permissivism is true, then having accurate beliefs about which kinds of objects there are is a trivial accomplishment (not a coincidence), since there are objects answering to virtually every way that we might have perceptually and conceptually divided situations up into objects. So, the idea goes, anyone who wants to resist the skeptical conclusion that we shouldn't believe in trees ought to embrace a permissivist ontology, which can make sense of the noncoincidental accuracy of our object beliefs.

2. Arbitrariness Arguments

Arguments from arbitrariness turn on the idea that there is no *ontologically significant difference* between certain ordinary and extraordinary objects. That is to say, there is no difference between them that can account for why there would be things of the one kind but not the other.

Consider the incar. A full-sized incar is like a car in nearly all respects. The main difference is that, unlike a car, it is impossible for an incar to leave a garage. As a car pulls out of the garage, the incar begins to shrink at the threshold of the garage, at which time an outcar springs into existence and begins growing. What it looks like for an incar to shrink and gradually be replaced by an outcar is exactly the same as what it looks like for a car to leave a garage. But an incar is not a car that is inside a garage, since a car that is inside a garage can later be outside the garage. Nor is the incar the part of a car that is inside a garage, because that too will later be outside of the garage. But the incar will never be outside the garage.[1]

Here is an arbitrariness argument for the existence of incars:

(AR1)   There is no ontologically significant difference between islands and incars.
(AR2)   If so, then: if there are islands then there are incars.
(AR3)   There are islands.
(AR4)   So, there are incars.[2]

The idea behind AR1 is that incars and islands are objects of broadly the same kind, namely, objects that cease to exist when their constitutive matter undergoes a certain sort of extrinsic change. Incars cease to exist when their constitutive matter leaves the garage, and islands (the idea goes) cease to exist when their constitutive matter is completely submerged at high tide. The idea behind AR2 is that, if there truly are islands but no incars, then there would have to be *something* in virtue of which it's the case that there are things of the one kind but not the other. To think otherwise would be to take the facts about what exists to be arbitrary in a way that they plausibly are not.

This is just one example of an arbitrariness argument. Permissivists might also argue that there are scattered objects like trogs on the grounds that there is no ontologically significant difference between them and ordinary scattered objects like solar systems. And eliminativists can turn these arguments on their heads,

---

[1] The example is due to Hirsch (1976: §2, 1982: 32).
[2] See Hawthorne (2006: vii).

arguing from the *non*existence of incars and trogs to the nonexistence of islands and solar systems.

3. The Argument from Vagueness

According to conservatives, pluralities of objects sometimes compose a further object and sometimes don't. The argument from vagueness purports to show that this isn't so: either every plurality of objects composes something, or none do.[3]

- (AV1)   If some pluralities of objects compose something and others do not, then it is possible for there to be a sorites series for composition.
- (AV2)   Any such sorites series must contain either an exact cut-off or borderline cases of composition.
- (AV3)   There cannot be exact cut-offs in such sorites series.
- (AV4)   There cannot be borderline cases of composition.
- (AV5)   So, either every plurality of objects composes something or none do.

AV1 is extremely plausible. A sorites series for composition is a series of cases running from a case in which composition does not occur to a case in which it does occur, where adjacent cases in the series are extremely similar in all respects that would seem to be relevant to whether composition occurs (e.g., the spatial and causal relations among the objects in question). As an illustration, consider the assembly of a hammer from a handle and a head, and suppose that the conservative is right that they do not compose anything at the beginning of the assembly process and that they do compose something by the end. In that case, the moment by moment series leading from the beginning to the end of the assembly would be a sorites series for composition.

AV2 is trivial. Any such series must contain *some* transition from composition not occurring to composition occurring, and in any given series there either will or will not be an exact point at which that transition occurs.

AV3 is plausible. It just seems absurd to suppose that there is some exact moment in the sorites series at which the handle and head go from not composing anything to composing something. Furthermore, if composition occurs in one case but not in another, then surely there must be some explanation for why that is; compositional facts are not brute. Yet the sorts of differences that one finds among adjacent cases in a sorites series for composition—for instance, that

---

[3] Some xs compose something just in case there is a y such that (i) each of the xs is part of y and (ii) every part of y shares a part with at least one of the xs. I depart from van Inwagen (1990: 29) in dropping a third condition that he places on composition: (iii) no two of the xs share a part.

8   THE ARGUMENTS

the handle and head are a fraction of a nanometer closer together in the one than in the other—can't plausibly explain why composition would occur in one case but not in the other.

What is less obvious is why we should accept AV4. It seems just as obvious that there can be borderline cases of composition (e.g., the loosely-affixed hammer head and handle) as that there can be borderline cases of redness or baldness. But as we will see in chapter 9, there is reason to believe that composition is importantly different. That's because questions about when composition occurs look to be intimately bound up with questions about which things exist, in a way that questions about which things are red or which people are bald are not. Compositional vagueness thus threatens to give rise to existential indeterminacy, something that is ruled out by the widely accepted linguistic theory of vagueness.

4. Overdetermination Arguments

Overdetermination arguments aim to establish that ordinary objects of various kinds do not exist by way of showing that there is no explanatory work for them to do that isn't already being done by their microscopic parts. Here is one such argument:

(OD1)   Every event caused by a baseball is caused by atoms arranged baseballwise.

(OD2)   No event caused by atoms arranged baseballwise is caused by a baseball.

(OD3)   So, no events are caused by baseballs.

(OD4)   If no events are caused by baseballs, then baseballs do not exist.

(OD5)   So, baseballs do not exist.

'Atoms' can be understood here (and throughout) as a placeholder for whichever microscopic objects or stuffs feature in the best microphysical explanations of observable reality. These may turn out to include the composite atoms of chemistry, or they may all be mereological simples (i.e., partless objects), or they may even be a nonparticulate quantum froth.[4]

OD1 is plausible. To deny it, one would have to say that baseballs cause things that their atoms don't. Perhaps one could say that atoms arranged baseballwise

---

[4] I follow Merricks (2001: 4) in using *the xs are arranged K-wise* to mean: the xs both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if Ks existed, the xs' composing a K would nontrivially supervene. See Brenner (forthcoming) for further discussion of the 'arranged K-wise' locution.

can't collectively cause *anything* to happen so long as they're parts of the baseball. Or perhaps one could postulate a division of causal labor: baseballs cause events involving macroscopic items like the shattering of windows, while their atoms cause events involving microscopic items like the scatterings of atoms arranged windowwise. But neither option is especially plausible.

OD2 can be defended by appeal to Ockham's Razor: do not multiply entities beyond necessity. Either postulate the baseball or postulate the atoms, but there is no explanatory need to postulate *both*, systematically overdetermining each other's causal impacts. Some may feel that this is a misapplication of Ockham's Razor: given the intimate connection between baseballs and their atoms, this isn't an especially objectionable sort of overdetermination. More on this in chapter 10.2.

OD4 can (again) be defended by appeal to Ockham's Razor. If there is no explanatory need to postulate baseballs—if they aren't doing any causal work—then we shouldn't postulate them. Or it may be defended more directly by invoking the controversial Eleatic Principle, according to which everything that exists has causal powers.[5] Together with the plausible assumption that if baseballs don't cause anything it's because they *can't* cause anything, the Eleatic Principle delivers OD4.

5. The Problem of Material Constitution

Wooden tables are constituted by hunks of wood. Clay statues are constituted by lumps of clay. Reflection on the relationship between constituted objects and the objects that constitute them reveals a tension between our intuitions about the persistence conditions of these objects and our intuitions about which objects are identical to which. The tension can be resolved by simply eliminating the ordinary objects that give rise to it in the first place.

Here is an argument from material constitution for the elimination of clay statues. Let Athena be a clay statue, and let Piece be the piece of clay of which it's made.[6]

(MC1)   Athena (if it exists) has different properties from Piece.
(MC2)   If so, then Athena $\neq$ Piece.
(MC3)   If so, then there exist distinct coincident objects.

---

[5] The principle is controversial because numbers and other abstracta, if they exist, are plausibly causally inert. For purposes of the argument, one could get by with the weaker principle that *physical* objects exist only if they have causal powers. See Merricks (2001: 81).
[6] I borrow the names from Paul (2006: 625).

(MC4)   There cannot exist distinct coincident objects.

(MC5)   So, Athena does not exist.

MC1 can be motivated by appeal to modal differences between Athena and Piece: Piece is able to survive being flattened and Athena isn't. Or by sortal differences: Athena, but not Piece, has the property of being a statue. And, depending on how the details of the case are filled in, there may be other differences as well. If Piece was just a ball of clay on Monday and was not made into a statue until Tuesday, then they will have different temporal properties: Piece but not Athena has the property of having existed on Monday. Additionally, Piece may be well made by virtue of being made from high-quality clay, while Athena lacks the property of being well made because it is a poor representation of the woman of whom it is meant to be a statue.

MC2 follows from Leibniz's Law: $\forall x \forall y (x=y \rightarrow \forall P(Px \leftrightarrow Py))$.[7] In other words, if x and y are identical, then they had better have all the same properties. After all, if they are identical, then there is only *one thing there* to have or lack any given property.

To say that objects coincide, or that they are coincident, is to say that they share all of their parts. And Athena and Piece plausibly do coincide: each is composed of precisely the same bits of clay. So, if indeed Athena $\neq$ Piece, then Athena and Piece are distinct coincident objects.[8] Thus, we get MC3.

The idea behind MC4 is that, while it is plausible that some things can compose one thing at one time and a distinct thing at a later time—as when some Lego bricks first compose a castle and later compose a ship—it is hard to see how some things can compose more than one thing at a single time. Moreover, those who say that Athena is distinct from Piece face what is called *the grounding problem*: the putative modal and sortal differences between Piece and Athena seem to stand in need of explanation and yet there seems to be no further difference between them that is poised to explain, or ground, these differences.

6. The Problem of the Many

The office appears to contain a single wooden desk. The desk is constituted by a hunk of wood whose surface forms a sharp boundary with the environment, without even a single cellulose molecule coming loose from the others. Call this

---

[7] More cautiously, it follows from the contrapositive of Leibniz's Law. Some (e.g., Parsons 1987: 9–11) deny that the two are equivalent. I will ignore this complication.

[8] I use 'distinct' to mean 'not numerically identical'. Others use it to mean something like 'entirely separate from'.

hunk of wood *Woodrow*. Now consider the object consisting of all of Woodrow's parts except for a single cellulose molecule, *Molly*, making up part of Woodrow's surface. Call this ever so slightly smaller hunk of wood *Woodrow-minus*. The *problem of the many* is that, as soon as we admit that there is a single desk in the office (or cat on the mat, or lamp on the nightstand), we seem forced to conclude that there are countless desks (cats, lamps) there. The problem can be framed as an argument for the elimination of desks:

(PM1)   Woodrow is a desk iff Woodrow-minus is a desk.
(PM2)   If so, then it is not the case that there is exactly one desk in the office.
(PM3)   There is at most one desk in the office.
(PM4)   So, there is no desk in the office.

The idea behind PM1 is that Woodrow-minus seems to have everything it takes to be a desk: it's got a flat writing surface, it's suitable for sitting at, and so on. Accordingly, it would be arbitrary to suppose that Woodrow but not Woodrow-minus is a desk. Moreover, if Molly were removed, Woodrow-minus would plausibly then be a desk. But since Woodrow-minus doesn't itself undergo any interesting change when Molly is removed (after all, Molly isn't even a part of Woodrow-minus), it stands to reason that Woodrow-minus must likewise be a desk even *while* Molly is attached to it.

PM2 is plausible. Given PM1, either both are desks, in which case there is more than one desk, or neither is a desk, in which case there is fewer than one desk.

And PM3 is about as plausible a premise as one can expect from an argument in metaphysics. If ever there were an office in which there is no more than one desk, this is it.

A sneak peek at what's to come. I deny DK1 of the debunking arguments: there is an explanation of our object beliefs in terms of the object facts, which crucially involves postulating a capacity for the apprehension of facts about composition and kind-membership. I deny AR1 of the arbitrariness argument from islands to incars, and I identify ontologically significant differences between numerous other such pairs of ordinary and extraordinary objects. I respond to the argument from vagueness by denying AV4, embracing existential indeterminacy, and rejecting the linguistic theory of vagueness. I deny OD2 of the overdetermination argument and affirm that events are systematically overdetermined by objects and their parts. I deny MC4, grant that statues are distinct from the lumps of clay that constitute them, and solve the grounding problem. And I deny PM2 of the problem of the many: there is exactly one desk, and it is constituted by (but not identical to) Woodrow.

No other arguments have been as influential as these six in driving people away from conservatism. That said, these are not the only arguments against conservatism. For instance, there are sorites arguments that purport to show that there are no tables, turning on the premise that the removal of a single atom can never turn a table into a nontable.[9] I set these aside, not because I think they are unimportant or that they have some obvious flaw, but because I have nothing to add to the sprawling literature on the sorites. The correct response to the sorites argument against tables will almost certainly be the same as the correct response to the sorites arguments that everyone is bald or that nothing is red. Whatever that is.[10] My inclination is to say that, in some cases, there is just no fact of the matter whether something is bald, or red, or a table. But that is only the beginning of a response to the paradox, and a proper response would take us far beyond the scope of this book.[11]

---

[9] Arguments of this sort have been advanced by Unger (1979a, 1979b), Wheeler (1979: §3), and Horgan and Potrč (2008: §2.4).

[10] Cf. Sider (2001a: 188): "If paradoxical conclusions emerge in the area, it is hard to justify attributing them to the postulation of ordinary objects . . . rather than to an inadequate understanding of vagueness."

[11] I also do not discuss arguments from the impossibility of indeterminate identity: if there were tables, then there could be cases in which it is indeterminate which is identical to which, which is impossible. Such arguments have been advanced by van Inwagen (1990: 128–35), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997: §5.4), and Hossack (2000: 428). I am attracted to Lowe's (2011: 20–32) response to the arguments against indeterminate identity. See my (2011) for some discussion of sorites arguments and arguments from indeterminate identity.