# How Perceptual Experience Bears on the Metaphysics of Ordinary Objects

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*Abstract*: *Ordinary ontology* is the thesis that there exist ordinary objects like rocks, but no extraordinary objects like trogs (mereological sums of tree trunks and dogs) or incars (objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages). Metaphysicians almost uniformly reject ordinary ontology. Most do so based on the charge that ordinary ontology is objectionably parochial, placing the unique concerns of human beings over the objective ontological truth. I contend that this charge – and thereby the almost uniform rejection of ordinary ontology among metaphysicians – rests on an empirically outdated picture of perceptual experience. In this dissertation, I argue that replacing this picture with a contemporary account of perception in better empirical standing vindicates ordinary ontology. Here's how I proceed. In Chapter 1, I argue that perception (properly construed) justifies claims about the persistence of objects. In Chapter 2, I defend ordinary ontology by arguing that perception provides us with evidence for both the existence of ordinary objects and for the nonexistence of extraordinary objects – as such, I conclude that material object ontology is an empirical discipline. Finally, in Chapters 3 and 4, I leverage my claim that material object ontology is an empirical discipline to diagnose where several challenges to ordinary ontology go awry.

*Keywords*: ordinary ontology, perceptual experience, parochialism, material objects

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## Introduction

I'm an *ordinary ontologist*. That is, I contend there are ordinary objects like rocks and cars, but that there are no extraordinary objects like *incars* – objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages which shrink out of existence as cars pass under garage doorways (cf. Hirsch, 1982, 32). Ordinary ontology aligns quite closely with common sense; when watching cars leave garages, the overwhelming majority of ordinary people are disposed to agree with statements like "There's a car before me" and "There's no object shrinking out of existence before me". The folk certainly seem to talk as if cars exist and incars don't.

Ordinary ontologists, however, sparsely populate contemporary ontology. Most ontologists endorse some sort of revisionism vis-à-vis the common sense assumption that there are cars but no incars. *Ontological eliminativists* maintain that neither cars nor incars exist (cf. Van Inwagen, 1990; Merricks, 2001); *ontological permissivists* maintain that both cars and incars exist (cf. Hawthorne, 2006; Fairchild, 2021). And eliminativists and permissivists often object to ordinary ontology on the grounds it would be somehow *arbitrary* or *parochial* to maintain that our representational apparatus gets ontological questions right. Ontologists want to know what exists and what doesn't. If evolution had proceeded differently, we might have 'seen the world' differently as well. So, the thought goes, it's difficult to understand why our representational apparatus, one we possess as a merely contingent matter of fact, should serve as any sort of guide to ontological reality.

Call the debate between eliminativists, ordinary ontologists, and permissivists a "first-order" ontological dispute. Another "meta-ontological" dispute currently occupies prime real estate within contemporary ontology, namely the debate between *ontological realists* and *ontological deflationists*. Deflationists maintain that ontological questions – "Do cups exist? Does

there exist a mereological sum of my left foot and the Taj Mahal?" – are appropriately answered by consulting our concepts and ways of talking. For example, *quantifier variantists* (cf. Hirsch, 2010) maintain that we are welcome to speak a language according to which the sentence "Cups exist but mereological sums don't" is true; but it depends on what we mean by quantifier-like expressions such as 'there are' and 'the existence of an object'. *Easy ontologists* (cf. Thomasson, 2014) maintain that the expressions 'cup' and 'sum' are each governed by coherent collections of rules, and that sentences like "Mereological sums exist" are true provided that the rules governing 'sum' are fulfilled.

Realists maintain that, in some way or other, there's more to ontology than conceptual and/or semantic analysis. For example, Theodore Sider (2011; 2013) maintains that certain quantifier-like expressions 'carve at the joints' – reality has a distinguished ontological structure, and we ought to speak an ontological language that best aligns with this structure. (Notice that Sider-style realists assume that there are distinct ontological languages.) Others maintain that ontologists ought to be in the business of formulating and defending powerful ontological principles. Ontological nihilists defend the principle that no collection of simples composes a further object; permissivists defend the principle that "[e]very material object coincides with an abundance of further objects… that differ with respect to which properties they have essentially and accidentally" (Fairchild, 2021, 621)"; and so on. Such principles, these ontologists maintain, guide us to the ontological truth.

My defense of ordinary ontology doesn't rest on any general ontological principles that vindicate ordinary ontology. I simply maintain that ordinary ontology better accounts for the totality of our evidence than eliminativism or permissivism. I include perceptual evidence among the totality of our evidence. And it is neither arbitrary nor parochial to rely on the deliverances of

perception. Indeed, I contend that such charges rest on an outdated (if intuitive) picture of perceptual experience, one according to which we 'carve up reality' by applying concepts to experience (cf. Chapter 1, §2). Over the past few decades, this picture of experience has largely lost its grip among cognitive scientists and philosophers of perception – our best empirical evidence doesn't support it. This picture nevertheless remains dominant among metaphysicians. Its dominance traces back to Locke.

Consider how Locke justifies claims about the persistence conditions of persons ("persistence claims"). He does not tell us that we can justify persistence claims about persons by perceiving persons; he tells us that we must consider "…what *Person* stands for" (Locke, 1990, 335). To consider what *Person* stands for is to investigate our concept [PERSON], or perhaps how the word 'person' is used. Locke justifies persistence claims about other objects in a similar way. He justifies persistence claims about lumps of clay, for example, by appealing to the principle of individuation for masses. He identifies this principle by investigating our *idea* of masses. And investigating our idea of masses is a way to investigate our concept [MASS].[1] Locke never even suggests that we justify an object's persistence conditions just by perceiving it persisting.

Locke's picture of perceptual experience motivates his justificatory story for persistence claims. Locke says that perceptual experience delivers a diffuse array of sensory appearances ("simple ideas") that we 'lump together' into objects via conceptual mediation.[2] On this account of perception, we do not *just perceive* objects. Perception delivers simple ideas, and concepts are extra-perceptual mechanisms that turn perceptual deliverances into information about objects.

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[1] For Locke's justification of persistence claims about masses, see XXVII.III of the *Essay*. Locke himself might not wish to draw a strict equivalence between our idea of mass and our concept [MASS]. Nor do I intend to draw a strict equivalence between ideas and concepts. My point is that whatever Locke is doing when justifying persistence claims, it is best cashed out as a kind of conceptual analysis.

[2] For Locke's account of perceptual experience, see II. I-II of his *Essay*. See also Ott (2020) & (2021) for more on the relationship between Locke's account of perceptual experience and our faculty of judgement.

Locke justifies claims about the persistence conditions of objects by consulting our concepts and ways of talking. This method ("conceptualism about persistence") remains to this day the primary method by which metaphysicians justify persistence claims. Indeed, conceptualism makes perfect sense if Locke's account of perception is true. After all, on his account, perception delivers only an array of simple appearances that the mind then lumps together into objects by way of conceptual mediation. Since deflationists think that persistence claims trivially follow from how we think and talk, they naturally find it amenable. But even many realists endorse conceptualism. Almost all philosophers of persistence measure persistence claims against our concepts by testing intutions against thought experiments (cf. Chapter 1, footnote 2).

Like Locke, my account of perceptual experience also motivates my justificatory story for persistence claims (cf. Chapter 1). But I rely on an account of perceptual experience that departs from the Lockean picture almost immediately. For our best empirical evidence suggests that Locke's account of perceptual experience is false. The falsity of Locke's picture of perception opens up new theoretical terrain within metaphysics. In this dissertation, I explore that terrain.

Recall (i) the first-order ontological dispute between eliminativists, ordinary ontologists, and permissivists, and (ii) the meta-ontological dispute between realists and deflationists. Once we replace Locke's outdated picture of perception with a contemporary picture in superior empirical standing, I argue that two primary conclusions follow. With respect to the first-order ontological dispute, I maintain that ordinary ontology better accounts for the totality of our evidence than eliminativism or permissivism; thus, I conclude that ordinary ontology is true. I defend this claim in Chapters 1 and 2. With respect to the meta-ontological dispute, I conclude that deflationism about ordinary ontology is false. I defend this claim in Chapters 3 and 4. I'll now briefly outline the central theses I defend in the following chapters.

In Chapter 1 (“The epistemology of persistence”) I argue that perceptual experience justifies claims about the persistence conditions of material objects. Call this view “perceptualism”. While perceptualism might seem obvious, it turns out to be inconsistent with almost every view metaphysicians advance concerning the epistemology of persistence. Nearly everyone endorses some version of “conceptualism”, the thesis that our justification for making persistence claims about, say, rocks comes only from analyzing the concept [ROCK], or how the word ‘rock’ is used. This is plausibly because metaphysicians are heir to Locke’s picture of perception; they conceive of perceptual experience as a diffuse array of information that we go on to conceptually ‘carve up’ into objects.

Once we replace Locke’s picture of perception with a picture in better empirical standing, perceptualism gains far more force. To that end, I first show that perception justifies claims about the persistence of material objects: claims like “Rocks can survive motion”, “Rocks cannot survive being blown to bits”, “Rocks can survive when we look away”, and so forth. I then argue that perceptualism has a number of significant advantages over conceptualism, advantages that emerge once we consider how perceptualists and conceptualists respectively justify claims about the persistence conditions of extraordinary objects like incars. Perceptualism is more intuitive; it overcomes certain of conceptualism’s explanatory defects; it allows for epistemological differences between claims about ordinary and extraordinary objects, differences of a sort than conceptualism fails to capture; and it allows ontologists to remain neutral on the question of deflationism. I conclude that we should abandon conceptualism and endorse perceptualism.

This sets the stage for Chapter 2 (“Perception and extraordinary objects”) where I leverage the perception-based story from Chapter 1 into a defense of ordinary ontology. Several ontologists contend that perception justifies claims about the existence of objects (cf. Korman 2015; Hofweber

2019; Byrne 2019). I argue for a stronger claim; perception also provides us with evidence for the nonexistence of extraordinary objects. For, I claim, the picture of perception on which I rely motivates what I call "the perceptual argument against extraordinary objects". Here are the perceptual argument's premises:

(E1) If we should see incars but we don't, then there are no incars.
(E2) We don't see incars.
(E3) We should see incars.
(E4) Therefore, there are no incars.

(E1) relies on an incontrovertible principle concerning perceptual experience: if our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect a certain kind of entity and yet we fail to see it before us, then we should conclude that there's no such entity right before our eyes. (E2) is justified empirically – we simply fail to undergo experiences that permit us to believe in incars. (E3) gains credence from the observation that incars are moderate-sized specimens of dry goods, objects just as large, loud, and heavy as cars; our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect such entities. (E4) follows from (E1)-(E3). Thus I conclude that there are no incars (as well as all other manner of extraordinary mid-sized material objects).

The perceptual argument also issues in the conclusion that the existence of extraordinary objects is an empirical matter, making inquiry into their existence subject to standard norms of empirical inquiry. This undermines the charges of arbitrariness and parochialism often levied at ordinary ontologists. It's no more arbitrary or parochial to deny the existence of extraordinary things based on perception than it is arbitrary or parochial to deny the existence of the Jersey Devil based on perception. If we fail to locate the Jersey Devil, we should conclude that the Jersey Devil doesn't exist. We need no powerful general principle to reach this conclusion. And the possibility of creatures that 'see the Jersey Devil' when they look into an empty meadow is entirely irrelevant to the question of whether the Jersey Devil exists. I say the same of extraordinary objects like

incars, and the attendant possibility of creatures who 'see extraordinary things'. These conclusions bolster ordinary ontology's dialectical standing within contemporary ontology; indeed (as I argue in Chapter 2, Appendix, and Chapter 3, §1.2) my argumentative method gives ordinary ontologists powerful new responses to parity and debunking argumentation.

Up to this point in my defense of ordinary ontology, I say nothing that would preclude ordinary ontologists from counting as ontological realists. To be sure, I don't defend any powerful ontological principles that issue in the existence of cars and the nonexistence of incars. But we need no such principle to recognize that ordinary ontology is true. We perceive ordinary things, and we don't – but should – perceive extraordinary things. This provides us with evidence for the existence of ordinary objects and for the nonexistence of extraordinary objects. Moreover, my defense of ordinary ontology never appeals to the fact that 'we just talk and think in such-and-such ways'. I merely appeal to the claim that perception justifies belief in ordinary things. Outside of the ontology room, this is about as uncontroversial assumption as one could find. Ontological realists should therefore find my defense of ordinary ontology amenable.

Some will remain unsatisfied. For, first, some endorse a form of ontological realism according to which we ought to speak whatever *ontological language* possesses the most fundamental quantifier-like expressions (e.g. 'there are' and 'the existence of an object') – according to them, certain quantifier-like expressions cleave more closely to reality's quantificational structure than others (cf. Sider 2009, 2011; Cameron 2010). Call this kind of a realist a "heavyweight variantist". To illustrate, consider two languages A and B. In language A, "There are cars but no incars" is true. (Assuming that quantifier variance is true, I maintain that language A is our home ontological language.) In language B, "There are cars and incars" is true. Provided that language B operates with more fundamental quantifier-like expressions than

language A, heavyweights claim that we should prefer to speak language B. Thus, heavyweights would have it that we ought to repudiate ordinary ontology.

Second, *strong quantifier variantists* maintain that all ontological languages are on a metaphysical par. We are free to speak our everyday ontological language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true, claims the strong variantist: but we have no normative commitment to do so. Indeed, strong variantists maintain that ordinary ontologists ought to interpret their ontological opponents – eliminativists and permissivists – as speaking languages according to which their associated ontological utterances come out true. If strong variance were true, then, my defense of ordinary ontology would lose much of its bite.

In Chapter 3 ("Ontological empiricism"), I respond to these two lines of meta-ontological pressure. I do so by first defending the claim that ontological empiricists can resist the *defeaters* that some ontologists have offered against our perception-based object beliefs, such as debunking defeaters (cf. Korman, 2015) and defeaters concerning the causal etiology of our object beliefs (cf. Merricks, 2017). I then argue that whether ontological empiricists should endorse either strong variance or heavyweight variance depends on whether there are defeaters for our perception-based object beliefs. And since, as I argue, there are no defeaters for such beliefs, I conclude that ontological empiricists should endorse neither strong nor heavyweight variance.

Easy ontology places another line of meta-ontological pressure on ordinary ontology. Recall that easy ontologists maintain that sentences like "The mereological sum of my left foot and the Taj Mahal exists" are true provided (i) that the expression 'the mereological sum of my left foot and the Taj Mahal' is governed by a coherent collection of rules, and (ii) that the rules governing this expression are fulfilled. The term 'incar' is similarly governed by a coherent collection of rules, and such rules are often fulfilled. Thus, easy ontologists endorse ontological

permissivism, the view that there exist both ordinary and extraordinary objects.

In Chapter 4 (“Reference variance”), I argue that easy ontology is either a form of ontological eliminativism or another version of quantifier variance. I do so by presenting easy ontologists with what I call “the problem of referential adicity”. Consider the expression ‘Cuppy’, intended to name a cup. Now compare with the expression ‘$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$’, intended to name whatever plurality of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise presently plays the relevant Cuppy-like role. The expression ‘Cuppy’ is intended to refer to a single, composite object, and to refer to that same composite object so long as it refers. By contrast, ‘$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$’ is intended to refer to a plurality of objects, and it can refer to different pluralities of objects so long as it refers. I argue that given the theoretical tools currently at their disposal, easy ontologists cannot account for the different referential behaviors exhibited by ‘Cuppy’ and ‘$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$’. Thus, easy ontologists cannot adequately distinguish themselves from ontological eliminativists.

I then argue that we can modify easy ontology in such a way that easy ontologists can account for the different referential behaviors exhibited by ‘Cuppy’ and ‘$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$’. In particular, I show that easy ontologists can fix the rules of use governing terms like ‘object’ with respect to the rules governing terms like ‘$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$’. This modification, however, comes with a price tag –it commits easy ontologists to a form of quantifier variance. Granted, the easy ontological route to quantifier variance I propose differs from traditional routes to variance. But since their modified view is a form of quantifier variance, easy ontologists cannot endorse ontological permissivism without further argument. They must show that a permissivist friendly sense of the term ‘object’ is somehow in better standing than its less expansive counterparts. And this opens the door to heavyweight ontological debate once more.

This concludes the overview of my central claims in this dissertation. Note that I do not

attempt to show that my perception-based defense of ordinary ontology provides its adherents with novel tools for resisting every challenge the view faces. For instance, I do not address *the argument from vagueness* (cf. Lewis, 1986; Sider, 2001; Merricks, 2005; Barnes, 2007), *the problem of causal overdetermination* (cf. Merricks, 2001; Thomasson, 2007, ch.1), *the argument from material constitution* (cf. Heller, 1990; Jubien, 2001; Fine, 2003; Crane, 2012), nor *the problem of the many* (cf. Unger, 1980; Horgan & Potrč, 2008). Each of these topics comprise literatures unto themselves, and ordinary ontologists have offered responses largely independent of the perceptual considerations upon which I rely.

I maintain, however, that my defense of ordinary ontology suggests new directions with respect to these topics, directions I intend to explore in future work. Additionally, my conclusions in Chapters 2 and 3 bear on debates over the status of animal minds – perhaps there are creatures that 'see the world' in fundamentally different ways than us, but it's unclear that the possibility (or even actuality) of such creatures should move us to revise our ontological beliefs. Finally, I intend to further explore the modified form of easy ontology I propose in Chapter 4. It's not only of independent interest to metaphysicians; I believe that it will allow philosophers of mind to provide a simple solution to the *problem of direct coordination* (cf. Chapters 1 and 2; Campbell, 1987; Dickie, 2015, ch. 3; Clarke, 2022).

A final note before moving forward. One might see the ordinary ontologist as a kind of *descriptive metaphysician*. In motivating the descriptive project, P.F. Strawson once wrote:

> [T]here is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history – or none recorded in histories of human thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplaces of the least refined thinking; and yet are the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. (Strawson 1959, 10)

The task of metaphysics, thought Strawson, was to analyze these categories and concepts so central

to human thought. Think of our ordinary [OBJECT] concept, under which all the familiar mid-sized dry goods – cars, tigers, and teacups – fall. This concept is central to our manner of engaging with the world: to imagine operating without it invites discomfort.

Contemporary ontologists have largely ignored the descriptive project, and for somewhat justifiable reasons: ontologists seek ontological truths, and to merely describe our contingent representational apparatus does not yet show that our representational apparatus somehow 'gets ontological questions right'. But I think that ontologists have discounted the descriptive project too casually. I agree that there's more to metaphysics than 'how we think about and see the world' – to that extent, I'm perhaps not a full-fledged descriptive metaphysician. Examining how our representational apparatus works in greater detail, however, unveils epistemic resources that have escaped notice, resources that allow us to explain why perceptual experience keys us into ontological reality. The chapters to come will seek to explain why.

## Chapter 1: The epistemology of persistence

Material objects can continue to exist over certain changes. Rocks, for example, can persist over the course of moving through the air. Presumably, we are not irrational to think this – so we must have some sort of justification for the claim that rocks can survive motion. I say that we are so justified because we see rocks moving. Thus, I maintain that our perceptions of rocks in motion can justify claims about the persistence conditions of rocks ("persistence claims"). Let "perceptualism" name the thesis that perception justifies persistence claims.

Perceptualism might seem obvious. It is quite strange, then, that perceptualism is incompatible with almost every way that contemporary philosophers of persistence justify persistence claims. Invariably, such metaphysicians appeal to a mix of conceptual and semantic analysis to justify claims about the persistence conditions of objects. Call this approach – one that I will clarify below – *conceptualism about persistence* (hereafter "conceptualism").

Consider some of the questions philosophers of persistence entertain: Can objects survive the complete replacement of their parts? Can persons survive teletransportation? Do objects persist by virtue of possessing temporal parts or are objects 'wholly present' at each time they exist?[1] I will not attempt to settle these questions in this paper. But our answers to these questions require justification. And whatever justification we have for our answers plausibly rests on whatever justification we have for far more basic persistence claims, such as the claim that rocks can survive motion. It is problematic, then, that philosophers of persistence continue to rely on an empirically outdated epistemology of persistence. I aim to remedy this situation. To that end, I will argue that philosophers of persistence should abandon conceptualism – in all its forms – and endorse perceptualism.

[1] Perdurantists endorse the former thesis, endurantists the latter. For more on the debate between perdurantists and endurantists, see Hawley (2004).

I do not claim that perceptualism itself is novel. Considering recent advances in the science of perception (which I will review shortly), I suspect that many philosophers of perception assume that some form of perceptualism is true. But (i) such philosophers have not spelled out perceptualism in detail, and (ii) ontologists and philosophers of persistence have failed to even consider perceptualism as a viable alternative to conceptualism. My first task, then, is to show – by appealing to resources developed within cognitive science and philosophy of perception – that our perceptual access to material objects allows us to develop an epistemology of object persistence. I shall carry out this task in §1-3.

If this first task is successful, it shows that perceptualism is legitimate alternative to conceptualism. My second task is to show metaphysicians that they themselves have good reason to reject conceptualism and endorse perceptualism. I will do so by arguing that considerations about *extraordinary objects* (objects with strange mereological and/or modal profiles) reveal that perceptualism has several advantages over conceptualism. I shall carry out this task in §4-5. I conclude, in §6, that we should endorse perceptualism.

## §1: Conceptualism

To understand how perceptualism differs from conceptualism, it will be useful to first explain conceptualism in greater detail. I will outline three variants of conceptualism – those offered by David Wiggins, Eli Hirsch, and Amie Thomasson – and then point out what these variants have in common.[2]

[2] See Wiggins (2001), Hirsch (2010), and Thomasson (2007), (2014), and (2020). This is only a representative sample; nearly everyone appeals to conceptual or semantic analysis to justify persistence claims. Indeed, philosophers of persistence almost universally employ the method of testing intuitions against various thought experiments – and this is a way of measuring the truth of persistence claims against our concepts. See Parfit (1992), Johnston (1987), Lowe (1989), and Mackie (2018). Even comparative non-conceptualists are not perceptualists. For instance, Korman (2015, 23) endorses a view according to which intuition directly justifies certain persistence claims, and intuition is not perception. To know knowledge, Campbell is the only philosopher who explicitly endorses perceptualist-adjacent claims and uses them to criticize the conceptualist's justificatory strategies; indeed, his remarks are directed at Wiggins. See Campbell (2002, 81-3).

First, consider Wiggins. Wiggins writes that "…f is a substance-concept only if the grasp of f determines… what can and cannot befall any *x* in the extension of f, and what changes *x* tolerates without there ceasing to exist such a thing as *x*" (2001, 70). In other words, once we grasp [ROCK], we thereby understand the changes that rocks can or cannot tolerate. So we come to understand that rocks can survive motion by grasping the concept [ROCK]. This, for Wiggins, enables to justifiably claim "Rocks can survive motion". Note that our grasp of [ROCK] is what bears justificatory weight for Wiggins, and not the fact that we see rocks in motion.

Now consider Hirsch. Hirsch appeals to considerations related to linguistic interpretation to justify persistence claims. He writes that "…the most plausibly charitable interpretations of typical assertions in our community about the existence of physical objects makes these assertions come out true" (2010, 203).[3] And nothing peculiar to perceptual experience makes an interpretation charitable. The principle of interpretive charity has one demand: that our interpretations of linguistic utterances make those who utter them come out as reasonable as possible.[4]

For example, Hirsch would justify the claim "Rocks can survive motion" by observing that most speakers in our linguistic community assent to such claims. And in light of community-wide assent to "Rocks can survive motion", Hirsch contends that an interpretation on which "Rocks can survive motion" comes out true makes us out to be more reasonable than an interpretation on which it comes out false. So, he argues, "Rocks can survive motion" is true. On Hirsch's view, this is what enables us to justifiably claim "Rocks can survive motion". Note that the principle of interpretive charity is what bears justificatory weight for Hirsch, and not the fact that we see rocks

[3] For more on the principle of charity, see Lewis (1974, 1983). For Hirsch's treatment of persistence, see his discussion of mereological essentialism (2010, chapter 9).

[4] Hirsch assigns weight to what he calls 'charity to perception' (cf. his 2010, 149). But Hirsch does not locate the rationality-making force of perceptual reports in anything special about perception. Charity to perception is a metasemantic principle of interpretation, just one that privileges particular pieces of language.

in motion.

Finally, Thomasson argues that persistence claims are guaranteed to be true by virtue of the rules of use governing our linguistic terms. She writes:

> …[T]here are constitutive rules for proper use of our singular and sortal terms… These rules of use for the terms may be expressed in object-language claims about the conditions of existence and identity for the things (if any) the terms apply to… Basic truths about frame-level identity and persistence conditions, stated in the object language, then turn out to be analytic, where this is understood in the broad sense as *illustrations* of the rules of use involved (Thomasson 2007, 59).

Thomasson thus maintains that we justify persistence claims by investigating the rules of use governing the object terms within such claims: for, "…given the conceptual content of the singular terms used in making these [claims], if those terms refer at all, they must refer to things with the relevant frame-level identity and persistence conditions" (2007, 59).[5]

On Thomasson's view, words like 'rock' are governed by a set of semantic rules. Without these rules in mind, attempts to ground the reference of 'rock' would prove unsuccessful. Given the rules of use governing the term 'rock', Thomasson maintains, claims like "Rocks can survive motion" are guaranteed to be true, for expressions like 'that rock' are appropriately applied before and after motion. So Thomasson justifies "Rocks can survive motion" by arguing that "Rocks can survive motion" is in line with the rules of use governing 'rock'. Note that semantic competence is what bears justificatory weight for Thomasson, and not the fact that we see rocks in motion.

Wiggins, Hirsch, and Thomasson tell different justificatory stories, but their views are similar in an important respect. Wiggins thinks that our justification for the claim "Rocks can survive motion" comes from grasping and analyzing our concept [ROCK]. Hirsch thinks that our justification for the claim "Rocks can survive motion" comes from conducting a charity-based

[5] Thomasson calls these rules of use 'application' and 'coapplication conditions'; see her (2007, chs. 2-3) and (2014, ch. 2). Her hybrid approach to reference builds on Devitt & Sterelny (1999).

analysis of our language. And Thomasson thinks that our justification for the claim "Rocks can survive motion" comes from analyzing the rules of use governing 'rock'. So each conceptualist contends that *our justification for making persistence claims about rocks comes only from analyzing the concept [ROCK], or how the word 'rock' is used*.

Conceptualism is far and away the dominant view among metaphysicians concerning how we come to know about the persistence of objects. But I'll now argue that recent developments in cognitive science and philosophy of perception make an alternative – perceptualism – both tenable and highly plausible.

## §2: Empirical backing

Around rocks, we form beliefs like <That's hard>, <That's round>, and <That's gray>. Call the demonstratives within these beliefs 'perceptual demonstratives'. These beliefs are about rocks. We form them around rocks, and the properties we attribute within such beliefs map onto rocks. So the perceptual demonstratives within these beliefs refer to rocks.

Philosophers of perception have proposed different explanations for how bodies of perceptual demonstrative beliefs come to be about objects like rocks.[6] But the common core among their proposals is that such beliefs are about rocks, in part, because they are formed on the basis of *perceptual links* with rocks. My justificatory story builds on the widely endorsed suggestion that perceptual links play a key role in grounding reference to objects.

I will now further discuss the notion of a perceptual link. Note that none of what I say about perception and perceptual demonstrative thought in this section is itself novel. What is novel is my

[6] See Quilty-Dunn & Green (2021) for more on the relationship between perceptual reference and property attribution. Bodies of perceptual demonstrative beliefs are often called 'mental files'. For progenitors of the idea of a mental file, see Strawson (2004) and Evans & Altham (1973). For contemporary acquaintance-based proposals making use of the notion, see Bach (1987), Levine (1998), Lawlor (2001), Campbell (2002), Perry (2002), Jeshion (2002), Recanati (2012), and Dickie (2015, 50; 2020). See Goodman & Gray (2022) for an alternative interpretation of the mental files framework.

contention that empirically well-founded work on the notion of a perceptual link within the philosophy of mind has implications for the metaphysics of persistence.

Call 'ordinary' experiences those undergone in normal circumstances with no epistemic chicanery. In ordinary experiences, we can enter into a perceptual link with an object by directing our *selective attention* onto that object.[7] When we attend to an object under normal conditions with no epistemic funny business afoot, our perceptual apparatus performs sub-personal calculations on environmental input and delivers a stable feed of information. Around certain rocks, for instance, experience delivers shape-information in the form of roundness. We are disposed to form perceptual demonstrative beliefs like <That's round> on the basis of such information.

When we attend to rocks, perception delivers multiple pieces of information, like grayness, roundness, and hardness. We marshal this information into bodies of *directly coordinated* perceptual demonstrative beliefs when we form beliefs like <That's gray>, <That's round>, and <That's hard>. These beliefs are directly coordinated because the following two conditions are satisfied: (i) we do not explicitly form a thought like <That$_1$ is identical to that$_2$ is identical to…>, even when (ii) we take the perceptual demonstratives within such beliefs to co-refer. We thus treat bodies of perceptual demonstrative beliefs formed on the basis of a single perceptual link as being about a single ordinary thing.[8]

Perception delivers different kinds of information over the course of our experience. For example, round rocks can 'appear' elliptical when we look at them from an angle. But we are not fooled: there is also a sense in which such rocks continue to 'appear' round even when seen at an

[7] See Xu (2014) for more on the science of attention.
[8] Strawson (2008), Campbell (1987, 275-283), Schroeter (2012), Recanati (2012, 47-51), Dickie (2015, ch. 3), and Clarke (2022) provide different justifications for our direct coordination strategies. For more on the relationship between direct coordination and singular thought, see Goodman (2022).

angle.[9] In particular, rocks can continue to 'look' round in this latter sense over the course of our entire experience. I will call this 'constancy information'. Constancy information, like the roundness of the rock, corresponds to the properties we take the rock to possess.

We tend to directly coordinate our perceptual demonstrative beliefs when our perceptual apparatus delivers stable arrays of constancy information over time, allowing us to keep track of the object at the end of our link. The presumption that a stable array of constancy information corresponds to an ordinary object is, of course, defeasible. However, we do not form bodies of perceptual demonstrative beliefs with wild abandon. In ordinary experiences, stable arrays of constancy information almost always correspond to ordinary things.

Finally, when we are linked with an ordinary object, we are disposed to track it across various changes. Say that we are tracking a tree, as opposed to one of that tree's branches. Then in ordinary experiences, the loss of a single branch will not sever our perceptual link with the tree. But if we are tracking one of that tree's branches, then that branch's sudden incineration will sever our perceptual link.

The same applies to statues and their constituent lumps of clay.[10] Sometimes, we enter into perceptual links with lumps of clay. When we are linked with a lump of clay, our link does not break when the lump is squashed. But other times, we enter into perceptual links with statues. When we are linked with a statue, the squashing of its constituent lump will sever our perceptual link. So sometimes, perception delivers information corresponding to statues, and at other times it delivers information corresponding to lumps. We are not exclusively disposed to 'see the world'

[9] See Chisholm (1982, 48-51), Palmer (1999, chapter 7), Cohen (2015), Dickie (2015, ch. 4), Schulte (2020), and Burge (2022, ch. 3) for more on the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. Note that I do not claim *all* perceptual information is constancy information, à la Burge (2009).

[10] Most metaphysicians think that statues are numerically distinct from lumps of clay – that is, most metaphysicians are *pluralists*. In contrast, *monists* think that the statue is numerically identical to its constituent lump. For a representative pluralist, see Crane (2012). For a representative monist, see Jubien (2001).

in one way or the other.

According to the picture I've been tracing, we do not *need* to use concepts like [STATUE] or [LUMP] to enter into perceptual links with statues and lumps.[11] When we are linked with an object in ordinary circumstances, perception delivers constancy information about that object. And empirical work by cognitive scientists makes it plausible that the brain does not typically invoke extra-perceptual resources when it delivers constancy information. This is why some philosophers (John Campbell and Imogen Dickie, for example) maintain that entering into perceptual links with ordinary objects does not typically involve *conceptual mediation.* Dickie writes that a perceptual link with an object "…involves conceptually unaided [perceptual calculations] – calculations which require a characteristic kind of coherence in the [qualitative] appearances that serve as their input, and a corresponding kind of coherence in the behavior of the attended thing" (2015, 128).[12] In this sense, our perceptual apparatus delivers constancy information without cognitive, conceptual mediation.

There is significant empirical support for the claim that our perceptual apparatus tends to deliver perceptual constancies without conceptual mediation. One line of support comes from studies on perceptual constancies. For instance, cognitive scientists have shown that creatures without substantive cognitive capacities, like bees, goldfish, and human infants, possess sensory apparatuses that also exhibit color constancy (cf. Burge 2022, ch. 3). Additionally, scientists have observed that our perceptual apparatus can fail to deliver constancy information even when our

[11] We can still use concepts like [STATUE] or [LUMP] to orient our attention onto statues or lumps, but we do not need to do this to enter into perceptual links with statues or lumps. Cf. Campbell (2002, 75-8).

[12] Campbell (2002, chapter 4) argues that perceptual links are conceptually unmediated in a similar sense. One might think, alongside McDowell (1996) and Sedivy (1996), that the contents of perception are conceptual. Engaging with this line of thought would take us too far afield; given the relative unpopularity of this view among contemporary philosophers of mind, I set it to the side.

broader cognitive capacities remain intact.[13] Yet another line of support comes from studies on visual attention itself.[14] Taken together, these studies make it plausible that our perceptual apparatus delivers a world already 'pre-carved' into visual objects, and that visual objects thereby serve as the basic units of selective attention.

Entering into perceptual links with visual objects does not require conceptual mediation. Where visual objects correspond to ordinary objects, the constancy information that perception delivers based on a perceptual link will be stable over time. This partially explains why beliefs formed on the basis of perceptual links with ordinary objects are about such objects. Thus, conceptually unfiltered perceptual links with rocks deliver constancy information about rocks on whose basis we form beliefs about rocks like <That's hard> and <That's round>. So perception delivers information about ordinary objects prior to our using concepts.

## §3: Perceptualism

It is not only the case that we in fact form beliefs like <That's round> on the basis of the information that perception delivers when we are perceptually linked with a rock. The roundness-information that our perceptual apparatus delivers when we are perceptually linked with a rock provides us with (defeasible) *justification* for the belief <That's round>.[15]

Now note that we often form beliefs like <That's moving> as we watch rocks flying

[13] See Neumeyer (1998) for a review of constancy studies on creatures with baser cognitive capacities, and Rüttiger et al. (1999) for a study on lesion cases. All of what I say is compatible with the claim that cognitive penetration sometimes impacts constancy phenomena – it is only that constancy is by-and-large a pre-conceptual phenomenon.

[14] See, for instance, studies on *amodal completion* (cf. Rensink & Enns 1998). See also the experiments on 'object files' in Kahneman et al. (1992), Scholl (2001), Driver et al. (2001), and Noles et al. (2005), and Pylyshyn (2000; 2001; 2003, chapter 2; 2007). Carey (2009, 69-87), Dickie (2010; 2014), Murez & Recanati (2016), Green & Quilty-Dunn (2021), and Quilty-Dunn (2023) review some of the experimental results.

[15] Cf. Pollock (1974), Pryor (2000), Huemer (2001), Burge (2003), Schellenberg (2013), and Silins (Winter 2021). Ontologists generally accept that experience provides us with prima facie justification for belief in ordinary objects; cf. Korman (2015, 96). Even eliminativists like Trenton Merricks grant that "[f]olk ontology and belief in [ordinary objects] is a *justified starting-point* in forming beliefs about the world" (Merricks 2001, 74-5); such ontologists would claim that the justification our experience as of a rock moving provides gets defeated in light of philosophical argumentation. See also Sider (2013, sec. 5).

through the air. <That's moving> is a belief about an object undergoing a change. And we have experiences of things undergoing changes all the time. Even my opponent Eli Hirsch writes:

> As I look around me, the perceptual judgements that seem to form directly in my mind are such as "The pen is moving on the paper," "The cigarette is burning down," "The cup remains stationary." These are evidently judgements about how bodies persist and change. It is not clear that I make any judgements at all about continuity or sortal coverage, let alone that I derive from these my judgments about the vicissitudes of bodies (Hirsch 1982, 203).

I assume that Wiggins and Thomasson would agree with Hirsch's claim. Really, it is hard to see how they could not. *Of course* we form beliefs about objects undergoing changes. And once we accept that we form beliefs like <That's moving> around rocks in motion, we should similarly maintain that we are justified in believing <That's moving>. For the moving-information that our perceptual apparatus delivers when perceptually linked with rocks provides us with justification for the belief <That's moving>.

Our belief <That's moving> is justified when it is formed on the basis of a perceptual link with a moving rock. Thus it follows straightforwardly from the considerations discussed in §2 that perception justifies beliefs about objects undergoing changes. This makes me suspect that many philosophers of mind assume that some form of perceptualism is true. As I've shown, conceptualism nevertheless remains the dominant view among metaphysicians. I will now show that perceptualism serves as a viable alternative to conceptualism.

Here is how I will proceed. I first argue that we can infer <Rocks can survive motion> from <That's moving>. And since <That's moving> is justified, so is <Rocks can survive motion>. Therefore, the corresponding claim "Rocks can survive motion" is justified. After that, I will argue that my view also secures justification for persistence claims about rocks, like "Rocks can persist when we look away", that cannot be justified on the basis of immediate experience. As I proceed, I will contrast my justificatory story with the conceptualist's.

*§3.1: "Rocks can survive motion"*

Imagine watching a rock fly through the air in ordinary experience. When linked with rocks in motion, we often form beliefs like <That's moving>. Since <That's moving> is formed on the basis of a perceptual link with a rock, it is justified.

Moreover, <That's moving> is true only if <That survives over the course of its motion> is also true. For the experience that justifies <That's moving> involves a single perceptual link, not multiple perceptual links. If multiple perceptual links were created and destroyed over the course of our experience, we would not merely think <That's moving>; we would think <*That's* right there>, and then <Now, *this* is right next to where *that* was previously>, and so on. We would 'see' one thing move a little bit, and then another thing move a little bit more, until the arc of apparent motion finished. This is not what our experience is like. Perception just delivers a single piece of motion-information over the course of our experience. As such, we just think <That's moving>. Thus <That survives over the course of its motion> is justified.[16]

Since the belief <That's moving> is about a rock, the perceptual demonstrative in <That's moving> refers to a rock. So the perceptual demonstrative in the belief <That survives over the course of its motion> also refers to a rock. If we know what rocks are, we are able to know that *that* [pointing at the rock] is a rock. Thus, our justification for <That survives over the course of its motion> transfers to <That *rock* survives over the course of its motion>.

Finally, <That rock survives over the course of its motion> implies <Rocks can survive motion>. And since the former belief is justified, so is the latter. Therefore, the corresponding

[16] Several (Scholl, 2007; Paul, 2010; Green, 2023) have noted that perception of motion and perception of persistence can come apart, but I take it that this example is not such a case. Additionally, I make no claim to the effect that the *contents* of this experience somehow feature the perception of persistence. I rely only on the claims that (i) perception justifies <That's moving> and that (ii) we can infer <That survives over the course of its motion> from <That's moving> under these circumstances.

persistence claim “Rocks can survive motion” is justified – and our justification comes from our experiences of rocks in motion.

We can use this method to justify many persistence claims about rocks (and other objects, of course). Around stationary rocks, we form beliefs like <That’s stationary>. So we can infer that rocks can survive sitting still from our justified belief <That’s stationary>. Another example: when we chip off tiny bits of minerals from rocks, we think <That chipped>. So we can conclude that rocks can survive the loss of tiny bits of minerals. Finally, blowing a rock to smithereens severs our perceptual link with the rock, and there is little hope of rekindling that link in ordinary circumstances. So we can justifiably conclude that something went out of existence upon blowing up; that is, rocks cannot survive being blown to bits.

*§3.2: Just conceptualism in disguise?*

In the previous subsection, I argued that experience justifies the belief <That’s moving>, and that we can infer the claim “Rocks can survive motion” from <That’s moving>. As such, my justificatory story for persistence claims relies not on perception alone, but also on principles governing the transmission of justification. But the relevant contrast between perceptualism and conceptualism still obtains. Contra conceptualists, perceptualists can justify persistence claims about rocks without analyzing the concept [ROCK], or how the word ‘rock’ is used.

There is, however, a different version of this worry. Above, I argued that we can justifiably believe <That survives over the course of its motion> based on our belief <That’s moving>. Then I argued that *if we know what rocks are*, we can justifiably believe <That *rock* survives over the course of its motion>. And knowing what rocks are plausibly involves grasping the concept [ROCK]. This might also make one think that perceptualism is just variant of conceptualism.

This is not the case. For according to perceptualists, perception justifies our belief <That’s

moving> around rocks in motion, and <That survives over the course of its motion> follows from <That's moving>. So <That survives over the course of its motion> and the corresponding claim "That survives over the course of its motion" are both justified. Moreover, since the perceptual demonstrative in <That survives over the course of its motion> refers to a rock, "That survives over the course of its motion" is a persistence claim about a rock. So conceptually unfiltered perception justifies demonstrative persistence claims about rocks. And notice that I have said nothing of our grasp of [ROCK]; or how the principle of charity determines the truth-conditions of utterances containing the word 'rock'; or the rules of use governing 'rock'.

Conceptualists are committed to the view that perception cannot justify *any* persistence claims, including demonstrative persistence claims, absent conceptual or semantic analysis. Wiggins maintains that our grasp of [ROCK] determines our grasp of the changes that rocks can tolerate. So we cannot grasp, much less justify, "That [pointing at a rock] survives over the course of its motion" unless we also grasp [ROCK]. Hirsch maintains that "[t]he principle of charity to use… is… constitutive of the phenomena of language and meaning" (Hirsch 2010, 23). We thus come to be able to justifiably make demonstrative persistence claims, Hirsch argues, by analyzing the most charitable interpretation of our language. Finally, Thomasson maintains that "…reference to individuals… is determinate *only to the extent that* the term is associated with determinate [rules of use], via association… with a certain sort or category of entity to be referred to" (Thomasson 2007, 42). So on Thomasson's view, our use of demonstratives must be associated with a sort of entity in order to refer, and the rules of use associated with that sort of entity are what ensure that "That survives over the course of its motion" is true.

*§3.3: "Rocks can persist when we look away"*

Rocks can survive when we close our eyes; they can survive when we look away; and they *will*

survive motion if thrown. Above, I explained how conceptualists justify claims like "Rocks can survive motion". They would justify claims like "Rocks can persist when we look away" in a similar fashion. Wiggins maintains that our grasp of [ROCK] both determines our understanding, and allows us to justifiably claim, that rocks can tolerate our looking away. Hirsch maintains that an interpretation of our language according to which "Rocks can persist when we look away" comes out true is more charitable than an interpretation on which it comes out false. And Thomasson maintains that 'rock' comes pre-packaged with rules of use that guarantee "Rocks can persist when we look away" is true.

Perceptualism parts ways with each of these variants of conceptualism. As I have emphasized, we regularly undergo experiences that justify persistence claims about rocks. We can *abductively* justify claims like "Rocks can persist when we look away" by using this preponderance of perceptual evidence. For example, imagine looking at a stationary rock. We tend to think <That's stationary> around stationary rocks, and (as per §3.1) we can justifiably believe <That survives sitting still> on this basis. Suppose we look away for a short moment, and nothing seems to happen in the interim. When we look back and nothing appears to have changed, we form another belief, like <That's (still) stationary>.[17]

When we look directly at the rock, our perceptual apparatus delivers an array of constancy information (stationariness, grayness, etc.). And we are justified in believing <That survives sitting still> on the basis of this information. Moreover, when we look away and back again, it typically does not appear as if anything has changed – we receive by and large the same information at both times. The simplest explanation of this fact is that the rock hasn't moved. So <That's still

[17] In doing so, we directly coordinate the referent of this belief with our body of perceptual demonstrative beliefs about the rock. By considering further facts about our direct coordination strategies, one might be able to provide more than abductive justification for claims like "Rocks can persist when we look away". This requires redundant argumentative machinery, so I set this possibility to the side.

stationary> is justified. With no reason to think that we are receiving different information, we can thereby justifiably form the belief <That survives my looking away> on the basis of our belief <That's still stationary>. Therefore the belief <Rocks can persist when we look away>, and the claim "Rocks can persist when we look away", are both justified.

## §4: Extraordinary objects

I have now shown that perceptualism is a viable alternative to conceptualism. I will now present considerations intended to convince metaphysicians to endorse perceptualism. Philosophers of perception can read what follows as further support for perceptualism; metaphysicians should read what follows as reason to abandon the received view in their field – conceptualism – and endorse perceptualism.

Many metaphysicians countenance objects with manifestly odd persistence conditions. Consider *incars* (cf. Hirsch, 1982, 32). An incar is an object that exists in the same place as (i.e. is *co-located* with) a car inside of a garage. But incars, if they exist, exist solely inside of garages. This means that as cars exit garages, incars *shrink* until they cease to exist. So even when cars are inside of garages, they have different persistence conditions than incars. For cars do not shrink when they leave garages, and incars do. Thus, cars are numerically distinct from incars.

Conceptualists handle claims about the existence and persistence of incars in different ways. I will first explain what conceptualists have to say about incars, and then I will show how my view differs from theirs.

### *§4.1: Conceptualists on incars*

Thomasson thinks that there are extraordinary objects. She writes:

> …I accept, and do not think that common sense denies (or would deny) that there are… referents of whatever… terms may be introduced in a way that… genuinely guarantees that their [rules of use] are met…. Indeed, wherever we have a sortal with coherent [rules of use], and the [rules of use] are fulfilled, we may then, if we use 'object' in a covering sense,

say that there is an object of that sort (Thomasson 2007, 184-5).

On Thomasson's view, we can justify claims about incars by first stipulating the rules of use governing 'incar'. For instance, we can stipulate that 'incar' is appropriately applied given that there is a car inside of a garage. And where the rules of use for 'incar' are satisfied, Thomasson maintains, "There are incars" is true.

Both Wiggins and Hirsch maintain that "There are incars" is false. Hirsch maintains that the most charitable interpretation of our ontological language is one according to which "There are incars" is false.[18] But Wiggins would be skeptical of the concept [INCAR] itself. He writes:

> [I]f we could invent sortal concepts simply at will, then the real content of the assertion that something lasted till t and then ceased to exist would be trivialized completely. For if one were unconstrained in the invention of a substantial concept by which to represent that a thing persisted, one would be equally unconstrained in the invention of a substantial concept by which to represent that it failed to persist… We do not think of things like this, however (Wiggins 2001, 65).

If we could naturally grasp [INCAR], Wiggins contends, then we could know that there are incars. But [INCAR] seems like a paradigm instance of a concept that we simply 'invent at will'. So Wiggins would maintain that since we do not naturally grasp [INCAR], we cannot justifiably claim "There are incars".

When it comes to existence claims about incars, conceptualists provide three different answers. Thomasson thinks that "There are incars" is true. Hirsch thinks that "There are incars" is false. And Wiggins maintains that we cannot justifiably believe in incars.

It is unclear what Wiggins and Hirsch would say about the persistence claim "If there are incars, then incars cannot survive leaving garages". It is open for them, however, to endorse Thomasson's view that persistence claims about incars are analytic. On Thomasson's view, we can stipulate that the word 'incar' means something like 'the object co-located with a car that ceases

[18] See Hirsch (2010, chapter 9).

to exist as the car leaves the garage'.[19] Given that incars are defined as objects that cannot survive leaving garages, persistence claims about incars would immediately follow from claims about cars inside of garages. Persistence claims about incars would therefore serve as illustrations of the rules of use governing 'incar', making them analytic in Thomasson's sense.

This is how conceptualists handle existence and persistence claims about incars. I now turn to what perceptualists say about incars.

*§4.2: Perceptualists on incars*

Imagine looking at a car as it leaves a garage. We are disposed to form beliefs like <That's red>, <That's rectangular>, and <That's moving> around cars leaving garages. Now, think of what our body of beliefs would look like if we entered into perceptual links with incars: <That's stationary>, <That's moving>, <That's *shrinking*>, and <That's gone>. We are not disposed to form these kinds of beliefs around cars leaving garages. This is because, in ordinary experience, our perceptual apparatus does not deliver shrinking-information as we watch cars leaving garages. So we are not disposed to enter into perceptual links with incars.

Suppose that there are incars. The information that our perceptual apparatus delivers when cars are inside of garages is consistent with both cars and incars – we might say that cars 'look just like' incars at that time. So one might worry that when a car is inside of a garage, it is unclear whether our thought <That's stationary> is about a car or an incar. But recall that perceptual links last over time. And when we hold our patterns of conceptually unfiltered attention constant as cars leave garages, we are disposed to attend to cars rather than incars – that we form beliefs like <That's moving>, and *not* <That's shrinking>, around cars leaving garages shows that we link up

[19] See her (2007, ch. 2). Thomasson might object to my use of the word 'object' in the stipulated definition, but this does not impact the present point: however we define 'incar', persistence claims about incars are analytic on her view. For more on the different senses of terms like 'thing' or 'object', see Thomasson (2009).

with cars, and not incars. So even if there are incars, we do not enter into perceptual links with incars in ordinary experience.[20]

I do not claim that when we are perceptually linked with cars, perception always delivers information that would enable us to distinguish the car at the end of our link from an incar. We can imagine cases where perception delivers incar-esque information; perhaps the garage's lighting is so odd that our perceptual apparatus delivers information that would justify the belief <That's shrinking>. But this is a case of epistemic chicanery. In ordinary, non-illusory experiences – like our ordinary experiences of cars leaving garages – perception delivers information that allows us to reliably distinguish the object at the end of our perceptual link from objects with different information-profiles.

We are not, in general, disposed to enter into perceptual links with extraordinary objects. Take *trogs*, (purported) objects composed of tree trunks and dogs. Around tree trunks and dogs, we do not undergo experiences that deliver information justifying the belief <That's leafy and furry>. For we do not enter into perceptual links with trogs. Nor do we enter into perceptual links with *snowdiscalls*, clumps of snow that are essentially round-to-disc shaped; nor do we enter into perceptual links with gollyswoggles, statues essentially shaped some arbitrary way.[21]

The fact that we do not enter into perceptual links with extraordinary objects has consequences for claims about the existence and persistence of such objects. Beliefs formed on the basis of a perceptual link with an object are justified. In the absence of a perceptual link with an object, we are not perceptually justified in believing that an object is present. And since we enter

[20] Madden (2019) argues that perception alone cannot select between objects when they are visually indistinguishable from one another. I maintain that the empirical results discussed in §2 above render Madden's considerations implausible – for the sake of space, however, I save detailed discussion of his concerns for another time.
[21] Compare with Korman's discussion of trogs in his (2014, 13). See Sosa (1999) for the snowdiscall example. And see van Inwagen (1990) for the gollyswoggle example.

into perceptual links with ordinary, and not extraordinary objects, we are perceptually justified in believing that there are ordinary objects, and we are not perceptually justified in believing that there are extraordinary objects.

Perceptualists could endorse arguments *from* the existence of ordinary objects *to* the existence of extraordinary ones.[22] For example, some philosophers use parity arguments to argue for the existence of extraordinary objects.[23] Consider one such argument:

(1) There are islands.
(2) If there are islands, then there are incars.
(3) Therefore, there are incars.

One might motivate (2) by arguing that we perceive islands shrinking out of existence as the ocean rises. And just like islands, incars shrink out of existence as they leave garages. So whether or not we can see incars, adherents to parity maintain that there is no ontologically significant difference between islands and incars. Thus, if there are islands, then there are incars.

Suppose that parity arguments are sound. Then philosophical argumentation justifies claims about the existence of extraordinary objects. The important thing, according to perceptualists, is that *perception* does not justify the existence of incars. Perception *does* justify the existence of cars. This generates an epistemological difference between claims about cars and claims about incars; philosophical argumentation justifies claims about incars, and perception justifies claims about cars. (I will soon argue that this epistemological difference lends perceptualism an advantage over conceptualism.)

Perceptualists could maintain that persistence claims about incars are true, or that they are false. They could even maintain that persistence claims about incars are analytic. But none of this

[22] For example, Alex Byrne and Riccardo Manzotti – who could plausibly be construed as perceptualists – endorse the existence of scattered objects based on parity considerations (cf. their 2022, §4).
[23] For more on parity arguments, see Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018).

is essential to perceptualism as such. However we settle the truth or falsity of persistence claims about incars, perceptualists maintain that we will settle the truth or falsity of persistence claims about *cars* in a different way. For perception justifies persistence claims about cars, not incars.

## §5: Advantages

I have defended perceptualism and distinguished it from each variant of conceptualism. I will now argue that these differences lend perceptualism several advantages over conceptualism. I conclude that we should abandon conceptualism and endorse perceptualism.

### *§5.1: Explanatory shortcomings*

Wiggins maintains that [INCAR] is not the right sort of concept to justify claims about the existence of incars. Hirsch claims that according to the most charitable interpretation of our language, "There are incars" is false. And Thomasson thinks that we can stipulate the rules of use governing the term 'incar', thereby guaranteeing the truth of "There are incars". However, when we consider each conceptualist's way of handling existence claims about incars, natural questions emerge for which their respective variants of conceptualism do not provide answers. And perceptualism is well-poised to answer these questions.

Let us begin with Wiggins. If [INCAR] is not a sortal concept at all, it is unclear how we can make sense of its application in claims like "If there are incars, then incars cannot survive leaving garages". But of course we can make sense of these claims; indeed, we might think that they are true. So Wiggins would likely want to maintain that [INCAR] is, in some way, a defective sortal concept. Perhaps we can make sense of its application, but it is somehow not *substantial*, thus making it unfit for determining what things exist.

I agree. But we should not leave [INCAR]'s conceptual inferiority a mystery where there is a plausible explanation of its inferiority. And perceptualism immediately explains why we think

of [CAR] as a substantive concept, and [INCAR] as non-substantive: we see cars, and we do not see incars. So [CAR] is rooted in perceptual experience, and [INCAR] is not. Since perceptualism immediately secures this explanation, this gives us a reason to endorse perceptualism over Wiggins's variant of conceptualism.

Hirsch claims that in our own ontological language, "There are cars" is true and "There are incars" is false. However, we could just as easily opt to speak a language that operates with a different concept of [A THING IN THE WORLD]. He writes:

> Suppose we are evaluating the truth of the sentence, "There exists something that is composed of Clinton's nose and the Eiffel Tower." Mereologists will accept this sentence, whereas anti-mereologists will reject it… the expression "there exists something" can be interpreted in a way that makes the sentence true or in a way that makes the sentence false… [so] we have a choice between operating with a concept of "the existence of something" that satisfies the mereologist or operating with a different concept that satisfies the anti-mereologist (Hirsch 2010, 69).

Hirsch maintains that we can pick between these 'concepts of existence'. And, importantly, he holds that "…there is no use asking which [concept of existence] is metaphysically better or which better reflects objective reality" (Hirsch & Warren 2020, 351). This is because both concepts of existence correspond to distinct ontological languages, each of which can express all the same facts.[24] Such languages are on a metaphysical par for Hirsch – we need only choose the language we want to speak. Therefore, the truth-conditions of existence and persistence claims about incars, and thus the truth or falsity of claims about incars within our language, depend on our choosing to operate with a concept of existence that does or does not apply to incars.

While we can pick between different ontological languages on Hirsch's view, we in fact speak an ontological language that countenances cars and not incars. The best explanation of this fact is that we enter into perceptual links with cars, and not incars. So, plausibly, we speak the

[24] See Hirsch (2010, chapters 9-11).

ontological language we do *because* of the sorts of experiences that we undergo.[25] Perceptualism secures this explanation, and Hirsch's variant of conceptualism does not. So perceptualism is explanatorily more basic than Hirsch's variant of conceptualism. This gives us a reason to endorse perceptualism over Hirsch's variant of conceptualism.

As we saw above, Thomasson maintains that "There are Os" is true provided that the rules of use governing the object-term 'O' are satisfied. Since we can stipulate that the presence of a car inside of a garage is sufficient for application of the term 'incar', "There are incars" is true on Thomasson's view. Thomasson is thereby committed to ontological *plentitude*.[26] This is because, for any consistent set of rules of use, we can stipulate that there is a term whose application is appropriate provided those rules of use are satisfied. So we can set up rules of use for terms like 'incar', 'car-slice', 'car-fusion', and so on, ensuring the truth of claims like "There are incars, car-slices, and car-fusions".

My current charge is similar to charge I just raised against Hirsch. Ordinary speakers find themselves using terms like 'car', and *not* terms like 'incar', 'car-slice', 'car-fusion', and so on. The best explanation of this fact is that we enter into perceptual links with cars, and not incars, car-slices, and car-fusions. Perceptualism secures this explanation, and Thomasson's variant of conceptualism does not. So perceptualism is explanatorily more basic than Thomasson's variant of conceptualism. This gives us a reason to endorse perceptualism over Thomasson's variant of conceptualism.

### *§5.2: Epistemic differences*

We see cars, and we do not see incars. So there are epistemological differences between cars and

[25] This could also explain why charity to perception is such an important metasemantic principle on Hirsch's account; see footnote 4.

[26] Ontologists who endorse a plentitudinous ontology are known as *permissivists*. Adherents to permissivism include Sider (2001), Thomasson (2007), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), and Fairchild (2019) among their ranks.

incars, and thus between claims about cars and incars – we come to grasp, justifiably believe, and know claims about cars and incars in different ways. Our account of how we justify persistence claims about objects ought to register these epistemological differences.

Wiggins and Hirsch each register *some* epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars. Since we do not naturally grasp the concept [INCAR], Wiggins would say that we cannot justifiably claim "There are incars". And Hirsch would say that on the most charitable interpretation of our language, "There are incars" is false. However, Wiggins does not explain why we do not naturally grasp [INCAR]. And Hirsch thinks that we could choose to speak a language according to which "There are incars" comes out true. So Wiggins and Hirsch leave the epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars mysterious.

Now recall Thomasson's claim that satisfying the rules of use governing some object-term 'O' is sufficient for "There are Os" to be true. As I noted above, this commits Thomasson to the claim that both "There are cars" and "There are incars" are true. But, more importantly, this also means that "There are cars" is justified in *just the same way* that "There are incars" is justified. We can justifiably believe that there are both cars and incars, on Thomasson's view, because we can justifiably believe that there are referents satisfying the rules of use governing the terms 'car' and 'incar'. By justifying existence claims about cars and incars in the same way, Thomasson places claims about cars and incars on an epistemic par.[27]

We should avoid placing claims about cars and incars on an epistemic par. In the previous subsection, I argued that perceptualism is well-poised to answer questions that emerge when we consider how each variant of conceptualism handles claims about incars. This is one way that perceptualism bolsters the epistemological differences between claims about cars and incars. But

[27] Note that my objection here is *not* that a commitment to extraordinary objects is objectionable. Thomasson has argued elsewhere that a commitment to extraordinary objects is not objectionable; see her (2007, section 9.6).

perceptualism secures other epistemological distinctions between claims about cars and incars.

First, according to perceptualists, persistence claims about cars are justified in a *different* way than persistence claims about incars (if persistence claims about incars are justified at all). For recall that we enter into perceptual links with cars. And when we form beliefs like <That's moving> based on the information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with cars, such beliefs are about cars. So conceptually unfiltered perception justifies demonstrative persistence claims about cars. But we do not enter into perceptual links with incars. Therefore, we cannot ground reference to incars, nor justify demonstrative persistence claims about incars, via perceptual experience. Perception justifies persistence (and existence) claims about cars, and it does not justify persistence (nor existence) claims about incars. So perception does not adjudicate whether there are incars, nor how they persist.

Of course, it is open for perceptualists to endorse philosophical arguments from the existence of ordinary objects to the existence of extraordinary objects. Above, I discussed parity arguments for the existence of incars, but this is just an example – there are other arguments for the existence of objects like incars.[28] If any such arguments were successful, then our justification for existence claims about incars would come from philosophical argumentation. And this is entirely suitable; philosophical argumentation seems the only appropriate route for justifying the existence of incar-like theoretical extravagances. So if there are incars, we will not justify their existence *the same way* that we justify the existence of cars.

There is also an epistemic difference between the concepts [CAR] and [INCAR] themselves. To get clear on this difference, first distinguish between two claims: (i) perception justifies persistence claims about cars, and not incars, and (ii) grasping [CAR] and [INCAR]

[28] Take, for instance, the argument from vagueness, as in Sider (2001, 120-39).

suffices for grasping the changes that both cars and incars can undergo. Whoever accepts both (i) and (ii) maintains that we can grasp persistence claims about cars and incars by virtue of grasping [CAR] and [INCAR], but that experience justifies only those persistence claims about cars.

Suppose that (ii) is true. Even so, perceptualists recognize an epistemic subtlety in the claim that grasping [CAR] and [INCAR] suffices for grasping the changes that cars and incars can undergo. Perceptualists maintain that our grasp of [CAR] can come from experience, while our grasp of [INCAR] cannot come from experience. For note that grasping [CAR] involves understanding the basic situations under which [CAR] is appropriately applied. And here is one way that we often come to such an understanding. First, we form bodies of perceptual demonstrative thoughts about cars (<*That* is red and moving>, <*This* is blue and stationary>, etc.). Then, someone says to us "Those things, and things like them, are called 'cars'". On this basis, we can come to know that [CAR] is appropriately applied to the referents of certain of our perceptual demonstrative thoughts, as well as to similar entities.

I maintain that we sometimes, and likely most of the time, come to grasp [CAR] in just this way. But sometimes, hearing a long description of what cars are ("Cars are hunks of metal with tires and engines, that people created to drive place to place…") produces our grasp of [CAR]. No matter: there is still a relevant difference between coming to grasp [CAR] and [INCAR]. For the *only* way that we can come to grasp [INCAR] is through some description of what incars are. Since we do not enter into perceptual links with incars, we do not form bodies of perceptual demonstrative thoughts about incars. So someone trying to get us to grasp [INCAR] by pointing and telling us "Those things, and things like them, are called 'incars'" will do us a fat lot of good.

Even if grasping [CAR] suffices for grasping that cars can survive leaving garages, our grasp of [CAR] can come from experience. But our grasp of [INCAR] cannot come from

experience. So we can come to grasp [CAR] and [INCAR] in different ways. And this has downstream effects on our grasp of claims about cars and incars. Plausibly, the way that we grasp claims like "Cars can survive leaving garages" and "Incars cannot survive leaving garages" depends on the way that we grasp [CAR] and [INCAR], respectively. Therefore, our epistemic access to persistence claims about cars differs from our epistemic access to persistence claims about incars; our grasp of persistence claims about cars can come from perception, and our grasp of persistence claims about incars cannot come from perception. This is another epistemic difference between claims about cars and incars.

Perceptualism secures a far starker epistemic contrast between claims about cars and incars than each variant of conceptualism. This is a reason to endorse perceptualism over conceptualism.

*§5.3: Deflationism*

We have now seen that perceptualism has epistemological advantages over conceptualism. I will now argue that it also has a metaphysical advantage; it can avoid a deflationary view of ontology.

Hirsch argues that we could speak an ontological language that countenances either cars or incars. Thus debates about whether or not there are incars – or cars, for that matter – are non-substantive. This is why Hirsch often calls his position 'deflationary'. Thomasson is also a deflationist.[29] Recall her claim that "…, wherever we have a sortal with coherent [rules of use], and the [rules of use] are fulfilled, we may then… say that there is an object of that sort (Thomasson 2007, 185). Therefore, "There are incars" and "Incars cannot survive leaving garages" are true provided that the rules of use we have stipulated to govern 'incar' are satisfied. For both Hirsch and Thomasson, the meanings of our object-terms, and thus the truth-conditions of claims about the existence and persistence of objects, depend on our linguistic decisions.

[29] Both Hirsch and Thomasson embrace the "deflationist" label: see Hirsch (2010, introduction) and Thomasson (2014, ch. 1).

None of this entails that Hirsch and Thomasson are anti-realists. Both argue that their positions are consistent with the thesis that "…the world consists of things whose existence and properties are independent of language or consciousness" (Hirsch 2010, 76). All metaphysical realists should secure this claim about mind-and-language-independence. As deflationists, however, Hirsch and Thomasson's positions definitively foreclose debate about the existence and persistence of ordinary and extraordinary objects. Once we have determined the correct interpretation of our language, or once we have determined the rules of use governing our terms, debates about the existence of objects with extraordinary persistence conditions become defunct. There are perhaps practical reasons to reject talking in terms of extraordinary objects, but there is no way to adjudicate whether some way of speaking is metaphysically more perspicuous than another way of speaking.

Perceptualists are not committed to deflationism. *Perception* does not justify belief in incars, although it justifies belief in cars. But perceptualists could accept or reject arguments for the existence of extraordinary objects. My view leaves these debates open; thus, it allows us to maintain that ontological debates are substantive. It is better if our view on how we come to form justified beliefs about the persistence conditions of ordinary objects does not foreclose metaphysical debates concerning extraordinary objects. So if we do not want to be deflationists, this gives us a reason to endorse perceptualism over Hirsch's and Thomasson's variants of conceptualism.

Wiggins's variant of conceptualism is not obviously deflationary, nor is it anti-realist. But there is still reason to think that realists should prefer perceptualism to Wiggins's variant of conceptualism. Recall Wiggins's contention that we come to understand the changes that rocks can tolerate by grasping [ROCK]. Thus, Wiggins maintains that we cannot parse our experiential world

into persisting things without bringing concepts to mind. Wiggins construes the mind as engaged in a sort of activity with the informational deliverances of perception.

But we are not 'carving the world' into persisting objects; we just enter into perceptual links with objects and form beliefs about them on the basis of perception. This picture assigns perception a more receptive role than Wiggins assigns it. This is not to say that any view which entails that the mind does some 'carving' work is thereby anti-realist – it is just another metric that we can use to judge the realist bona fides of any given view. One can certainly maintain that there *really are* the objects we countenance while simultaneously holding that our conceptual apparatus must do some work in making them available in experience. My claim is that realists should be less satisfied with a view according to which our conceptual apparatus has to do this kind of work to justify claims about the existence and persistence of objects than otherwise. So, as realists, we should endorse perceptualism over Wiggins's variant of conceptualism.

### *§5.4: Compatibility?*

I have argued that perceptualism has important advantages over conceptualism. Considering these advantages, I conclude that we should reject conceptualism and endorse perceptualism.

One might think that we should not draw this conclusion. Rather, we might conclude that we simply have two sources of justification for persistence claims – one perceptual, and another conceptual. According to this line of thought, conceptualists should grant that we have perceptual justification for persistence claims and maintain that we also have justification that comes from conceptual or semantic analysis. I have said nothing that would imply such a view is inconsistent. But then, one might worry that perceptualism is not in competition with conceptualism.

Note that if conceptualists think that we can use perception to justify persistence claims, they have not presented their views in ways that would allow for this possibility. In fact, as I argued

in §1.1 and §3.2, actual conceptualists are committed to the claim that conceptual or semantic analysis is the only way to justify persistence claims. And I have argued that this claim is false. We do not need to analyze concepts or language in order to justify demonstrative persistence claims like "That [pointing at a rock] survives over the course of its motion".

Moreover, my discussion makes evident that actual conceptualists justify persistence claims in ways that are either flawed or else derivative on our perceptual means of justification. Thomasson justifies claims about cars and incars in just the same way – but this does not capture the epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars. Both Hirsch and Thomasson must say that debates about the existence and persistence of extraordinary objects are bunk – but our means of justifying persistence claims should not force our hand in metaphysical debates. And Wiggins claims that our grasp of [ROCK] is what enables us to justifiably make persistence claims about rocks – but plausibly, our grasp of [ROCK] comes from perceptual experience.

On its own, it is not illicit to combine two sources of justification for one set of claims. Perhaps there is a possible variant of conceptualism that (i) is not committed to the claim that conceptual or semantic analysis is the only way to justify persistence claims, and (ii) does not justify persistence claims in ways that are either flawed or derivative on our perceptual means of justification. I would have no problem with such a variant of conceptualism. But we should not combine our perceptual means of justification with alternative means that are either flawed or else derivative on our perceptual means. So we should reject that we can combine our perceptual means of justification with those means offered by actual conceptualists. This gives us a reason to reject conceptualism in its current form and endorse perceptualism.

## §6: Conclusion

By and large, contemporary metaphysicians justify persistence claims via conceptual and semantic

analysis. I have argued that a better view, perceptualism, becomes available once we take recent developments in cognitive science and philosophy of perception into account. Perceptualism is not only coherent and defensible – it has several important advantages over conceptualism. It naturally accommodates conceptualism's explanatory shortcomings; it registers epistemological differences between claims about ordinary and extraordinary objects, giving it an epistemic richness that conceptualism cannot capture; and it allows us to evade deflationism and retain a substantive view of debates about the persistence and existence of objects. I conclude that metaphysicians should abandon conceptualism and endorse perceptualism.

## Chapter 2: Perception and extraordinary objects

Legend has it that South Jersey's Pine Barrens house a creature called 'the Jersey Devil'. Some say the Jersey Devil has the head of a goat, others the head of a horse. Most versions of the tale specify that the Jersey Devil has hooves and wings. No matter the variant of the myth one picks, the Jersey Devil should be a highly visible critter – one well-poised for perceptual detection. To determine whether such a creature exists, then, we should look for it. If we come up empty handed after an exhaustive search, we should conclude that there is no Jersey Devil.

I say the same about the *ontological permissivist's* extraordinary objects, things like *trogs* (mereological sums of tree trunks and dogs) and *incars* (objects co-located with cars that cease to exist as cars pass under garage doorways).[1] Incars strike the uninitiated as odd; indeed, some think that extraordinary things so affront 'common sense' as to warrant their repudiation.[2] But cars and incars have one thing in common – they're both moderate-sized specimens of dry goods (to use J.L. Austin's phrase).[3] Incars are (often) just as big as cars. They share the same shape, color, surface texture, and so forth. Incars, then, seem well-poised for perceptual detection.

Ontological permissivists – who countenance both cars and incars – reply:

> [P]ermissivism is itself neutral about such perceptual claims. Even granting, for example, that there are myriad objects that are mereologically co-incident with a [car], it is far from straightforward to conclude that we *see* each of them whenever we see that [car] (Fairchild & Hawthorne 2018, 46-7).

Permissivists note – surely correctly – that we cannot conclude that we see an incar just because we see the car with which it's co-located. But I insist that we would expect to see incars, given that they're mid-sized dry goods. Thus my concern isn't merely that we *fail to* see incars: it's that we

[1] See Cartwright (1987), Yablo (1987), Sosa (1999), Fine (1999), Sider (2001), Hawthorne (2006), Leslie (2011), Inman (2014), Thomasson (2014), Jago (2016), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), Fairchild (2019; 2021), and Dorr et al. (2021, ch. 11) for defenses of permissivism.
[2] Cf. Hirsch (2002).
[3] Cf. Austin (1962).

*should* see them. Combine this with the claim that we don't see incars (a claim permissivists already find plausible) and permissivism is in trouble. In argument form:

(E1) If we should see incars but we don't, then there are no incars.
(E2) We don't see incars.
(E3) We should see incars.
(E4) Therefore, there are no incars.

Replace 'incar' with 'trog' and the argument runs just the same. Call (E1)-(E4) 'the perceptual argument against extraordinary objects' (hereafter, just 'the perceptual argument').

*Ordinary ontologists* countenance ordinary but not extraordinary objects.[4] In this paper, I defend ordinary ontology by way of defending the perceptual argument. To that end, I'll first outline a cognitive scientific story about perception and perceptual justification according to which perception gives us reason to countenance ordinary things (§1). I'm not the first ontologist who contends that perception furnishes us with such reasons. But I go one further – I claim that perception furnishes us with reasons to *disbelieve* in extraordinary things. For, in the second phase of my defense, I'll show that the cognitive scientific story on which I rely renders the premises of the perceptual argument irresistible. We therefore have reasons to countenance the ordinary and to repudiate the extraordinary (§2-4). I close by showing that my defense of ordinary ontology evades perhaps the most significant objection levied against it – namely, that ordinary ontology is somehow *arbitrary* or *parochial* (§5).

## §1: Perception

I maintain that perceptual experience gives us reasons to believe in ordinary objects. A few material object ontologists agree. Daniel Korman writes:

> [A] typical experience carries information not just about how sensible qualities are distributed in a situation, but also about which qualities are borne by single objects and about the kinds to which those objects belong. As I turn my attention to the atoms arranged

[4] Markosian (1998), Lowe (2007), Hirsch (2010), and Korman (2015) defend ordinary ontology. I opt for the label 'ordinary ontology' – rather than Korman's 'conservatism' – to avoid any political connotations.

> tablewise before me, the content of my experience is *that there is a table that is brown, smooth, etc.,* not simply *that brownness, smoothness, etc., are distributed thus*. On this view of perceptual content, experience directly supports [the existence of tables] (Korman 2015, 31).[5]

Thomas Hofweber concurs:

> [T]he perceptual belief that we form on the basis of perceptual experience… has a content that is only true if composition occurs. It has the propositional content that there is a table, say, and that belief, with that content, is only true if there is a table and thus if composition at least sometimes occurs. What we are defeasibly entitled to hold is not just that the world looks as the phenomenology of experience presents it to us to be… but the content of our perceptual beliefs (Hofweber 2019, 33).

And Alex Byrne makes an even stronger claim, writing that "[p]erceptual experience, whether veridical or not, requires the existence of ordinary objects" (2019, 8).

Recent work in the philosophy of mind bolsters such remarks. Philosophers of mind concur that if perception justifies any beliefs at all, it justifies certain *demonstrative* beliefs formed on the basis of the information our perceptual apparatus delivers in good perceptual circumstances (cf. Smithies, 2011; Dickie, 2015, ch. 4; Silins, 2015; Schellenberg, 2018, pt. 4; and Burge, 2003, 2020 on perceptual reasons). When we look at brown trees in good lighting, for example, perception delivers a piece of brownness-information permitting us to justifiably believe <That's brown>. Call these *perceptual demonstrative beliefs* ("PDBs"). I assume that perception justifies PDBs; and PDBs are about composite objects.[6]

I'll now outline the circumstances under which perception justifies PDBs by taking a short cognitive scientific detour. This will allow us to understand more clearly the sense in which perception justifies belief in ordinary objects. The story I present offers empirical support for the remarks made above by Korman, Hofweber, and Byrne. Moreover, my account motivates the

[5] Korman has in mind Siegel (2010)'s view of perceptual content.
[6] See Comesaña (2020) for more on perceptual reasons. Even those who reject the view that perceptual experience has any contents – like Martin (2002) and Campbell (2002) – would agree that perception justifies PDBs.

premises of the perceptual argument, which I will discuss in §2-4.

Our perceptual apparatus divides our perceptual field into *visual objects* (cf. Palmer, 1999, ch. 7; Pylyshyn, 2003, 173; Carey, 2009, 69-87; Dickie, 2010; Murez & Recanati, 2016). When we attend to visual objects, our perceptual apparatus delivers an array of information about their shape, size, color, and so on. Some of this information changes from moment to moment, but other pieces of perceptual information remain stable over time. When we look at round rocks from a sharp angle, there's a sense in which such rocks 'look' elliptical. We tend not to form beliefs like <That's elliptical> under these circumstances, for there's also a sense in which such rocks 'look' round the entire time; so, we just believe <That's round>. Since this latter type of information corresponds to the well-studied phenomenon of perceptual constancy, call it *constancy information* (cf. Cohen, 2015; Burge, 2022, ch. 2).[7]

Suppose we're looking at a tall, brown tree. We form PDBs like <That's tall> and <That's brown> on the basis of the constancy information our perceptual apparatus delivers under such circumstances. Moreover, we *directly coordinate* PDBs formed on the basis of a single perceptual link with a visual object (cf. Campbell, 1988; Dickie, 2015, ch. 3; Clarke, 2022). That is, we assume that <That's tall> and <That's brown> are about the same object without explicitly forming some further belief like <That$_1$ is identical to that$_2$>. Say that we treat a visual object X as if it corresponds to a single composite thing when we (a) form beliefs like <That's C> on the basis of the C-ness constancy information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with a X, and (b) directly coordinate those beliefs.

This story secures the claim that perception justifies beliefs about the existence and persistence of ordinary things. First, perception justifies PDBs like <That's round and gray> in

[7] For more on the philosophical implications of constancy, see Burge (2009) and Schulte (2021). I make no commitment to the claim that perceptual constancies mark the divide between perceiving and mere sensing, à la Burge.

paradigmatic cases of perceptual contact. We can infer <There's something round and gray> from <That's round and gray>, and the latter belief transmits its justification to the former. So, through a trivial inferential step, perception justifies beliefs about the existence of objects.

Now suppose we're looking at a moving rock. When we do so, our perceptual apparatus delivers a single piece of moving-information, allowing us to justifiably believe <That's moving>. Since perception delivers a single piece of information over time, and not multiple pieces of information, we can thereby infer <That survives over the course of its motion>. And from this belief we can infer <There is something that survives over the course of its motion>. Whatever justification we have for <That's moving> transfers to <There's something that survives over the course of its motion>. So perception justifies beliefs about the persistence of objects.

Perception similarly justifies beliefs concerning when objects cease to exist. Absent major environmental changes, we can indefinitely maintain selective attention to rocks. But suppose the rock we're looking at explodes into a million pieces – we see the rock's parts fly every which way, and those parts no longer arrange in such a way as to lead to the delivery of constancy information. So the visual object to which we previously attended and on whose basis we formed PDBs is gone. This permits us to believe <What I previously attended to no longer exists>.

We can justifiably believe that there's something round and gray before us that can survive moving through the air but cannot survive the complete dispersion of its parts. If we know what rocks are supposed to be, we can infer that the object of our perceptual experience is a rock.[8] So perception puts us in a position to justifiably believe that there are rocks. The same story applies

[8] Experience permits us to form PDBs about rocks like <That's moving>, <That's round and gray>, and <That went out of existence> even if we don't possess the concept [ROCK]; [ROCK] merely plays the role of enabling us to conclude that such PDBs are about rocks. I take it that this is an abductive inference – we perceive something round and gray which can survive motion but not the total dispersion of its parts, and [ROCK] better captures this description than any competitor concept. For more on the role that concepts play in experience, see §3.2 and the citations collected in footnote 16.

to other ordinary things, such as tigers and tables.

Rocks (and statues, tigers, etc.) look to have certain shapes, sizes, and colors, when seen from behind; when submerged in water; as we move around them; and so forth. Call the visual objects our perceptual apparatus generates in response to such arrangements of matter *ordinary visual objects*. When we attend to ordinary visual objects, perception delivers an array of constancy information that remains stable across a wide variety of circumstances. This provides us with justification for treating ordinary visual objects as if they correspond to single composite objects. And this permits us to justifiably believe in ordinary things.

I've now defended the claim that perception allows us to justifiably believe in ordinary things. I further maintain that the perceptual story I've outlined in this section allows us to justifiably *repudiate* extraordinary things (like trogs and incars). In particular, this story allows us to motivate and defend the perceptual argument, an argument that issues in the nonexistence of extraordinary objects. I will now defend the perceptual argument.

## §2: Introducing the perceptual argument

Incars – if they exist – are objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages, objects which shrink and pop out of existence as cars exit garages. Now recall premise (E1) of the perceptual argument:

(E1) If we should see incars but we don't, then there are no incars.

When I say that we should see incars, I mean that we would expect to see incars given how they're described; I'll sometimes articulate this by saying that our perceptual apparatus is "well-poised" to detect incars. In turn, premise (E1) articulates a near incontrovertible principle about perceptual experience: if there's something in front of us that our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect, then provided we're in good lighting and have had a restful night's sleep, we'd see it; otherwise,

no such thing is before us. If cars exist, for instance, then cars are large entities that make loud noises when we start them up. Cars are just the sorts of entities that our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect. If we nevertheless fail to see a car immediately before us, we should conclude that there is no car before us.

So suppose that (E1)'s antecedent is true. Thus, our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect incars when we look at cars inside of and exiting garages. Since our perceptual apparatus is so poised, we should see incars if there are any. But (we're supposing) we don't see incars. Absent some claim to the effect that we're systematically unlucky in our perceptual efforts, we should conclude that there are no incars before us when we look at cars inside of and exiting garages. This reasoning applies each time we attempt to seek out incars.

Now recall (E2):

(E2) We don't see incars.

Premise (E2) is antecedently plausible – we saw permissivists express sympathy with (E2) in the introduction. To clarify and defend it, I'll now say more.

Incars – if they exist – cease to exist as the cars with which they're co-located exit garages. When we watch cars leaving garages, our perceptual apparatus delivers a piece of moving-information on whose basis we can form the belief <That's moving>, from which we can infer <That survives over the course of its motion>. So perception allows us to justifiably form PDBs about entities with car-like persistence conditions. But when environmental conditions are normal, our perceptual apparatus delivers no shrinking-information on whose basis we might come to believe things like <That's shrinking> or <That went out of existence>. So perception doesn't

allow us to justifiably form PDBs about entities with incar-like persistence conditions.[9] I'll defend (E2) further in §3.

Now recall (E3):

(E3) We should see incars.

Again, (E3) amounts to the claim that our perceptual apparatus is set up in such a way as to detect incars, provided that no epistemic funny business is afoot. I'll defend (E3) further in §4.

Note that (E3) doesn't rely on the claim that perception serves as our only means of justifying ontological beliefs. Scientific investigation provides us with evidence for the existence of quarks and galaxies. And perhaps philosophical argumentation provides us with evidence for the existence of, for example, propositions. Plausibly, propositions aren't the sorts of entities we would expect to perceptually detect. Incars, I claim, are different. For incars, if they exist, are mid-sized material entities that shrink and eventually pop out of existence as cars exit garages. Once we've described what it is to be an incar, we should recognize that an incar is just the sort of entity we're disposed to perceive.

From (E1)-(E3), it follows that

(E5) There are no incars.

Replace 'incar' with 'trog' and the argument runs just the same. Thus, if the perceptual argument is sound, then there are no extraordinary mid-sized dry goods.

I've now explained and motivated the perceptual argument's premises. I take it that few wish to deny (E1).[10] By contrast, there are several ways for one to object to (E2) and (E3). In §3-

[9] Sometimes, garages are lit so strangely as to make it appear as if something shrinks when cars exit them. These are abnormal circumstances – whatever justification we have for treating the relevant visual object as if it corresponds to a single thing undergoes defeat once we recognize the nature of our circumstances.

[10] I can envision one objection to (E1) that rests on ground I cover in defending (E2) and (E3); I discuss this objection in §5.

4, I'll further motivate (E2) and (E3) and defend against such objections.

## §3: Defending (E2)

Recall (E2):

(E2) We don't see incars (/trogs).

In this section, I'll consider two objections to (E2). First, one might claim that we see extraordinary things in the sense outlined in §1. And second, one might claim that we see extraordinary things in some other relevant sense of 'seeing'.

### *§3.1: Seeing trogs*

Alex Byrne and Riccardo Manzotti claim that we're sometimes perceptually aware of spatiotemporally discontinuous objects like trogs (they say nothing of incars). They write:

> …[S]ometimes gerrymandered objects *do* appear "as one." A pencil sharpener, stapler, Post-it notes, pencils, and other office paraphernalia scattered on a desk form a gerrymandered object… Imagine that the sharpener, stapler, and so on start moving together, like a flock of birds. Phenomenologically, in addition to the *plurality* – the sharpener, stapler, … – there is also a *singularity* – the office-supply-"flock" (2022, 342).

Thus, Byrne & Manzotti might claim that we sometimes undergo experiences that justify belief in gerrymandered objects like trogs. That is, they might reject (E2) on the grounds that we see trogs in the sense of §1.

I reply that these sorts of experiences fail to justify belief in mereologically scattered objects. To see why, first recall that the visual objects corresponding to composite objects like rocks remain stable across a wide variety of circumstances – this, at least in part, explains why we're justifiably permitted to treat rock-induced visual objects as if they correspond to single composite objects.

Other visual objects behave far less coherently. Take, for instance, *floaters*, "…small dark shapes that float across your vision… [which] can look like spots, threads, squiggly lines, or even

little cobwebs" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Floaters appear and disappear across our visual field relatively randomly; sometimes they stay in place as we turn our heads, and other times they fade into nothing upon notice. Perhaps we're justified in believing <There's a round object before me> based on the roundness information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with a round floater. We quickly lose whatever justification we would otherwise possess for so believing when floaters exhibit their characteristic odd behaviors. Thus, discovering that a visual object behaves in non-ordinary ways precludes us treating it as if it corresponds to a composite object.

The same reasoning applies to flocks of birds.[11] When we look at flocks from afar, they appear to move as a unit, to continuously change their shape, to bear a fairly uniform color, and so on. We're defeasibly entitled to treat the flock-induced visual object as if it corresponds to a single thing. So we're justified in believing <That's brown> on the basis of the brownness information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with this visual object.

But flock-induced visual objects behave differently than ordinary-object-induced visual objects. As we approach flocks, our perceptual apparatus divides our visual field into many visual objects, namely the birds themselves. And if we watch flocks for long enough, they exhibit behaviors that distinguish them from the visual objects for which it's definitely rational to employ our direct coordination strategies – flocks rapidly scatter and then recombine, or split into groups, or what have you. We can treat the visual object to which the flock corresponds as a unit for some amount of time, but certainly not over the same circumstances that we can treat the visual objects to which ordinary things correspond.

Upon discovering that this visual object is non-ordinary, we lose whatever justification we

[11] Compare with Brenner (2023, 74).

would otherwise possess for (i) forming beliefs like <That's brown> on the basis of the brownness-information our perceptual apparatus generates and (ii) directly coordinating such beliefs with other beliefs formed on the basis of the same perceptual link. So discovering that a visual object is non-ordinary undermines whatever justification we would otherwise possess for treating it as if it corresponds to a single composite object.

Thus, I accept that we sometimes see many objects 'as one'. But as with floaters and flocks, I reply that we lose whatever justification we have for treating the office-supply-flock-induced visual object as if it corresponds to a single thing once that visual object manifests non-ordinary behavior. If our initial experience was 'about' anything, it was about a plurality of objects, and it misattributed to them the kind of unity that ordinary things possess.[12] I say the same of trogs.

Note that Byrne & Manzotti *assume* that there are gerrymandered objects and argue on this basis that we sometimes see gerrymandered objects (ibid., 340-2).[13] But I have argued that we should reject their claim that we see gerrymandered objects. Further, if the perceptual argument is sound, we should reject the assumption that there are gerrymandered objects, as well as all other extraordinary moderate-sized specimens of dry goods.

### *§3.2: Alternative senses of 'see'*

My argument for (E2) rests on the claim that we fail to undergo experiences that justify belief in incars. Thus, my argument for (E2) appealed to the sense of 'seeing' outlined in §1. There are, of course, other senses of 'seeing' according to which one might claim that we can 'see incars', some of which I'll discuss momentarily. But first note that this is not yet an objection to (E2), nor to the perceptual argument more generally. To see why, recall (E1):

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[12] Moreover, it's unclear why Byrne & Manzotti's theory requires gerrymandered objects rather than mere pluralities of objects. It's plausible that we're often perceptually aware of multiple objects at once (cf. Alzahabi & Cain 2021).

[13] Byrne and Manzotti motivate the assumption that there are gerrymandered objects by appealing to considerations of parochialism. I maintain that the perceptual argument undermines such considerations; see §5.

(E1) If we should see incars but we don't, then there are no incars.

I motivated (E1) with the following thought: provided that no epistemic funny business is afoot, we would see a car if it was directly before us – for cars are just the sorts of entities our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect. If we fail to see a car before us, then, we should conclude that there is no car before us. Similar considerations apply to incars provided they're well-poised for perceptual detection.

The sense of 'seeing cars' on which (E1) – and thereby the rest of the perceptual argument – trades ought to give us reason to countenance cars, provided there's a car before us. The account of 'seeing' I outlined in §1 is just such a sense. This account is backed by decades of cognitive scientific research into object-seeing. Indeed, it's the standard sense in which one might say we 'see ordinary things'; this gives us reason to employ the account in our discussion. Furthermore, as I argued in §1, this account issues in the claim that perception allows us to justifiably believe in ordinary things. So I maintain that this is the sense on which (E1) – and thereby the rest of the perceptual argument – trades. I appealed to this sense when I defended (E2); I'll proceed similarly when I defend (E3) ("We should see incars") in §4.

One might nevertheless worry that if we can 'see incars' in another sense, then we should question the perceptual argument's conclusion ("There are no incars"). I reply that the alternative senses fail to issue in reasons to countenance incars, and thus fail to threaten the perceptual argument's conclusion. I'll now discuss two salient alternatives and show that neither provide us with reasons to countenance incars.

Consider a first sense in which one might claim we 'see incars' with an example due to Susanna Siegel (2006, 430). Suppose that we're looking in our fridge for mustard. We open the door, and we cannot see it. We close the door, open it once more, and voila – there it is. The mustard

was there the entire time and we failed to register it, somehow-or-other. It's clear that we didn't 'see the mustard' on our first pass in the same sense we 'saw the mustard' on our second pass. Nevertheless, one might claim, there's a legitimate sense in which we 'saw the mustard' on our first pass. And as with bottles of French's, so with incars. Perhaps we 'see incars' in just the same way we see bottles of mustard when we fail to register them.

The sense in which we 'see' bottles of mustard when we fail to register them clearly lacks epistemic force. An experience where we fail to register the presence of mustard gives us no reason to believe that there's mustard before us. If we carefully deploy our selective attention onto the fridge's contents, of course, we *do* typically undergo experiences which permit us to justifiably believe things like <That's oval-ish and yellow>. But similar considerations fail to apply to incars. Try as we might to carefully deploy our selective attention onto cars inside of garages, we fail to undergo experiences which permit us to justifiably believe in incars.

Now consider a second sense. To be sure, the objector claims, our perceptual apparatus doesn't deliver constancy information corresponding to trogs or incars of its own accord. But when we bring the concept [INCAR] to mind, we can judge – on the basis of perception – whether or not environmental conditions are such there's anything in our environment that would fall under the extension of [INCAR]. We might say that we can 'detect' incars by bringing the concept [INCAR] to mind and applying it on the basis of our perceptual knowledge of cars and their locations inside garages.

By comparison, consider a kind of entity called a 'smartcar'. Smartcars, if they exist, are conscious objects essentially co-located with cars, who attempt in vain to square the circle from 9:00AM to 5:00PM and who, after their workday, repeat Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty" over and again in their minds until they drift into dreamland. If we grasp the concept

[SMARTCAR], then we can recognize when environmental conditions are such that were there smartcars, *this* would be a situation where there's a smartcar. This gives us reason to believe in smartcars only if we have prior reason to believe in smartcars – perception gives us no such reason. (And of course we can't see smartcars; there are none.) Similar remarks apply to incars. I grant that grasping [INCAR] allows us to recognize when environmental conditions are such that were there incars, *this* would be a situation where there's an incar. This gives us reason to believe in incars only if we have antecedent reason to believe in incars – perception on its own gives us no such reason. So for perception to be of any use in locating incars, we must have antecedent reason to think that [INCAR] has a nonempty extension.[14]

There's a relationship between this sense of 'seeing' and the sense I outlined in §1. With respect to ordinary things, our perceptual apparatus produces an ordinary visual object comprised of pieces of constancy information that allow us to track the properties of such objects. Some argue on this basis that attentional links with ordinary objects are "conceptually unmediated".[15] But perhaps linking up with certain objects requires conceptual mediation. One might think that when toddlers look at a hunk of clay that makes up a statue, they're disposed to perceptually detect only the hunk – not the statue. To 'see' the statue in the sense I've been stressing, maybe toddlers must possess the concept [STATUE] and/or learn how to apply it to experience.

I grant that [STATUE] might play a role in our coming to see statues. For I suspect that our coming to see statues is an early instance of *perceptual learning,* whereby we enact "…long-lasting changes to how perceptual systems process stimuli, typically caused by repeated exposure to a

[14] Some ontological deflationists think that conceptual and/or linguistic analysis gives us reason to believe that the extension of [INCAR] is nonempty. For instance, Thomasson (2014) maintains that we can introduce the term 'incar' in such a way that "There are incars" is guaranteed to be true. And Hirsch (2010) argues that we can use expressions like 'there are' in such a way that "There are incars" is guaranteed to be true. I discuss deflationism in greater detail in my [redacted]. I ignore it in this paper, since almost every permissivist (with Thomasson as a notable exception) maintains that conceptual analysis is ill-suited to metaphysical inquiry.

[15] Cf. Campbell (2002, ch. 4) and Dickie (2010; 2015, 158).

stimulus-type over time" (Jenkin 2023, 485).[16] This process often occurs via the intentional allocation of attention (cf. Goldstone, Landy, & Brunel 2011). If successful, it results in the creation of newer and more fine-grained perceptual units. So I grant that we might need to mediate our attention through [STATUE] to begin undergoing experiences that justify belief in statues.

The role that [STATUE] plays, however, is limited. Philosophers of perception now frequently observe that concepts have a less sizable influence in shaping perceptual experience than previously thought.[17] For example, Tyler Burge writes:

> Any perceptual state can be generated computationally without any concept's or propositional state's figuring in the computation. Formation of perceptual representations does not depend essentially on conceptual resources… [T]he perceptual-level initiations of attention and their effect on perception, the task dependence of perception on conative states, and so on, can be computationally explained without reference to conceptual or propositional input (Burge 2022, 13).

So suppose we must mediate our attention through [STATUE] to begin undergoing experiences that justify belief in statues. Even so, deploying [STATUE] isn't *required* to undergo such experiences. The squashing of a hunk of clay that constitutes a statue can sever our perceptual link with that hunk, but other times it doesn't.[18] If our perceptual link persists through the squashing, then we're attending to the hunk; otherwise, we're attending to the statue. This merely shows that the severance of an attentional link doesn't always result from the disappearance of constancy information. When the squashing of a hunk severs our perceptual link, our perceptual apparatus continues to deliver certain pieces of shape, size, and color information corresponding to the hunk. But our link was specifically keyed to statue-esque information – that's why our link was severed.

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[16] Cf. Gibson (1963), Goldstone & Byrge (2015), Connolly & Prettyman (2024), Landers (2021), and Burge (2022, ch. 18).

[17] This is widely accepted among philosophers of perception (if not ontologists). Compare Burge's quote with Campbell (2002), Carey (2009), Dickie (2010), Siegel (2010), and Recanati (2012).

[18] Cf. Dickie (2011): "…it is if, but only if, you are attending to the piece of metal of which the chair is made, rather than to the chair itself, that your attentional link will remain intact through a change that the piece of metal but not the chair survives." See also Burge (2022, 188, fn. 181). Not everyone agrees; see Madden (2019) for criticism.

Seeing statues might involve [STATUE] in a limited sense. This is no objection to (E2). The concept [INCAR] has been in the ontologist's repertoire for roughly 40 years, and we don't see incars. And try as we might to deploy [INCAR] as we look upon garaged cars, this fails to result in the generation of any experiences on whose basis we could justifiably believe in an object co-located with a car that shrinks out of existence. Say whatever you want to say about how concepts are involved in 'seeing statues' – such conceptual considerations fail to issue in reasons to countenance incars.[19]

Having shown that these alternative senses of 'seeing' fail to provide us with reasons to countenance incars, I reiterate that my argument trades on the sense I outlined in §1. Given that this is the sense on which the perceptual argument trades, (E3) amounts to the claim that when we look at cars in garages, we should (at least sometimes) undergo experiences that permit us to believe in incars. I'll now defend (E3).

## §4: Defending (E3)

Incars are mid-sized dry goods, material objects just as large, loud, and heavy as cars. Ordinary ontologists sometimes draw attention to this fact. Daniel Korman characterizes permissivism as a view according to which "…there are wide swaths of *highly visible* extraordinary objects, right before our eyes, that ordinarily escape our notice" (2015, 13, my italics). And Eli Hirsch defines revisionary ontology as a family of views according to which "[m]any common sense judgements about the existence or identity of *highly visible* objects are a priori necessarily false" (2002, 107, my italics). Ordinary ontologists seem to take this observation only as evidence of permissivism's strangeness. I'll argue that it gives us reason to endorse (E3):

(E3) We should see incars.

[19] If you're worried that we haven't worked hard enough at 'seeing incars', see §4.2 and §5.

To that end, I'll first defend (E3) in greater detail. After that, I'll respond to the objection that certain differences between incars and ordinary things should make us doubt (E3).

*§4.1: Andy and Minnie*

Suppose that there's a large, metallic object located in a garage – call it 'Minnie'. Minnie, if it exists, is an incar. It's about fifteen feet long, and under the garage's fluorescent beam one can appreciate its gold finish. Minnie weighs a little over two tons. Its adhesives emanate a glue-like odor; it's warm to the touch and knocks the nearby shelving units asunder as it rumbles. Suddenly, Minnie moves backwards. Its rearmost parts begin to disappear as it passes under the garage doorway. This proceeds in a continuous gradation – the object gets smaller and smaller as it loses further parts. At this end of this process, Minnie has ceased to exist.

Minnie behaves in a remarkably similar fashion to other entities that perception gives us reason to countenance. Imagine a log passed through the blade of a woodchipper. As we watch this process unfold, our perceptual apparatus delivers a piece of shrinking-information on whose basis we can justifiably form beliefs like <That's shrinking> and <That popped out of existence>. Or imagine whittling a thick blade down into a paring knife. Minute-by-minute, our perceptual apparatus detects the blade becoming smaller; this permits us to form analogous PDBs. When objects lose parts, our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect this change, and it delivers suitable information in turn. So too does Minnie go out of existence by shedding parts.

While Minnie is inside of a garage, Minnie is co-located with a car. This should be no barrier to our seeing Minnie in the relevant sense. We can see statues in the sense outlined in §1 and §3.2, for the squashing of a hunk of clay sometimes severs our perceptual link with the hunk; this permits us to justifiably believe in an object that goes out of existence upon squashing. Again, maybe we must possess the concept [STATUE] to begin undergoing such experiences. We

nevertheless undergo experiences which justify belief in statues.

Minnie is a moderate-sized material object with a determinate shape, size, and color. As it exits the garage, it sheds parts. So described, Minnie is an appropriate candidate for perceptual detection. We should see Minnie. Minnie is an incar. I conclude that (E3) is true.

My argument for (E3) proceeds similarly vis-à-vis trogs. Let 'Andy' name the mereological sum of my childhood dog André (rest his soul) and the tree trunk in my backyard – 'Trunky' – on which he would sometimes snooze. If Andy exists, then Andy is a trog. Further, Andy is a moderate-sized dry good. And when I carve "I love incars" into Trunky's side, Andy loses parts.

Andy is a spatially discontinuous object. So are ordinary things – indeed, permissivists sometimes brandish this fact against ordinary ontologists. Maegan Fairchild and John Hawthorne write:

> [T]he table does not seem to have spatially disconnected parts, but the flock does. It seems superficially as if one can draw a line from any bit of the table to any other bit of the table without straying outside of the table, but one can't draw a line from any bird in the flock to any other bird without straying outside of the flock. But, of course, when we look at the table under a microscope, we realize that this contrast is illusory (2018, 69).

I've already said my piece on flocks. My present point is that there's lots of empty space between the atoms that make up tables, and we nevertheless see tables. So spatial discontinuity cannot be what makes for our inability to see Andy.

I spent most of my time hanging out with André indoors and only occasionally deigned to mark Trunky as an object of singular thought. Thus, Andy was rarely "in full view". This isn't enough to show that Andy could exist and forever evade perceptual detection – André's heart and lungs were never "in full view" either. Indeed, we typically only see the surfaces of ordinary objects, and yet we still undergo experiences that justify their existence.[20]

[20] Cf. Hofweber (2019, 36-7).

When my family and I took André on a vacation, Andy continued to exist (if Andy existed at all) in a highly discontinuous form. Indeed, given how we've characterized Andy, it makes sense that Andy would almost always escape our sight. So I shouldn't expect to see Andy when my family, André, and I are on vacation. Nor do I hold any hope of seeing *André* "in his entirety" when his tail gets stuck in the dog door; nor would I expect to see my pet rock when it's nestled in my bookbag. External environmental circumstances often preclude us from perceiving ordinary objects in our immediate vicinity. This doesn't show that we wouldn't see such-and-such objects in favorable environmental conditions. We don't always undergo experiences that allow us to justifiably believe in dogs, but we often do.

Similar remarks to apply to Andy. That is, we would expect to *at least sometimes* undergo experiences that permit us to justifiably believe in Andy. Most obviously, we would expect to undergo such experiences if both André and Trunky were right in front of us, as "in full view" as they could possibly be. Andy, after all, is a large material object that reflects light in all the familiar ways. Mereological sums are certainly unfamiliar, but this too easily masks the fact that they remain moderate-sized specimens of dry goods.

### *§4.2: Perceptual learning*

Certain differences between incars and ordinary things might seem to place pressure on (E3) ("We should see incars"). Vision scientists agree that an object's location plays a central role in activating mechanisms for perceptual selection (cf. Treisman, 1990; Pashler, 1998).[21] We identify an object's location by means of that object's boundary and shape. When cars leave garages, incars change shape in accordance with the locations of garage doorway. By comparison, the car's shape continues to stand out from the rest of our environment. Thus, we might suspect the car's shape

[21] For discussion, see Campbell (2002, ch. 1.5) and Burge (2022, ch. 18).

‘crowds out’ the incar’s shape.

We’re undoubtedly disposed to notice the car’s shape more often than we notice sub-portions of its surface. This isn’t enough to resist (E3); rather, one must show that our perceptual apparatus is incapable of detecting the shifting sub-portion that would otherwise correspond to Minnie’s shape. This is implausible. First note that we perceptually detect sub-portions of objects all the time, with face-perception as perhaps the most striking example (cf. Tsao & Livingstone 2008). More generally, we can allocate our attention to sub-portions of ours’ and others’ bodies (think of how we calculate our positions under umbrellas to avoid soaking our bookbags).

Suppose that Minnie is halfway outside of the garage. We can identify which parts of the mass of metal belong to Minnie (if it exists) and which don’t. It may be vague whether certain atoms are among Minnie’s parts – it’s also vague whether a loose hair is among my cat’s parts. By intentionally allocating our attention to the portion of the car underneath the garage, we can track Minnie’s shape. This is plausibly what we’re doing when we deploy the concept [INCAR] while looking at a car inside of a garage.

I’ve argued that we can track Minnie’s shape via attentional allocation, perhaps via mediation through our [INCAR] concept. This is just the conceptual sense of ‘seeing’ I discussed in §3.2, one on which I argued the perceptual argument doesn’t trade. I still maintain this. As I noted there, however, there’s a relationship between these two senses of ‘seeing’. Through perceptual learning processes – specifically those related to attentional allocation – we can enact the creation of perceptual units. Again, I suspect that this is how we come to undergo experiences which justify belief in statues; we initially mediate our attention via [STATUE], after which our perceptual apparatus learns to spontaneously engage in specific forms of attentional allocation.[22]

[22] Siegel (2010) argues that the contents of our visual experiences of pine trees change once we learn the concept [PINE TREE]. I make a weaker claim, one which doesn’t concern the contents of experience. Rather, my claim

Nothing prevents us from perceptually learning to track Minnie's shape. Indeed, perceptual learning operates across an impressive variety of domains. We learn to visually unite individual chess pieces into available moves (cf. Chase & Simon 1973); we learn to chunk individual letters into complete words (cf. O'Hara 1980); we learn to perceptually discriminate dog breeds from one another (cf. Diamond & Carey 1983). It would be epistemically arbitrary to grant that perceptual learning is an effective mechanism in so many other domains while denying that it would be an effective mechanism for detecting Minnie's shape – we track the shapes of portions of things in relation to other things all the time.

I do not claim that we can perceptually learn to detect all sub-portions of composite objects. Perhaps I cannot learn to perceptually process the shape of my cat's nose plus some gerrymandered portion of her back-left foot. But tracking Minnie shouldn't prove so tricky. Minnie (if it exists) is a mid-sized dry good, one that shrinks out of existence in a smooth, continuous motion with respect to another highly visible object. And perceptual learning processes are well-attuned to the mid-sized material domain.

Just under a decade ago, Eli Hirsch gifted me with the concept [INCAR]. I soon found myself performing strange experiments as I set upon my morning commute; I would look at my garaged car and attempt to shift between seeing it *as* a car and *as* an incar. (I sometimes repeat this exercise; it's a nice mindfulness activity.) Of course, as per (E2), my non-conceptually-laden experiences remained the same. I – and everyone else who possesses the concept [INCAR] – fail to spontaneously undergo perceptual experiences which justify belief in incars. We would nevertheless expect to undergo such experiences. Perceptual learning mechanisms should issue in the spontaneous tracking of constancy information corresponding to Minnie's shape.

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concerns the pieces of information our perceptual apparatus delivers, and the corresponding patterns of attention we develop, in response to environmental stimuli post-perceptual training.

## §5: Parochialism

In §1, I argued that perception justifies belief in ordinary things. In §2-4, I argued that the justificatory story undergirding our perception-based beliefs allows us to motivate and defend the perceptual argument. I conclude that there are trees and cars, but no trogs or incars. Therefore, I endorse ordinary ontology. Given the nature of the perceptual argument, this conclusion is limited to mid-sized dry goods, the sorts of things we would expect to see. My conclusion is no less powerful for that. Objections to ordinary ontology uniformly focus on the ontological status of mid-sized dry goods.[23]

Now consider perhaps the most prominent objection to ordinary ontology: the idea that it's *arbitrary* and/or *parochial*. Richard Cartwright explicitly levies this objection against ordinary ontology, writing: "[it's difficult] to say what sort or kind of object [a scattered object] is. But it is not clear to me that this is indicative of anything more than a paucity of readily available schemes of classification, a paucity resulting from quite parochial concerns of human beings" (1987, 183). Yablo (1987, 307), Sider (2001, 156-7), and Byrne & Manzotti (2022, §4) rely on similar lines of thought. And Fairchild and Hawthorne suggest that ontologists should therefore be in the business of formulating and defending *general principles*:

> [O]ur metaphysical views are, at least in part, driven by a preference for powerful general principles. In this respect, we see metaphysics as very much like other fundamental sciences – in each case general principles provide compelling candidate explanations for a wealth of data. Parity considerations, as well as physics itself, thicken the ontological data vis-à-vis that provided by a common-sense inspection of the world (Fairchild & Hawthorne 2018, 73).

In turn, permissivists have addressed the ontological status of extraordinary things via conceptual-philosophical interventions. Thus Amie Thomasson argues for permissivism by "[introducing] new or technical terms in ways that permit easy arguments for the existence of their

[23] Cf. Korman (2020, §2).

referents, enabling us to make easy arguments for the existence of mereological sums… Hirsch's incars… and so on" (Thomasson 2014, 214). Thus Theodore Sider argues for permissivism by claiming that there can be no borderline cases of composition (cf. Sider 2001, chapter 4).[24] Thus Maegan Fairchild and John Hawthorne argue for permissivism by claiming that it would be objectionably arbitrary to countenance islands but not incars.[25]

Permissivists sometimes motivate the need for a powerful general principle by having us consider the possibility of creatures with alternative perceptual constitutions. Consider *Tablers,* creatures whose "…perceptual systems make it seem that when particles are arranged tablewise, they compose an object, but when particles are arranged chairwise, they don't" (Fairchild & Hawthorne 2018, 58). Similarly, we can imagine *Troglodytes* – creatures whose experiences permit them to justifiably believe in objects with trog-like existence and persistence conditions (cf. Korman 2015, 200-2) – and *Incritters* – creatures with a perceptual apparatus that delivers shrinking-information as they watch cars leaving garages. Given the possibility of these creatures, the thought goes, why place such epistemic weight on human perception in coming to ontological conclusions? "To insist on the credentials of the things we recognize against those which others do, or might," Stephen Yablo writes, "seems indefensibly parochial. In metaphysics, unusual hypothetical coloring can be no ground for exclusion" (1987, 307). Better then to proceed by way of formulating and defending powerful general principles concerning composition and coincidence, claims the permissivist.

The possibility of such creatures is a red herring. The possibility of Tablers gives us no reason to repudiate chairs, so the possibility of Troglodytes and Incritters gives us no reason to countenance trogs and incars. But the point cuts deeper than this. The perceptual argument doesn't

[24] Cf. Merricks (2005) and Barnes (2008).
[25] Cf. Hawthorne (2006, vii), Korman (2015, ch. 8), and Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018).

show that it's categorically impossible to undergo the sorts of experiences that Troglodytes and Incritters undergo. The argument shows that given how extraordinary things are described – namely, as moderate-sized specimens of dry goods – *we would expect ourselves to undergo such experiences* (in well-lit backyards and garages). And even if we don't presently see incars, we would expect to develop such a capacity by submitting the concept [INCAR] to standard perceptual learning processes. These processes nevertheless fail to issue in our seeing incars – ditto for trogs. *We* should be Troglodytes and Incritters, yet we are not.

Perhaps permissivists would grant (E2) – "We don't see incars" – and (E3) – "We should see incars" – but reject (E1) – "If we should see incars but we don't, then there are no incars" – on the grounds that our present failure to see incars is due to lack of adequate training.[26] I've said nothing that precludes this maneuver outright. Maybe with a more rigorous training program in tow, one can develop the capacity to spontaneously detect incar-like information. Granted, I find it implausible that such a training program exists. We ontologists have had the concept [INCAR] for forty years and still we fail to see incars. I endorse (E2) partially on the strength of this observation. But I remain open to falsification: just as I should. The perceptual argument demonstrates that that the existence of incars is an empirical matter. Those sympathetic to the prospects of 'seeing incars' must agree.

Permissivists have assumed that perception is silent on the existence of incars, and thus that the existence of incars is not an empirical matter. Recall Fairchild and Hawthorne's claim, quoted in the introduction, that "…permissivism is itself neutral about [whether we 'see incars']" (2018, 46).[27] This assumption sometimes even plays a role in how permissivists characterize their

[26] In what follows, everything I say vis-à-vis incars also applies to trogs.
[27] Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018, 47) similarly say that common sense takes no stand on the existence of incars. Thomasson (2007, 183) makes a similar claim.

positions. Consider how Matti Eklund characterizes *maximalism* (a form of radical permissivism): "What maximalism says is that for any type of object such that there can be objects of that type *given that the empirical facts are exactly what they are*, there are such objects" (2008, 391, my emphasis).[28] As stated, maximalism leads to surprising ontological results only if perception fails to give us evidence for the nonexistence of extraordinary things. (To illustrate: as I have argued, there can be no such objects as incars given that the empirical facts are exactly what they are.) Of course, not all permissivists characterize their positions in terms of empirical consistency.[29] I maintain that these versions of permissivism are not trivial but merely false – for we should not believe in material objects well-poised for perceptual detection that we forever fail to see.

The fact that perceptual experience takes a stand on the existence of incars leads to another important upshot for ordinary ontology: it allows ordinary ontologists to relinquish whatever duty one might've thought we possessed in producing a powerful general principle which allows cars and disallows incars. Consider an analogy. Suppose that two associates – Angle and Bangle – are lost in the woods. When Angle looks in the direction of a nearby meadow, he sees a pine snake but he fails to see the Jersey Devil. Now imagine the following exchange:

- *ANGLE*: There's a pine snake right before me, but there's no Jersey Devil right before me.
- *BANGLE*: You're being objectionably arbitrary. On what grounds can you simultaneously countenance a pine snake while repudiating the Jersey Devil?
- *ANGLE*: Well, for one thing, I can see the pine snake *right there*, but I see no Jersey Devil.
- *BANGLE*: Now you're being objectionably parochial! What's so special about the human perceptual apparatus? Consider the possibility of *Devilites*, creatures who undergo experiences that present them with both pine-snake-like and Jersey-Devil-like information when they look in the direction you're looking. They'd say that there's *both* a pine snake *and* a Jersey Devil right before them!
- *ANGLE*: Why does that matter?

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[28] Compare with Merricks (2001, 9) and Sider (2001, 75-6) on which ontological debates we ought to count as 'straightforwardly empirical'.

[29] Fairchild, for instance, characterizes permissivism as the combination of *universal composition* ("For any *x*s, there exists a *z* such that *z* fuses the *x*s" (2019, 169)) and *global plentitude* ("Necessarily, given any material object *o* and any nonlocally closed modal profile *M* based on all of *o*'s neutral properties, there is something coincident with *o* which has *M*" (2019, 163)). These theses do not obviously appeal to empirical consistency.

- *BANGLE*: I'm suggesting that without some powerful general principle that explains why there's a pine snake but no Jersey Devil before you, you shouldn't be so confident in in the deliverances of your perceptual apparatus.

Bangle is simply misguided. Angle has an obvious reply; the existence of the Jersey Devil is an empirical matter. The Jersey Devil is a large, feathery biped with wings and hooves. Thus, if there's a Jersey Devil right before us, we should see it. If we don't see it, then it doesn't exist. We need no powerful ontological principle to reach this conclusion. And the possibility of Devilites is entirely irrelevant to the present issue.

Devilites are epistemically tragic creatures. So are Incritters. And the fact that Incritters 'see incars' around atoms arranged car-inside-of-a-garage-wise – while Devilites 'see Jersey Devils' even when there are no atoms arranged Devil-wise – lacks epistemic relevance. If a Jersey Devil or an incar is directly before us, then we should undergo an experience that permits us to justifiably countenance such an object (in well-lit meadows and garages). Thus our failure to undergo such an experience constitutes evidence that no such object is before us. We ought then maintain that both Devilites and Incritters undergo hallucinatory experiences – each seems to see an object that is not before them. Devilites hallucinate a Jersey Devil where there are trees and blades of grass; Incritters hallucinate an incar where there is a car.

Given that the existence of incars is an empirical matter, it's just as inappropriate to settle whether incars exist by appealing to ornate philosophical argumentation or conceptual analysis as it would be inappropriate to settle whether the Jersey Devil exists via philosophical argumentation or conceptual analysis. This is the permissivist's fundamental error. Permissivists have assumed that one must appeal to extra-perceptual resources to settle the ontological status of incars. No such appeal is necessary; indeed, my ordinary ontologist finds the permissivist's conceptual-philosophical interventions highly unusual. Incars are just the sorts of entities our perceptual

apparatus is well-poised to detect – namely, moderate-sized specimens of dry goods – and still we fail to see them. So there are no incars: the matter is settled. We need no powerful ontological principle to reach this conclusion. And the possibility of Incritters is irrelevant to the present issue.

Here, then, is a crucial upshot of the perceptual argument: the charges of arbitrariness and parochialism often levied against ordinary ontologists rest on a mistake. The ontological status of extraordinary material things is an empirical matter, one subject to standard norms of empirical inquiry. Thus our failing to see trogs and incars constitutes conclusive evidence of their nonexistence. This is a straightforward consequence of their being mid-sized dry goods.

## Appendix: Parity argumentation

Many ontological permissivists maintain that we have *philosophical* reasons to countenance extraordinary things. Consider how permissivists sometimes argue for the existence of incars. Even if we find incars strange, they claim, we already believe in objects that cease to exist by changing their position with respect to other stuff; after all, islands cease to exist just by virtue of becoming covered with water, but islands exist. In other words:

(I1) There's no ontologically significant difference between islands and incars.
(I2) Thus, if there are islands, then there are incars.
(I3) Islands exist.
(I4) Therefore, incars exist.

Call these *parity arguments*. If parity arguments are sound, then we have philosophical reasons to countenance extraordinary things. This would indicate that the perceptual argument has gone astray someplace-or-other. I maintain, however, that these arguments fail – for the existence of extraordinary things is an empirical matter. I'll now show how this upshot allows ordinary ontologists to resist parity argumentation.[30]

[30] Notice that in what follows, Daniel Korman and I agree that (i) 'island' is a phase sortal (cf. Korman, 2015, 128-9), and that (ii) 'the supreme court' is referentially plural (cf. Korman, 2015, 142). But Korman justifies these claims via

I reject (I1); I maintain that there's an ontologically significant difference between islands and incars. To see why, consider the following analogous argument:

(H1) There's no ontologically significant difference between housecats and Jersey Devils.
(H2) Thus, if there are housecats, then there are Jersey Devils.
(H3) There are housecats.
(H4) Therefore, there are Jersey Devils.

Now suppose that someone defended (H1) in the following way:

> Housecats and Jersey Devils are both furry animals. They differ in size, species, and manner of transportation, sure – but these differences aren't of the sort that would explain why one exists and the other doesn't. And indeed, Jersey Devils possess properties that other real animals possess. They have hooves and wings, for instance, just like other animals. I conclude that there's no ontologically significant difference between housecats and Jersey Devils.

Something has gone wrong. *Of course* there's an ontologically significant difference between housecats and Jersey Devils; after all, there are housecats and no Jersey Devils.[31]

Notice that housecats and Jersey Devils are both the sorts of entities that we should perceive, if there are any – both have a definite shape, size, color, smell, and so forth. And as a matter of empirical fact, we see housecats but fail to see Jersey Devils. I conclude that there are housecats and no Jersey Devils. And this is an ontologically significant difference between housecats and Jersey Devils; the empirical facts simply don't allow for any composite object that matches the description of Jersey Devils. I conclude that (H1) is false.

I say the same thing about islands and incars. Islands and incars are both the sorts of entities that we should perceive, if there are any. And as a matter of empirical fact, we see islands but fail to see incars. I conclude that there are islands and no incars. And this is an ontologically significant difference between islands and incars: reality simply doesn't contain any composite object that

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*intuition,* inviting permissivist objections (cf. Fairchild & Hawthorne, 2018, 58). I don't rely on intuition. I maintain that we can respond to parity argumentation by appealing only to uncontroversial considerations about perception.

[31] If you believe in Jersey Devils, replace 'Jersey Devil' with 'unicorn'. If you believe in unicorns, I'm afraid this is where we two must part.

matches the description of incars. I conclude that (I1) is false.

In sum: if some entity is such that we *should* perceive it, then our failure to perceive it constitutes evidence of its nonexistence. And as I've argued in this chapter, extraordinary mid-sized dry goods are such that we should perceive them.

One might retort that my response to this parity argument elides the perceptual case for (I1). Suppose that we're sitting in the seat of an airplane, watching an island below. Under certain circumstances, our visual system treats this strip of land as a visual object, delivering pieces of constancy information corresponding to its shape and color. Now suppose that water slowly overtakes the strip of land. As this happens, our perceptual apparatus delivers a piece of shrinking-information on whose basis we can justifiably form the belief <That's shrinking>. Once the bit of land becomes completely submerged, the visual object that our perceptual apparatus previously distinguished from its surrounds disappears.

There are a couple things we might do here that speak in the permissivist's favor. First, we might form a belief like <That's gone>, indicating that our sequence of thoughts was about the visually salient strip of land the whole time. Second, we might observe that this situation is just like all the others in which we judge that an object has gone out of existence. When we blow a rock to smithereens, we judge that the rock ceases to exist partially because the relevant visual object is gone for good. It's plausible that we judge that the island ceases to exist on a similar basis – the visual object to which we previously attended has disappeared.

I grant that when we watch islands become covered with water, our perceptual apparatus delivers shrinking-information on whose basis we can justifiably believe that islands shrink out of existence. I reply: it's plausible that our experiences as of islands shrinking have defeaters. To see why, note that illusory or otherwise misleading environmental circumstances can generate

defeaters. For example, suppose we're looking at a stick partially submerged in water. We might mistakenly form the belief <That's bent> based on the information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with the stick-induced visual object. Once the stick is removed from the water, we see that it isn't bent. Upon recognizing that sticks look bent in water, it's no longer rational to form perceptual demonstrative beliefs ("PDBs") concerning the stick's shape on the basis of the information our perceptual apparatus delivers when linked with the submerged-stick-induced visual object.

Now suppose that we only ever see the top of our neighbor's head because they're hidden behind a fence. Two points are relevant. First, if we know that *that's* our neighbor, it's not rational to treat the head-induced visual object as if it corresponds to a single thing. Even if this visual object exhibits some behavioral regularity, we know that the top of our neighbor's head would no longer 'stand out' in the same way were we to go round the other side of the fence. Second, if we mistakenly treat the head-induced visual object as if it corresponds to a single thing, any PDBs we form will be about our neighbor, not some object that only exists when their head appears above the fence. Attending to our neighbor's head allows us to link up with our neighbor, even if we might form some false beliefs about them on the basis of our limited informational access.[32]

We should say the same about islands. Once we acknowledge that the visible strip of land is connected to a larger hunk, we should recognize that it only contingently 'stands out' from the rest of its constituent matter because it's surrounded by water. If we swam underwater after the strip's complete submersion, our perceptual apparatus wouldn't treat the strip as a visual object, ordinary or otherwise. By contrast, were some rocks to sink below water, our perceptual apparatus would continue to deliver similar pieces of shape and size information about those rocks if we

[32] Cf. Lewis (1983a, 10-1) and Recanati (2012, 34-5) on *relations of acquaintance*. A relation of acquaintance opens up an informational channel between objects and ourselves, even if such relations occasionally deliver misinformation.

sought them out. Our perceptual apparatus treats rocks consistently across changes in environmental circumstances, and it doesn't so treat strips of land. Thus, the strip-of-land induced visual object is non-ordinary. This defeats whatever justification we would otherwise have for treating it as if it corresponds to a single thing.

When we thought <That's shrinking>, we were getting the properties of the hunk of land wrong. This doesn't imply that the PDBs we formed on the basis of our link with the strip of land were about nothing at all. Our PDBs were about the larger hunk of land to which the visible strip of land is connected. Hunks of land behave in ways that are consonant with the rest of the entities in which perception allows us to believe – they go out of existence only provided that they break apart, or siphon away matter, and so on. And just as we can link up with our neighbor by linking up with the top of his head, we link up with hunks of land by linking up with their visible parts.

At any rate, suppose you disagree with my case for the claim that our experiences as of islands shrinking have no defeaters. This wouldn't affect my central point. So what if islands shrink out of existence as they're covered with water? Provided that our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect incars – as I argued in §4 – our failure to see incars constitutes conclusive evidence of their nonexistence. The same conclusion follows: there's an ontologically significant difference between islands and incars.

I have not attempted to address every parity argument that permissivists offer for the existence of extraordinary objects.[33] But I hope to have shown that someone who defends ordinary ontology in the manner I've proposed has new resources for addressing such arguments.

[33] See Korman (2015, ch. 8) for a more thoroughgoing survey of the relevant arguments.

## Chapter 3: Ontological empiricism

In Chapter 1, I appealed to a scientifically informed story about perception and perceptual justification to argue that perception justifies claims about the persistence conditions of objects. In Chapter 2, I used that same story to defend ordinary ontology, the thesis that there exist ordinary objects like rocks, but no extraordinary objects like incars (objects essentially co-located with cars which cease to exist as cars pass under garage doorways).[1] In particular, I argued that perception both (i) justifies belief in ordinary objects and (ii) justifies disbelief in extraordinary objects. So I endorse the following thesis:

- *Ontological empiricism*: We can settle ontological questions about material objects via empirical means.

Ontological empiricism is a thesis that concerns how we're permitted to conduct ontological inquiry. As I'll soon discuss, many ontologists endorse the thesis that we can empirically settle ontological questions about ordinary objects; to my knowledge, however, I'm the only ontologist who endorses ontological empiricism and uses it to defend ordinary ontology.

In this chapter, I discuss two upshots of ontological empiricism. First, ontological empiricists can provide a better, less mysterious defense of ordinary ontology than other defenders of ordinary ontology. Second, ontological empiricists can resist the pull to interpret both themselves and their ontological opponents as speaking different *ontological languages*. My primary conclusion: whether ordinary ontology is both *true* and *substantive* depends on whether our perception-based object beliefs have defeaters.

Here, then, is the plan. I first review ontological empiricism, clarify the sense in which ontological inquiry is empirical, and argue that empiricists do a better job than their other defenders of ordinary ontology vis-à-vis defending against the possibility of systematic defeaters (§1). I then

[1] Cf. Hirsch (1982, 32).

argue that ontological empiricists can resist the pull to interpret both themselves and their ontological opponents as speaking different languages; in particular, I argue that whether we should interpret others or ourselves as speaking an alternative ontological language depends on whether our object beliefs have defeaters (§2). I conclude that ordinary ontology is both true and substantive (§3).

## §1: Ontological empiricism and defeaters

In this section, I will first motivate ontological empiricism and contrast it with a nearby view (§1.1). After that, I will argue that ontological empiricists do a better job than other of ordinary ontology's adherents at defending against the possibility of systematic defeaters (§1.2).

### *§1.1: Explaining ontological empiricism*

Several ontologists endorse the view that we have perceptual evidence for the existence of ordinary objects like rocks, tigers, and cars. Alex Byrne writes:

> …it is natural to take *perceptual evidence* to consist in facts about individual ordinary objects – that *this* (the tomato) is red and bulgy, for example. And if so, then perception is decidedly not neutral on the existence of ordinary objects (2019, 7-8).

Thomas Hofweber concurs:

> The smart money in metaphysics is to consider questions where the empirical evidence is weak or, even better, non-existent. This appears to be the case for many of the traditional metaphysical questions, but it is not the case for the question about the existence of ordinary objects. That there are such objects at all is answered empirically (2019, 47).

And Daniel Korman agrees that "…it is easily (perceptually) knowable that there are chairs" (2024, 14).[2]

Notice that Korman, Hofweber, and Byrne each claim that we can settle ontological questions about *ordinary* objects ("Are there chairs?") by appealing to perception. Thus, I take it that Byrne, Hofweber, and Korman wish to endorse at least the following thesis:

[2] Cf. Korman (2015, 29-33).

- *Restricted ontological empiricism*: We can settle ontological questions about ordinary objects empirically.

Since I endorse ontological empiricism, I also endorse restricted ontological empiricism. And outside of material object ontology, it's hard to imagine any (non-skeptic) philosopher denying restricted empiricism.

Empirical work makes it plausible that those experiences on whose basis we can justifiably believe in ordinary things don't involve conceptual mediation; we needn't deploy the concept [ROCK] in order to undergo experiences that justify belief in rocks.[3] Thus the empiricist's belief in rocks stems not from conceptual and/or semantic analysis, but from the fact that we 'just see' rocks – the concept [ROCK] merely enables us to infer that the objects of our rock-experiences *are* rocks. So the restricted empiricist contends that belief in rocks is an empirical, a posteriori matter.

By contrast, the assumption that we must settle ontological questions about extraordinary things on non-empirical grounds permeates contemporary ontology. This assumption gains traction from the idea that perceptual experience is somehow 'silent' on the existence of objects like incars. Maegan Fairchild and John Hawthorne write: "Even granting, for example, that there are myriad objects that are mereologically co-incident with a [car], it is far from straightforward to conclude that we see each of them whenever we see that [car]" (Fairchild & Hawthorne 2018, 46-7). And Amie Thomasson writes: "…[C]ommon sense does not recognize the existence of [extraordinary things]. Nor, of course, does it deny their existence… common sense understandably does not consider such things at all since, given our current range of practices, such entities would be quite irrelevant and uninteresting" (2007, 184).

The assumption that perception is silent on the existence of mid-sized extraordinary things

[3] I discuss this in much greater detail in Chapter 1, §2; and Chapter 2, §3.2.

makes ontological empiricism appear untenable. But I maintain that this assumption is false – we can settle ontological questions about extraordinary things empirically. If I'm correct, it would be quite strange to require that we vindicate our answers to such questions via intuition or philosophical argument. It would be like asking biologists to independently verify the nonexistence of Bigfoot via intuition or philosophical argument.

To see why, suppose that we're peering into a meadow; we spot some blades of grass, tree trunks, and rocks. We don't see Bigfoot (and I think that we never have). Now consider the following argument:

(B1) If we should see Bigfoot before us but we don't, then there's no Bigfoot before us.
(B2) We don't see Bigfoot before us.
(B3) We should see Bigfoot before us.
(B4) Therefore, there's no Bigfoot before us.

Premise (B1) trades on an incontrovertible principle about perceptual experience – if our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect a particular sort of object but we don't see that object before us, then we should conclude that there is no such object before us. Premise (B2) trades on the fact that we fail to undergo experiences that permit us to believe in Bigfoot. And (B3) trades on the fact that Bigfoot has traditionally been characterized as a 10-15 foot tall, hairy, humanoid creature. Our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect entities so described. (We see gorillas, for instance.) Thus, I maintain that (B1)-(B3) are true. I conclude that there's no Bigfoot before us.

Now consider an analogous argument for the nonexistence of incars:

(E1) If we should see incars in garages but we don't, then there are no incars.
(E2) We don't see incars in garages.
(E3) We should see incars in garages.
(E4) Therefore, there are no incars.

Call this "the perceptual argument against extraordinary objects". Premise (E1) trades on the same principle that motivated (B1); if our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect incars but we

forever fail to see incars, then we should conclude that there are no incars. Premise (E2) trades on the empirical fact that we fail to undergo experiences that present us with incars. And (E3) trades on the fact that incars are mid-sized dry goods. When cars are inside garages, incars (if they exist) are just as large, loud, and heavy as cars. When cars exit garages, incars (if they exist) lose parts and eventually pop out of existence. Our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect this sort of change; when we watch logs fed through woodchippers, our perceptual apparatus delivers shrinking-information on whose basis we can form beliefs like <That [pointing at the log] is losing parts>. So incars are just the sorts of entities we should see. Thus, I maintain that (E1)-(E3) are true. I conclude that there are no incars. Furthermore, one can replace 'incars' with 'trogs' in (E1)-(E3) and the argument runs just the same – I conclude that there are no trogs.

There are, of course, places where one might put pressure on the perceptual argument. For instance, one might object to (E2) on the grounds that we 'see incars' in some other sense of 'seeing'. Or one might object to (E3) on the grounds that we shouldn't expect to see an object when it's co-located with another object. I addressed these and other objections to the perceptual argument in Chapter 2.

The most obvious upshot of the perceptual argument is that the existence of extraordinary things is an empirical matter. If premise (E3) is true, then our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect incars, trogs, and all other manner of extraordinary mid-sized dry goods. Thus seeing such objects would constitute conclusive evidence for their existence. As a matter of fact, however, we don't see such objects, and this constitutes conclusive evidence for their nonexistence. We needn't appeal to philosophical argumentation or conceptual analysis to reach this ontological conclusion – indeed, it would be strange to appeal to philosophical argumentation or conceptual analysis in light of the fact that we can 'look and see' that there are no incars, so to speak. So we

can settle ontological questions about both ordinary and extraordinary things empirically. That is, ontological empiricism is true.

One might object that the empiricist's rejection of permissivism rests not on perceptual experience alone, but also on principles related to perception. Recall the perceptual argument against incars. Premise (E2) of the perceptual argument is justified on empirical grounds. Premise (E3) is inductively justified; once we've described what it is to be an incar, we should recognize that incars are relevantly like all the other entities in which perception permits us to justifiably believe. The case for (E3) thus rests on comparing the concept [INCAR] to other object concepts we have discovered it appropriate to apply on the basis of experience. And premise (E1) gains plausibility by reflecting on the nature of perception itself and the sorts of beliefs we ought to form on perception's basis. Thus, my rejection of permissivism involves more than mere observation – it involves reflecting on perception itself.

I grant that ontological empiricism rests on the sorts of philosophical reflections just discussed. But it would be strange if this forced one to conclude that when one fails to see a car inside of a garage, one's belief <There's no car before me> isn't justified empirically. Rather, reflections on the nature of perception allow us to better understand why it's rational to believe <There's no car before me> under such circumstances. Philosophers of perception and mind spend most of their time reflecting on the nature of experience, and some of these reflections are of an a priori nature. Consider how Tyler Burge outlines his reliance on a priori justification when setting out his theoretical project:

> Some of [my claims about perception] are… supported apriori… To be apriori supported, or apriori warranted, is to have support or warrant that does not depend for its force on perception or on sensing. Most apriori warranted judgments in this book are warranted by reflection that yields understanding of key concepts or principles used or presupposed in the science… Apriori supported judgments can be further supported empirically, by the science (2022, xiv).

Suppose that Burge's theory of perception is correct. His theory rests on certain a priori considerations – indeed, it's difficult to imagine *any* theory of perception doing without a priori considerations wholesale. But the fact that Burge's theory rests partially on a priori reflections concerning the nature of experience doesn't imply that the beliefs we're permitted to form on perception's basis aren't empirically justified. Thus, the fact that the perceptual argument against incars rests partially on a priori reflections concerning the nature of experience doesn't imply that the beliefs we're thereby permitted to form on perception's basis aren't empirically justified.

### *§1.2: Defeaters*

Many ontologists contend that our perception-based object beliefs – and thus ordinary ontology itself – have *defeaters*. Arguments to the effect that there are no ordinary objects (as the eliminativist contends) as well as arguments to the effect that there are extraordinary objects (as the permissivist contends) serve as *rebutting* defeaters for ordinary ontology; such arguments provide us with evidence that ordinary ontology is false.[4] Arguments to the effect that perceptual experience fails to justify object beliefs formed on its basis serve as *undercutting* defeaters for ordinary ontology; such arguments undermine ordinary ontology's evidentiary source.

Ordinary ontologists have offered a slew of responses to individual arguments against their view, and I won't review my preferred responses here.[5] But undercutting defeaters present serious trouble for ontological empiricists. For if our perception-based object beliefs have undercutting defeaters, then we would have no empirical reasons to countenance ordinary objects, and thus no empirical reasons to repudiate extraordinary objects by way of the perceptual argument. We would

[4] Van Inwagen (1990), Merricks (2001), Sider (2013), Contessa (2014), and Builes (2022) defend eliminativism. Sider (2001), Hawthorne (2006), Thomasson (2014), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), Fairchild (2019; 2022), and Kriegel (2022) defend permissivism.
[5] See Korman (2015; 2020) for a review of such arguments.

therefore have to settle ontological questions via other means. Thus, the presence of undercutting defeaters is tantamount to ontological empiricism's falsity. I'll now consider some possible undercutting defeaters and argue that ontological empiricists can resist them.

Some suggest that merely recognizing philosophical challenges to our perception-based object beliefs generate defeaters for such beliefs. Thus Sider writes that "…to anyone who understands the challenge of nihilism and takes it seriously, any prior perceptual justification in favor of tables vanishes" (2013, 260). But taken by itself, this goes to fast – it suggests that we ought to abandon our beliefs about the external world merely upon encountering the skeptic (cf. Korman 2015, 201-2; Hofweber 2019, 34-5). We need something more to generate a defeater for our perception-based object beliefs.

Some ontologists maintain that *the debunking argument against ordinary objects* constitutes an undercutting defeater for ordinary ontology. Korman (2015, 93) characterizes the argument as follows:

(DK1) There is no explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts.
(DK2) If so, then we shouldn't believe <There are cars>.
(DK3) Therefore, we shouldn't believe <There are cars>.[6]

Korman motivates the debunking argument in the following way. First, he observes that we form our objects beliefs (<There's a car before me>, <There's no object shrinking out of existence before me>) based on the information our perceptual apparatus delivers in response to environmental stimuli. But, of course, evolution might have proceeded differently, and thus our perceptual apparatus might have delivered different information in response to environmental stimuli. For instance, we might have been *Incritters*, creatures who undergo experiences that permit them to form beliefs like <There's an incar before me> when they watch cars leaving garages. Why aren't

[6] See Korman (2014; 2015, ch. 7; 2019), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018, sec. 3), Hofweber (2019), Bagwell (2021), Egeland (2022), and Gładziejewski (2023).

we Incritters? The debunker claims that "…this is entirely the result of various biological and cultural contingencies" (Korman 2015, 93) Thus, that we could've been Incritters indicates that "…we divide up the world into objects the way that we do for reasons having nothing at all to do with how the world actually is divided up" (ibid., 93). This makes (DK1) plausible. And (DK2) is a short step away; once we recognize that there's no explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts, we should recognize that our object beliefs are only accidentally true if they're true at all.

I reject (DK1). Before I explain how, two preliminary remarks. First, even if those who rely on perception as a source of ontological evidence can identify an explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts, only certain explanatory connections allow one to maintain a commitment to ontological realism. To resist the debunking argument while adhering to realism, the idea goes, we need an *alethic* explanation of our object beliefs, "…where our beliefs about some subject matter have an alethic explanation just in case facts about that subject matter explain why we have those beliefs" (ibid., 93). Since I'm an ontological realist, I need to identify an alethic explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts.

Second, there is no consensus as to what counts as a 'nondeviant' explanatory connection. Korman offers the following case as an example of a *deviant* explanatory connection:

> *Colorization*. A digital camera snaps a black and white image of a red ball. The image is then opened in a computer program designed to colorize the image, based on the shades of gray in the original. Some colors produce indistinguishable shades of gray, and in such cases the program selects among the candidate colors on the basis of the ink levels of the attached printer. This is just such a case: red and blue produce the same shade of gray, and the program colors the ball in the image red rather than blue, not because the ball was red, but because there is more red ink than blue ink available in the attached printer (ibid., 106).[7]

In some sense, then, the fact that the ball is colored red in the image fails to depend on the fact that

[7] Cf. Peacocke (1979, 128).

the ball is red in "the right sort of way". It's difficult to say what the right sort of dependence would look like. At any rate, I intend to show that ontological empiricists have good reason to maintain that the causal chain leading from the object facts to our object beliefs lacks the sort of deviance exhibited in *Colorization*.

To illustrate what it would look like to reject (DK1) with these two caveats in mind, consider Korman's own response to the debunking argument. He ends up endorsing a form of *rationalism* concerning how we come to know that there are ordinary things:

> [W]e have the beliefs that we do because we apprehend facts about coinstantiation, composition, and kind membership – that is, facts about which of the properties we perceive are borne by a single object, about which objects before us compose a single object, and about the kinds to which perceived objects belong… Our apprehension of [the object facts], together with our perceptual awareness… accounts for why we have an experience as of a [car], and no experience as of [an incar]… So [(DK1) is false] (ibid., 111).

Apprehension is a rational capacity to 'key into' the object facts. Korman justifies the claim that we have such a capacity by making an "…inference to the best explanation of the accuracy of our experiences" (ibid., 120). Korman admits that apprehension is somewhat mysterious.[8] He nevertheless maintains that it's rational to posit such a capacity on grounds of the accuracy of our experiences.

On Korman's view, our perceptual apparatus allows us to 'see ordinary things' because we rationally apprehend the object facts. Thus, we cannot settle ontological questions concerning the existence of ordinary things by empirical means alone – we can settle such questions only because we have such-and-such a rational capacity underlying our experiences as of ordinary things. By placing so much epistemic weight on rational apprehension, Korman abandons the claim that we can settle such questions merely empirically. Korman's apparent endorsement of restricted

[8] Compare with Boghossian (2003, §4).

empiricism, then, is illusory. And more generally, debunking argumentation presses restricted empiricists to either (i) abandon perceptual evidence for ordinary things or (ii) endorse some non-empirical approach to settling ontological questions about material objects.

Ontological empiricists can resist debunking argumentation without forfeiting their claim that we can settle ontological questions about material objects empirically. To see why, consider the following argument:

(BF1) There is no explanatory connection between our Bigfoot beliefs and the Bigfoot facts.
(BF2) If so, then we shouldn't believe <There is no Bigfoot>.
(BF3) Therefore, we shouldn't believe <There is no Bigfoot>.

Now suppose that someone motivated (BF1) in the following way:

> When humans look into empty meadows, they fail to undergo experiences that present them with Bigfoot-like information. We believe <There's no Bigfoot before me> on this basis. But suppose that evolution had gone differently, and we turned out to be *Squatches* – creatures whose perceptual apparatus delivers Bigfoot-like information when they look into empty meadows. Squatches believe <There's a Bigfoot before me> on this basis. That we could've been Squatches indicates that we divide up the world into objects the way that we do for reasons having nothing at all to do with how the world actually is divided up. So (BF1) is true.

If correct, this would force us to conclude that our Bigfoot beliefs have defeaters; we should thus remain neutral on the existence of Bigfoot.

The possibility of Squatches undermines my present justification for repudiating Bigfoot only if various biological and cultural contingencies best explain why humans aren't Squatches. But Bigfoots are just the sorts of creatures our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect; they're large, furry creatures that walk on two legs. So if there's a Bigfoot right before me, I should see it. Provided we assume that our perceptual faculties are in good working order, then, biological and cultural contingencies do not best explain why humans aren't Squatches – the better explanation is simply that there are no Bigfoots. Indeed, if there were Bigfoots around, then we should undergo just the sorts of experiences that Squatches undergo. I conclude that (BF1) is unmotivated – the

bare possibility of creatures who ‘see the world’ differently shouldn’t move those of us who maintain that the existence of Bigfoot is an empirical matter.

Ontological empiricists say the same about the possibility of Incritters. The possibility of Incritters undermines my present justification for repudiating Incars only if various biological and cultural contingencies best explain why humans aren’t Incritters. But incars are just the sorts of entities our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect; they’re just as large and loud as cars, and they shrink out of existence just like logs fed through woodchippers. So if there’s an incar right before me, I should see it. Provided we assume that our perceptual faculties are in good working order, then, biological and cultural contingencies do not best explain why humans aren’t Incritters – the better explanation is simply that there are no incars. Indeed, if there were incars around, then we should undergo just the sorts of experiences that Incritters undergo. I conclude that (DK1) is unmotivated – the bare possibility of creatures who ‘see the world’ differently shouldn’t move those of us who maintain that the existence of extraordinary things is an empirical matter.

Granted, there’s a difference between Squatches and Incritters. Incritters undergo experiences that permit them to countenance incars around atoms arranged Incar-wise. Squatches undergo experiences that permit them to countenance Bigfoot even when there are no atoms arranged Bigfoot-wise. In some sense, then, Squatches look worse off than Incritters. But this difference has little epistemic relevance. Squatches ‘seem to see Bigfoot’ when there’s no object matching the description of Bigfoot directly before them. Incritters ‘seem to see incars’ when there’s no object matching the description of an incar directly before them. By my lights, both creatures undergo hallucinatory experiences – they seem to see objects where there are none. At best, we should characterize Incritters as undergoing an illusory ‘singular experience’ of atoms arranged incar-wise. And the bare possibility of creatures who undergo illusory experiences around

atoms arranged incar-wise gives us no reason to doubt the epistemic deliverances of our perceptual apparatus around atoms arranged incar-wise.

I've argued that ontological empiricists should maintain that (DK1) lacks motivation – I haven't yet argued that ontological empiricists can positively identify an explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts. But there's an obvious candidate explanatory connection; the presence of a car causes me to undergo an experience as of a car, and I form beliefs like <There's a car before me> on this basis. Thus, there's a causal connection between my belief <There's a car before me> and the car before me. And if that's right, then there's an explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts. Thus, (DK1) is false.

Recall, however, that to reject (DK1) one must identify a *nondeviant* explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts. And Korman argues that even if there's a causal connection between our object beliefs and the object facts, this causal chain is deviant in just the same way as the *Colorization* case. Suppose, for example, that we're looking in the direction of a tree and a dog. Korman writes:

> …[W]hen we encounter the leafiness of the leaves, the woodiness of the trunk, and the furriness of the dog, we have an experience of the form *∃x[Leafy(x) & Woody(x)] & ∃y(Furry(y))*. Why, though, do we end up with an experience of that form rather than a "troggish" experience of the form *∃x(Leafy(x)) & ∃y[Woody(y) & Furry(y)]*? The answer (the debunker contends) is entirely in terms of the biological and cultural contingencies… It is independent of whether it was a tree or a trog that was responsible for that raw sensory input… Thus, the mere fact that a tree causes the tree experiences and tree beliefs is not enough to secure a nondeviant explanatory connection (2015, 107).

The debunker concludes that we should no longer believe <There's a tree before me> based on our experiences as of trees – the causal route from trees to our tree beliefs is deviant.

We should conclude that the causal route from trees to our tree beliefs is deviant only if biological and cultural contingencies best explain why we end up with "treeish" rather than "troggish" experiences. But recall the empiricist's contention that our perceptual apparatus is well-

poised to detect trogs, given that they're mid-sized dry goods. Thus, if there's a trog before me, I should see it. Provided we assume that our perceptual faculties are in good working order, then, biological and cultural contingencies do not best explain why we end up with "treeish" rather than "troggish" experiences – the better explanation is simply that there's no trog before me. After all, I would expect to undergo a "troggish" experience on the assumption that there's a trog before me. I conclude that the debunker has given ontological empiricists no reason to think that the causal route from trees to our tree beliefs is deviant.

The debunker motivates both (DK1), and the claim that the causal route from trees to our tree beliefs is deviant, by inviting us to imagine creatures that 'see the world' differently. Ontological empiricists are liable to find such creatures as tragically misguided, just like brains-in-vats; their bare possibility, then, is a purely skeptical concern. But such concerns shouldn't move those of us who think that the existence of extraordinary things is an empirical matter. So ontological empiricists can reasonably maintain that there's a nondeviant causal connection between our object beliefs and the object facts. Thus, unlike restricted empiricists, unrestricted empiricists can resist the debunker without forfeiting their empiricist credentials.

The empiricist's response to the debunker, however, raises another potential defeater to the fore. It's plausible that ordinary objects are *mere causal overdeterminers*; that is, it's plausible that we can fully casually account for anything that ordinary objects purportedly cause (such as our experiences as of ordinary objects) by appealing only to facts about the relevant arrangements of atoms that would otherwise compose such objects. On this basis, Trenton Merricks claims that believing in a pair of gloves ("Pair") based on an experience as of Pair "…is a bad reason for believing in Pair because even if Pair does not exist, you still have that experience, and it is still fully causally explained" (Merricks 2017, 138). He goes on to write:

> …[A]ny reason for believing that any particular wholly causally redundant physical object exists that turns on some causal effect of that object is a bad reason… [Moreover,] all the *ordinary* reasons to believe in the existence of any particular physical object… turn on the causal effects of that object… [So,] we have no good ordinary reasons at all for believing that [ordinary objects] exist (ibid., 138).

So suppose that trees, say, are mere overdeterminers. Then my experience of a tree is fully causally explained by atoms arranged treewise. Thus, Merricks claims, my experience as of a tree before me is a bad reason to believe in trees – because even if there is no tree before me, I undergo the same experience. Perhaps recognizing this fact generates a defeater for my tree-belief.

I deny the claim that even if there is no tree before me, I undergo the same experience. For when there is no object before us that our perceptual apparatus is otherwise well-poised to detect, we undergo experiences that fail to justify belief in such objects. To illustrate: I argued in Chapter 2, §4 that our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect trogs (mereological sums of tree trunks and dogs). We nevertheless fail to undergo experiences that justify belief in trogs around atoms arranged trogwise, which gives us evidence that there are no trogs.[9] To be sure, we usually undergo experiences that justify belief in trees around atoms arranged treewise. But on the assumption that there is no tree before me, I would expect to undergo an experience that fails to justify belief in trees – for these are the sorts of experiences I'm otherwise disposed to undergo when there's no composite object before me. And this is a different sort of experience than those we're actually disposed to undergo around atoms arranged treewise.

One might reply that this forces me to deny that trees are mere causal overdeterminers. For on this line of reply, it looks like the presence of a tree causes different sorts of experiences than the presence of atoms arranged treewise. Thus, the thought goes, I cannot maintain that we can fully casually account for anything that trees purportedly cause (such as our experiences as of

[9] Such experiences are distinct at a level tractable by cognitive scientists. For a detailed account of this difference, see Chapter 2, §1, §4.

trees) by appealing only to facts about the relevant arrangements of atoms that would otherwise compose trees. But the claim that objects have emergent causal powers is objectionable – it's plausible that we can fully causally explain everything an object causes in terms of whatever its parts cause (cf. Merricks, 2001, 59-66).

In reply, first note that by the ontological empiricist's lights, a world where there are atoms arranged treewise but no trees is a world where the facts about which arrangements of atoms compose further objects differ from actuality. And – I claim – when we alter the compositional facts, we thereby alter facts about which arrangements of atoms cause which experiences. Thus, I agree that (i) atoms arranged treewise (actually) causally explain those experiences that justify our belief in trees, and that (ii) in worlds where there are atoms arranged treewise but no trees, those atoms would causally explain those experiences that justify disbelief in trees. In the latter worlds, I maintain that the laws governing which arrangements of atoms cause which experiences differ from actuality.

Some will worry that I'm thereby committed to a sort of spooky, preestablished harmony between the compositional facts and perceptual experience. I reply that the relevant cognitive scientific work gives us good reason to maintain that perceptual experience reliably tracks the presence of objects in our immediate environment. If we also assume that we can fully causally account for those experiences by appealing only to the atoms making up those objects, we can predict that arrangements of atoms that compose a further object will cause "justificatory" experiences, whereas arrangements of atoms that fail to compose a further object will cause "non-justificatory" experiences. Thus, when we alter facts about which objects are in our environment (for instance, by supposing that atoms arranged treewise fail to compose a tree), we should conclude that facts about which arrangements of atoms cause which experiences are different from

actuality (for we should now suspect that atoms arranged treewise will cause "non-justificatory" experiences). None of this should strike empiricists as spooky or surprising.

We've surveyed several possible defeaters for our perception-based object beliefs and found that ontological empiricists can resist them all. Absent other possible defeaters, I conclude that the empiricist's defense of ordinary ontology is secure.

## §2: Alternative ontological languages

I have argued that ontological empiricists can resist arguments to the effect that our perception-based object beliefs have undercutting defeaters, and I conclude that ordinary ontology is safe from such defeaters. In turn, I maintain that ontological eliminativists and ontological permissivists are mistaken, and thus that they ought to revise their ontological views.

In this section, I will consider two related meta-ontological challenges to my claim that eliminativists and permissivists harbor mistaken ontological positions. First, *deflationary quantifier variantists* maintain that even if "There are cars but no incars" is true in our language, there are other, equally good ontological languages that we ought to interpret eliminativists and/or permissivists as speaking – thus, by the deflationary variantist's lights, my dispute with eliminativists and permissivists is merely verbal. Second, *heavyweight quantifier variantists* maintain either (i) that "There are cars but no incars" is in fact false in our language or (ii) that we ought to speak another ontological language that cleaves more closely to reality's distinguished ontological structure. One might suspect that even if ontological empiricists are correct that "There are cars but no incars" is true, the possibility of alternative ontological languages makes their claim non-substantive or uninteresting.

I respond to deflationary variantists (§2.1) and heavyweight variantists (§2.2) in turn. I draw out the following moral: whether the threat of alternative ontological languages should make

ontological empiricists nervous depends on whether our perception-based object beliefs have defeaters. Therefore, if one accepts my arguments from §1 to the effect that our perception-based object beliefs have no defeaters, then the threat of alternative ontological languages shouldn't worry ontological empiricists.

### *§2.1: Deflationary quantifier variance*

*Modest quantifier variance* is the thesis that "…there are many *distinct* quantifier languages" (Hirsch & Warren 2020, 350), each of which is truth-functionally equivalent to the other.[10] Thus, modest variantists maintain that sentences like "There are cars" can vary in truth-value depending on the meaning of quantifier-like expressions such as 'there are' and 'the existence of an object'.[11] More controversial is *strong quantifier variance*, the thesis that "…when two quantifier languages are equivalent, there is no use asking which of them is metaphysically better or which better reflects objective reality" (Hirsch & Warren 2020, 351). Deflationary variantists are distinguished by their commitment to strong variance.

Eli Hirsch maintains that *the principle of linguistic charity* compels us to interpret ordinary speakers as speaking an ontological language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true.[12] The principle of linguistic charity tells us to interpret a speaker's utterances and beliefs in such a way that their utterances and beliefs come out as reasonable as possible, *ceteris paribus*. When looking at a car inside of a garage, for example, ordinary speakers are overwhelmingly inclined to agree that "There's a car before me" is true; when looking at a car leaving a garage, ordinary speakers are overwhelmingly inclined to agree that "There's no object directly before me

[10] Hirsch (2010) provides the classic exposition of quantifier variance, and Warren (2020) develops the thesis further. For a helpful introduction to debates over variance, see Hirsch & Warren (2020).
[11] Modest variance doesn't necessarily have a deflationary upshot; see Dorr (2005), Sider (2009), and Cameron (2010). The most pressing objections to modest variance concern dicey questions about semantics that needn't concern us here; cf. Dorr (2014), Hirsch & Warren (2017), and Sider (2023).
[12] Cf. Lewis (1974; 1983) and Hirsch & Warren (2020, 349).

that's shrinking out of existence" is true. An interpretation according to which such sentences come out true, Hirsch claims, makes ordinary speakers out to be more reasonable than an interpretation according to which such sentences come out false. Thus, Hirsch argues, linguistic charity compels to endorse an interpretation of ordinary speakers according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true.

I agree with Hirsch's conclusion, for I think that "There are cars but no incars" is true. However, Hirsch's approach to answering ontological questions about mid-sized material objects renders ontological disputes *merely verbal* in the sense that "…each party [eliminativists, ordinary ontologists, permissivists] ought to agree that the other party speaks the truth in its own language" (2010, 229). I disagree, for I maintain that eliminativists, ordinary ontologists, and permissivists have been speaking the same language all along, and that eliminativists and permissivists have been speaking falsely. (Were this not the case, my endorsement of ordinary ontology would lose much of its bite.) To see why I disagree with Hirsch, we must assess how he argues for the claim that ontological disputes are merely verbal.

Suppose that I encounter a community of ontological permissivists inside of my garage. We turn towards my car, and one permissivist utters the sentence "There's an incar before me". As an ordinary ontologist, I'm inclined to say that she has uttered a falsehood, provided that she means what I mean were I to utter the same sentence. Indeed, claims Hirsch, "…on the assumption that [members of the permissivist's community] mean the same thing by their sentences that we mean, they are frequently making extreme mistakes, both of an a priori and perceptual sort" (2010, 153). Hirsch claims that the principle of charity compels me to interpret these permissivists as speaking a different ontological language, one according to which "There's an incar before me" is true in the context, but where the expression 'there are' means something different than what I mean with

my usage. This, he contends, is the more charitable interpretation of the permissivist community's utterances.

The above argument rests on what Hirsch calls *charity to perception*, "…a strong presumption against attributing to the community massive perceptual errors about the existence and identity of the objects typically encountered, *especially errors that are alleged to be of an a priori conceptual nature*" (2010, 185, my italics). The last bit is crucial – Hirsch would have it that by the ordinary ontologist's lights, permissivists make systematic perceptual errors of 'an a priori conceptual nature'. He stresses this elsewhere, writing: "My general assumption is that ontological disputes concern matters of a priori necessity… Both sides are to be understood as defending their claims on grounds of a priori necessity" (2010, 222).

This point proves crucial to Hirsch's deflationary project vis-à-vis material object metaphysics. One might worry that deflationary variantists are committed to the claim that when medieval speakers uttered sentences like "The Earth is flat", they were speaking truly – after all, almost everyone within their linguistic community would've assented to such utterances and rejected their negations. But surely your average Ulric Schmulric was simply wrong: the Earth isn't flat. On this point, Hirsch writes:

> [T]he correct interpretation of a language can sometimes have the effect that typical speakers make assertions that are empirically (as opposed to a priori) false, even about (perceptual) examples. Suppose that typical speakers are prepared to assert "The Earth is flat." Why not interpret that as being true, as meaning something like "The Earth is locally flat (or looks flat)?" We have to take into account many other assertions these people will make, such as, "If the Earth is flat, then if you keep moving in as straight a line as possible (over land and sea) on its surface you'll reach a point where you can't go any farther (you fall off)," and "If the Earth is flat it's shaped more like a large pancake than like a large grapefruit. "… On one interpretation "The Earth is flat" turns out to be true, but numerous conditionals asserted by the speakers turn out to be incomprehensibly unreasonable. On the second interpretation the conditionals are correct, and, although "The Earth is flat" is false, people have (tolerably) good reasons for asserting it, given their sensory data. The second interpretation is, therefore, the credible one (Hirsch 2010, 114).

So when it comes to *empirical* assertions, the principle of charity might compel us to endorse interpretations that impute systematic falsity onto speakers. By contrast, Hirsch claims, "…revisionists imply that typical speakers of the language make many *a priori false* ontological judgments for no good reason" (ibid., 114, my italics). Thus, deflationary variantists would have it that an interpretation of ordinary language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is false makes speakers out to be incredibly unreasonable – they're consistently disposed to make a priori errors. Similarly, an interpretation according to which a member of the permissivist community's utterance of "There's an incar before me" is false makes them out to be unreasonable.

Now recall the ontological empiricist's contention that we can settle ontological questions about material objects empirically. If the empiricist's contention is correct, then ontological disputes do not concern matters of *a priori* necessity – they concern matters of *a posteriori* necessity. According to empiricists, then, sentences like "There are cars but no incars" are epistemically more similar to sentences like "Water is $H_2O$" than they are similar to sentences like "Either it's raining or it's not raining".[13] We come to justifiably believe <There are cars but no incars> by undergoing experiences that justify such beliefs, not by constructing ontological principles that issue in such beliefs. Perhaps revisionary ontologists have indeed defended their positions on a priori grounds.[14] But my endorsement of ordinary ontology does not rest on a priori grounds; it rests on an empirically plausibly picture of perceptual experience.

Let's now reconsider the exchange between permissivists and I. When a member of the permissivist community utters "There's an incar before me" upon seeing a car leaving a garage, I'm initially inclined to think that she's said something false, provided that she means what I mean

[13] Empiricists might maintain – alongside Cameron (2007) – that composition is a contingent relation. Those sympathetic to this view should interpret the remainder of this section's claims as pertaining only to the actual world.
[14] Although see Hawthorne (2009) for reasons to think that this is an oversimplification.

by that sentence. Is an interpretation according to which her utterance comes out true more charitable than an interpretation according to which her utterance comes out false? No. I can make perfect sense of her mistake – she's unaware that incars are just the sorts of entities that our perceptual apparatus is well-poised to detect. If she recognized this, I contend, she should maintain that there is no incar before her, since she doesn't see an incar before her.

Indeed, an interpretation according to which her utterance "There's an incar before me" comes out true makes many other of her utterances – "There's no Bigfoot before me", "There's no Jersey Devil before me", and so forth – woefully unreasonable. So this interpretation is bad for just the same reasons an interpretation according to which "The Earth is flat" comes out true is bad. This permissivist asserts "There's an incar before me" for tolerably good reasons; it follows from such-and-such ontological principles for which she has some theoretical and/or argumentative evidence. She's made the mistake that all other ontologists have made, according to ontological empiricists; she's failed to recognize that the existence of incars is an empirical matter, a matter it would be inappropriate to settle on theoretical and/or argumentative grounds. She's made an empirically false assertion for argumentative reasons, and I can comprehend why she's failed to see that such assertions are empirically false.

Now suppose that I encounter a community of eliminativists, one of which utters "There's no car before me" as he watches a car leaving a garage. I'm inclined to think that he's said something false, provided that he means what I means by that sentence. Does an interpretation according to which "There's no car before me" comes out true make this member of the eliminativist community out to be more reasonable than an interpretation according to which that sentence comes out false? No. I can make perfect sense of his mistake – he thinks that our perception-based object beliefs have defeaters. Given this, his tendency to ignore his perceptual

evidence in favor of ordinary things is comprehensible, even if I think he's mistaken.

By the empiricist's lights, then, eliminativists make empirical mistakes different from the sorts of empirical mistakes permissivists make. Eliminativists marshal philosophical arguments to the effect that our perception-based object beliefs have defeaters, and these defeaters make it seem appropriate to discard one's perceptual evidence for ordinary things. Thus Merricks claims that "…whether atoms arranged [carwise] compose a [car] is not straightforwardly empirical… [this question] must be decided on philosophical grounds" (2001, 9). Empiricists, on the other hand, maintain that whether atoms arranged carwise compose a car is a straightforwardly empirical question. We can nevertheless comprehend why eliminativists would claim otherwise.

I have argued that ordinary ontologists who endorse ontological empiricism ought not interpret revisionary ontologists as speaking alternative ontological languages. Of course, if our perception-based reasons to countenance ordinary things have defeaters, then one cannot run the arguments I have run against Hirsch's deflationary conclusions. But, I contend, our perception-based reasons to countenance ordinary things have no defeaters. So ontological empiricists should not endorse Hirsch's deflationary conclusions.

### *§2.2: Heavyweight quantifier variance*

Recall that deflationary variantists endorse *strong quantifier variance*, the thesis that "…when two quantifier languages are equivalent, there is no use asking which of them is metaphysically better or which better reflects objective reality" (Hirsch & Warren 2019, 351). Those who reject strong variance typically do so by appealing to a metaphysical constraint on interpretation: *naturalness*.[15] According to this line of thought, certain quantifier-like expressions cleave more closely to

[15] Cf. Lewis (1983b) on natural predicates. Sider (2009; 2011; 2014) rejects strong variance by extending the notion of naturalness to quantifier-like expressions; Cameron (2010) proceeds similarly. For strong variantist responses to the claim that naturalness compels us to speak a language with highly natural quantifier-like expressions, see Hirsch (2010, chapter 11) and Warren (2024).

reality's distinguished quantificational structure – some such expressions 'carve at the joints'. Call the ontological language which operates with the most fundamental quantifier "Ontologese". The debate between deflationary variantists and heavyweight variantists has centered on the conflict between naturalness on the one hand, and the principle of linguistic charity on the other. To briefly summarize the debate: strong variantists argue that linguistic charity wins out over naturalness in the Grand Interpretive Reckoning, and heavyweights disagree.[16]

My defense of ordinary ontology does not rest on considerations concerning linguistic charity. Rather, I maintain that we have perceptual evidence for the existence of cars and for the nonexistence of incars, and thus that "There are cars but no incars" is true in the language ontologists have been speaking all along. Heavyweight variantists have further tools at their disposal, however. As Shamik Dasgupta (2018) points out, heavyweight variantists endorse an additional normative claim; namely, that that we *should* speak Ontologese. Theodore Sider – paradigmatic heavyweight variantist – writes:

> Realism about natural properties, Dasgupta argues, must be paired with certain *value* judgments about naturalness. We do a better job of representing the world if we think and speak of natural properties rather than shmatural properties, even holding fixed the extent to which we think and speak the truth… [T]he realist is committed to thinking additionally that the value of naturalness, and not just naturalness itself, is objective. For if… we ought to project green rather than grue simply because only the former is entrenched in our usage, the intuitive core of realism has been lost… I agree with Dasgupta that realism about natural properties needs realism about their value (Sider 2022, 4).[17]

Thus heavyweight variantists might endorse one of the following two theses: (i) the normative pull of naturalness compels us to interpret ordinary speakers as speaking Ontologese, or (ii) even if ordinary speakers aren't speaking Ontologese, we ought to speak Ontologese 'within the ontology room'. With respect to the latter view, heavyweights say something similar vis-à-vis the conflict

[16] Cf. Hirsch (2010, ch. 11) for the strong variantist's line, and Sider (2014) for the heavyweight variantist's.
[17] Sider cites Goodman (1983, ch. IV) as a proponent of the view that we project green rather than grue simply because the former is entrenched in our usage.

between naturalness and linguistic charity. Sider writes that

> ontological realists might conduct their ontological debates in the metaphysics room rather than the marketplace… They might introduce [Ontologese]… whose quantifiers are stipulated to carve at the joints… [To do so, we] stipulatively remove any normal metasemantic pressure towards tolerant interpretations that assign non-joint-carving meanings to quantifiers (2011, 172).

There are reasons to doubt if such a stipulative maneuver could prove successful.[18] But I'll grant that if the only relevant interpretive issue concerns the conflict linguistic charity and naturalness, then one can stipulatively remove whatever metasemantic pressure pushes us towards non-natural interpretations of quantifier-like expressions. Inquiry within the ontology room, after all, concerns distinctively metaphysical matters. We should allow ontologists some license to table the fact that "people just talk that way".

To illustrate how heavyweight variantists defend their position, consider Sider's argument for ontological nihilism via *ideological simplicity*:

> In addition to eliminating composite objects from our ontology, nihilism also allows us to eliminate the extra-logical (or perhaps quasi-logical) notion of 'part' from our ideology, and this kind of ideological simplification is an epistemic improvement. Nihilism is an ideologically simpler theory, and so is more likely to be true (Sider 2013, 239).[19]

The argument from ideological simplicity proceeds on the assumption that we needn't consider the fact that people talk 'as if' chairs and tables exist. Nihilism is ideologically simpler than its opponents; ideologically simpler theories are more likely to be true than their competitors, all else equal; thus, nihilism is (more likely to be) true. Sider later notes an important caveat:

> Choiceworthy theories must also be compatible with our evidence and predict as much of it as possible… But this is exactly the situation with nihilism and its competitors, since our best theories of fundamental matters… have no need for composite objects… Deleting 'part of' and all reference to composite objects in these theories does not weaken their predictive power (Sider 2013, 241).

[18] Cf. Hirsch (2010, ch. 11), Sider (2014), and Korman (2015, ch. 6) for more on this issue.
[19] Dorr (2005) takes a similar line.

Furthermore, Sider recognizes that we have perception-based reasons for our object beliefs (ibid., §5); he just thinks that there are defeaters for such beliefs.

In summary, heavyweight variantists argue for their ontological positions by appealing to the theoretical virtues that their preferred positions exhibit – this allows us, claims the heavyweight, to figure out which ontological language operates with the most natural, joint-carving quantifier. And I grant that ontological nihilism is ideologically simpler than its competitors. This might make one suspect that an ontological language according to which "There are no cars" is true carves at the world's distinguished quantificational joints more finely than a language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true.

Perhaps heavyweights think that the normative force of naturalness compels us to interpret the sentence "There are cars but no incars" as false in the language we're currently speaking. If this is correct, then my defense of ontological empiricism has gone awry somewhere. Alternatively, heavyweights might agree that "There are cars but no incars" is true in our present ontological language, but that we *ought* to speak a language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is false. If this is correct, then ontological empiricism is uninteresting even if it's true. For ontological empiricism would amount to the claim that we can empirically settle ontological questions formulated in an ontological language that we shouldn't speak in the first place. At any rate, the difference between these two interpretations of the heavyweight's claim won't matter in what follows; my response applies to both.

Heavyweights assume that theoretical virtuosity is a guide to quantificational naturalness; the fact that a language according to which "There are no cars" is true is ideologically simpler than its competitors is a reason to believe that such a language carves more finely at the world's quantificational joints, claims the heavyweight. As Sider notes, however, v. Call this theoretical

virtue "evidential adequacy". I take it that evidential adequacy is worth far more, theoretically speaking, than ideological simplicity – an ideologically simple theory that fails to cohere with and/or predict our evidence isn't worth all that much. (A physical theory that predicts the relevant physical phenomena by postulating four fundamental forces, for instance, is surely preferable to a competitor that does away with the notion of 'force' altogether but which fails to predict the phenomena.) And further suppose, as I argued in §1, that our perception-based reasons to countenance ordinary things have no defeaters. Then our body of evidence contains numerous perception-based reasons to countenance ordinary things (and thereby to repudiate extraordinary things). Our theories must be compatible with this perceptual evidence and predict as much of it as possible. Thus, deleting reference to composite objects would indeed make our ontological theories less evidentially adequate.

If heavyweight variantists wish to defend the claim that some language other than an ordinary-ontologist-friendly language carves at the joints, then they must explain why it's appropriate to discount our perceptual reasons upon entering the ontology room. But there's a basic problem with this suggestion. Nihilism (and any other fundamental ontological theory) ought to be compatible with and predict as much of our empirical evidence as possible. Sider thinks nihilism meets this task on the grounds that nihilism is consistent with physics, and "[p]hysics… makes predictions based on laws governing simple entities like subatomic particles" (2013, 241). But perceptual reasons partially constitute the evidence we possess for our best physical theories.[20] To discount perceptual reasons would therefore significantly undermine our evidential case for fundamental physics. It would become woefully unclear what empirical evidence nihilism ought to be compatible with and predict as much of as possible.

[20] Sider recognizes this; see his (2013, fn. 42).

Heavyweight variantists might wish to claim that even if we discount whatever perceptual reasons we have to countenance cars, we can hold onto whatever perceptual reasons we have to countenance atoms arranged carwise. I reply that I see no grounds on which heavyweight variantists could justify their proposed differential treatment of cars and atoms arranged carwise. For on this proposal, heavyweight variantists must maintain that our perceptual faculties generate reasons to countenance atoms arranged carwise. This must occur via some perceptual mechanism or other. Perhaps the contents of our experiences justify the existence of atoms arranged carwise, or perhaps perception delivers such-and-such information permitting us to justifiably countenance atoms arranged carwise.[21] But those very same mechanisms first and foremost generate reasons to countenance cars. If heavyweight variantists accept that epistemic story vis-à-vis atoms arranged carwise, it would be epistemically arbitrary to reject that epistemic story vis-à-vis cars.

If there were defeaters for our perception-based object beliefs, then we would have good reason to discard them both inside and outside of the ontology room, of course. My primary point is that the heavyweight variantist's challenge should worry ontological empiricists only if there are defeaters for our perception-based object beliefs. And as I argued in §1, ontological empiricists can resist the foremost defeaters currently on offer. I conclude that the challenge from heavyweight variantists shouldn't worry ontological empiricists.

## §3: Conclusion

Ontological empiricists maintain that we can settle ontological questions about material objects empirically, namely by appealing to perceptual experience. The empiricist's defense of ordinary ontology can get off the ground only if there are no undercutting defeaters for our perception-based object beliefs – otherwise, we have no reason to countenance ordinary things,

[21] See Chapter 1, §2-3 for a more detailed outline of the relevant perceptual mechanism.

and thereby no reason to repudiate extraordinary things (via the perceptual argument). But I've argued that ontological empiricists have the resources to resist the foremost defeaters currently on offer. I conclude that ordinary ontology is safe from such defeaters.

The empiricist's defense of ordinary ontology would be relatively uninteresting if we were under pressure to interpret our ontological opponents as speaking another language, or if there were reason to speak a more fundamental ontological language. But I've argued that the possibility of alternative ontological languages – when invoked to either deflationary or inflationary ends – should worry empiricists only if there are defeaters for our objects beliefs. Therefore, both ordinary ontology's *truth* and its *substantivity* as an ontological thesis hinge on precisely the same consideration: whether our object beliefs have defeaters. And since empiricists can resist the relevant defeaters, they needn't worry about the possibility alternative languages.

## Chapter 4: Reference variance

*Easy ontology* is a form of ontological deflationism according to which it's easy to settle ontological questions like "Are there cups?": we need only figure out the rules of use governing expressions like 'cup', and then determine if those rules of use are fulfilled.[1] By the easy ontologist's lights, we can therefore answer ontological questions by engaging in routine forms of conceptual analysis and empirical investigation. So if easy ontology is correct, ontological inquiry is a far more trivial enterprise than its non-deflationary opponents would have us believe.

Let 'Cuppy' name a particular cup and 'atoms arranged Cuppy-wise' (hereafter 'AACW') name the atomic parts that make up that particular cup, respectively. Easy ontologists must secure the claim that 'Cuppy' doesn't refer to AACW. For if 'Cuppy' refers to AACW, then Cuppy is identical to AACW. Some *ontological eliminativists* – those who believe that cups don't exist – endorse such a view. According to these eliminativists, people speak truthfully when they utter sentences like "Cups exist", but the term 'cup' doesn't refer to a composite object.[2] Amie Thomasson – easy ontology's most prominent defender – rejects all such attempts to rehabilitate 'deep ontology'.[3] Accordingly, Thomasson repudiates the claim that Cuppy is identical to AACW.

But I argue that easy ontologists cannot adequately distinguish themselves from the kind of ontological eliminativist I just discussed. To show this, I consider an encounter between the easy ontologist and a referential skeptic. Thomasson maintains that cups aren't identical to AACW. The skeptic presses: "How do we know that terms like 'Cuppy' refer to composite objects, rather than to whatever Cuppy-wise arrangement of atoms plays the relevant Cuppy-like role?" I'll show that easy ontologists cannot answer this question with the tools currently at their disposal. Thus,

[1] See Thomasson (2007; 2014) for canonical statements of easy ontology.
[2] Cf. Van Inwagen (1990) and Contessa (2014).
[3] See her (2014, ch. 2.6, ch. 10).

for all easy ontologists have said, their view might be a linguistically sophisticated form of eliminativism. Call this "the problem of referential adicity". I can identify only one way out of the problem for easy ontologists – but it comes at a cost. For I argue that this solution commits easy ontologists to a form of *quantifier variance*, the thesis that quantifier-like expressions such as 'there are' and 'the existence of an object' can vary in meaning.[4]

Here's the plan. I first explain easy ontology (§1). Then I present the problem of referential adicity, and show why it's a problem (§2). After that, I survey some responses on the easy ontologist's behalf and argue that their responses fail to address the problem (§3). Finally, I show that the only remaining response available to easy ontologists commits them to a form of quantifier variance (§4). I conclude with a disjunctive claim; either easy ontology isn't a tenable alternative to eliminativism, or easy ontology is another form of quantifier variance.

## §1: Explaining easy ontology

Thomasson defends easy ontology by way of defending the following claim:

- (E) There are Ks iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled.[5]

An *application condition* is a rule of use that governs when an expression is appropriately applied. (More on this soon.) According to Thomasson, (E) articulates "…rules of use… for the quantifier [expressions like "exists", "there are", etc.], treating it as a formal concept and showing its relation to other expressions" (2014, 69). In other words, existence is "…a formal notion that says of a concept that it is instantiated" (ibid., 67). If the application conditions governing 'K' are fulfilled, claims the easy ontologist, then the concept expressed by 'K' is instantiated; this allows us to conclude that Ks exist. In all that follows, I grant easy ontologists the claim that quantifier-like

[4] Cf. Hirsch (2010), Warren (2017; 2020), and Hirsch & Warren (2017; 2020). Some – such as Cameron (2020) – call their view a kind of 'easy ontology'. However, in earlier work, Cameron makes it clear that he endorses a form of quantifier variance (cf. Cameron (2010)).
[5] Cf. Thomasson (2014, 86).

expressions play this formal role.

Note that endorsing (E), by itself, fails to show that Cuppy and atoms arranged Cuppy-wise ("AACW") aren't identical. Even if "There are Ks" is true, it doesn't follow that Ks are single things. Indeed, consider the expression 'AACW', and suppose that its application conditions are fulfilled.[6] Then there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise. Atoms arranged Cuppy-wise aren't single things; they're many things. So for all we've said, terms like 'Cuppy' might yet refer to AACW. To see how easy ontologists resist this claim, we must say more about the notion of a rule of use.

Rules of use come in two forms, the first of which – application conditions – we've already begun to discuss. More specifically, Thomasson writes that "[a]pplication conditions… establish certain basic conditions under which the term will succeed or fail in referring… (Thomasson 2014, 89-90). Additionally, Thomasson calls the rules that govern when our terms are appropriately reapplied *coapplication conditions*. These are "…rules that… specify under what conditions the term would be applied again to one and the same entity" (Thomasson 2007, 40).

Thomasson claims that we can introduce the term 'cup' in such a way that 'cup' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged cupwise. She writes:

> [E]ven if one lacked a term like 'cup', but instead (with the eliminativist) merely used such phrases as 'there are particles arranged cupwise', one could perfectly well introduce a term 'cup' as follows: if there are particles arranged cupwise, we are entitled to infer 'there is a cupwise arrangement of particles', and so to infer: 'there is a cup'. This enables us to state a sufficient condition for the application of a new noun (indeed one for a common-sense concrete object) without that statement making any appeal to the existence of the disputed object (the cup) (Thomasson 2014, 106-7).

She would presumably agree that 'cup' is appropriately reapplied provided that there are cupwise arrangements of atoms that stand in the right relationship to one another. Thus, we could introduce the term 'Cuppy' with the following application and coapplication conditions:

- The term 'Cuppy' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-

[6] If you're worried about my assumption that referentially plural terms are rule-governed, see §2.1

wise ("AACW").
- The term 'Cuppy' is appropriately coapplied at $t_2$ provided that (i) there are two Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms $AACW_1$ and $AACW_2$ at $t_1$ and $t_2$, respectively, (ii) $AACW_1$ makes appropriate the application of 'Cuppy' at $t_1$, and (iii) $AACW_1$ bears the right sort of relationship of spatiotemporal continuity (symbolized "|") to $AACW_2$.

Now consider Thomasson's claim that

> …the… application conditions for the relevant terms *fix the… existence conditions* for the entities (if any) named by them… the coapplication conditions for terms of the category associated with the name also *fix the truth-conditions for any identity claims* made using the relevant names (2007, 55-6, my emphases).

So Thomasson contends that the rules just outlined for 'Cuppy' fix the following truth conditions for existence and identity claims about cups:

- Cuppy exists provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.
- $Cuppy_1$ is identical to $Cuppy_2$ provided that $AACW_1 \mid AACW_2$.

Now consider 'AACW', which is governed by something like the following rules:

- The expression 'AACW' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms that "…both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if [Cuppy exists], those atoms' composing [Cuppy] would non-trivially supervene" (Merricks 2001, 4).[7]
- The expression 'AACW' is appropriately coapplied at $t_2$ provided that (i) there are two Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms $AACW_1$ and $AACW_2$ at $t_1$ and $t_2$, respectively, (ii) $AACW_1$ makes appropriate the application of 'AACW' at $t_1$, and (iii) $AACW_1$ contains all of the same atoms as $AACW_2$.

These rules fix the following truth conditions for existence and identity claims about atoms arranged Cuppy-wise:

- Atoms arranged Cuppy-wise exist provided there are atoms that "…both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if [Cuppy exists], those atoms' composing [Cuppy] would non-trivially supervene" (Merricks 2001, 4).
- $AACW_1$ is identical to $AACW_2$ provided that $AACW_1$ and $AACW_2$ contain all the same atoms.[8]

[7] Given her skepticism concerning debates about composition, it's unclear if Thomasson would accept every element of this definition. This won't matter. At the very least, she must agree to some eliminativist-friendly definition of 'AACW' – to do otherwise begs the question against eliminativists, her dialectical opponents. By substituting whatever definition Thomasson prefers, my argument runs just the same.

[8] I assume that plural identity is defined in terms of the 'amongness'-relation. See Kim (2021) for a challenge to this claim.

We're can now explain why easy ontologists reject the claim that Cuppy is identical to AACW. Thomasson writes:

> [It's not the case that] the term ['cup'], so introduced, just refers to the same thing as 'particles arranged [cup]wise' does: first there is the difficulty that the former term aims to refer to a single object, the latter to refer plurally to many particles. Even if we overcome this by using the term 'collection of particles arranged [cup]wise', they presumably do not corefer on account of different identity conditions involved in each case. The point is rather that we may introduce a term ['cup'] in this way (2014, 282).

Thomasson first notes that expressions like 'Cuppy' aim to refer to single objects, whereas 'AACW' aims to plurally refer to a collection of particles. She additionally notes that 'Cuppy' and 'AACW' have different identity conditions fixed by their coapplication conditions. Cuppy is made up of different pluralities of atoms at different times, but one cupwise arrangement of atoms is identical to another only if they contain all the same atoms.

I grant that this explanation shows that that cups aren't identical to atoms arranged cupwise. I deny that this explanation generalizes. I'll now explain why.

## §2: The problem of referential adicity

### *§2.1: Referential adicity*

Suppose a vacationer comes to Easyville. This vacationer has the term 'Cuppy' in her home language, and she grants that existence and identity claims about Cuppy are true. She maintains, however, that 'Cuppy' refers to whatever collection of atoms plays the relevant Cuppy-like role at any given time. We're initially confused; we don't think that 'Cuppy' works like this. Luckily, our vacationer's home country is well-versed in easy ontology, allowing her to communicate with deflationists abroad. For clarity, she labels her term '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$'.

Rather than referring to a single entity so long as it refers, '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is meant to refer to whatever Cuppy-wise arrangement of atoms plays the relevant Cuppy-like role at any given time.

If we tried to use this term in the manner so described, we would apply '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' whenever there were atoms arranged Cuppy-wise and reapply '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' whenever there was a plurality of atoms that played the relevant Cuppy-like functional role and which stood in the right relationship to the plurality that previously played the relevant Cuppy-like functional role.

Note that the expressions 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' differ in referential character along two dimensions. An expression 'T' is *referentially singular* iff 'T' refers to a single thing (if it refers at all).[9] And an expression 'T' is *referentially plural* iff 'T' refers to many things. Furthermore, call a term or expression *referentially functional* iff it can refer to different objects (or pluralities of objects) so long as it refers. By contrast, a term or expression is *referentially nominative* iff it refers to the same object (or pluralities of objects) so long as it refers. 'Cuppy' is meant to be both referentially singular and nominative; '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is meant to be both plural and functional.

Given these two dimensions along which expressions can vary in their referential character, we can distinguish between four referential types: expressions that are *singular/nominative* ("type SN"), *singular/functional* ("type SF"), *plural/nominative* ("type PN"), and *plural/functional* ("type PF"). I'll call an expression's referential type its "referential adicity".

Expressions of types SN and PN are familiar; names like 'Evan' are type SN, and expressions like 'atoms arranged Cuppy-wise' are type PN. Expressions of type SF and PF are less familiar but readily enumerated. Some descriptions are referentially functional. For instance, 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' can refer to different entities so long as it refers. Further, it's plausible that the expression 'The Chief Justice' is referentially functional. When we say things like "The Chief Justice is getting more and more liberal", we're saying that the successive referents of 'The Chief Justice' are more liberal than the former referents of 'The Chief Justice'. That is, the

[9] In what follows, I drop the 'if it refers at all' addendum.

expression ‘The Chief Justice’ refers to different objects over the course of its referential lifespan. So ‘The Chief Justice’ can refer to different objects so long as it refers, making it referentially functional. Since it also refers to a single thing, ‘The Chief Justice’ is type SF. By that same token, it’s plausible that the expression ‘The Supreme Court’ is type PF.[10] For ‘The Supreme Court’ refers to whatever collection of justices plays the role of adjudicating high-level disputes, banging gavels, and so on.

*§2.2: Assumptions*

I’ve now explained some of the dimensions along which expressions can vary in referential adicity. Before turning this into a problem for easy ontology, I must defend two assumptions upon which the problem depends. First, I assume that an expression’s rules of use determine its referential adicity. This is plausible; easy ontologists already characterize the kind of entity to which an expression refers in terms of its rules, and thus rules are well-poised to similarly determine an expression’s related referential characteristics. No other tool in the easy ontologist’s toolkit is better poised to account for an expression’s referential adicity. If an expression’s referential adicity is somehow explanatorily prior to or independent of its rules, it’s unclear what could possibly account for referential adicity at all.

Second, I assume that referentially plural and referentially functional expressions are rule-governed, just like singular and nominative expressions. One might object here. Recall that Thomasson defends easy ontology by defending the following claim:

- (E) There are Ks iff the application conditions actually associated with ‘K’ are fulfilled.

Thomasson says that (E) is true when ‘K’ is a general noun (cf. her 2014, 83-6). It’s unclear if Thomasson would count referentially plural terms like ‘cups’ or referentially functional

[10] Korman (2015, ch. 8.3.2) maintains that ‘the Supreme Court’ is referentially plural. Uzquiano (2004), Ritchie (2013, §2), and Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018) maintain that ‘the Supreme Court’ is referentially singular.

expressions like ‘The Supreme Court’ (if indeed this expression is referentially functional) as general nouns. Additionally, Thomasson articulates the role that rules of use play on her view by saying that “…the reference of *singular* and *sortal* terms is determinate only to the extent that the term in question is associated with disambiguating frame-level application and coapplication conditions that establish what category of entity the term is to refer to, if it succeeds in referring” (2007, 54, my italics).[11] Terms like ‘cups’ aren’t singular, and expressions like ‘The Supreme Court’ aren’t sortals.

Thomasson must nevertheless agree that we can introduce referentially plural and functional expressions into our language somehow-or-other. Ontological eliminativists require expressions like ‘atoms arranged Cuppy-wise’ (‘AACW’) to state their theses, and the eliminativist is one of Thomasson’s foremost dialectical opponents. Recall Thomasson’s claim that “…one could perfectly well introduce a term ‘cup’ as follows: if there are particles arranged cupwise, we are entitled to infer ‘there is a cupwise arrangement of particles’, and so to infer: ‘there is a cup’” (2014, 106-7). To converse with eliminativists, then, Thomasson must allow that we can introduce ‘AACW’ into our language. To reject that outlining the rules governing ‘AACW’ allows us to do so is ad hoc.

Furthermore, Thomasson grants that many expressions fail to wear their referential adicity on their sleeve. Korman (2019b) argues that if the debate over the referential adicity of the expression ‘The Supreme Court’ is sensible, then there’s a sortal-neutral sense of the term ‘object’ in good semantic standing. (For more on various uses of the term ‘object’, see §4.1.) Thomasson responds:

[11] Elsewhere, Thomasson includes the reference of descriptions under the scope of her project. She writes: “…whether we attempt to refer to individuals by way of names, demonstratives, or descriptions, attempts at establishing reference to an individual must involve frame-level application conditions and coapplication conditions that determine the broad (ontological) category of thing that the expression will refer to, if it succeeds in referring at all” (2007, 106).

> [W]hy think this is a 'sensible debate' I should want to make sense of? It is a feature, not a bug, of my analyses that they can show us that… this question is also easily answerable, and that the debate can be diagnosed as arising from competing intuitions that derive from our two (clear and legitimate) senses of 'object'. Or, to be clear, there is a reasonable question about how the *language works*, whether the term 'The Supreme Court' functions as a singular term or as a plurally referring term. But there is not a further question for 'deep metaphysics' about whether it 'really' is one object or many. To deny that there is, in my view, is a strength of the easy approach (2019, 259).

So Thomasson grants that there's a reasonable question at the level of how the language works concerning whether 'the Supreme Court' is referentially singular or plural. The same consideration extends to this expression's other noteworthy referential characteristic – namely, whether 'The Supreme Court' is referentially nominative or functional.[12]

Perhaps one could resist my assumption that referentially functional expressions are governed by rules of use by noting that functional terms behave like definite descriptions, whereas easy ontologists developed their view in the context of debates over the reference of name-like expressions (complex sortals, demonstratives, names, etc.). I agree that definite descriptions and name-like expressions likely refer by virtue of different facts. This is no reason to conclude that referentially functional terms aren't rule-governed. Definite descriptions like 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand', for instance, merely wear their application conditions on their sleeves; this expression is appropriately applied provided that there's one and only one cat currently resting under my nightstand.

*§2.3: The problem*

Let's now return to the referential vacationer. Suppose we wish to outline the rules of use governing '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$'. By design, '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied and reapplied under precisely the same circumstances as 'Cuppy'; we're entitled to apply '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' whenever there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise ("AACW"), and we're entitled to reapply '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' whenever there are AACW that

[12] Korman himself focuses on this referential characteristic in his (2015, 142-3).

stand in the right relationship of spatiotemporal continuity to previous Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms. One might therefore suspect that '$Cuppy_{role}$' is governed by the same application and coapplication conditions as 'Cuppy'.

This would be bad news for easy ontologists. The expressions 'Cuppy' and '$Cuppy_{role}$' are supposed to differ in referential adicity. But what determines the difference? These expressions, we're supposing, are governed by precisely the same rules of use. And since the rules governing our expressions determine the entity (or entities) to which such expressions refer, those rules ought to determine an expression's referential adicity. If we insist that we're referring to a composite object, the vacationer might demur: "You're using 'Cuppy' the same way as me, and I'm referring to different pluralities of objects over time. So I insist that you're mistaken."

Perhaps the easy ontologist would point out that the rules of use governing 'Cuppy' lay down truth conditions for existence and identity claims about cups; these conditions, the easy ontologist maintains, ensure $Cuppy_1$ *is identical to* $Cuppy_2$ provided that $AACW_1 \mid AACW_2$, and thus that 'Cuppy' is referentially singular. But the vacationer might reply that the rules of use governing '$Cuppy_{role}$' lay down the following truth conditions for existence and identity claims about $Cuppy_{role}$:

- $Cuppy_{role}$ exists provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.
- $Cuppy_{role1}$ is identical to $Cuppy_{role2}$ provided that $AACW_1 \mid AACW_2$.

The vacationer maintains that '$Cuppy_{role}$' is referentially plural even though $Cuppy_{role1}$ is identical to $Cuppy_{role2}$ provided that $AACW_1 \mid AACW_2$, where $AACW_1$ and $AACW_2$ can differ in parts. They say: "We can make true claims about the identity of $Cuppy_{role}$, no question about it. It's just that these claims are true only in a 'loose' sense of identity. When we claim that $Cuppy_1$ is identical to $Cuppy_2$, that's another way of saying that there's a spatiotemporally continuous succession of Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms, each of which plays the relevant Cuppy-like functional role."

Easy ontologists now face a dilemma. If the rules governing 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' determine their referential adicity, but both are governed by the same rules, then they're either both referentially singular and nominative (type SN) or both referentially plural and functional (type PF). If '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is type SN, then it's unclear how we would get plural and functional reference off the ground at all. And if 'Cuppy' is type PF, then the rules governing 'Cuppy' fix truth conditions for ontologically undemanding claims. The claim "$\text{Cuppy}_1$ is identical to $\text{Cuppy}_2$" could be true, but it would have to be true in a 'loose' sense of identity, for $\text{Cuppy}_1$ could be identical to $\text{AACW}_1$ and $\text{Cuppy}_2$ identical to $\text{AACW}_2$, where $\text{AACW}_1$ and $\text{AACW}_2$ have different members. And as with 'Cuppy', so too for all other terms that purport to refer to composite objects.

This is the problem of referential adicity. The problem, in its most basic form, goes as follows: easy ontologists need to explain why an expression is of such-and-such referential type, but they can't. I'll sometimes articulate this by saying that easy ontologists "cannot explain/account for an expression's referential adicity". I'll soon consider how easy ontologists might respond to the problem. Before doing so, however, I'll say more about why the problem is a problem for easy ontology.

### *§2.4: Eliminativism*

If easy ontologists cannot respond to the problem of referential adicity, I claim that they cannot adequately distinguish themselves from ontological eliminativists. But eliminativism comes in numerous forms. For instance, Merricks (2001) defends a *non-compatibilist* variety of eliminativism, whereby sentences like "Cups exist" are strictly and literally false. Even if easy ontologists cannot respond to the problem of referential adicity, they won't count as eliminativists in this sense. The problem doesn't call into question the easy ontologist's claim that sentences like "Cups exist" are true.

*Compatibilist* varieties of eliminativism are more common. For example, Dorr (2005), Sider (2013), and Cameron (2010; 2020) defend the compatibilist view that while "Cups exist" may be true, such sentences aren't true in the most fundamental ontological language; and, these ontologists maintain, we ought to read our ontological commitments off the most fundamental language. Sider writes: "…even if sentences like 'composites exist if subatomic particles are appropriately arranged' are conceptual truths of *ordinary* languages, they're not conceptual truths of the ontologist's fundamental language" (2013, 30).

The problem of referential adicity doesn't show that easy ontologists might be compatibilist eliminativists in this sense. For one thing, Thomasson criticizes this eliminativist's assumption that some ontological languages are more fundamental than others: she writes that "…Sider's idea that logical terms carve at the joints may be based on a mistake about the way logical terms function, in which case our puzzlement about what these logical joints could be (which are supposed to attract the reference of the logical terms) would be entirely appropriate." (2014, 299). Further, this kind of eliminativist maintains that sentences like "The expression 'Cuppy' refers to a composite object" are true when formulated in our non-fundamental ontological language. But the problem of referential adicity calls into question the easy ontologist's claim that sentences like "The expression 'Cuppy' refers to a composite object" are true in our language.

Some compatibilist eliminativists maintain that sentences like "Cuppy exists" are true, but that expressions like 'Cuppy' refer only to atoms arranged Cuppy-wise. For example, Peter Van Inwagen writes:

> [A]ll facts of the sort that most philosophers would say were facts about artifacts, and about nonliving "natural" objects like stones, are facts about the arrangement of simples. If this position is, as I have been arguing, not absurd, then it should be possible to paraphrase the sentences of ordinary language that most philosophers would say expressed facts about things like chairs in language that refers to no material things but simples (1990, 108).

Gabrielle Contessa defends a similar view. He maintains that

> …sentences such as [the cat is on the mat] can (literally) express true propositions (in all contexts) and that, if common sense is wrong about anything, it is not wrong in believing that there are cats and that they sit on mats but is (at most) wrong in believing that cats and mats are composite objects (2014, 201).

This kind of eliminativist, I claim, is the kind from which easy ontologists cannot adequately distinguish themselves in light of the problem of referential adicity. For all easy ontologists have said, expressions like 'Cuppy' might refer to different Cuppy-wise arrangement of atoms at each time such expressions are appropriately applied.

(Easy ontologists might resist the pull of eliminativism by endorsing a form of *composition as identity* ("CAI"), the thesis that composite objects are numerically identical to their parts.[13] This won't do the easy ontologist much good. CAI is a highly disputed thesis among heavyweight ontologists. We must ask questions such as: is composition the very same relation as identity? If not, what defensible form of CAI is available? Endorsing CAI holds easy ontology hostage to controversial theses concerning composition, identity, and the relation between the two – topics from which Thomasson herself steers clear. The whole point of going in for easy ontology is that it makes ontology easy; not so once we bring CAI into play.)

At base, the problem of referential adicity is a problem of semantic underdetermination. It's plausible that the rules governing 'Cuppy' determine its referential adicity. However, we can construct a different expression – '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' – which, while plausibly governed by the same rules of use, ought to differ in referential adicity from 'Cuppy'. So easy ontologists have no way to guarantee that their view differs from the relevant form of compatibilist eliminativism. Sentences like "Cuppy persists over time" might just be another way of saying "There is a succession of Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms, each of which plays a Cuppy-like functional role". Of course,

[13] Cf. Lewis (1991, 81-2), Van Inwagen (1994), Merricks (1999), Sider (2007), and Wallace (2011) on CAI.

this semantic problem also leads to an epistemic problem – we have no way of *knowing* that expressions like 'Cuppy' refer to composite objects rather than atoms arranged Cuppy-wise. And we'll soon see that even if easy ontologists can answer the semantic problem, they cannot answer downstream epistemic concerns.

## §3: Responding to the problem

### *§3.1: Grammar and stipulation*

Recall Thomasson's claim that 'Cuppy' "…*aims to refer* to a single object, ['atoms arranged Cuppy-wise'] to refer plurally to many particles" (2014, 282). This suggests that easy ontologists might respond to the problem in the following way: "Sure, we can't infer that Ks are single things solely on the basis that the rules of use governing 'K' are fulfilled. We also need to know that 'K' *functions as* a referentially singular term. If we know both that 'K' functions as referentially singular and that its rules of use are fulfilled, then we can infer that Ks are single things. By that same token, if we know that 'K' *functions as* a referentially plural term, we can infer that 'K' refers to many things." (I take it easy ontologists would say something similar vis-à-vis the nominative/functional distinction.)

As it stands, to say that a term *functions* as referentially singular adds little to the claim that a term *is* referentially singular. If this response is to go some way towards addressing the problem, easy ontologists need to identify what it takes for some terms to function as referentially singular, and others as referentially plural.

Consider a proposal according to which an expression functions as referentially singular because it's *grammatically* singular, and where an expression functions as referentially plural because it's *grammatically* plural. This account seems to me inadequate, and I don't believe that Thomasson would endorse it. Evaluating this account will nevertheless prove helpful – it will show

us what easy ontologists need to say in order to address the problem.

The most glaring issue with the grammatical account is that it doesn't jibe with the linguistic data. As discussed above, it's plausible that expressions like 'The Supreme Court' are referentially plural (and functional), even though they're grammatically singular. Endorsing the present account would force us to say that expressions like 'The Supreme Court' cannot even possibly be used in such a way as to refer to many things. This is odd. We can use language however we want. If we want to use a grammatically singular expressions in such a way that it functions to refer to many things, why should conventional grammatical constructions stop us? Furthermore, we saw Thomasson grant in the previous subsection that there's a reasonable question – at the level of how the language works – concerning whether 'the Supreme Court' is referentially singular or plural. The grammatical account prevents us from maintaining even this much.

Since we can use language however we want, there's no barrier to our stipulating that grammatically singular terms are heretofore to function as referentially singular. But if we're free to make this sort of stipulation, then nothing should stop us from abandoning the grammatical account altogether and simply stipulating that 'The Supreme Court' is heretofore to function as referentially plural.

To make such a stipulation is to effect a change in how we use our expressions. This is why Thomasson claims that there's a reasonable question concerning whether 'The Supreme Court' is referentially singular or plural – we can resolve this question by evaluating how 'The Supreme Court' is used. Generalizing, say that we intend for 'E' to function as referentially singular. Then we intend to use 'E' in such a way that 'E' is appropriately applied only if there's a single object. To talk of 'appropriate application' is to talk of rules of use. So we effect a change in the rules of use governing 'E' when we stipulate that 'E' is referentially singular.

In §2, I argued that ‘Cuppy’ and ‘Cuppy$_{role}$’ are plausibly governed by the same rules of use. If so, then their respective referential types are indeterminate, and the problem of referential adicity remains. So if the stipulative maneuver under discussion is to be of any use in responding to the problem, easy ontologists must outline some difference between the rules of use governing ‘Cuppy’ and ‘Cuppy$_{role}$’ that would allow for stipulations concerning their referential adicity to take effect. Identifying a relevant difference would allow Thomasson to cash out on her claim that there’s a reasonable question – at the level of how the language works – concerning the referential adicity of expressions like ‘The Supreme Court’. I’ll now consider some possible differences between the rules governing ‘Cuppy’ and ‘Cuppy$_{role}$’.

*§3.2: Coapplication and reapplication*

Recall that Thomasson characterizes coapplication conditions as “…rules that… specify under what conditions the term would be applied again to one and the same entity” (Thomasson 2007, 40). Specifying the conditions under which a term can be reapplied to one and the same entity is more demanding a task than specifying the conditions under which a term can be merely reapplied. Recall the expression ‘the cat currently resting under my nightstand’. At the time of writing, this expression refers to my cat (‘Toots’). If another cat surreptitiously took Toots’ spot under my nightstand, I could reapply the expression ‘the cat currently resting under my nightstand’ – but it wouldn’t apply to one and the same entity. So while ‘the cat currently resting under my nightstand’ is appropriately reapplied under certain circumstances, whatever rule governs its appropriate reapplication cannot be a coapplication condition. We must distinguish between an expression’s *coapplication* and its *mere reapplication*.

The expression ‘the cat currently resting under my nightstand’ is referentially singular and functional, making it type SF. How should easy ontologists characterize its rules of use?

Considering the distinction between coapplication and mere reapplication, I suggest the following: easy ontologists should maintain that 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' is governed by application conditions but supplies no coapplication conditions. On this view, 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' is governed merely by the following application conditions:

- The expression 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' is appropriately applied provided that there's a cat currently resting under my nightstand.

If 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' is appropriately applied, then we can conclude that there's a cat. But we cannot conclude that if this expression is appropriately applied at $t_2$ that this expression refers to the same cat to which it referred at $t_1$. So while 'the cat currently resting under my nightstand' can be appropriately applied at different times, it appropriate reapplication fails to show that that it refers to one and the same entity.

Easy ontologists are free to say the same thing about all referentially plural expressions. Such expressions, the proposal goes, are governed by application conditions but aren't governed by coapplication conditions. This indicates that we should characterize the application conditions governing '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' in the following way:

- The term '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise ('AACW').

The expressions 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' are governed by the same application conditions, but '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' has no coapplication conditions at all. Thus, 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' differ in their rules of use. This allows easy ontologists to distinguish referentially nominative from referentially functional expressions at the level of their rules of use. This goes some way towards resisting the problem of referential adicity.

The distinction between coapplication and mere reapplication generates a minor epistemic worry – how do we know that our term 'Cuppy' is governed by both application and coapplication

conditions and not governed by application conditions alone? This shouldn't much concern easy ontologists. I take it that ordinary speakers are inclined to agree that when they use terms like 'Cuppy', they're referring to one and the same entity over time. This indicates that they're using 'Cuppy' in such a way that it's governed by both application and coapplication conditions. And even if they're not, we're free to introduce both 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' with the application and coapplication conditions so outlined. This permits us to conclude that if there are AACW, then Cuppy exists.

But the distinction between coapplication and mere reapplication doesn't resolve the problem of referential adicity outright. Recall that '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is intended to be both referentially functional *and referentially plural*. By maintaining that that referentially functional terms supply no coapplication conditions, easy ontologists can secure the claim that 'Cuppy' is referentially nominative and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' referentially plural – but they haven't yet secured the claim that 'Cuppy' is referentially singular and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' referentially nominative.

Indeed, we can reintroduce the problem of referential adicity by considering another expression. First note that easy ontologists endorse *ontological permissivism*. Thomasson writes:

> We can… introduce new or technical terms in ways that permit easy arguments for the existence of their referents, enabling us to make easy arguments for the existence of mereological sums, Van Inwagen's gollyswoggles (which exist if a piece of clay is squished in a particular shape), Hirsch's incars (which are guaranteed to exist whenever a car is in a garage), and so on (Thomasson 2014, 214).[14]

Thus, Thomasson maintains that there exist not only ordinary objects like cups and plates but also extraordinary objects like *incars* (objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages that shrink out of existence as cars exit garages) and *mereological sums* of arrangements of atoms. For,

[14] See Sider (2001), Hawthorne (2006), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), and Fairchild (2019; 2021) for other defenses of permissivism. The 'incar' example is due to Hirsch (1982, 32), the 'gollyswoggle' example to Van Inwagen (1990, 126).

she claims, we can "introduce new or technical terms in ways that permit easy arguments for the existence of their referents".

Suppose we wish to introduce the expression '$AACW_{sum}$' to refer to the mereological sum of whatever Cuppy-wise arrangement of atoms currently plays the relevant Cuppy-like functional role. Since '$AACW_{sum}$' is meant to be referentially functional, easy ontologists should maintain that it has no coapplication conditions. And we can presumably introduce '$AACW_{sum}$' with the following application conditions:

- The expression '$AACW_{sum}$' is appropriately applied provided that there are AACW.

Now note that '$Cuppy_{role}$' and '$AACW_{sum}$' are governed by the same rules of use. But '$Cuppy_{role}$' is meant to be referentially plural, whereas '$AACW_{sum}$' is meant to be referentially singular. Another dilemma emerges; either both expressions are referentially singular, or both are referentially plural. If both are referentially singular, how can we get plural reference off the ground at all? If both are referentially plural, why think that easy ontologists can secure the existence of mereological sums *qua* composite objects? Furthermore, if easy ontologists cannot distinguish between singularity and plurality at the level of rules of use, why think that 'Cuppy' is singular rather than plural? The problem of referential adicity has emerged in a new dress.

An adequate response to the problem of referential adicity must explain why 'Cuppy' is both singular and nominative. In explaining why 'Cuppy' is nominative, easy ontologists identified a difference between the coapplication conditions governing 'Cuppy' and '$Cuppy_{role}$' – namely, the former is governed by such-and-such coapplication conditions, whereas the latter isn't governed by coapplication conditions at all. Easy ontologists cannot similarly eliminate application conditions altogether; surely there are circumstances wherein 'Cuppy' and '$Cuppy_{role}$' can be appropriately applied. Rather, easy ontologists must identify a difference between the application

conditions governing ‘Cuppy’ and those governing ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’, a difference that extends to the application conditions governing ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’ and ‘$AACW_{sum}$’.

*§3.3: Building ‘objects’ into the rules*

Given what easy ontologists say about application conditions, it seems as if both ‘Cuppy’ and ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’ are governed by the following application conditions:

- The term ‘Cuppy’ (and ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’) is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise (“AACW”).

Easy ontologists need to show that I’ve gone wrong somewhere in outlining the application conditions for ‘Cuppy’ and ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’. And if they can identify a difference between the application conditions governing these expressions, they might be able to marshal this difference into a response to the problem of referential adicity.

There’s a one notable difference concerning how we intend to use ‘Cuppy’ and ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’; ‘Cuppy’ is meant to refer to a single object, and ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’ to many objects. This suggests that we ought to construct the application conditions governing ‘Cuppy’ in such a way that ‘Cuppy’ is appropriately applied only if there’s a single thing made up of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise. By that same token, we ought to construct the coapplication conditions governing ‘Cuppy’ in such a way that ‘Cuppy’ is appropriately coapplied only if there’s a single thing that persists over time. Thus, one might claim, the rules governing ‘Cuppy’ must actually look something like the following:

- The term ‘Cuppy’ is appropriately applied provided that *there’s an object* made up of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.
- The term ‘Cuppy’ is appropriately coapplied at $t_2$ provided that (i) *there are objects* $O_1$ and $O_2$ at $t_1$ and $t_2$, respectively, (ii) $O_1$ makes appropriate the application of ‘Cuppy’ at $t_1$, and (iii) $O_1 = O_2$.

By contrast, ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’ is meant to refer to many objects. So we should say that ‘$Cuppy_{role}$’ can be

appropriately applied even if there's not a single thing made up of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.[15] Its application conditions thus remain the same, namely:

- The term '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.

This would make the application conditions governing 'Cuppy' differ from those governing '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$'.

This proposal generalizes in a very natural way. Recall that there are four different referential types: those that are singular/nominative ("type SN"), singular/functional ("type SF"), plural/nominative ("type PN"), and plural/functional ("type PF"). The singular/plural distinction tracks whether we're referring to one or multiple objects with our use of referring expressions. The nominative/functional distinction tracks whether we're referring to the same object or possibly to different objects when we reapply referring expressions. As I've been arguing, we can account for the singular/plural distinction by building statements about objects into the rules governing our expressions. And we've seen that easy ontologists can account for the nominative/functional distinction by maintaining that functional expressions have no coapplication conditions. Here, then, is the full proposal:

Object-Rules

- Expressions of type SN (i) feature statements about a single object in their application conditions and (ii) have coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type SF (i) feature statements about a single object in their application conditions but (ii) have no coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type PN (i) feature statements about many objects in their application conditions and (ii) have coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type PF (i) feature statements about many objects in their application conditions but (ii) have no coapplication conditions.

Object-Rules would ensure that the rules governing expressions of all referential types differ in

[15] Both Schaffer (2009) and Korman (2015, §4.4; 2019) press a variant of this line as an objection to easy ontology.

systematic ways.

I grant that endorsing Object-Rules would solve the problem of referential adicity. Indeed, as I'll discuss in §4, some version of this proposal seems to me the correct response. It's not, however, a response presently available to easy ontologists. Recall once more Thomasson's claim that we can "…introduce a term 'cup' as follows: if there are particles arranged cupwise, we are entitled to infer 'there is a cupwise arrangement of particles', and so to infer: 'there is a cup'" (2014, 106-7). She endorses this claim for good reason: it's crucial to the easy ontologist's project that we needn't settle debates about whether there are such objects as cups prior to determining if 'cup' refers. For we can justifiably say things like "There are cups", according to Object-Rules, only if we've already settled questions about the ontological status of cups. Endorsing Object-Rules would thereby render easy ontology entirely non-deflationary – we would have to engage with murky existential questions prior to saying that the rules governing 'cup' are satisfied. Ontology would turn out to be hard indeed.

Is there another proposal concerning the rules governing 'Cuppy' and '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' that could systematically account for their differing referential characteristics? Prospects look dim. The only difference between these expressions concerns whether they're meant to refer to a single thing or to many things; they're otherwise appropriately applied and (merely) reapplied under precisely the same conditions. And for easy ontology to have its intended deflationary import, easy ontologists must maintain that we can introduce the term 'Cuppy' in such a way that 'Cuppy' is appropriately applied provided merely that there are AACW. The application conditions governing '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' would have to be less demanding than even this to adequately account for its referential adicity.

When explaining rules of use, Thomasson says that the rules governing our terms needn't be statable (cf. Thomasson 2014, 91-3). So it's open for easy ontologists to maintain that there's

some systematic rule-based difference between expressions of differing referential types that we cannot identify. In our current argumentative context, this doesn't help the easy ontologist – the problem of referential adicity simply transforms from a semantic problem into an epistemic one. If we can't articulate a rule-based difference between expressions of differing referential types, then we have no way of *knowing* whether 'Cuppy' is type SN rather than type PF. Thus, we have no way of knowing whether easy ontology is a linguistically sophisticated variant of eliminativism.

## §4: Bootstrapping and quantifier variance

### *§4.1: Solving the problem*

The expressions 'singular', 'plural', 'nominative', and 'functional' are each defined in terms of expressions like 'single object', 'multiple things', 'different things', and their cognates. Thomasson maintains that expressions like 'object' and 'thing' have multiple uses, some of them well-formed and others not. On their sortal use, "…'object', 'thing', and the like clearly may be used as sortals if the speaker associates them with [rules of use] outlining what it would take for there to be an object or thing in a given situation, and under what conditions we could refer to the same object or thing again" (2009, 458). On their covering use, "…'object' or 'thing' is used as a place-holder for any genuine sortal term, and is guaranteed to apply given the application of any genuine (first-order) sortal term (or at least most such terms)" (2009, 459-60). And the neutral use of 'object' is supposed to lack rules of use, making it sortal-independent.

The sortal use of 'object' is ill-suited to the present dialectic. This use of 'object' applies only to "…medium-sized lumps of stuff well bonded together but independently mobile from surrounding stuff" (Thomasson 2009, 458); but a single atom is also an object, insofar as we think of expressions like 'that atom' as referentially singular. And since Thomasson argues that the neutral use of 'object' is semantically defective (ibid. 460-2), I'll put this use to the side as well.

This leaves us with the covering use. Moving forward, I'll assume that the definitions of referential singularity, plurality, and so on appeal to the covering use of 'object'.

Now recall the proposed solution to the problem of referential adicity I discussed in §3.3: Object-Rules. To reiterate:

Object-Rules

- Expressions of type SN (i) feature statements about a single object in their application conditions and (ii) have coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type SF (i) feature statements about a single object in their application conditions but (ii) have no coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type PN (i) feature statements about many objects in their application conditions and (ii) have coapplication conditions.
- Expressions of type PF (i) feature statements about many objects in their application conditions but (ii) have no coapplication conditions.

I argued that endorsing Object-Rules would allow easy ontologists to respond to the problem of referential adicity, but that it would render their view non-deflationary. With Thomasson's discussion of the covering use of 'object' in mind, however, we can make Object-Rules available to easy ontologists while retaining easy ontology's deflationary spirit.

Let's begin by assuming that the expression '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is both referentially plural and functional (and thus type PF). Recall the application conditions governing '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$':

- The term '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise ("AACW").

The covering use of 'object' is appropriately applied and coapplied to the referent of a sortal term whenever a sortal term is appropriately applied and coapplied. Assuming that '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is type PF and that sortal terms refer to composite objects, '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' isn't a sortal term.

Easy ontologists might now claim that we can introduce a covering use of 'composite object' (hereafter just 'object') with the following rules of use:

- The term 'object' is appropriately applied provided that '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied.
- The term 'object' is appropriately coapplied provided that '$\text{Cuppy}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately

merely reapplied.

Furthermore, easy ontologists should claim that 'object' *fails to apply to Cuppy$_{role}$*. This is kosher by the easy ontologist's lights. They already maintain that if 'AACW' is appropriately applied, then so is 'Cuppy', but presumably 'Cuppy' doesn't apply to AACW. Now recall the easy ontologist's central claim:

- (E) There are Ks iff the application conditions actually associated with 'K' are fulfilled.

Suppose that the application conditions actually associated with 'Cuppy$_{role}$' are fulfilled. Thus, by stipulation, the application conditions actually associated with this covering use of 'object' are fulfilled. Therefore, by (E), there is a composite object.

I'll now argue that this response provides easy ontologists with means to solve the problem of referential adicity. Given how we've introduced 'object', we know that there's a composite object whenever the rules governing 'Cuppy$_{role}$' are fulfilled. So the covering use of 'object' applies to something-or-other whenever the rules governing 'Cuppy$_{role}$' are fulfilled. And indeed, 'object' is appropriately applied and coapplied under precisely those conditions where 'Cuppy$_{role}$' is appropriately applied and merely reapplied. That is, we know (i) that there's a composite object whenever there are atoms arranged Cuppy-wise, and (ii) that this object continues to exist whenever various Cuppy-wise arrangements of atoms bear the appropriate relationship of spatiotemporal continuity to one another.

Nothing prevents easy ontologists from including this use of 'object' within the rules governing our expressions. In particular, they're now permitted to introduce the term 'Cuppy' in the manner I suggested in §3.3:

- The term 'Cuppy' is appropriately applied provided that there's an object made up of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise.
- The term 'Cuppy' is appropriately coapplied at $t_2$ provided that (i) there are two objects $O_1$ and $O_2$ at $t_1$ and $t_2$, respectively, (ii) $O_1$ makes appropriate the application of 'Cuppy' at $t_1$,

and (iii) $O_1 = O_2$.

Given how we've introduced the term 'composite object', we know that there's an object made up of atoms arranged Cuppy-wise that persists over such-and-such changes whenever the rules governing '$Cuppy_{role}$' are fulfilled. So 'Cuppy' is appropriately applied and coapplied whenever '$Cuppy_{role}$' is appropriately applied and reapplied. Furthermore, easy ontologists can now endorse Object-Rules wholesale. So they can maintain that 'Cuppy' is type SN. And for any term relevantly like '$Cuppy_{role}$', easy ontologists can introduce the rules governing 'composite object' in the manner just outlined.

The problem of referential adicity is thus averted. Easy ontologists must revise their claim that expressions which purport to refer to cups need only mention atoms arranged cupwise among their rules. This doesn't make ontology difficult – whenever there are atoms arranged cupwise, 'object' applies to something-or-other in its covering sense. And given this fact, we're trivially permitted to construct an 'object'-loaded expression that refers to this entity. So easy ontologists can endorse Object-Rules without forfeiting their deflationary credentials.

One might worry that my proposed solution to the problem of referential adicity involves "defining composite objects into existence" (cf. Bennett 2009, 54-7). For I've argued that easy ontologists should stipulate that the term 'object' is appropriately applied and coapplied whenever '$Cuppy_{role}$' is appropriately applied and reapplied; it follows that there exists a composite object whenever $Cuppy_{role}$ exists. I reply that my proposed revision to easy ontology leaves the easy ontologist no worse for wear with respect to this objection than before. Consider how Thomasson herself responds to this worry:

> The trivial inferences entitle us to infer that objects of a certain kind exist, but they do not create the disputed objects… The conceptual truths may indeed introduce a new noun term such as 'proposition', 'property', 'event', or 'number': but what is introduced (or 'defined into existence') is just the term or concept. The entities the existence of which we can infer

> are not created by this conceptual or terminological introduction. Instead, they typically exist quite independently of our language and concepts… (2014, 217).

I say precisely the same thing. When I introduced the expression 'object', I defined an expression, or perhaps a concept, into existence – I didn't define any objects into existence. While we can infer that composite objects exist by considering how we use the expression 'object', such objects exist independently of human action or thought. Put another way: how we use the expression 'object' determines what we mean by 'object', but it doesn't determine the existence of composite objects.[16]

*§4.2: The price tag*

Recall *quantifier variance*, the thesis that sentences like "There are cups" can vary in truth value depending on what we mean by quantifier-like expressions such as 'there are' and 'the existence of an object'. Thomasson writes that easy ontology "…does not rely on quantifier variance… [thus,] the vast majority of recent defenses of hard ontology, focused on responding to threats of quantifier variance, are irrelevant to assessing the original Carnapian deflationary position" (2014, 80).[17] I disagree. Perhaps Thomasson's original presentation of easy ontology doesn't rely on quantifier variance. So outlined, easy ontologists cannot respond to the problem of referential adicity. And I contend that my proposed solution to the problem commits easy ontologists to a form quantifier variance. I'll now explain why.

Thomasson endorses ontological permissivism; she countenances not only cups and chairs, but also incars and mereological sums. Quantifier variantists are welcome to endorse permissivism, but they need not. Variantists maintain that we could speak a language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true, or one according to which "There are cars and incars"

[16] Cf. Hirsch (2010, 69-72).
[17] See also Thomasson (2007, 118-9).

is true. We could even speak a language according to which "There are neither cars nor incars" is true. It depends on which sense of expression like 'there are' and 'the existence of an object' we choose to adopt.

My solution to the problem of referential adicity doesn't involve directly fixing the meaning of expressions like 'there are' and 'the existence of an object' – it involves stipulating the circumstances under which terms like 'object' are appropriately applied and coapplied. But in combination with the easy ontologist's claim about the formal role of 'exists', my solution entails that we could speak a language according to which "There are cars but no incars" is true, or one according to which "There are cars and incars" is true.

To illustrate, imagine that a car is inside a garage, and suppose we wish to introduce the expression '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' to refer to whatever collection of atoms arranged carwise is currently located inside the garage. We could introduce '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' with the following rules of use:

- The expression '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' is appropriately applied provided that there are atoms arranged carwise inside a garage.

As I argued in §4.1, we're free to stipulate that the covering use of 'object' applies provided that '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' applies; we could then use this sense of 'object' to introduce the expression 'Incar' with the following rules:

- The expression 'Incar' is appropriately applied provided that there's an object made up of atoms arranged carwise that are located inside of a garage.
- The expression 'Incar' is appropriately coapplied at $t_2$ provided that (i) there are two objects $O_1$ and $O_2$ at $t_1$ and $t_2$, respectively, (ii) $O_1$ makes appropriate the application of 'Incar' at $t_1$, and (iii) $O_1 = O_2$.

Therefore, if we choose to adopt a use of 'object' according to which 'object' applies provided that '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' applies, then "There are incars" is true just in case "There are $\text{incars}_{\text{role}}$" is true. But we're under no obvious obligation to adopt this use of 'object'. Indeed, we could just as well adopt a use of 'object' which fails to apply provided that 'car' applies. In this language, the sentence "There

are *cars*" would be false.

One might worry that when we use 'object' in such a way that "There are incars" is false, we're merely restricting our domain of quantification to objects like Cuppy (cf. Lewis 1986, 3). This isn't the case. Suppose we adopt a use of 'object' according to which 'object' fails to apply when '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' applies. Now suppose we're presented with the rules of use introduced above governing 'Incar'. As per Object-Rules, we should maintain that 'Incar' aims to refer to a composite object, but that it fails to refer altogether. So, we conclude, there is no composite object co-located with a car when it's inside a garage. Of course, we must grant that there are other ways to use 'object' according to which sentences like "The expression 'Incar' refers to a composite object" are true. But those who adopt an alternative use of 'object' mean something different by expressions like 'singular reference to a composite object'.

Quantifier variantists sometimes observe that if we vary what we mean by quantifier-like expressions such as 'exists' and 'there are', we similarly vary what we mean by expressions like 'reference to an object'. But they maintain that the meaning of 'reference to an object' depends upon what we mean by quantifier-like expressions. Eli Hirsch writes that quantifier variance is

> [t]he key to understanding the relationship between [different quantifier languages]… Our [English] concept of '(the existence of) something" is not the same as the corresponding concept expressed in [a permissivist-friendly language]. All of the other differences between the languages depend on that one (2010, 239).[18]

My proposal goes in the opposite direction: what we mean by 'reference to an object' determines what we mean by quantifier-like expressions. The formal role of 'exists', as defended by easy ontologists, remains fixed. Object-Rules then issues in the claim that what we mean by 'reference to an object' varies given what we mean by 'object' (introduced as above). If we adopt a meaning of 'object' according to which 'object' fails to apply provided that '$\text{Incar}_{\text{role}}$' applies, then "The

[18] See also Hirsch & Warren (2017).

term ‘Incar’ refers to an object” is false. This implies that “There are no incars” is true.

To respond to the problem of referential adicity, easy ontologists must commit themselves to quantifier variance – their route to variance, however, differs from the traditional one. Variantists typically argue for their view by appealing to *the principle of linguistic charity*, a constraint on linguistic interpretation which tells us to interpret a speaker’s utterances and beliefs in such a way that their utterances and beliefs come out as reasonable as possible.[19] This is a *top-down* semantic approach whereby “[s]entential semantic facts are explanatorily prior to subsentential semantic facts” (Warren 2017, 87). I’ve made no appeal to the principle of charity. I’ve argued that if we vary what we mean by ‘object’, we thereby vary what we mean by ‘reference to an object’; the meanings of quantifier-like expressions vary in turn. This is a *bottom-up* semantic approach whereby “[s]ubsentential semantic facts are explanatorily prior to sentential semantic facts” (ibid., 87).[20] To distinguish it from the traditional route to quantifier variance, call the view I’m defending “reference variance”.

My solution to the problem of referential adicity on the easy ontologist’s behalf issues in reference variance, a new approach to quantifier variance. This is interesting in its own right, and it warrants further investigation. But it comes at a cost. I’ve argued that there are different uses of expressions like ‘object’ according to which sentences like “The term ‘Incar’ refers to a composite object” may vary in truth-value. Critiques of quantifier variance often center on the claim that some quantifier-like expressions cleave more closely to the world’s distinguished ontological structure. Many reject *strong quantifier variance* – the thesis that “…when two quantifier languages are equivalent, there is no use asking which of them is metaphysically better or which

[19] Cf. Lewis (1974; 1983) and Hirsch & Warren (2020, 349).
[20] Perhaps we should call the semantic account my proposal suggests a *mixed* account, given the easy ontologist’s contention that ‘exists’ plays a formal role. At any rate, my account directs more substantial focus to the role played by subsentential terms like ‘object’.

better reflects objective reality" (Hirsch & Warren 2020, 351) – on this basis.[21] I take it that a similar line of criticism extends to the claim that different uses of expressions like 'object' and 'singular reference to an object' are on a metaphysical par.

Thomasson endorses ontological permissivism. If she wishes to retain her permissivist credentials, she must adopt a use of 'object' according to which 'object' applies just in case *any* expression with non-'object'-laden rules of use applies. She must further argue that this use of 'object' is in better standing than its less expansive counterparts. Perhaps this argument would proceed via considerations of naturalness; perhaps she would claim that her use of 'object' strikes the best balance between theoretical virtue and common sense; I'm honestly not sure. But observe that we've landed ourselves back into the heavyweight metaphysician's territory, where difficult questions concerning theoretical virtues and constraints on interpretation take dialectical precedence. We've entered a realm where ontology is not as easy as it seems.

Easy ontologists might try to resist the pull of reference variance. As I've argued, the problem of referential adicity looms large over any attempt to do so. Easy ontologists are thus caught between the Scylla of ontological eliminativism and the Charybdis of heavyweight ontological debate. I see no middle path through which they can navigate.

[21] Cf. Lewis (1983b), Sider (2009; 2011; 2014), and Cameron (2010) for resistance to strong variance. See Hirsch (2010, chapter 11) and Warren (2024) for strong variantist replies.

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