Against Conservatism in Metaphysics[1]

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Abstract
In his recent book, Daniel Korman contrasts ontological conservatives with permissivists and eliminativists about ontology. Roughly speaking, conservatives admit the existence of 'ordinary objects' like trees, dogs, and snowballs, but deny the existence of 'extraordinary objects', like composites of trees and dogs ('trogs'). Eliminativists, on the other hand, deny many or all ordinary objects, while permissivists accept both ordinary and extraordinary objects. Our aim in this paper is to outline some of our reasons for being drawn to permissivism, as well as some of our misgivings about conservative metaphysics. In the first section, we discuss a tempting epistemic line of argument against conservatism. This isn't a line of argument we find especially promising. Our most basic complaint against conservatism is not that conservatism has poor epistemic standing even if true, but instead that conservatism is weird. We develop this thought in the second part of the paper. In the final section we discuss some larger methodological issues about the project of ontology.

In his recent monograph, *Objects*, Daniel Korman contrasts ontological *conservatives* with *permissivists* and *eliminativists* about ontology. Roughly speaking, conservatives admit the existence of 'ordinary objects' like trees, dogs, and snowballs, but deny the existence of 'extraordinary objects', like composites of trees and dogs ('trogs') or snowball-like objects capable of surviving some but not all kinds of substantial squashings ('snowdiscalls'). Eliminativists, on the other hand, deny many or all ordinary objects, while permissivists accept both ordinary and extraordinary objects. Korman is a conservative. We are permissivists. In what follows, we will say something about why we are drawn to permissivism and not very drawn at all to conservatism.

In the first section, we discuss a tempting epistemic line of argument against conservatism. This isn't a line of argument we find especially promising, and in this we agree substantially with Korman. However, we do disagree about the tricky issue of *why* this argument

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isn't promising, and what should be said about the other epistemic issues in the vicinity. We offer what we hope will be helpful remarks about the relevant epistemic issues, often drawing on epistemic ideology that guides our own thinking but is less salient in Korman's presentation. Along the way, we outline some of our misgivings about Korman's discussion.

Our most basic complaint against conservatism is not the thought that conservatism has poor epistemic standing even if true, but instead the thought that conservatism is *weird*, and altogether foreign to our own metaphysical sensibilities. We develop this thought through our discussion of arbitrariness and parity in Section 5. Along the way, we voice some misgivings about Korman's own presentation and appraisal of arbitrariness arguments. In a final section we discuss some larger methodological issues about the project of ontology.

1. Permissivism

First, a few words about our permissivism.

The label 'permissivist', like 'conservative' and 'eliminativist', picks out a broad and heterogeneous family of theories about the structure of the material world.[2] (We might mention in passing two parameters along which one might be permissive. One concerns composition – the permissivist about composition, the 'universalist', will think that any plurality of material objects compose a further object. Another concerns the abundance of coincidence – here, the permissivist allows for a multitude of coincident material objects whenever there is any material object. This kind of permissivist standardly holds that the variety of coincident object have divergent, often radically divergent, essences.)

The locus of the disagreement between conservatives and permissivists is sometimes framed in terms of a question about perception. For example, at one point Korman describes the permissivist as claiming that 'there are countless highly *visible* macroscopic objects right before our eyes'.[3] However, we wish to emphasize that permissivism is itself neutral about such perceptual claims. Even granting,

[2] There are also lots of ways to be an 'eliminativist', though we won't get into that here.

[3] Korman, *Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 13, emphasis added. See also e.g. Hirsch, 'Against Revisionary Ontology', *Philosophical Topics* 30(1) (2002): 107, 117.

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for example, that there are myriad objects that are mereologically coincident with a certain tree, it is far from straightforward to conclude that we *see* each of them whenever we see that tree. Best not to burden the permissivist, then, with controversial theses in the philosophy of perception.

Conservatives are often presented as the friends of common sense, and permissivists as far less friendly (though Korman himself is cautious about this).[4] But, again, it is far from clear whether common sense takes a stand on extraordinary objects. Even granting that common sense does not commit itself to a certain class of extraordinary objects, it remains to be seen whether it is antithetical or merely neutral in regards to the question of their existence. Granted, they do 'escape our notice',[5] at least ordinarily. But why, then, suppose that by the lights of common sense, they seem not to exist? We will not then presume that conservatism is the position of common sense, but we won't pursue this issue further.

Finally (roughly in line with the two parameters mentioned above) Korman distinguishes two subcategories of permissivism. The 'doctrine of plenitude'[6] says that for any function from worlds to filled regions in those worlds, there is an object that exists at exactly those worlds and exactly occupies those regions at those world (this straightforwardly entails a kind of liberalism about spatiotemporal coincidence, at least assuming there are multiple possible worlds).[7]

[4] See especially Korman and Carmichael ('What Do Folk Think about Composition and Does it Matter?', in *Experimental Metaphysics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 187–206), as well as Korman's discussion of 'folk capitulation' (*Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary*, 59–62). See also Rosen and Dorr 'Composition as a Fiction', in R. Gale (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Metaphysics* (Blackwell, 2002), §4 for the observation that Universalism isn't 'manifestly incompatible with what we take for granted'.

[5] Korman, *Objects*, 13.

[6] From Hawthorne, *Metaphysical Essays*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 53.

[7] Other versions of permissivism that allow for a plenitude of coincident objects can be found in, for example, K. Fine, 'Things and Their Parts', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23(1) (1999): 61–74; S. Yablo, 'Identity, Essence, and Indiscernibility', *Journal of Philosophy* 84(6) (1987): 293–314; K. Bennett 'Spatio-temporal Coincidence and the Grounding Problem', *Philosophical Studies* 118(3) (2004): 339–371; A.T. Thomasson *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford University Press, 2007), §9.6 and 10.3; A.T. Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy* (Oxford University Press, 2015) §6.1; M. Eklund, 'Neo-Fregean Ontology', *Philosophical Perspectives* 20(1)

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The doctrine of universalism says 'for any object there is an object composed of those objects'. He goes on to say that the doctrine of plenitude entails universalism.[8]

However, this isn't quite right, since at least the occupational formulation of plenitude in Hawthorne's *Metaphysical Essays* is silent on the mereological relations between region-occupants. That said, we both have some sympathy with both universalism and plenitude as defined, but we do not wish to suppose that there are no *other* interesting versions of permissivism beyond those built out of some combination of occupational plenitude and mereological universalism. Still, that combination gives a good flavour of our theoretical leanings and we shall not in this paper be examining the comparative merits of various ways to develop a radically permissivist outlook.[9]

2. Epistemological Arguments Against Conservatism

One potential line of attack against conservatism is epistemological. Roughly speaking, the argumentative strategy is to argue that *if* conservatism is true, then various of our ontological beliefs are in epistemic trouble. (The details will depend in part on the target ontological beliefs: those of ordinary people, or those of the metaphysician who propounds conservative views, or both? Beliefs about what there *is*, or beliefs about what there *isn't*, or both? And so on.)

A very natural broad-brush way to pursue this kind of argument is to appeal to ways that our ontological views are contingent on the vicissitudes of our social, cultural and/or biological milieu, and the observation that as we move across modal space, variation in these parameters induces variation in ontological views, without corresponding variation in the metaphysical structure of the world. Contingencies in whether we recognize things essentially suitable for holding flowers (as we ordinarily do) or whether we recognize car-shaped things

(2006): 95–121; S-J. Leslie, 'Essence, Plenitude, and Paradox', *Philosophical Perspectives* 25(1) (2011): 277–296; R. Inman, 'Neo-Aristotelian Plenitude', *Philosophical Studies* 168(3) (2014): 583–597; M. Jago, 'Essence and the Grounding Problem', in *Reality Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 99–120.

[8] Korman, *Objects*, 17.

[9] See Fairchild, 'Unlimited Ontology and Its Limits' (PhD Thesis), for discussion of the varieties of permissivism.

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essentially contained in garages (as we ordinarily do not) may not correspond to contingencies in whether there *are* such things.

Assuming a sufficiently extravagant version of permissivism, there is *prima facie* no problem here: there is something for everyone, so to speak. For any modal profile we might cook up, there will be something in the world to answer to it, at least according to plenitude-friendly picture thinking. But if only a select few of the candidate modal profiles are actually instantiated in the world – as the conservative would have us think – then then it is much harder to be charitable towards our counterparts with divergent metaphysical perspectives. Given conservatism, if we are right, then our counterparts, almost certainly, are wrong. Aren't we at best lucky to be getting at the truth? And isn't that kind of luck incompatible with knowledge?

We can easily imagine the plenitude lover being tempted by this kind of argumentative strategy. However, we do not think that it is especially promising. Let us briefly say why we're pessimistic.

An obvious point to begin with is that some luck in acquiring the truth is by no means straightforwardly incompatible with knowing the truth. If by sheer luck you turn your head in a particular direction and see someone robbing your home, that hardly precludes you *knowing* that there is someone robbing your home. The key issue, then, is whether the kind of luck in question is incompatible with knowledge. And here we are very skeptical. The most compelling cases where luck is incompatible with a true belief counting as knowledge are cases where very minor tweaks in the environment would have induced a false belief. For example: suppose that someone is only barely under six feet tall, and you believe that they are under six feet tall, and furthermore you would have *also* believed that they were under six feet if they were *exactly* six feet – the kind of proneness to error in this case *is* suggestive of a lack of knowledge. But if instead, you have a true belief about a subject matter where you would have had a false belief if you had gone to Harvard, or had been born into certain cult-infused households, or had been instructed in a different religious tradition, *that* kind of proneness to error seems far less indicative of an absence of knowledge. (For those thinking of knowledge in a safety-theoretic way, this gives us the following heuristic: the relevant 'close' worlds that test for knowledge are ones that are not allowed to vary very much as far as the process of belief-fixation is concerned.) And *prima facie*, the proneness to error made salient by vicissitudes in culture, biology, and so on is more akin to the family of examples that are epistemologically less damaging.

Now, there may nonetheless be some cases where the vicissitudes in ontological belief-fixation are so close to hand as to be more obviously

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knowledge depriving. Suppose for example – and this is not especially far fetched – that various ordinary people oscillate between asserting something along the lines of 'Ships cease to be when they sink' and 'Ships continue to be when sink, its just that they need a whole lot of work to become seaworthy again'. Given a conservative metaphysics, one will struggle to find a plausible contextualist semantics according to which both speeches are true. If, when adopting one perspective, one is in real danger of the other, then this may indeed be a case where one is too lucky to know.

However, we see no compelling general argument to the effect that, assuming conservatism, true beliefs are too epistemically precarious to count as knowledge. In the sinking ship case, the danger of error is much more live than need generally be the case assuming conservatism and a general dependency of ontological views on culture, biology, etc.

We would like to introduce one further theme. Even supposing that a community has seriously misguided views about when things come in and out of existence, that need not at all mean than that propositions they express by claims of the form 'There are Ns', where 'N' is a natural kind term in their language, are false. Consider an example inspired by Korman's own discussion: suppose a community has the word 'uptree', and further suppose that there are trees. When the community is in the presence of an upright tree, the members of the community say 'There is an uptree'. And when the tree topples over, the community say 'The uptree has just ceased to exist'. The community also says things like 'Uptrees are essentially upright'. Suppose we embrace some sort of conservatism according to which there are trees, but there is nothing coincident with an upright tree that is essentially upright. What should we make of this community?

Here is one point that bears emphasis: insofar as 'uptree' is functioning as a kind of natural kind term, we should say that members of this community are speaking the truth when they say 'there are uptrees'. We think the most reasonable semantics here is one according to which the word 'uptree' picks out the kind *tree*, and the community just has incorrect views about the essence of trees. (People similarly had incorrect views about the essence of gold and of stars, but that does not dissuade us from taking the kinds *gold* and *stars* to be the designata of the relevant natural kind terms in their mouths.) What this ultimately means is that claims of the form 'there are Ns' – for example, 'there are trees' – are particularly non-precarious sorts of claims. Wildly incorrect views about essence will not by themselves stop such claims from being true. (Of course, if simples

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arranged treewise composed nothing at all, that would be a different matter! The point is that merely having wildly incorrect views about essence does not make for the falsity of one's existential claims.) Thus, claims like 'there are trees' ought, by conservative lights, count as especially stable in truth value across modal space, even if views about essence and persistence conditions vary quite wildly across that space.

Since we are not optimistic about epistemological arguments against conservatism, epistemological principles and premises are unlikely to constitute the central battleground in our fight for plenitude. We ultimately agree with Korman on this front: the plenitude lover has no good argument to the effect that she is on epistemically firm footing, but the conservative's position is epistemically *un*stable. That said, we have some misgivings about Korman's epistemological remarks, some of which we briefly indicate below.

3. Korman on Debunking

Korman anticipates that the central thrust of the epistemological critique of conservatism has to do with a lack of explanatory connection between the subject matter of ontological beliefs and the beliefs themselves. As he sees things, the lack of such a connection is epistemologically bad news, and the acknowledged lack of a connection is *especially* bad news, because it constitutes a 'defeater' of one's ontological beliefs. He then considers something like the following argument being run against conservatism by the permissivist: our ordinary ontological beliefs are dictated by the contingencies of biology, culture, etc, and not by the metaphysical fabric of the world that constitutes the subject matter of the relevant beliefs. (i.e. there is no 'alethic explanation' of our beliefs). Neither is the metaphysical fabric of the world (except perhaps in special cases) dictated by our doxastic makeup (i.e. there is no 'doxastic explanation' of the facts of ontology). This is (the argument goes) especially bad news for the conservative, insofar as the conservative rests his case on the epistemic good-standing of ordinary ontological beliefs. This is at least very close to what Korman calls the *Debunking Argument* against conservatism.

As we read him, there are three main threads running through Korman's discussion of the debunking argument. First, he argues that the permissivist would *also* be in epistemic trouble were there no explanatory connection between our ontological beliefs and the world. Second, the plenitude lover has no special advantage *vis-à-vis* the conservative in making room for such an explanatory

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connection. Third, the conservative *can* make room for a suitable connection: Korman's own proposal is that we directly *apprehend* the relevant facts of metaphysical structure. (Although the details of how this works are bound to be a little elusive, he provides a proto-theory of the explanatory connection that the conservative needs.)

Korman devotes much of his attention to the first thread. He argues that familiar and tempting arguments for permissivism rely just as much on the epistemic good-standing of our ordinary ontological beliefs, and so the permissivist who wishes to motivate her view thus is largely in the same boat as the conservative with respect to the debunking challenge. As we read him, he thinks it is not promising to try to put our ontological beliefs on firm epistemic footing simply by populating the world with so many objects that we are not lucky to hit the mark. For even if we are not lucky in this sense, a lack of explanatory connection between ontological beliefs and their subject matter is still bad news for those beliefs. (By analogy, positing a pluriverse so rich that pretty much any belief of the form 'Somewhere out there, an alien is doing *F* right now' was true at this and other close possible worlds would not suffice to put those beliefs in good epistemic standing.)

As we said above, we already agree that there is not a promising line for the permissivist here. But, nonetheless, we still have some misgivings about framing the epistemic issues in the vicinity in terms of 'explanatory connections', as Korman does. Here briefly are some of our worries:

First, it does not seem especially clear that knowledge of a subject matter requires *either* an alethic *or* a doxastic connection between subject matter and belief. When we know something about the future, it is not quite the subject matter of the belief – i.e. facts about the future – that explains the belief.[10] (Of course, one might relax things: perhaps it is good enough that the belief be explained not by its subject matter, but instead by something that explains its subject matter. But then one might think, by parity of reasoning, that it might also be good enough that our belief in tables be explained by something that constitutes its subject matter rather than the subject matter itself. Once the alethic dimension of the explanatory requirement is relaxed in this or that way, it may be too weak to be interesting.)[11]

[10] Except in very special cases, a doxastic explanation is unavailable.

[11] Another way of relaxing things is to allow that the beliefs that form the justificatory basis of the belief is explanatorily connected, even if the

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A similar worry is made vivid by thinking about beliefs about logic. It seems far from clear to us that one's belief in some principle of logic – say, universal instantiation or an S4 principle of modal logic – is to be explained by the fact that the belief is about. Again, one might be so lax about explanation that it becomes unmysterious how the truths of logic can explain belief. For example, one might think that pretty much any subsumption of a phenomenon under a general and non-gerrymandered pattern counts as explanation. But in that case, one can explain the fact that (e.g.) someone believes the principle of excluded middle by appeal to the fact that he believes all the basic truths of classical logic, thus giving an explanatory role to the truths of classical logic. But this renders the explanatory filter largely uninteresting.[12] (Note also that some philosophers have provided construals of explanation that are so weak as to be of little interest in this setting. A good example here is David Lewis's 'main thesis' about causal explanation: 'to explain an event is to provided some information about its causal history').[13]

Here is one further concern: Korman's motivating thought seems to be that there must be an explanatory connection between a belief that P and the truth that P.[14] But it seems that a belief may be justified even if properties of a proposition other than its truth explain the belief. Suppose for example, a person is sensitive to objective probabilities in such a way that he believes a proposition only when that proposition is objectively likely (note that we are not thinking of this sensitivity as going through beliefs about objective likelihood). Here it is the likelihood and not the truth of the proposition that explains the belief. But is this really so damning?

In sum, we do not think that putting things in terms of explanatory requirements on knowledge is a promising way to set things up. If the

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resulting belief is not. For discussion of a version of this idea (given an extra internalist tweak), see Korman 'Debunking Arguments in Metaethics and Metaphysics', in A. Goldman & B. McLaughlin (eds), *Metaphysics and Cognitive Science* (*forthcoming*).

[12] An aside: Korman's discussion focuses on justification. We think it is better to begin with the question whether there is an explanatory requirement on knowledge. (If not, then it is hard to see why believing one is absent should defeat knowledge.) But we shall not argue for our preferred order of inquiry here.

[13] David Lewis, 'Causal Explanation', in *Philosophical Papers Vol. II* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 214–240.

[14] Albeit one that he refines in 'Debunking Arguments in Metaethics and Metaphysics' (*forthcoming*).

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permissivist were to have opted for an epistemological critique of conservatism, it should have been along the lines of: 'if conservatism is true, our ontological beliefs are too unsafe to count as knowledge' rather than 'if conservatism is true, there is no appropriate causal-explanatory connection between subject matter and belief'. (Of course, we do not think that the safety argument is promising either – but we do think it is a more helpful way to frame things.)[15]

We also think it would advance the discussion on the explanatory side to pay more attention to the contrastive aspects of explanation. Suppose you believe that someone is tall. In a normal context, when someone asks why you believe someone is tall, she is asking why you believe someone is tall as opposed to, say, short or of moderate height. In this context, answers like 'Well, I heard he plays power forward for a basketball team' or 'I stood next to her and she was quite a bit taller than me' or 'My friend told me' are all fairly compelling answers. But there are also contexts where the contrast is a bit different. 'Tall' is associated with one height cutoff. But there are also myriad other cutoffs, very close to that of tallness, in the vicinity. Thus there are myriad other properties – tall*, tall**, and so on – that are or induce slightly different intensions. When one notes this, one's request for an explanation of belief might have the following implicit shape: why do we believe that this or that person is tall, as opposed to tall*, tall**, and so on?

In this explanatory context, the answer 'because I stood next to her and she was quite a bit taller than me' is completely unhelpful. In this context we may, for example, entertain answers along the lines of 'Which property one picks out is highly sensitive to facts about uses of "tall" by one's community, and the object of one's belief is, in turn, similarly sensitive to those contingencies.' We don't want to endorse this answer (perhaps 'we have beliefs about many of those properties' is another kind of answer).[16] But we do take the answer seriously. And notice that in *that* explanatory context, it is delicate contingencies about the community's patterns of use, rather than the pattern of heights, that is the central explanatory parameter. Of course, such a contingency needn't render the belief unsafe: suppose that we get up close to someone that is six foot

[15] Of course, there are many subtle decision points related to the safety approach, including how to control for methods, whether to impose counterclosure, etc. We are not going to pursue these questions here.

[16] Dorr and Hawthorne ('Semantic Plasticity and Speech Reports', *Philosophical Review* 123(3) (2014): 281–338) explore this kind of multiplicity view at length.

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eight, and believe that they are tall. And suppose that we very easily could have lacked *that* belief, but had instead had beliefs directed at other properties (tall*, etc.) on account of vicissitudes in the use of 'tall' by our linguistic community. That hardly threatens the safety of our beliefs – assuming that the person instantiates all of the candidate values of 'tall'. But it does mean that, at least within a certain explanatory setting, the fact that we have beliefs that someone is tall is not very well explained by their height.

The situation for ontological beliefs is remarkably similar from the perspective of the plenitude-lover. Suppose we believe that there is a hammer in the kitchen. In the very special context in which one asks why someone's belief is about hammers rather than hammer*s, it will not be at all helpful to explain his belief by saying 'Well, he remembers putting a hammer in the kitchen'. In this context, we may well take seriously a response according to which the main explanatory parameters are facts about the linguistic community. Meanwhile, there will be plenty of other explanatory contexts where facts about hammers *do* count as explaining various beliefs about hammers. (Why does he believe the hammer is in the kitchen rather than the garden shed? Why does he believe there is a hammer there rather than an axe?)[17]

Further, we think an alethic answer here along the lines of 'because we apprehend the facts' is unlikely to be illuminating. 'Apprehends that *P*', as it is used in English, is factive and plausibly entails 'knows that P'.[18] What does 'apprehend' add to 'know'? The main

[17] Granted, there are some residual questions about lines of efficient causation. When one looks at a hammer, do the hammer, hammer*, and hammer** all cause the experience in a way that is causally over determines the experience? Or do certain of the coincident things play a special role *viz a viz* causation? Again, we won't purse those questions here – we don't think that knowledge about hammers turns on any particular answer. Here's a helpful analogy: suppose we think that beliefs about holes in cheese are caused by hole-linings and not holes, or that it is the table *surface* rather than the table that, strictly speaking, causes the experience as of a table. These hypotheses do not seem to involve a kind of deviance that would block the acquisition of knowledge of the presence of holes or tables by vision.

[18] Verbs like 'aware' also take noun phrases (at least if we insert a preposition): 'She is aware of the cat.' Such constructions do not require knowledge. Might a verb plus noun phrase construction be more helpful to Korman's purposes, picking out a state that can explain knowledge without presupposing it? One thing to note here is that when used non-idiomatically, the noun-phrase occurs transparently: someone can be *aware of* Michelle Obama's best friend without having any knowledge of

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thing it seems to add – as with factives like 'realized' – is something like the presupposition that one didn't know the proposition in question earlier. Take any context where we say 'realized'; e.g. someone tells you an anecdote about a person's behavior and you realize that they are kind. In any such setting, 'apprehend' will sound tolerable: 'At that point I apprehended that she was a kind person'. Here, switching to 'apprehended' doesn't clearly add anything at all to 'realized' or 'comes to know'.

Granted, Korman tells us that he intends to be using 'apprehends' as a term of art, as 'a dummy term for that, whatever it is, by which (the relevant metaphysical facts) non-deviantly influence our mental states'.[19] But this doesn't seem to add much to the strategy of using 'apprehends' as a term of art for 'whatever it is that explains how we come to know stuff about metaphysics'. 'Non-deviant' is here a shout-out to the observation that sometimes a fact that *P* plays a role in explaining a belief that *P* that nonetheless isn't known.[20] And 'influence' adds little to the expectation that the relevant metaphysics facts will play some kind of role in the complete explanatory story of such knowledge that we have. In short, we don't see that the prototheory proposed here adds mh to the demand for an explanatory connection beyond a promissory note along the lines of 'Well, assuming we know some things about metaphysics, there is some kind of explanation of that, and the subject matter is bound to play some kind of role in that explanation'.

4. How Bizarre!

One of us once wrote:

> It is something of a biological and/or cultural accident that we draw the lines that we do. If we are to be charitable towards ourselves…it seems that we should posit ever so many objects

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who is friends with who. On a transparent reading, being aware of the truth that P can occur even if one has no clue about the truth value of that proposition. Granted, the normal use of 'noticing the fact that P', 'being aware of the truth that P' do not seem to be compatible with just ignorance. But that is because these are merely idiomatic ways of conveying that someone is aware that P, noticed that P and so on.

[19] Korman, *Objects*, 112.

[20] See Korman *Objects*, 106 fn.30, for one attempt to say what deviance amounts to.

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> than we habitually talk about, in order not to credit ourselves with too much luck or sophistication in successfully hitting ontological targets most of the time.[21]

We don't want to get too involved in recollecting authorial intentions. And certainly, the passage is wanting when it comes to clarity! But what we wish to emphasize now is that a distaste for hypotheses along the lines of 'We got lucky!' need not take the form of an epistemological argument of the form: 'If we are lucky in that way, our beliefs are too lucky to count as knowledge'. And, in particular, our distaste for the luck postulated by various conservative ontological views need not take the form of 'unless we are permissivists, we're too lucky to know'.

Let us call a hypothesis along the lines of 'you ended up with a true belief concerning the question *whether P* because you got lucky in such-and-such a respect' a *luck hypothesis*. By way of setup, it will be helpful to distinguish two reactions to luck hypotheses. One reaction is this: 'if that luck hypothesis about such-and-such a belief is true, that belief is not knowledge!'. Call this the *No-Knowledge reaction*. Another kind of reaction is: 'the world would have to be very bizarre indeed for the luck hypothesis to be true!'. Call this the *How Bizarre!* reaction. To get a flavor of what we have in mind here, consider the following two cases:

Case one: You ask someone whether there is a gas station at the end of the road, and they reply 'Yes'. You believe them. The person then admits that they answered your question with a guess determined wholly by a coin flip: 'Yes' if heads, 'No' if tails. In this setting, one salient luck hypothesis is: your belief that there is a gas station at the end of the road is true because the person luckily flipped the coin in a way that delivered the right answer. If it is true, the belief is not knowledge. As a result, in the setting in question, it is natural to think 'Well, at best I truly believe on account of a lucky coin flip, and that isn't good enough for knowledge! So, I've just learned that my belief wasn't knowledge.' The No Knowledge reaction is perfectly appropriate here, but the How Bizarre! reaction is not. There would be nothing particularly bizarre about a world in which someone made a true but lucky guess about whether there was a gas station at the end of the road.

Case two: You are brought up in a small town in the Carolinas and believe that Country music has objective aesthetic value. Here is one kind of luckiness hypothesis: in fact, it does! Indeed, Country music

[21] Hawthorne, *Metaphysical Essays*, 109.

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is the *only* kind of possible music that has objective aesthetic value. If you had been born into other epochs or cultures, you would have believed that various other sorts of music had aesthetic value. But then you would have had a false belief. Very lucky, then, that you were born into that small town in the Carolinas!

In case two, we might try the No Knowledge reaction. But it is far from clear that such a reaction is well motivated. If the luck hypothesis here is true, it is still far from clear that the abundance of false aesthetic beliefs in other epochs and cultures spells epistemic doom for the Country music belief. (Our earlier remarks about luck and knowledge should give the reader some sense of why we think this.) But in this case, the How Bizarre! Reaction is very compelling. Reality would have to be a truly very weird place in order for Country music alone to have aesthetic value!

The distinction between these reactions is, admittedly, not fully precise. But we trust that it is not so vague as to be theoretically useless.

Let us now imagine we come across a community with a very strange metaphysical view. Members of this community think that tables exist, but chairs *don't*. Under dialectical duress, the Tablers are very stubborn: 'It just strikes us that way', they say. 'Our perceptual systems make it seem that when particles are arranged tablewise, they compose an object, but when particles are arranged chairwise, they don't.' When asked for general metaphysical principles to corroborate their beliefs, they demur: why should you expect our views about what exists to be undergirded by general ontological principles? We don't go in for that kind of theorizing. You are like anti-particularist ethicists who tell us that we are not able to say that an act is bad unless we have a fully general theory about the principles by which badness is determined.'

We might point out that if they had been endowed with perceptual systems more like ours, they would have treated tables and chairs on an ontological par. At this point, they advance a luck hypothesis: 'Well, since there are tables and there aren't chairs, it is very lucky that we were born with our perceptual endowments. Please accept our ontological condolences.'

Here again we might try a No Knowledge reaction: even if the Tablers are right, their beliefs are too lucky to count as knowledge. But, as should now be clear, we aren't much taken by that reaction. If their view is correct, it doesn't seem that our mistakes would constitute a proximate enough danger of error to deprive them of knowledge. But the How Bizarre! reaction is altogether compelling. It would be completely bizarre for the world to be as the relevant luck

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hypothesis states. Now, of course, if the Tablers' sensibilities are alien enough to our own, we may have a hard time making dialectical progress. 'We see nothing intrinsically bizarre about our worldview', they may say, adding 'and apparently *you* are willing to concede that if we are right we may even know that we are right'.

Such is life. There may be some creatures that are so deep into an ontological coal-pit that we cannot drag them out of it, at least not by ordinary methods of rational dialogue. Still, we find the Tablers' view to be a complete non-starter metaphysically – their view is far worse than merely one we think is false; it is one we all find somewhat absurd. And when pressed to explain why, at least part of our story will be along the lines of the How Bizarre! reaction: it would be quite bizarre for reality to be set up so that *those* guys were getting it right, and we all (permissivists and Korman-style conservatives alike) were getting it wrong.

One more piece of ground-clearing. Here is a point which is very prominent in Korman's discussion and which we have much sympathy towards. Suppose that one believes that P, and then acquires significant evidence that one's belief is too unsafe to count as knowledge. It is generally unacceptable in such a setting to then modify one's worldview in an *ad hoc* way, so as to make it plausible that the belief was safe after all. Suppose, for example, that you were given the name of a town when asking someone for a town within a hundred miles where one could find a Mercedes dealer. Your source then admitted to having picked a local town at random. Here, it seems that even if your belief was true, you easily could have formed a false belief in that situation, and that the relevant proneness to error is indicative of a lack of knowledge. In this setting, it would be completely unacceptable to shore up your belief by filling out your worldview with the hypothesis that every town within a hundred miles has a Mercedes dealer, and so the informant 'couldn't miss'.[22]

By analogy, there would be something unsettling about a route to permissivism that took the form of reacting to *prima facie* powerful evidence that one's beliefs were too unsafe to count as knowledge by a postulation of plenitude that shored up the safety of one's metaphysical beliefs. If this were the route, it might not be *quite* as bad as Korman thinks. A very externalist and 'knowledge-first' way of thinking about the dealership situation is this: the postulation of a Mercedes dealership in every town is a bad one, since it is not in

[22] Cf. Korman's *Birds* (*Objects*, 100) and *Citrus Detector* (*Objects*, 109). See his discussion for more on the problems with this kind of reasoning.

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fact very likely conditional on what you actually know. The situation would of course be far more delicate if you in fact knew *P*, and knew that you knew *P*, and then got evidence E that provided *prima facie* support for the hypothesis that you *didn't* know *P*. In such cases, it might not be easy to decide as theorists whether such evidence destroyed the knowledge one previously had, or instead allowed one a basis to learn more about the world by finding hypotheses compatible with *E* and also with the proposition that one knows *P*. So, in a world where plenitude is true and we know that there are tables, then, on the supposition that plenitude is the most plausible explanation of why some conjunction of the form 'I know that there are tables and *E*' is true, learning *E* might render plenitude plausible. Still, we are willing to concede that there would be something troubling about a route to plenitude that had the appearance of a desperate strategy for shoring up the safety of one's ontological beliefs. Certainly, this path would be of very little dialectical use.

That said, it is not the route we recommend. We don't, after all, think that if conservatism is true, our beliefs are too unsafe to count as knowledge. So, the epistemological 'shoring up' is not called for. Our reaction to the conservative, and to the kind of luck that accompanies her worldview, is much more along the lines of the How Bizarre! reaction. The next section will help give the reader a feel for our sensibilities here.

5. Arbitrariness Arguments Against Conservatism

We turn next to arbitrariness arguments that push in a plenitudinous or permissivist direction. Roughly speaking, such arguments justify a conditional claim 'If there are *F*s then there are *G*s' by claiming that to deny such a conditional would somehow be appallingly arbitrary. These arguments then proceed to argue for *G*s on the basis of the conditional premise combined with the premise that there are *F*s (hereafter, *the existential premise*).[23]

[23] This line of argument is extremely pervasive. See, for example, Yablo 'Identity, Essence, and Indiscernibility', 307; van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 66–69, 126; E. Sosa 'Subjects Among Other Things', *Philosophical Perspectives* 1 (1987), 178; E. Sosa, 'Existential Relativity', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23(1) (1999), 178; K. Bennett 'Spatio-temporal Coincidence and the Grounding Problem'; Hawthorne, *Metaphysical Essays*, vii; J. van Cleve 'The Moon and Sixpence: A Defense of Mereological Universalism', in T. Sider,

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What does the complaint of 'arbitrariness' come to? Very broadly, such complaints rely on a background sensibility to the effect that certain kinds of metaphysical theories are bizarre, and in particular, that it would be bizarre to think that certain kinds of variations were ontologically significant. Let us begin with an non-tendentious case, revisiting the Tablers.

Consider again someone who proposes the theory that although tables exist, and although there are atoms arranged chairwise, chairs do not exist. Atoms arranged-chairwise compose nothing at all. Such a person might go on to give the property of *being arranged tablewise* a starring role when answering van Inwagen's Special Composition Question: for any *x*s, when is there some *y* such that the *x*s compose *y*?[24] Let us imagine that the proponent of the theory is not relying on any deep insight about the underlying structure of the atoms composing the table (eg. that although we don't realize it, when atoms are arranged tablewise they *also* come under the direct control of a demon, in a way that atoms-arranged-chairwise do not). Rather, it just strikes the theorist as natural to think that *being arranged tablewise* is ontologically special.[25]

Now, the Tablers' theory is not guilty of any outright logical incoherence. But we will assume that all readers will find such a theory

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J. Hawthorne and D.W. Zimmerman (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics* (Blackwell, 2008), 323–333; S-J. Leslie, 'Essence, Plenitude, and Paradox', 281; M. Fairchild 'A Paradox of Matter and Form', *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 6(1) (2017), 34.

[24] Van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, ch 2.

[25] Korman characterizes 'ontologically significant differences' between a pair of cases as differences that 'could account for' why one is a case of existence and the other a case of non-existence (*Objects*, 124). On one way of reading this, 'could' is epistemic and 'account for' means something like 'provides an explanation', but we are unsure whether a special purpose notion of metaphysical explanation is in play. We are much less comfortable with making some notion of explanation the theoretical centerpiece of this dispute (especially if unexplicated). However, we don't think that this construal ultimately alters the dialectic very much: the Tabler will say that the presence of the property *being arranged tablewise* in one case but not the other *does* explain the difference between the cases. Of course, we think we *know* it doesn't, and so *couldn't* explain differences (in the epistemic sense connected to knowledge). Similarly, by our lights it is metaphysically impossible that this sort of difference explain divisions in the way the Tabler suggests. And so we have the very kind of standoff envisaged in the text. It is not as if the proposition that nothing could account for a certain difference is common ground between us and the Tabler.

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outlandish. We likely all share sensibilities to the effect that *being arranged chairwise* and *being arranged tablewise* are 'on a par' when it comes to the generation of composite objects. A view to the effect that there are neither tables nor chairs is not outlandish in this way. Neither is the theory that there are both tables *and* chairs. But the theory that there are tables but not chairs is not only 'disgracefully messy' (to use Van Inwagen's phrase) but is also alien to our shared sensibilities. Of course, we may not be able to make dialectical progress on these grounds with the proponent of this theory – absent sufficient shared sensibilities, this may be impossible. But we can well enough articulate, even to such a theorist, why such a theory seems like a non-starter to us.

Is the proponent of the strange theory being 'arbitrary'? It wouldn't be unnatural to say that the person was being arbitrary, given the lack of any systematic basis for the theory. But it wouldn't be so unnatural either to *deny* that they were being arbitrary – after all, the theorist's picture is not based on capricious personal whim, at least insofar as the theory is propelled by which differences genuinely strike that person as ontologically significant. We thus think it is best not to fixate on the term 'arbitrary' here.[26] The arguments that we are interested in ultimately rely on what we hope are sufficiently shared sensibilities about what kinds of cases are metaphysically on a par and, relatedly, on what sorts of differences are not going to be 'ontologically significant'. Henceforth, we shall call the relevant family of arguments *parity arguments*.

One final point of clarification: by way of example, we looked an an outlandish answer to the Special Composition Question. But not all of our targets involve unwelcome answers to the Special Composition Question. After all, philosophers may (and often do!) agree about composition, and still disagree about the range of coincident objects. For example, two philosophers may agree on the most liberal answer to the special composition question (i.e. for any *x*s, there is always a *y* that they compose) and yet disagree either about how many objects fuse some *x*s, or else about which kinds of modal profiles are instantiated by objects that fuse some *x*s. In this case too there is a role for parity arguments. For example, supposing Socrates simultaneously runs and juggles, it would be outlandish to

[26] It bears emphasis that when we say a theory is bizarre, we do not mean to imply that no one could have a reason for embracing it (especially if we are liberal enough to count 'intuitions' or 'seemings' as reasons). Insofar as arbitrary theory choices are ones that lack reasons we thus prescind from calling bizarre theory choices arbitrary.

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suppose that at that time, the atoms composing Socrates also compose something that essentially runs but to nonetheless deny that at that time, those atoms compose something that essentially juggles.

It is reasonably clear, at a high level, how one might use parity arguments to push in a permissivist direction. Thinking through things for oneself, one starts by recognizing that certain categories of things exist, and then realizes that to accept the existence of *those* things and to deny the existence of various others would involve attaching ontological difference-making to a kind of distinction that doesn't seem the right kind of thing to be an ontological difference-maker. And so one naturally expands one's ontological commitments to avoid unwelcome parity violations. Having thought things through for oneself, one will try to make dialectical progress with others, trusting that they will be sufficiently sympathetic to your sensibilities concerning parity.

Korman's discussion is one of few attempts (from either side of the debate) to be explicit about the formulation and prospects of various parity arguments, and so we find it especially illuminating to work through the differences between how we think about these arguments.

For his part Korman does not aim to offer any master argument against parity arguments. Rather, he looks at a variety of arguments in the family centered on familiar permissivist examples, and in each case proposes particular defensive maneuvers. Let us look at two sample arguments and extract responses to them from his discussion:

A

1. There are objects, namely islands, that shrink as the surrounding ocean rises and are destroyed if completely submerged.[27]
2. If there are such objects, there there are certain other objects, namely incars, objects that have the shape and location of a car while the car is in a garage, but, as the car leaves the garage, shrink to the size of whatever part of the car is in the garage.
3. Therefore, there are incars.

[27] Perhaps it is better to say 'destroyed when the constituting rock is completely submerged'.

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B

1. There are certain objects that are essentially roughly round and made of snow; namely, snowballs.[28]
2. If there are such objects, then there are certain other objects made of snow that are are roughly round, are *not* essentially roughly round, but are essentially somewhere in the shape-range from roughly round to disc-shaped.
3. Therefore, there are snowdiscalls.[29]

Korman's discussion suggests a different attitude to A and B.

In the case of A, he will deny what we have called the existential premise. Of course, he doesn't wish to deny that there are islands – what he *does* deny is that there are objects that fit the profile laid out in the first premise. While there is a case to be made, he says, that the island is no longer an island when it becomes submerged in the ocean, there is no plausible case that it ceases to exist.[30] It seems that according to Korman, not only are islands not like that, but *nothing* is. Importantly, then, Korman's disagreement with the permissivist who wishes to run an argument like A is *not* apparently about whether there would be a violation of parity were there to exist something with the first profile and nothing with the second – that is, the disagreement is not over the *conditional premise*. Rather, it is about a particular existence claim, which might initially have seemed to be in our common ground.

On the other hand, in the case of Argument B, Korman seems likely to be suspicious of the conditional premise. His discussion suggests that there is nothing objectionable, at least in the case of artifacts, about the compositional facts depending on the intentions of

[28] The difference in phrasing here is not meant to track a significant difference between arguments A and B. Rather, we use the vocabulary of essential properties here because the target modal / persistence profile is harder to concisely characterize than the one at issue in A1.

[29] Neither sample appears exactly as written in Korman's discussion. Here's his presentation of what we have called argument A:

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

Put this way, Korman describes his response as a denial of (AR1). However, we find it most helpful to articulate the real locus of our disagreement by presenting the argument (and his response) as we do above.

[30] By analogy, when a Lord Mayor stops being Lord Mayor it is not *prima facie* plausible that something stops existing.

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the artificer. We often intend to make snowballs, but don't intend to make snowdiscalls. This, on Korman's picture, is crucially relevant to why we make snowballs and not snowdiscalls. It is, in his words 'an ontologically significant difference' between the cases – and so we needn't accept the second premise.[31]

It is especially important to note that Korman is generally friendly to the idea of parity arguments. For example, he at one point considers the suggestion that there are constraints on what profiles could possibly be instantiated: that 'no amount of intending can bring into existence something with the persistence conditions of a snowdiscall'. But this, he writes 'does seem intolerably arbitrary, that you could make something that can be anywhere between perfectly round and roughly round but not something that can be anywhere between perfectly round and flat'.[32] Rather, he seems to be optimistic that there are no good parity arguments that begin with objects that his brand of conservatism is friendly to but which then make a persuasive case for a much more plenitudinous ontology.

As we have said, Korman's aim is not to offer a master argument against permissivism and so, not surprisingly, we have no master line of defense to offer. However, we think it would be helpful to chart a variety of reasons why we were somewhat unmoved by the considerations that move Korman. We summarize our reactions under three headings.

5.1. Ontological difference-makers: Some unpromising hypotheses.

At various points Korman relies on categories that, when given a load-bearing role, induce quite striking parity violations, at least by the lights of our sensibilities. The results are what we take to be

[31] Korman offers two diagnoses of this case that are open to the conservative: either the conservative can grant, as we we've suggested, the existential premise – there are snowballs, and snowballs do have the proposed modal profiles – and deny that any violations of parity result. But they might instead handle snowballs and snowdiscalls case more on the model of islands and incars: 'On the other hand, it's plausible that the snowball is just a clump of snow. When you mash the snowball into a pancake, it ceases to be a snow*ball*. But it doesn't cease to exist, since the clump of snow that it is doesn't cease to exist.' (*Objects*, 157) Korman also considers other cases in this chapter that he thinks are clearly better handled in the former way (e.g. statutes and gollyswogles (ibid., 152), pieces of driftwood and wineracks (ibid., 155)).

[32] Korman, *Objects*, 156–157.

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'gruesome' or 'bizarre' theories: accounts of the physical world that are so ontologically inelegant as to be suspicious. In some cases, attention to physics reveals the lack of promise for giving certain categories a load-bearing role. (We discuss this in the next section.) But in other cases, the lack of promise is more apparent. By way of case study, let us look at what Korman says about the case where one finds a piece of driftwood and intends to use it as a wine-rack, placing it in one's home, using it as such, but doing very little to alter its shape and color.

Korman's view is that although in these cases there is one more wine rack than there was before you came along, no new further object comes into existence in this case – even if there is a creative intention. He offers the hypothesis that making a new physical object requires 'substantial physical alteration'.[33]

But this category – that of substantial physical alteration – is not to our mind the sort of thing that can mark an important ontological divide. The key pairs to think about here are those that involve on the one hand 'substantial physical alteration' and on the other physical alteration that is *almost* but not *quite* substantial. The theory that when one (for example) alters a piece of driftwood 'substantially' or 'a lot' or 'a good deal' alongside the right creative intention, one brings a winerack into existence, but that when one alters it just short of substantially (a lot, a good deal), one fails to do so – is to our mind a quite egregious violation of parity.[34] This kind of difference is not the kind of difference to make an ontological difference and the theory that results is, by our sensibility, bizarre. (Of course it doesn't wear its bizarreness on its sleeve, as the Tabler worldview does.)

By way of making this thought concrete, imagine a continuum of physical transformations one could induce with a sanding machine applied to the driftwood, ranging from minimal application to some edge to largescale transformation into a winerack of enduring beauty. No pair of cases seems to have any hope of marking an ontological difference between bringing a thing into existence and not bringing a thing into existence. The fact that one pair may mark the cutoff for some woolly ordinary language predicate like 'altered a lot by the sander' is not the kind of thing to have metaphysical import.

Note that our central complaint here is not a 'vagueness' argument premised on the following line of thought: '"substantially altered" is

[33] Korman, *Objects*, 155.

[34] And this is so whatever the details of 'substantial' turn out to be – Korman acknowledges that those may be tricky to work out, but the point here stands however the conservative might do so.

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vague, and so *if* substantial alteration is a test of existence, existence itself is vague.' Our thought, instead, is that the difference between substantial and not-quite-substantial alteration is obviously not the kind of thing to constitute a special criterion of existence generation.[35] By analogy: one complaint about the theory that an individual's having sufficient credence in theism is the difference maker in whether they go to heaven or hell is that 'sufficient credence' is vague. A *different* complaint is that it would be bizarre were the world set up so that a minute difference between credence made all the difference between beatific vision and eternal isolation.[36]

Our complaint is not vagueness complaint. But might the defender to the substantial alteration criterion still be able to defuse the force of the complaint by claiming that the line between substantial and non-substantial alteration is vague? The most natural way to put that thought is this: there is *some* amount of alteration that is required for substantial alteration, but for certains amounts of alteration, it is indeterminate whether they are substantial (as opposed to non-quite substantial).[37] Our main complaint is not that this way of developing the theory gives rise to one or both of indeterminate composition or existence. It is rather that it does not escape the parity argument. As we see it,

Alteration Parity: It is determinate that no small difference in amount of alteration is metaphysically special.

The theory we are opposing says that it is determinate that some amount of alteration is metaphysically special, merely adding that for no amount is it determinate that *that* amount is special (Compare: it is determinate that some hair makes the difference

[35] Of course as plentitude lovers we are happy to allow that there are certain things that require substantial alteration of underling matter to come into existence rather than not-quite substantial. But we are also happy to allow that there are things that require not-quite substantial as opposed to not-quite not-quite substantial. Thus we do not end up treat the line between substantial and non-substantial alterations as metaphysically special.

[36] See Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

[37] Korman favor approaches to ontology that go in for vagueness, including vagueness in existence and composition. But it is hard for us to figure out exactly what he himself would say about the current line of thought, since he never provides a logic. For example, he doesn't seem to take a clear stand on the status of excluded middle. But it is hard to fill out a view when such questions are left open.

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between *bald* and *non-bald*, but it is indeterminate which hair that is). Thus, the theory conflicts with Alteration Parity.

5.2. 'Scattered Objects' and attention to science

We think that particles arranged table-wise compose something, as do particles arranged gold-nugget-wise. We also think that birds arranged flock-wise compose something. Moreover, we think that *any* plurality of physical particles, however scattered, composes something.

Conservatives will typically be on board with the first thesis and will not be on board with the third thesis. Many will even reject the second. Korman is himself rather more cautious about committing to verdicts on particular cases, instead canvassing a range of responses available to conservatives, and refrains from putting forth any general ontological principles. (By analogy with particularism in ethics, he is something of a 'metaphysical particularist'.[38]) Still, like many other conservatives, he is clearly on board with the first thesis and not the third. He acknowledges that cases of the sort mentioned in the second thesis – birds arranged flock-wise, the Supreme Court, bee colonies, etc. – may be especially tricky for conservatives. This is pressing for Korman because of parity arguments that aim to drive the conservative from these familiar 'scattered objects' (e.g. ones made up of nine justices) to extraordinary objects like trogs (mereological fusions of a tree and a dog).

However, we are just as compelled by a similar family of parity arguments that Korman seems to quickly set aside:

> What initially strikes us as objectionable about postulating trogs and other such extraordinary fusions is that their parts are entirely disconnected from one another. Of course, the same can be said of the microscopic parts of paradigmatic composites like table. But there are obvious differences between tables and trogs: the parts of the former exhibit a kind of unity and causal covariance that is altogether lacking in the latter.[39]

[38] Although 'Strange Kinds, Familiar Kinds, and the Charge of Arbitrariness' (*Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (2010): 119–144) Korman describes himself as a particularist in the sense of N. Markosian ('Brutal Composition', *Philosophical Studies* 92(3) (1998): 211–249), he disavows that in Korman (*Objects*, 24). Korman's brand of particularism is elegantly illustrated in his discussion of Cook Ting (*Objects*, 157–159).

[39] Korman, *Objects*, 139.

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We think first that his discussion of these issues is hampered by a reluctance to look at the natural world through the lens of physics and, second, that in general doing so will likely put conservatism in a less favorable light.

As a first point, if birds arranged flock-wise or the members of the Supreme Court fail to compose something, it would be good to be able to say something about why not. Although Korman discusses the Supreme Court case in some detail, his discussion focuses on defending the thesis that the English expression 'The Supreme Court' (which bears the superficial hallmarks of a singular term) in fact functions as a disguised plural. But even if so, this doesn't yet provide us with an ontologically significant difference between (for example) the Supreme Court and a trog. What it does, in effect, is show that even *if* the members of the Supreme Court compose something, the expression 'The Supreme Court' in English does not function as a singular term that refers to *that* thing, but instead plurally refers to the nine members. The relevant linguistic hypothesis, even if true, cannot explain the ontological difference between the cases. Korman is aware of all of this: he suggests that the differential linguistic treatment reveals that 'on some level, we are already marking and tracking a difference between things like assortments, pairs, supreme courts, and things like tables, statues, and baseballs,' thus providing the conservative with the space to resist the relevant family of parity arguments.[40]

Here, to our mind, is where physics (and science more generally) comes in. Cases that seem radically different to us by the lights of the manifest image may seem rather less different through the lens of physics. To take the familiar case from the passage above: the 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. This seems to us to be a special case of a much more general theme: the contrast between cases like tables and cases that conservatives are reluctant to accept as cases of composition may well diminish significantly when one looks at the world through the eyes of physics.[41] (As Cian Dorr pointed out, it may also be

[40] Korman, *Objects*, 147–148.

[41] Physics need not be special in this respect. The special and social sciences often teach us that apparent differences fall away on closer inspection.

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therapeutic to imagine what various conceivable physics could have revealed. By the lights of the manifest image, atoms may seem obviously very different to solar systems. But for some time physicists took seriously the hypothesis that atoms were tiny solar systems.)

Korman himself says very little about what is so good about tables and gold nuggets and so bad about fusions of scattered particles. Two remarks from the passage above are suggestive: he remarks that 'extraordinary fusions' are 'entirely disconnected' from each other. What does it mean to be entirely disconnected, here? If it means spatially disconnected, the same is true (as Korman notes) of the parts of the table and the gold nugget. If it means entirely *causally* disconnected, then it is false: we have learned that for any pair of particles, no matter how distant, exert forces on each other. He goes on to say that tables 'exert a kind of unity and causal covariance altogether lacking' in the case of extraordinary fusions. Again: what exactly is this unity that is altogether lacking in extraordinary objects? For example, is it a kind of unity that puddles of water enjoy, as well?[42]

One rough idea in the vicinity is that when you move a bit of a gold nugget or a table, the rest moves as well. This is a feature that bodies of liquid and gas tend not to have, but which various common sense objects – like beaches – *also* tend to lack.[43] Another candidate gloss on the relevant sort of unity – one that figures in Chad Carmichael's discussion of related issues – is the notion of 'dynamic equilibrium'. Perhaps common sense recognizes puddles because we ordinarily take their parts to be in the relevant kind of 'dynamic equilibrium'. But if so, that is only because common sense isn't sensitive to the fact that common sense is blind to slow spread and evaporation of puddles. Common sense is similarly insensitive to the fact that even the parts of a gold nugget are not in dynamic equilibrium. (For example, it expands and contracts as the temperature goes up and down.)[44]

[42] We note in passing that expressions like 'that puddle' seem to pass Korman's diagnostics for genuine singular terms (*Objects*, 145) with flying colors.

[43] Korman ('Strange Kinds, Familiar Kinds, and the Charge of Arbitrariness'), although hostile to scattered individuals – at least in the absence of creative intentions – seems much more amenable to scattered *stuff*s. That idea is not salient in *Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary*.

[44] Carmichael ('Toward a Commonsense Answer to the Special Composition Question', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93(3) (2015): 475–490) invokes the notion of 'dynamic equilibrium' from Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (*Substance: Its Nature and Existence* (Routledge, 1997)) as just one component of his series-style response to the special composition question.

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Perhaps the conservative will be able to say something helpful here about the kind of unity that is important. But we do think that it is therapeutic here to look at the world with a scientific eye – the force of certain contrasts may survive, but the force of others may considerably weaken when one looks at the world through the lens of physics. Our suspicion is that physics will in many cases make the relevant contrast very much one of degree, even though it seemed to the manifest image to mark a much more radical difference. And at that point, it may be less promising to place one's ontological eggs in that contrastive basket.

We do not wish to overstate things. We are not supposing that all the relevant contrasts will *disappear* when one looks at physics. But what is foreign to our sensibility is to place significant faith in the manifest image without investigating what science teaches us about those cases.

5.3. Troubles with Intentions

As we have noted, Korman is happy to give intentions a starring role in his conservative metaphysics, where artifacts are concerned. As we've seen already, he suggests that things like snowballs (and statues, and wine racks) exist thanks to the fact that we make a snowball, we intend to make a snowball. And again, he seems at least willing to allow that maybe were we instead to intend to make a snowdiscall, we could make a snowdiscall.

We think that this view is considerably odder than Korman acknowledges. Here are a few considerations:

Suppose we surround someone with snow but tell them it is a special kind of substance, *schnow*, that looks and superficially behaves like snow but is not snow. They believe us, form the intention to make a schnowball, and proceed to pack what is in fact snow into a ball, which is then thrown in the normal way. The intention to make a snowball is absent. Should we really say that this person failed to make a snowball?

Hoffman and Rosenkrantz define a relation of dynamic equilibrium as one that holds between two objects iff (a) there are attractive forces between x and y, (b) there are repulsive forces between x and y, and the attractive forces of (a) and the repulsive forces of (b) are in equilibrium (*Substance: Its Nature and Existence*, 82).

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Similarly, consider someone who doesn't have the sortal 'snowball' in their mental vocabulary. They see people packing snow into ball shapes and think 'I wanna do that!'. They pack the snow and throw it in the normal way. Have *they* failed to make a snowball?

Someone else has a fabulous machine that can make both snowballs and snowcubes at the press of a button: button A is for snowballs and button B for snowcubes. They intend to make a snowcube, but get their buttons mixed up, and press button A. They do not intend to make a snowball. Does this cause the machine to malfunction (i.e., fail to make a snowball), even though what looks ostensibly like a snowball pops out? (Or does the intention of the machine designer call the shots?)

Someone is metaphysically ambitious. That person forms an intention: 'Hey, I'm going to make a snowball and a snowdiscall at the same time.' They intend to make a snowball and intend to make a snowdiscall. Should we say that – in this very special kind of case, but *only* in this very special kind of case – multiple coincident objects (in addition to the quantity of snow) are produced?

Someone else intends to make an *in*-snowball: something that looks much like a snowball, but shrinks as the ball of snow leaves the boundaries of their garden. Meanwhile, someone else forms a sophisticated quantificational intention which they announce as follows: 'For each x that is a shape on some parameter for which round appears, I intend that there be a round thing made of snow that is essentially in the range between round and x but not essentially in any narrow range', thereby intending to make continuum many coincident objects. Are these intentions successful too?[45]

We suspect that the intention-friendly conservative will somehow want to relax the intention requirement to handle some of the examples, and impose all sorts of further constraints to handle some of the other examples. But, again by our lights, the resulting theory is in dire risk of becoming even more obviously bizarre.

6. Parity Arguments and Plenitude

Parity arguments are a powerful tool in metaphysical theorizing. Although, as we've said, they rely heavily on shared background sensibilities, parity considerations in the right settings do make make

[45] See Thomasson ('Realism and Human Kinds', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67(3) (2003), 3.1) for discussion of these questions and closely related cases.

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trouble for various 'middle of the road' conservative positions about the Special Composition Question, and similarly make trouble for conservative positions concerning the temporal and modal profiles of coincident objects. But exactly *how* powerful are parity arguments as positive arguments for permissivism? Given a reasonable supply of paradigm existents, will our parity-theoretic sensibilities take one all the way to, for example, a radical plenitude of coincident objects or a thoroughgoing universalism about composition? This is far from clear. For example consider a plentitude so radical as allow something to be coincident with a physical object at one world but with rather more abstract objects like corporations or even numbers at other worlds. It is far from clear that parity arguments from a reasonable initial supply will get us all the way there. Similarly its not clear that parity arguments will get one all the way to a universalism that included sets and numbers in its scope. Thus we certainly do not wish to assume that our parity sensibilities will get us all the way to this or that version of radical plenitude (we have refrained from exploring the fine-tuned differences between various versions of plenitude in this paper).

Relatedly, we do not think of our metaphysical orientation as entirely driven by local sensibilities about what differences between cases might be ontologically significant. Rather, our 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. But general metaphysical principles, including those of logic and modal logic, are not to be seen as the outcome of some procedure of enumerative induction.

Our friendliness to permissivism is thus in part driven by a friendliness to general, powerful principles. This is especially clear for familiar views, like Universalism. But, similarly, radical plenitude about coincidence is attractive not just because it promises to avoid violations of parity in the sorts of cases discussed here, but because it promises a picture of the world likely characterized by powerful general principles. Of course, the task of articulating plenitude as some combination of powerful general principles is not straightforward.[46] Some combinations of principles fail to live up to the heuristic ambitions of plenitude. (For example, principles about occupation

[46] See Fairchild, 'Unlimited Ontology and Its Limits'.

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profiles, or restricted to spatio-temporal occupants, might seem insufficient to capture a more general pattern of plenitude concerning *all* objects.) Others are difficult to articulate coherently at all. And still others might clash in unexpected ways with principles drawn from logic, science and mathematics. (For example, von Neumann's limitation of size principle may, given plausible assumptions, clash with a universal fusion principle in ontology.)[47] Yet, by our lights, the search for powerful principles that systematize and explain the data is as noble an enterprise in metaphysics as physics, and in this respect we sense a marked difference between our orientation and that of Korman. He is avowedly particularist, examining each case of candidate being on its merits, but forgoing the project of crafting general ontological principles. By his lights, the ambitions of metaphysics ought to be scaled back. By our lights, one will thereby miss on the general structure of the world, which is there for the taking.

7. Concluding Remarks

We have two main complaints about Korman's brand of conservatism.

First, his particularism is altogether alien to us. Of course, that is not to say that particularism in any domain is unmotivated. The wine-maker who crafts a highly rated wine may not get very far at all with general principles – this or that combination of fruits and tannins and oakiness needs to be evaluated on its own merits. Particularism may even be well motivated in some areas of ethics. However, by contrast, particularism in *physics* would be an intellectual disaster. Imagine if earlier generations had thought: 'Things sometimes go up, sometimes go down, they sometimes get hotter and sometimes cooler, but the search for general principles that explain these vicissitudes is inappropriate.' This attitude would have led to intellectual sterility and ignorance. Our view is that metaphysics, including ontology, is much more like physics in this respect than wine-tasting. Thus, by our lights, Korman has the wrong methodological instincts.

A second and distinct complaint is that, at least by the lights of our parity-theoretic sensibilities, the kind of conservatism that Korman goes in for looks unacceptable. By our lights, all views in the vicinity

[47] See e.g. J. Hawthorne & G. Uzquiano, 'How Many Angels Can Dance on the Point of a Needle? Transcendental Theology Meets Modal Metaphysics', *Mind* 120(477) (2011): 53–81.

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of Korman's conservatism suffer from this kind of problem, regardless of the details. The view that that mountains exist but galaxies don't, or that galaxies exist but fusions of spectacles don't, requires treating cases that are (by our sensibilities) relevantly similar as ontologically very different. If in ontology you wish to treat like cases alike, permissivism remains the best game in town.

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