Is Nonfundamental Existence Relative?

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1   Introduction

There was a time when mind-dependence was central to many of the leading approaches to metaphysics, but that time has come and gone.[1] Defanged successors, such as response-dependence and judgment-dependence, still enjoy currency.[2] But the old idea that the world is somehow custom-built for us and minds like our own has fallen into disrepute. This paper is part of a larger project of mine aimed at resuscitating mind-dependence.

I'll be defending *existential relativism*, the thesis that some concrete objects exists only relatively. Existential relativism has some proponents, including Einheuser (2006; 2011) and Sosa (1993).[3] But I'm surprised it's not more widely accepted, since, to my mind, it's a manifestly attractive metaphysics. It's conservative: it entails that, for the most part, we're right about what there is and isn't. It's Quinean: it entails that existence is univocal, that there is (so to put it) just one unrestricted existential quantifier. And yet it's also deflationary: it entails that disputes about whether

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[1] *Cf.* Rosen (1994).

[2] See *e.g.* Goswick (2018a; 2018b), Johnston (1993), Kriegel (2008), Passinsky (MS), Pettit (1991), Wedgwood (1997), and Wright (1992).

[3] Other proponents might include Goodman (1978) and Putnam (1983; 1987). Also see the discussion in Sosa (1999; 2003) and the ontological expressivism defended in Flocke (MS).

there are tables and mountains are, in some important sense, insubstantial. Given the weight of these virtues, I would have expected existential relativism to have a long list of proponents. But, in fact, it's very much a minority view, and I suspect that its unpopularity stems from a prevailing antipathy toward mind-dependence. Existential relativism says that concrete objects, like tables and mountains, are mind-dependent—the relativity of their existence is owed to their mind-dependence. And the claim that tables and mountains are mind-dependent entities strikes many metaphysicians as a bridge too far in the Berkeleyean direction.[4]

This paper is written as a defense, but it's primary aim is exploration. I want to put forward a particular form of existential relativism, see what arguments can be offered on its behalf, see what objections it faces, and see what resources are available when it comes to responding to those objections. I don't mean to be coy. At this stage in my exploration, I'm inclined to accept existential relativism. But my credence in existential relativism is exceeded by my credence that it needs further exploration.

2 Conservatism

Restricting our attention here and henceforth to the concrete realm, let's ask: what is there?

A number of surprising answers are on offer. *Organicists* say that there are only atoms (i.e., mereological simples) and living things—that there are trees, but no cups.[5] *Nihilists* say that there only atoms—that there are neither trees, nor cups.[6] *Universalists* say that, for any plurality of objects,

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[4]"[W]e did not make the stars, whether by hand, mind, or symbol," (Scheffler 1996: 164). "[T]he claim that we made the stars is false if anything is [....]" (Scheffler 19880: 206). Also see Korman (2015: 24).

Some authors argue that some objects are response-dependent or depend on creative intentions; see *e.g.* Ásta (2018), Goswick (2018a; 2018b), Korman (2015), Kriegel (2008), Passinsky (MS), Searle (1995), Thomasson (2003). But there is sharp distinction between response-dependence and the mind-dependence I'm concerned with, since I deny that the existence of mind-dependent objects is necessitated by our responses. *Cf.* fn. 13

[5]See *e.g.* van Inwagen (1990).

[6]See *e.g.* Dorr (2005).

there is some object composed of them—that there are not only trees and cups, but also cupcups,[7] which are fusions of cups, and treecups, which are fusions of trees and cups.[8]

I find these surprising answers not just surprising, but outlandish. I'm a commonsensical Moorean. I think an acceptable ontology must vindicate our ontological sensibilities.

Our ontological sensibilities make many pronouncements, but for now we can focus on the following claim:

C: There are cups, but no cupcups.

Not only do I think that C is true, I think ordinary people are in a position to know C. Our evidence can be equated with what we are in a position to know,[9] so I think our evidence entails C. We should accept the approach to ontology best supported by our evidence, so I think that nonconservative approaches to ontology—those that entail the falsity of C—have probability zero on our evidence. To put the point another way: I think conservatism is really the only game in town.

Of course, I might be wrong. Perhaps our evidence does not settle whether there are cups or cupcups.[10] If I am wrong about what we are in a position to know, then ontology is more interesting and more esoteric: more approaches to ontology are consistent with our evidence, and the choice among them is harder. Popular nonconservative views have theoretical virtues: they're simple and non-arbitrary, for example. If nonconservative approaches to ontology are consistent with our evidence, then a case can made that some nonconsecutive approach, on account of its theoretical virtues, is the approach best supported by our evidence.

But nonconservative approaches to ontology are consistent with our evidence only if ontological skepticism is true, and I reject ontological

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[7]The example of cupcups is from Chalmers (2009: 78).

[8]See *e.g.* Lewis (1986), Sider (1997), and Van Cleve (1986; 2008).

[9]*Cf.* Williamson (2000).

[10]But note that, given $E = K$, it's hard for our evidence to be *neutral*. If there are cups, then we know that there are cups. So if our evidence is consistent with there being no cups, then there are no cups. And similarly, a strong case can be made that there are cupcups if our evidence is consistent with there being cupcups.

skepticism. I think we know an awful lot about what there is and isn't. Like Kelly (2008), I think the right ontological methodology is Moorean:

> [T]he Moorean will insist that before engaging in ontology, we already know a great deal about what exists and what does not, and that we are entitled to bring such knowledge to bear in constructing and evaluating ontological theories. [. . .] Indeed, the Moorean should go further than this and insist on the following point: When one engages in philosophical inquiry, not only is one entitled to bring to bear any relevant knowledge which one already possesses, but one is obligated to do so, on pain of irrationality. (Kelly 2008: 62-3)

If we are in a position to know C, then we're rationally required to reject approaches to ontology that entail the falsity of C, even when those approaches are elegant and theoretically satisfying.

3 Absolute Conservatism

One conservative approach to ontology is the *absolute conservatism* defended by Korman (2015).[11]

There are many points on which Korman and I agree. He thinks that there are cups; I think that there are cups. He thinks that there are no cupcups; I think that there are no cupcups. He argues at length that the truth of C is incompatible with views like organicism, nihilism, and universalism, and I find those arguments of his compelling.[12] Let $\exists$ be an existential quantifier which ranges over absolutely every (concrete) object, and consider the following regimented claim:

$C_\exists$: $\exists x Cup(x) \wedge \neg \exists x Cupcup(x)$.

Like Korman, I think ordinary people are in a position to know $C_\exists$.

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[11]Other proponents of absolute conservativsm include: Carmichael (2015) Elder (2004; 2011), Koslicki (2008), Markosian (1998; 2008), and Simons (2006).

[12]*Cf.* Korman (2015: 41–90).

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But there is a crucial difference between Korman and me. He's an absolutist—he thinks that the same objects exist for every object. I, by contrast, am a relativist—I think that different objects exist for different objects.[13]

Absolute conservatism has some advantages over relative conservatism. There are superficial advantages—absolute conservatives can claim the mantle of realism, for example. But there are also substantive advantages. Objects that exist only relatively cannot feature in absolute truths, and this is a continuing source of discomfort for relativists. For example, when relativists offer explanations, they either must restrict their attention to objects that exist absolutely or accept that it's a relative matter whether the explanations they're offering are correct.[14] Absolutists never face this discomfort. They can appeal to the objects they countenance whenever they please, and that's a substantive advantage.

But absolute conservatism faces some challenges. Let me here mention two of the most serious.[15]

The first is epistemic. Absolute conservatism leads to chauvinism.[16]

Creatures, very different from us, might have had very different ontological sensibilities. It might have seemed obvious to them that there are no cups, or it might have seemed obvious to them that there are cupcups.

And even setting alien creatures aside, there's contingency. We, ourselves, might have had different ontological sensibilities. Boulders scattered in a river do not usually seem to me to compose anything. But when

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[13]There are views that might consider themselves conservative, but which are neither forms of absolute conservatism nor relative conservatism as I carve things up. One such view involves quantifier variance, which I discuss in §5.2. Another such view takes existence to be, not relative, but response-dependent; see *e.g.* Goswick (2018a; 2018b) and Kriegel (2008). I do not regard response-dependent views as properly conservative. According to a response-dependent view, if it seems obvious to some faraway aliens that there are cupcups, then it is absolutely true (here on Earth!) that there are cupcups. But I say that a conservative view must ensure that *C* is true for ordinary people, even if there are faraway aliens to whom it seems obvious that there are cupcups.

[14]For discussion of a problem that subsumes this problem—the problem of relativistic spread—see §6.3

[15]For other challenges, see fn. 27.

[16]This objection to conservatism is ubiquitous.

the boulders are arranged so that I can cross the river easily by stepping from one to the next, it seems to me that there is, in addition to the boulders, the natural bridge they compose. Would the boulders have seemed to me to compose something if I found crossing rivers easy? Probably not—boulders similarly arranged in a field do not seem to me to compose anything. Would the boulders have seemed to me to compose something if I had been physiologically different and thus unable to use them to cross the river? Probably not—when the boulders have more than a stride length between them, they don't seem to me to compose anything.

Absolute conservatives are thus forced to be chauvinistic. They have to think that our ontological sensibilities are epistemically superior to the ontological sensibilities that alien creatures would have had and that we, ourselves, would have had had things been slightly different. In that way, they have to think that we're epistemically lucky: winners of the ontological sensibility lottery.

If chauvinism were the price of conservatism, the price might be worth paying. But clearly it would be preferable if we could be egalitarian conservatives.

The second challenge is metaphysical. Absolute conservatives struggle to explain the weak supervenience of composition on arrangement.[17]

Let's suppose, to make things simple, that the world is *atomistic*: that every concrete object exactly overlaps some plurality of atoms. We'll say that some atoms are arranged cup-wise when, by the lights of our ontological sensibilities, they are arranged so as to compose a cup, and we'll say that some atoms are arranged cupcup-wise when, by the lights of our ontological sensibilities, they are arranged so that some of them compose a cup and the rest of them compose another cup. Arrangement is partly extrinsic. If there is hunk of marble in an otherwise empty region, then there are no atoms arranged cup-wise in that region, even though a cup could be created by annihilating a certain portion of the marble and leaving what remains intrinsically unchanged.

Let's say that some object *y fuses* some plurality of objects *xx* just if

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[17]This argument draws on the supervenience argument against moral realism; *cf.* Blackburn (1971; 1985) and Hare (1984).

every one of *xx* is a part of *y* and every part of *y* overlaps one of *xx*. (Thus: if *xx* compose something, they fuse.) As a bit of convenient formalism: let *Cxx* be the claim that *xx* are arranged cup-wise; let *CCxx* be the claim that *xx* are arranged cupcup-wise; and let $\forall_A$ be a restricted plural quantifier that ranges over absolutely every plurality of atoms. As a conservative, I say that atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse and that atoms arranged cupcup-wise never fuse. In other words, I accept:

(1) $\forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y$ fuses $xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \neg\exists y \ y$ fuses $xx))$.

Of course, (1) is controversial. Universalists agree that atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse, but they think that atoms arranged cupcup-wise always fuse, as well. They accept:

(2) $\forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y$ fuses $xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y$ fuses $xx))$.

Organicists think that atoms arranged cup-wise never fuse and that atoms arranged cupcup-wise also never fuse. They accept:

(3) $\forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \neg\exists y \ y$ fuses $xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \neg\exists y \ y$ fuses $xx))$.

Despite our disagreement about the compositional patterns, however, we all agree that composition weakly supervenes on arrangement—none of us think that atoms arranged cup-wise or cupcup-wise sometimes fuse and sometimes don't. Moreover, we all agree that the weak supervenience of composition on arrangement is no accident: that the compositional patterns are counterfactually robust.

Let '$\square\!\!\rightarrow$' be the counterfactual conditional and, if w is an atomistic world and A_w is a complete specification of how w is at the atomic level, let A_w be a *possible atomic characterization*. The counterfactual robustness then can be stated more precisely. As a conservative, not only do I accept (1); I accept the following counterfactual, for any possible atomic characterization A_w:

($1_>$) $A_w \square\!\!\rightarrow \forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y$ fuses $xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \neg\exists y \ y$ fuses $xx))$.

In other words: I think that had A_w been true, it still would have true that atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse and that atoms arranged cupcup-wise never fuse. Universalists reject ($1_>$) and instead accept:

($2_>$) $A_w \; \square\!\!\rightarrow \; \forall_A xx((Cxx \; \rightarrow \; \exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \; \rightarrow \; \exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx))$.

Organicists reject both ($1_>$) and ($2_>$) and instead accept:

($3_>$) $A_w \; \square\!\!\rightarrow \; \forall_A xx((Cxx \; \rightarrow \; \neg\exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \; \rightarrow \neg\exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx))$.

Let's call ($1_>$), ($2_>$), and ($3_>$), *the arrow claims*. An arrow claim cannot be both true and brute. If there is some counterfactually robust pattern of weak supervenience, then something explains that pattern. So someone who accepts an arrow claim owes us an explanation for it.

The natural first thought is to reach for a thesis of strong supervenience. For conservatives, the relevant thesis of strong supervenience is the following:

($1_\square$) $\square\forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \; \rightarrow \neg\exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx))$.

For universalists, it's:

($2_\square$) $\square\forall_A xx((Cxx \; \rightarrow \exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx))$.

For organicists, it's:

($3_\square$) $\square\forall_A xx((Cxx \; \rightarrow \neg\exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \; \rightarrow \; \neg\exists y \; y \text{ fuses } xx))$.

Let's call ($1_\square$), ($2_\square$), and ($3_\square$), *the box claims*. A box claim, if true, provides a satisfying explanation for the corresponding arrow claim.

But I think the box claims should be rejected by everyone. The compositional patterns are necessary is some strong objective sense. But the compositional patterns are not necessary in every objective sense. If metaphysical necessity is the broadest objective necessity,[18] as I'll assume, hereafter, then the prejacents of the box claims are not metaphysically necessary—so the box claims are not true.[19]

In fact, not only should we reject the box claims; we should accept the following three claims, for any possible atomic characterization A_w:

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[18]See *e.g.* Rosen (2006) and Williamson (2016).

[19]Like Rosen (2006), I think it's indeterminate whether 'metaphysical necessity' refers to the broadest objective necessity or the broadest objective necessity holding fixed the metaphysical laws, and I think that this indeterminacy partially explains the intuition that the compositional patterns are metaphysically necessary.

$(1_\diamond)$ $\diamond(A_w \wedge \forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \neg \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx)))$.

$(2_\diamond)$ $\diamond(A_w \wedge \forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx)))$.

$(3_\diamond)$ $\diamond(A_w \wedge \forall_A xx((Cxx \rightarrow \neg \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx) \wedge (CCxx \rightarrow \neg \exists y \ y \text{ fuses } xx)))$.

Let's call $(1_\diamond)$, $(2_\diamond)$, and $(3_\diamond)$, *the diamond claims*.

The strongest argument in favor of the diamond claims is an argument against their negations. The prejacents of the diamond claims are clearly conceivable. And more than that, they seem to be correctly conceivable: fusing is no part of what it is for atoms to be arranged cup-wise or cupcup-wise, so it seems that the prejacents of the diamond claims "would be conceivable for a logically omniscient being who was fully informed about the natures of things" (Rosen 2006: 23).[20] I'm inclined to think that correct conceivability entails metaphysical possibility. But even if there's no entailment, there's presumption. We should accept the metaphysical possibility of a correctly conceivable proposition unless we have some satisfying explanation for its impossibility. And, like Cameron (2007), who considers the matter at length, I think that there's no good explanation of what would make the prejacents of the diamond claims impossible.[21] So I conclude that the diamond claims are true. The compositional patterns are necessary in some strong objective sense, but they're not metaphysically necessary.

The diamond claims are problematic for existential absolutism, however. They're inconsistent with forms of existential absolutism that cannot be contingently true: the necessitations of conservatism, universalism, and organcism, for example, and also views like the absolutely plenitudinous approach that has gained some recent favor.[22] And they make trouble even even for the forms of absolutism with which they are consistent.

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[20]This requires a *conditional* understanding of the natures of things, which I think is plausible in any case. See Rosen (2006: 25).

[21]For more on the apparently contingent connection between atoms and composites, see Chalmers (2009: 102–4), Kment (2014: 167–72), and Sidelle (2002: 137–8).

[22]See *e.g.* Fairchild (2019), Fine (1999), Hawthorne (2006), Leslie (2011), Sosa (1999), and Yablo (1987).

One problem is epistemic. Absolute conservatives and absolute universalists claim that atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse. Absolute organicists claim that atoms arranged cup-wise never fuse. These forms of absolutism are consistent with the diamond claims, so long as they are put forward as being merely contingently true. But if it's contingent whether atoms arranged cup-wise fuse, one wonders how anyone could be justifiedly confident that they do or don't. And yet it seems to be a datum that we can be justifiedly *very* confident that atoms arranged cup-wise fuse.[23] (Moore once thought that the existence of cups was so epistemically secure that cups could be included among our sense data.[24])

Another problem is metaphysical. The diamond claims force absolutists to give contingent explanations for the arrow claims they accept.

This metaphysical problem is especially acute for absolute conservatives. If absolute conservatives want an explanation for $(1_>)$ that's consistent with the diamond claims—as they should—then it looks like the best option available to them is to posit a contingent law of metaphysics, a mereological law. This mereological law would govern composition, in something like the way that physical laws are thought to govern the physical evolution of the universe. The mereological law would be contingent, thus allowing absolute conservatives to accept the diamond claims. But it would be objectively necessary in a strong sense that this mereological law holds, and the holding of this mereological law would entail that cup-wise arrangements of atoms always fuse and that cupcup-wise arrangements of atoms never fuse, thus explaining $(1_>)$.

The suggestion that there's some contingent mereological law is not one that I dismiss out of hand. The mereological law that absolute universalists might posit to reconcile $(3_>)$ with the diamond claims does not strike me as objectionable, for example. But the mereological law that absolute conservatives would posit to reconcile $(1_>)$ with the diamond claims does strike me as objectionable; for the posited law is, I think, unacceptably anthropocentric, unacceptably complicated, and unacceptably vague.

If the posited mereological law vindicates our ontological sensibilities,

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[23]I return to this epistemic issue in §5.1.
[24]*Cf.* Moore (1953: 40–4).

then it, like our ontological sensibilities, must be anthropocentric. But we should be loathe to accept anthropocentric laws of metaphysics.

Our ontological sensibilities are also complicated. It's doubtful that they can be summarized compactly without appeal to gerrymandered predicates. The posited mereological law would thus have to be unprecedentedly unsimple. But it's doubtful that it's even possible for laws to be so unsimple.

Our ontological sensibilities also make pronouncements of indeterminacy: sometimes, according to our ontological sensibilities, it's indeterminate whether some atoms fuse. If the mereological law vindicates the pronouncements of indeterminacy that our ontological sensibilities make, then the mereological law would have to be vague, in one of two ways. Either it would have be indeterminate what the mereological law is, or the mereological law would have to be imprecise.

Here's one way of formalizing the problem. Let p be the mereological law posited by the absolute conservatives. Let 'Δ' be a determinacy operator, and let '∇' be its dual. If it always determinate what the metaphysical laws are, then: $p \rightarrow \Delta p$. If X is a way for atoms to be arranged, then let's say that X is *precise* just if it's impossible for it to be indeterminate whether atoms are arranged X-wise. If X is precise, then the claim that atoms arranged X-wise always fuse (i.e. $\forall_A xx(Xxx \rightarrow \exists y\, y \text{ fuses } xx)$) and the claim that atoms arranged X-wise never fuse (i.e., $\forall_A xx(Xxx \rightarrow \neg\exists y\, y \text{ fuses } xx)$) are both *precise compositional generalizations*. Laws explain universal generalizations by entailing them, and the mereological law is meant to explain all of the compositional patterns. So, if q is some precise compositional generalization and p is the mereological law, then: $q \rightarrow \Box(p \rightarrow q)$. If the mereological law is precise, then, for any precise compositional generalization, the mereological law either determinately entails it or determinately doesn't entail it. In other words, if q is a precise compositional generalization and p is precise, then: $\Box(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow \Delta\Box(p \rightarrow q)$. But, according to our ontological sensibilities, precise compositional generalizations are sometimes indeterminate. Let KC be some precise way for atoms to be arranged kinda-sorta-cup-wise, and let q be the claim that atoms arranged KC-wise always fuse (i.e. $\forall_A xx(KCxx \rightarrow \exists y\, y \text{ fuses } xx)$). According to

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our ontological sensibilities, ∇q. But if our background logics for $\square$ and Δ are at least as strong as KT, then the claims above are inconsistent. (Either q or $\neg q$; hence either $\square(p \rightarrow q)$ or $\square(p \rightarrow \neg q)$; hence either $\Delta\square(p \rightarrow q)$ or $\Delta\square(p \rightarrow \neg q)$. But Δp, so $\neg\nabla q$.)

Some *soi disant* conservatives repudiate the prouncements of indeterminacy that our ontological sensibilities make.[25] I'll say more about indeterminate composition and indeterminate existence in §6.3, but, for now, I'll just say that these *soi disant* conservatives are, in my view, not conservative enough. Like Korman, I think conservatives should vindicate the pronouncements of indeterminacy that our ontological sensibilities make.[26] But if the mereological law vindicates these pronouncements of indeterminacy, then either it's indeterminate what the mereological law is or the mereological law is imprecise—and neither of those options are acceptable. Fundamental laws, whether they be physical or metaphysical, should always be precise and always hold determinately.

So we have two reasons to reject absolute conservatism.[27] It leads to chauvinism, and it's capable of explaining the weak supervenience of composition on arrangement only by positing an unacceptable metaphysical law. Can relative conservatism do better?

4 Existential Relativism

Let a *world* be a complete specification of how things could be. A world is thus not at all like a container or a maximal spatiotemporal object; rather,

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[25]See *e.g.* Markosian (1998: 222–3).

[26]*Cf.* Korman (2015: 172–81).

[27]Korman discusses two other reasons to reject absolute conservatism. One is a debunking argument, which alleges that there is no appropriate explanation connection between our ontological beliefs and the ontological facts if conservatism is true; *cf.* (Korman 2015: 91–123). The other is an arbitrariness argument, which alleges that conservatives are committed to an unacceptable sort of metaphysical arbitrariness; *cf.* (Korman (2015: 124–59). Space prevent me from discussing these arguments. But I agree with Korman (2015: 23) that, while these argument present serious threats to absolute conservatism, they pose little or no threat to relative conservatism.

it's much more like a story.[28]

For worlds so-construed, actuality is truth: if bivalence holds, then exactly one world is actual, and the actual world is the one and only complete specification of how things could be—the one and only *world*—that isn't false.

Many philosophers accept *actuality absolutism*: the thesis that, necessarily, the same world is actual for everything. The Lewisian presuppositions of contemporary metaphysics run deep, so let me stress that actuality absolutism is not a claim about distance. Whether it's necessary that all (concrete) objects be spatiotemporally related is irrelevant. Actuality absolutism is a claim, not about the possible distance relations among objects, but about how things are. It says that no matter how things are, they are that way for everything. If we say that a world is *actualized* just if it's actual for some actual thing, then actuality absolutism is the thesis that, necessarily, there is just one actualized world.

Actuality absolutism is not compatible with existential relativism. Part of specifying how things are is specifying what there is. So if there are different things for different things, then how things are is different for different things—existential relativism entails actuality relativism.

I don't blush at actuality relativism. The theory of colors I favor entails actuality relativism,[29] so I would be an actuality relativist even if were convinced to reject existential relativism. But it's important to note the conflict between existential relativism and actuality absolutism—not just because actuality absolutism is widely accepted, but also because the rejection of actuality absolutism is one of the few things on which existential relativists agree. Existential relativists can disagree about almost every metaphysical issue. But one thing that brings them together and sets them apart from the majority of contemporary metaphysicians is their rejection of actuality absolutism.[30]

My own preferred form of existential relativism relies heavily on an unanalyzed distinction between the fundamental and the nonfundamental. I

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[28]See *e.g.* Kment (2014: 71–145).

[29]*Cf.* Spencer (2016a: 450–3).

[30]Ontological expressivists also reject actuality absolutism; *cf.* Flocke (MS).

start with a stock of ontological sensibilities and a stock of *fundamental ways*. Each fundamental way is a possible specification of the fundamental facts: a complete specification of how things could be fundamentally. Each ontological sensibility is compossible with many worlds; each fundamental way is compossible with many worlds;[31] and each ontological sensibility is compossible with each fundamental way. But the conjunction of any ontological sensibility and any fundamental way is compossible with exactly one world.[32] This gives us a convenient way of talking. If fundamental way f and ontological sensibility s together entail world $w_{f,s}$, then $w_{f,s}$ is the f-world that is actual for s.

If f is a fundamental way, then the *fundamental objects* at f are the objects whose existence is entailed by f. According to the form of existential relativism I favor, fundamental objects are mind-independent. They exist at every f-world. If f holds, then, no matter what ontological sensibility you have, the fundamental objects at f exist for you.

The *nonfundamental objects* at some f-world w are the objects that exist at w, which are not fundamental at f. According to the form of existential relativism I favor, nonfundamental objects are mind-dependent. They exist at only some of the f-worlds.

The world that is actual for unminded things is sparse. If f holds, then the world that is actual for unminded things is the world entailed by f and the null ontological sensibility, a world at which there are no nonfundamental objects.[33] The worlds that are actual for minded things are, by

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[31] I return to fundamental ways being compossible with many worlds in §6.1.

[32] This is a simplification. Since I am also a color relativist, I think a fundamental way and an ontological sensibility do not entail what colors things are. To determine the colors of things, we also need a type of perceiver. But the simplification is harmless.

[33] There is a question here about whether ontological sensibilities can be self-denying. Can the world that is actual for x be a world at which x does not exist? Existential relativists can disagree on this matter, but I favor a form of existential relativism that allows self-denying sensibilities. If humans a nonfundamental objects, then it can be true relative to a human that there are no humans—much as it can be true relative to a fiction that there are no fictions. For example, suppose some human thinks that atoms compose just when their activity constitute a *super-life*, and suppose that the activity of the atoms that compose human beings does not constitute a super-life. This human, then, does not exist at the world that is actual for this human. Similarly, tables, chairs, and mountains

contrast, much more generously populated. Minded things have nontrivial ontological dispositions. They have conditional doxastic dispositions: dispositions to have beliefs about what there is and isn't conditional on various hypotheses. They also have conditional perceptual dispositions: dispositions to perceptually represent claims about what there is and isn't conditional on various possible stimuli. An ontological sensibility is a long conjunction of conditional ontological claims, and the ontological sensibility a minded thing has is the one that best captures its ontological dispositions. Almost every minded thing is messy and finite, so it will almost always be indeterminate which ontological sensibility a minded thing has. But if ontological sensibilities are individuated finely, as I favor them being, then it still may be determinately true that you and I have different ontological sensibilities—in which case it may be determinately true that the world that is actual for you is different from the world that is actual for me.

I will not offer any view about what the fundamental objects are—I regard that as a difficult metaphysical matter that deserves the attention it receives. I'm open to atomistic views, to monistic views, and even to nihilistic views, which say that the fundamental facts are all of a feature-placing sort.[34] It's elegant to think that fundamental objects cannot overlap,[35] but I'm open to views that say otherwise—perhaps every portion of gunk is fundamental, for example. I'm also open to contingency. Perhaps it's possible for the cosmos to be the only fundamental object and also possible for atoms to be fundamental objects.[36] There are limits, of course. The existential relativism I favor is vacuous if there could not be nonfundamental objects, so I insist that there could be. In fact, I insist that there are some. But existential relativism is not put forward as a hypothesis about how things are fundamentally. It's put forward as an adaptable add-on: a bit of nonfundamental metaphysics that one can conjoin to their preferred fundamental metaphysics, thereby improving the plausibility of

do not exist at the world that is actual for them. In my view, every nonfundamental unminded thing as a self-denying ontological sensibility.

[34]See *e.g.* Dasgupta (2009) and Hawthorne and Cortens (1995).
[35]*Cf.* Schaffer (2010: 38–9).
[36]*Cf.* Siegel (2016).

the overall package.[37]

To illustrate the utility of existential relativism, consider the project, undertaken in Sider (2013), of defending fundamental nihilism: the thesis that "in the fundamental sense of 'exists', there simply do not exist any composite entities" (Sider 2013: 254). As Sider goes on to say, clarifying:

> According to our ordinary conception of existence, simple and composite things exist in the same way. We ordinarily think "there are tables" and "there are subatomic particles" are getting at facts that are similar save that one concerns being a table and the other concerns being a subatomic particle. But according to the [fundamental] nihilist, "there are subatomic particles" gets at a fact of fundamental singular existence, whereas there are no such facts in the vicinity of "there are tables" (the only facts in the vicinity are facts such as that there are things arranged table-wise). (Sider 2013: 255)

Fundamental nihilism is met immediately by an objection. Commonsense beliefs and the deliverances of perception entail that there are composite entities, so fundamental nihilism is consistent with commonsense and perception only if existence is equivocal, i.e., only if 'exists' has some sense other than its fundamental sense. But it's doubtful that existence is equivocal.[38] So it's doubtful that fundamental nihilism is consistent with

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[37]Existential relativism is a form of what Chalmers (2009) calls "ontological anti-realism." Chalmers preferred form of ontological anti-realism is an form of ontological indeterminism; *cf.* (Chalmers 2009: 123–6). Chalmers prefers ontological indeterminism because he is convinced that there is a distinction to draw between "lightweight" and "heavyweight" quantification; *cf.* Chalmers (2009: 94–99, 126). I do not think that there is any such distinction; for relevant discussion see Korman (2015: 41–90). I also think that existential relativism has some important advantages: (i) existential relativism secures the univocacy of being, *cf.* §5.2; (ii) existential relativism allows us to say that a domain is consistent with a fundamental way just if it is compossible with that fundamental way; *cf.* Chalmers (2009: 114–6); and (iii) existential relativism obviates the need for the suspiciously truth-like property of correctness; *cf.* Chalmers (2009: 82). But, as Chalmers notes, ontological indeterminism and existential relativism are close relatives.

[38]See §5.2 and Korman (2015: 41–90).

commonsense and perception. Yet it's very plausible that commonsense beliefs and the deliverances are perception are true.

Sider has his own way of trying to resist this objection. He develops a strategy of semi-vindication. He thinks that even if fundamental nihilism renders commonsense and perception false, commonsense beliefs and the deliverances of perception still can have a truth-like property, which he calls 'correctness'.[39] As it turns out, correctness is very much like truth. Correct propositions "play a role in communication and thought that is similar to the role played by true ones" (Sider 2013: 249), and correct propositions also play a similar epistemic role. It's usually thought that a rational agent apportions their credence to their total evidence, where an agent's total evidence is some collection of propositions all of which are true. But, according to Sider, a rational agent apportions their credence to their total quasi-evidence, where an agent's total quasi-evidence is a collection of propositions all of which are either true or correct.[40]

Now my goal is not evaluate Sider's arguments. Perhaps his response to the objection is adequate. But it's not hard to get the sense that someone with Sider's proclivities concerning fundamental metaphysics would be better off appealing to existential relativism. There then would be no need for any invidious distinction between truth and correctness. Com-

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[39]Sider is neutral about whether fundamental nihilism conflicts with commonsense and perception; *cf.* Sider (2013: 255).

[40]Sider does not *assert* this claim about quasi-evidence. But he's open to the view that fundamental nihilism renders almost all of the deliverances of perception false, and, in response to the objection that we would have almost no evidence if fundamental nihilism were true and conflicted with the deliverances of perception, he says:

> "Quasi-knowledge", let us say, is the substitute for knowledge: Quasi-knowledge is to knowledge as correctness is to truth. Similarly, "quasi-evidence" is the substitute for evidence. I cannot define these notions, but I hope the intuitive idea is clear: The conceptional or theoretical role of these concepts is to be like that of the originals, except with correctness substituted everywhere for truth. ... Even if [fundamental] nihilism precludes most perceptual evidence ... it allows us a rich array of quasi-evidence. (Sider 2013: 267)

Part of the conceptual role of evidence is to govern rational credence, so I take it that quasi-evidence is thought to play that role, too.

monsense beliefs and the deliverances of perception would be vindicated, not semi-vindicated; the conflict between them and fundamental nihilism would evaporate. Moreover, the contrast that is meant to be drawn between the way that tables exist and the way that atoms exist could be drawn, and done so without the dubious claim that existence is equivocal. Even if there is no distinction to draw between the *existence* of tables and the *existence* of atoms—even if, to borrow a line from Merricks (2019), there is only one way to be—there is still a distinction between mind-dependence and mind-independence. If something like fundamental nihilism is true, then atoms are mind-*independent*—they're *f*-necessary; their existence isn't even partially owed to any ontological sensibility—whereas tables are mind-*dependent*—they're *f*-contingent; their existence *is* partially owed to an ontological sensibility.

We thus have one route into existential relativism: namely, the route via fundamental metaphysics. One has a preferred conception of how things are fundamentally and appeals to existential relativism as a helpful add-on. Another route—the one we started in on in §2—begins with conservatism.

Given a modest assumption about fundamental objects (roughly, that there are not too many of them)[41] and a modest assumption about ontological sensibilities (roughly, that there are enough of them), existential relativism vindicates our ontological sensibilities.

It's also egalitarian. It seems obvious to organicists that there are no cups, and it seems obvious to universalists that there are cupcups. Absolute conservatism can vindicate an ontological sensibility only by chauvinisti-

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[41]One might try to argue against this modest assumption about fundamental objects by leveraging Hawthorne's (2006) contention that the *de re* facts about macroscopic objects do not supervene on the *de re* facts about microscopic objects. There are ways of resisting Hawthorne's argument: one can refuse to take *de re* modality seriously, or one can take the essences of macroscopic objects to be less flexible. But even if we accept Hawthorne's argument—even if we accept that the existence of the Lusitania is not entailed by the *de re* facts about the microscopic objects together with the qualitative facts—the conclusion that the Lusitania is a fundamental object does not follow. If we accept Hawthorne's argument, then fundamental way that holds cannot simply be a specification of the *de re* facts about microscopic objects. But the fundamental way that holds does not have to entail that the Lusitania exists; it only needs to entail that the Lusitania exists if there is some ship that is microscopically thus-and-so.

cally privileging it, but existential relativism vindicates every ontological sensibility. The world that's actual for organicists has no cups; the world that's actual for universalists has cupcups; and all of that being said, *C* is true: there are cups, but no cupcups.

Of course, a relative vindication is, by the same token, a relative repudiation. Organicists and universalists are both actually mistaken. Organicists falsely believe that there are no cups, and universalists falsely believe that there are cupcups. If the variance among ontological sensibilities is high enough, then existential relativism entails that most beliefs about what there is and isn't are false. But truth is not what organicists and universalists aim at with their beliefs.[42] They don't seek to have beliefs that are true at the actual world. They seek to have beliefs that are true at the world that is actual for them—and existential relativism ensures that, for the most part, they succeed in that epistemic endeavor.

Existential relativism also satisfactorily explains the weak supervenience of composition on arrangement. According to existential relativism, an ontological sensibility is like a lens through which fundamental ways are seen. Input a fundamental way, and an ontological sensibility outputs a complete specification of what there is. Which ontological sensibilities minded things have is highly contingent. It could easily have been the case that we all had different ontological sensibilities. But ontological sensibilities, unlike facts about minded things having them, have a high degree of objective necessity: the closeness relation among worlds underlying counterfactuals holds an ontological sensibility fixed, unless the antecedent of the counterfactual is analytically inconsistent with the ontological sensibility.[43] So, although there are close worlds in which I have a different ontological sensibility, there are no close worlds at which my actual ontological sensibility is false. The explanation for $(1_>)$ is thus straightforward: my ontological sensibility entails (1), and, for any possible atomic characterization A_w, the closest A_w-worlds are worlds at which my ontological sensibility is true.

It's indeterminate which ontological sensibility holds, and there's also

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[42]Or anyway, truth is not what they should aim for in their beliefs; see Spencer (2016b).
[43]See Einhueser (2011: 309–12).

imprecision: it's determinate that the ontological sensibility that holds entails that it's indeterminate whether atoms arranged *KC*-wise fuse. But while indeterminacy and imprecision in the metaphysical laws is problematic, indeterminacy and imprecision in ontological sensibilities is not. A fundamental way specifies the fundamental laws, so indeterminacy and imprecision in the metaphysical laws engenders indeterminacy and imprecision in how things are fundamentally. But a fundamental way does not specify an ontological sensibility, so indeterminacy and imprecision in ontological sensibilities does not engender indeterminacy and imprecision in how things are fundamentally.

So we get what we want. Our ontological sensibilities are vindicated. The weak supervenience of composition on arrangement is explained. Composition is, as it appears to be, *messy*: anthropocentric, unsimple, and vague. But we are able to keep that messiness out of fundamental metaphysics.

We are also able to see that a common objection to existential relativism rests on a misunderstanding.[44]

Ontology does not co-vary, either modally or temporally, with changes to my ontological sensibility. It could have seemed to me that there were cupcups. But had I had an ontological sensibility that countenanced cupcups, still there wouldn't have been any cupcups, and any theory that says otherwise is absurd. The same goes for time. I used to have an ontological sensibility that did not countenance (multi-volume) encyclopedias. It seemed to me that each (token) volume of the encyclopedia on our family bookshelf existed, but it didn't seem to me that the volumes composed anything. I don't know when I first came to have an ontological sensibility that was friendly to encyclopedias; I suspect that it was around 1990. But any view that says that encyclopedias first came into existence around 1990 is absurd. Diderot's *Encylopédie* was published in 1780, in 35 volumes.

Critics sometimes think that existential relativism is committed to one or both of these absurdities. For example, when Korman considers the possibility of something like the relative conservatism I favor, he says:

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[44]This objection is ubiquitous. See *e.g.* Boghossian (2006: 38).

> [Relative conservatism] has its perks, particularly when it comes to addressing debunking arguments ... and arbitrariness arguments .... But I, for one, can't bring myself to believe that there were no trees or stones before we came along and began to believe in trees and stones. (Korman 2015: 24)

And nor should he. Humans have existed for only about 200,000 years; but there have been trees for at least 300 million years, and there have been stones for billions of years.

But these historical facts do not tell against existential relativism. An ontological sensibility does not say that anyone has it. It's just a bunch of conditional ontological claims. Counterfactuals holds an ontological sensibility fixed, unless the antecedent of the counterfactual is analytically inconsistent with the ontological sensibility. The claim that I, Jack Spencer, have a cupcup-friendly ontological sensibility is analytically consistent with the cupcup-unfriendly ontological sensibility I actually have. Existential relativism thus predicts—rightly—that there would not have been any cupcups had I had a cupcup-friendly ontological sensibility. And the same goes for time. Claims about past and future existence are evaluated at the actual world, and thus by the lights of my present ontological sensibility. The claim that there are no encyclopedias might be true relative to the ontological sensibility I had as a child, but that does not entail that there weren't any encyclopedias back then. There were. In fact, my family had one on our bookshelf.[45]

5   More Arguments for Existential Relativism

The main argument for existential relativism goes via conservation. Conservatism is true. If conservatism is true, then existential relativism is true. So existential relativism is true.

But once we get existential relativism on the table, we see that other arguments can be offered on its behalf. In this section, I offer two.[46]

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[45]For this same reply to this same objection, see Einheuser (2011: 309–12) and Sosa (1999: 135).

[46]Einheuser (2011) defends existential relativism primarily on the grounds that it offers

5.1 The Argument from the Contingent Apriori

The first is the argument from the contingent apriori. Consider some compositional generalization: for example,

(4) Atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse.

Although true, (4) is contingent. Atoms arranged cup-wise could have failed to fuse. But (4), although contingent, is epistemically special: it seems to be entirely risk-free. Not only can we know (4) apriori; it seems that we know (4) apriori with certainty.

I have not seen any form of existential absolutism that can offer a satisfying explanation of how (4) can be both contingent and apriori certain, but existential relativism can. According to existential relativism, (4) is akin to a self-verifying sentence. If you wholeheartedly accept (4), then your ontological sensibility entails (4); and if your ontological sensibility entails (4), then even though (4) could be false, and even though you could falsely believe (4), your belief of (4) ensures that your belief of (4) is actually true for you. So your belief of (4) *is* risk-free, even though (4) is contingent.

5.2 The Argument from Univocal Charity

The second is the argument from univocal charity.

The *univocacy* of existence is the thesis that there's only one way to be: that there is (so to put it) just one unrestricted existential quantifier. There are arguments for univocacy.[47] One can point to the utility of the thesis. We need a semantics for existential claims, not just in our language but in other languages, too, and a particularly elegant semantics is available if existence is univocal; for we then can take any existential claim, in any language, to involve the unrestricted existential quantifier or some restriction thereof. There are also direct arguments for univocacy via so-called

a reductive account of the *de re* modal properties of ordinary objects. For arguments to a similar effect, see Goswick (2018a; 2018b).

[47]Van Inwagen(2009b: 482–92) argues for the univocacy of being via the univocacy of numerosity.

"collapse theorems," which purport to show that the meanings of unrestricted quantifiers are pinned down uniquely by their logical properties.[48] But though these arguments increase my confidence in univocacy, if I'm being honest, there isn't much room for improvement, since, to my mind, the univocacy of existence enjoys tremendous antecedent plausibility.

But univocacy appears to be in tension with charity. Speaking unrestrictedly, I truly say that there are no cupcups. But now consider an isolated tribe of universalists, who speak a language very much like English.[49] Like me, they utter the sentence, 'There are cups', and regard what they have said as obviously true, but then they utter the sentence, 'There are cupcups', and *again* regard what they've said as obviously true. It seems uncontroversial that the universalists speak quantificationally when they utter, 'There are cupcups'. So, given univocacy, their claim either involves the unrestricted existential quantifier or some restriction thereof. But the unrestricted existential quantifier does not range over cupcups. There are no cupcups. So, given univocacy, the universalists must speak falsely when they utter, 'There are cupcups'. But that seems unacceptably uncharitable. How can a sentence in a language express a falsehood if the sentence is resiliently treated as obviously true by every speaker of the language?

Considerations of charity have led some philosophers to *quantifier variance*, the thesis that existence is equivocal.[50] If there are many inequivalent unrestricted existential quantifiers, then we can reconcile the truth of what universalists say with the nonexistence of cupcups. There is a sentence of regimented English:

(5) $\neg \exists x Cupcup(x)$.

There is also a sentence of regimented Universalese:

(6) $\exists x Cupcup(x)$.

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[48]The most advanced collapse theorem is the one in Dorr (2014), which argues, in effect, that possibly being is the least upper bound of being some way or other. For more on collapse theorems and quantifier variance, see Harris (1982), Hale and Wright (2009), Rossberg (MS), Turner (2010), and Warren (2015).

[49]*Cf.* Dorr (2014: 503–4).

[50]See *e.g.* Dorr (2005), Hirsch (2002; 2004; 2008; 2009), Hirsch and Warren (2019), and Warren (2015; 2017).

According to quantifiers variantists, both sentences express obvious truths. It's obvious that—speaking English—there are no cupcups. And it's obvious that—speaking Universalese—there are cupcups. Universalists speak truly when they utter, 'There are cupcups', even though—speaking English—it's true, unrestrictedly speaking, that there are no cupcups.

Quantifiers variance faces serious challenges. One challenge is posed by the aforementioned collapse theorems.[51] Another challenge is posed by semantics.[52] Quantifier variantists must tell us what true propositions are expressed by (5) and (6), and that challenge is made much more difficult if we and the envisaged universalists are metaphysically sensible and regard ourselves as expressing contingent truths. Before we get into complicated questions about Tarskian approaches to compositional semantics, quantifier variantists face the simple but exigent twofold challenge of identifying a contingent but obviously true proposition that we could plausibly be taken to express by uttering (5) and a contingent but obviously true proposition that universalists could plausibly be taken to express by uttering (6). Proponents of quantifier variance have yet to meet this simple but exigent challenge, and no obvious strategies suggest themselves.

But, fortunately, quantifier variance is not the only route to charity. If we want to vindicate both us and the universalists, we have two options: we can take existence to be equivocal and absolute, as quantifier variantists do, or we can take existence to be univocal and relative, as existential relativists do. The dispute between quantifier variantists and existential relativists is thus akin to the dispute we see elsewhere between contextualists, who advocate variance in meaning to ensure absoluteness of truth, and truth relativists, who advocate relativity of truth to ensure sameness of meaning. Quantifier variantists achieve charity without denying actuality absolutism: the variance they posit is in our thought and talk. Existential relativists achieve charity without denying univocacy: the variance they

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[51]Warren (2015) attempts to response to the challenge of collapse theorems on behalf of quantifier variance. But the most formidable collapse theorems are not the sentential ones Warren focuses on, but the semantic ones, like the one in Dorr (2014).

[52]For relevant discussion, see Eklund (2008; 2009), Hawthorne (2006: 53–70), and Hirsch and Warren (2017).

posit is in the world.[53]

I think univocacy is more plausible that actuality absolutism, so I endorse the argument from charitable univocacy, which says that we should accept existential relativism because we should accept a charitable ontology that vindicates the univocacy of existence.

6 Arguments Against Existential Relativism

If I'm right that existential relativism has much to recommend it, then the task of unearthing the best arguments against it is an important one. In this section, I consider three.[54] If there are other (stronger) arguments against existential relativism, I hope and trust that they'll be brought to my attention.

6.1 Fundamental Entailment

Though there is much disagreement about what the fundamental facts are, almost everyone agrees that the fundamental facts must be complete.[55] What completeness requires is a matter of contention, but almost everyone agrees that the fundamental facts cannot be complete if they do not at least

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[53]*Cf.* Hirsch (2004: 229). I agree with Hirsch that existential relativism and quantifier variance are close cousins. But I do not agree that they "need have no disagreement with each other" (Hirsch 2004: 232); for existential relativists think that quantifier variantists are wrong to accept actuality absolutism and wrong to deny the univocacy of 'existence'.

[54]Another argument against existential relativism comes from the anti-realists' side. On the form of existential relativism I favor, some objects—namely, the fundamental ones—exist absolutely. Flocke (MS) prefers ontological expressivism to ontological relativism because she thinks that this distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental objects amounts to a vindication of the claim that only fundamental objects exist; cf. Flocke (MS: §8). I disagree; I think existential relativism vindicates only the weaker theses—that only fundamental objects exist absolutely. Moreover, I think ontological claims express cognitive attitudes, so I favor existential relativism over ontological expressivism. But the views are close cousins, and my defense of existential relativism owes much to Flocke's defense and exploration of ontological expressivism.

[55]"Completeness seems definitive of fundamentality. It would be a nonstarter to say that the fundamental consists solely of one electron: thus conceived the fundamental could not account for the vast complexity of the world we experience." (Sider 2011: 105)

form a global supervenience basis for the rest of reality. In other words, almost everyone accepts:

> **Fundamental Entailment**. Necessarily, the fundamental facts entail all of the facts.

But the truth of Fundamental Entailment would trivialize the form of existential relativism I favor. A nonfundamental object is an existent whose existence is not entailed by the fundamental facts (i.e. the fundamental way that obtains). But if, necessarily, every fact is entailed by the fundamental facts, then nonfundamental objects are impossible. And if nonfundamental objects are impossible, then the form of existential relativism I favor is trivial.[56]

Unwilling to accept the triviality of existential relativism, I reject Fundamental Entailment. But I insist that I am not thereby rejecting the completeness of the fundamental; for I say that Fundamental Entailment is really the conjunction of actuality absolutism and the completeness of the fundamental.

Let the *actuality assignment* at some world w specify which world is actual for each thing at w. The completeness of the fundamental requires the truth of the following thesis:

> **Complete Assignment**. Necessarily, the fundamental facts entail the actuality assignment.

In other words: the fundamental facts must fully determine how things are for each thing.

If actuality absolutism holds, then how things are is the same for everything: the actuality assignment at any world w maps each object to w. If we take Fundamental Entailment to be the claim that, at every world w, the fundamental facts at w entail that w is actual (for everything), then actuality absolutism and Complete Assignment together entail Fundamental Entailment.

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[56]Something akin to the argument from Fundamental Entailment appears as "Argument 2" in Bennett (2017: 50).

But if actuality absolutism fails, then there's space between Complete Assignment and Fundamental Entailment. The fundamental facts must settle the truth-value of each proposition for each thing. But when a proposition can vary in truth-value across the actualized worlds, the fundamental facts may not settle the truth-value of the proposition. I say, for example, that the fundamental facts do not settle whether there are cups. The fundamental facts entail that there are cups at the world is actual for us, and they entail that there are no cups at the world that is actual for organicists. But they do not entail that there are cups. So cups are nonfundamental.

Thinking about Fundamental Entailment brings out the special modal gap between fundamental facts and mind-dependent facts. Mind-dependent facts are not fundamental: they are not part of how things are fundamentally. But they're also not supervenient: they are not settled by how things are fundamentally.

This modal gap engenders an explanatory gap: some mind-dependent facts are both brute and nonfundamental. Not all mind-dependent facts are brute. Some mind-dependent facts are explained by others: the fact that there are cups or cupcups is explained by the fact that there are cups, for example. And some mind-dependent facts are explained by a mixture of mind-dependent and mind-independent facts. If s is the ontological sensibility that holds, i.e., my ontological sensibility, then the fact that there are cups is explained by three facts taken together: (i) s, (ii) the fact that there are atoms arranged cup-wise, and (iii) the fact that s entails that atoms arranged cup-wise always fuse. But some mind-dependent facts are brute, and s is one such. The fact that s is true for me is explained by the fact that I have s, together with the general fact that s is true for anything that has s. But s is logically independent of the fact that s is true for me, and the fact that I have s does not even partially explain s. Indeed, the order of explanation is very probably reversed: the fact that I have s is partially explained by my existence, and if I'm a nonfundamental object, as very probably I am, then my existence is partially explained by s. I say that s is "mind-dependent" to draw attention to the fact that it differs in truth-value across the actualized worlds, that it's not part of how reality

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is in and of itself. But I do not mean to suggest that *s* is explained by something mental. It isn't. *Nothing* explains *s*. And indeed, this brutality generalizes: for any ontological sensibility *s* and any world *w*, if *s* is true at *w*, then *s* is brute at *w*.

We're accustomed to thinking that every brute fact must be fundamental, since we're accustomed to thinking that the fundamental facts must entail all of the facts. But if we accept existential relativism and reject actuality absolutism, then we should accept a distinction between being brute and being fundamental. The brute facts include, not just the fundamental facts, but also the facts, like *s*, that fundamentally divide the actualized worlds.

6.2 Vagueness

Consider a sorites series for composition. There are a million pairs, each consisting of a handle and a hammer head, each more affixed than the last. By the lights of our ontological sensibilities: the first pair clearly does not compose anything, and the last pair clearly composes something, *viz.*, a hammer. If conservativism is true, then this series either contains borderline cases of composition or an exact cutoff. But it's implausible that there is an exact cutoff. And moreover, the claim that there is an exact cutoff is anti-conservative: our ontological sensibilities say that there are borderline cases of composition in the series. So conservatives should countenance borderline cases of composition.[57]

Borderline cases of composition appear to be incompatible with linguistic conceptions of vagueness. If there are borderline cases of composition, then sentences that can be stated using only logical vocabulary can be indeterminate. For example, if it's determinate that there are finitely many (concrete) things and there is a borderline case of composition, then, for some *n*:

(7) $\nabla \exists x_1, ..., \exists x_n (x_1 \neq x_2, \wedge ... \wedge x_{n-1} \neq x_n \wedge \forall y (y = x_1 \vee ... \vee y = x_n))$.

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[57] On this point I agree with Korman (2015: 160-90).

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In other words: for some n, it's indeterminate whether there are exactly n (concrete) things. But according to a linguistic conception of vagueness, (7) can be true only if (7) contains some vague term, and it's doubtful that any logical term is vague. So conservatism seems to be incompatible with a linguistic conception of vagueness.[58]

One could try to reconcile conservatism with a linguistic conception of vagueness by claiming that (7) is, though perhaps true, not determinately true.[59] But I don't recommend that attempted reconciliation. For one thing: if we want to vindicate the pronouncements of indeterminacy that our ontological sensibilities make, then we should accept that (7) could be determinately true. But more importantly: the cost of rejecting linguistic conceptions of vagueness is greatly reduced of late, thanks to advancements in our understanding of nonlinguistic vagueness.[60] One can no longer plausibly say that nonliniguistic vagueness is unintelligible.[61] The dialectical sword has reversed: where before the incompatibility between an otherwise tempting metaphysical thesis and linguistic conceptions of vagueness might reasonably have been taken to be a weighty consideration against the metaphysical thesis, the incompatibility now should be taken to be a weighty consideration against linguistic conceptions of vagueness.

So I recommend that existential relativists reject linguistic conceptions of vagueness. Existential relativists should claim that (7) could be determinately true, even though it contains no vague terms. For, after all, the minds of minded things are often messy and incomplete. So if, as existential relativists claim, nonfundamental existence is mind-dependence, then it stands to reason that nonfundamental existence often will also be indeterminate.

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[58]This is sometimes called the Lewis-Sider argument, since it is advocated by Lewis (1986: 212–3) and Sider (1997: §3.1; 2003; 2009).

[59]See Torza (2017).

[60]See *e.g.* Bacon (2018), Barnes (2010; 2013), Barnes and Williams (2011), Hawley (2002), Sud (MS), van Inwagen (2009), and Williamson (2003).

[61]*Cf.* Lewis (1986: 212).

6.3 Relativistic Creep

According to the problem of relativistic creep, we should reject existential relativism because it leads to other intolerable forms of relativism. The problem of relativistic creep cannot be captured in full, since it's essentially open-ended. But let me offer some examples of the creep that might seem worrying.

Take perception. I've seen cups. But consider w_O, the world that's actual for organicists. At w_O, I *think* that I've seen cups, on account of having had visual impressions as of cups. But seeing is existence-entailing—I've seen cups only if there are cups. And, at w_O, there are no cups. So existential relativism leads to perceptual relativism. If it's a relative matter whether there are cups, then it's a relative matter whether cups have been seen, heard, or felt.

Take causation. Very plausibly, I've seen cups just if cups have caused visual impressions of cups in me. But causation is existence-entailing—cups have caused only if there are cups. And, at w_O, there are no cups. So existential relativism appears to lead to causal relativism. Perhaps it's true both at the actual world and at w_O that atoms arranged cup-wise have caused visual impressions of cups in me. But, very plausibly, if existential relativism is true, then it's a relative matter whether cups have caused visual impressions of cups in me.

There might also be creep into semantics. Suppose that there is some cup c, and suppose that I attempt to Baptize it, saying "Let 'Cuppy' name this here cup." The Baptism succeeds: 'Cuppy' names c. But, arguably, at w_O, the Baptism fails. So, arguably, at w_O, 'Cuppy' is an empty name. Existential relativism thus appears to lead to emptiness relativism: the thesis that it can be a relative matter whether a name is empty. And if it's impossible for a referential name to be synonymous with an empty name, then existential relativism also appears to lead to meaning relativism: the thesis that it can be a relative matter what a name means.

One last example: there might be creep into normative fields, like morality. Suppose that a person is connected to a machine. We have two bad options: we either flip the switch and send an excruciating non-lethal voltage through the person's body, or we incinerate the artwork

housed at the Louvre. Suppose that morality says that saving the artwork is worth causing one conscious thing excruciating pain, but not worth causing multiple things excruciating pain. If it's possible for there to be coincident nonfundamental conscious things, then, existential relativism together with our supposition about what morality says, entails moral relativism. Relative to one-thingers, who countenance just one conscious thing in the person's body, we morally ought to flip the switch; relative to multi-thingers, who countenance many conscious things in the person's body, we ought to incinerate the artwork.

The problem of relativistic creep is a serious one, and, unfortunately, it cannot be resolved summarily. When existential relativism is alleged to lead to some intolerable form of relativism, we must proceed on a case-by-case basis: determining whether existential relativism really does lead to the allegedly intolerable form of relativism, and determining whether the allegedly intolerable form of relativism really is intolerable.

I don't know existential relativism to lead to any relativism I am unwilling to tolerate. (I'm not sure whether existential relativism leads to all of the forms of relativism mentioned above, though, for what it's worth, I find those forms of relativism tolerable.) But more exploration is needed. Existential relativism could, in the end, be done in by the problem of relativistic creep.

7 Conclusion

Some philosophers seek to deflate all of the metaphysics of material objects in one go. They champion a "picture of reality as an amorphous lump, not yet articulated into distinct objects" (Dummett 1981: 557). They claim to deflate, all at the same time, questions about the possibility of co-location, disputes between endurantists and perdurantists, and questions about composition.[62] This swashbuckling approach to anti-metaphysics is exciting; but it's not the approach I favor, and it's not what existential relativism delivers.

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[62]See *e.g.* Sidelle (2002).

If existential relativism is true, then reality is less like an amorphous blob than a digital Rorschach test. There's the mind-independent structure imposed by the fundamental facts, the pixel data, and then there's the mind-dependent structure imposed by our ontological sensibilities, the large-scale patterns and images seen therein.

Existential relativism leaves much of the metaphysics of material objects undeflated. It takes questions about fundamental metaphysics seriously, and it also takes questions about possible metaphysics seriously. One might ask: "could cups exist? Could cupcups exist? Could objects be exactly co-located? Could there be atomless gunk? Could objects change their parts? Could objects persist by enduring?" When existential relativism deflates a metaphysical question, it does so by rendering the answer relative. But the answer to a question cannot be relative when the answer is necessary, and answers to questions about possible metaphysics are always necessary. So existential relativism leaves these questions about possible metaphysics undeflated.

Existential relativism does, however, insulate us and our practices from these questions about possible metaphysics. A course or career in metaphysics may have one worried that there are no cups or that the world abounds with unnoticed cupcups. If existential relativism is true, then there are very distant worlds in which cup-wise arrangements of atoms fail to fuse, and there are very distant worlds with cupcups. But those very distant worlds needn't worry us, since, according to existential relativism, we can know for certain that there are cups and no cupcups.

This insulation is even clearer when we turn to minded things. I think that I am the only conscious being in my nearest vicinity. I don't just think that I am the only *person* in my nearest vicinity; I think that I alone think these thought and have these feelings. Many nonconservative approaches have the unnerving consequence that there lots of things that share my psychic life, thinking and feeling alongside me.[63] Johnston (2016) call these alleged hangers-on 'personites', and argues that the existence of personites has far-reaching normative implications:

> [S]omething more important than the ramshackle ontology of

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[63]*Cf.* Johnston (2016: 626).

common sense is threatened by the existence of personites. Practically speaking, personites are ethical termites; they eat away at the foundations. Our central practices of prudential reasoning, binding ourselves through promising, consenting, recognizing desert, fairly distributing surplus goods, rewarding and punishing, are all hard to reconcile with the existence of personites. (2006: 618)

Whether it's *possible* for coincident material objects to share the same psychic life is one of the metaphysical questions that existential relativism leaves undeflated. Personites may be possible, for all existential relativism has to say.

But it's doubtful that any fundamental object enjoys my psychic life, and it's even more doubtful that more than one fundamental object shares my psychic life. And given the safe assumption that there isn't more than one fundamental object that shares my psychic life: if existential relativism is true, then I can rest assured that I am indeed the only conscious being in the my nearest vicinity.

I don't know whether Johnston is right about the normative implications of there being personites. But the mere possibility of personites is no threat to our ordinary way of life.

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