

The epistemology of ontology

Abstract: Ontologists who seek to justify the existence of ordinary objects (“believers”) fall into one of three epistemic camps. *Conceptualists* maintain that conceptual and/or semantic analysis justifies the existence of ordinary things. *Apologists* maintain that philosophical argumentation justifies the existence of ordinary things. And *perceptualists* maintain that perceptual experience justifies the existence of ordinary things. I argue (i) that perceptualism has advantages over conceptualism and apologism that have escaped notice, advantages which give believers (all of them) reason to endorse perceptualism, and (ii) that endorsing perceptualism renders most varieties of conceptualism suspect.

Keywords: ordinary objects, persistence, justification, perception, conceptual analysis, ontological realism, ontological deflationism

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Introduction

Consider the following thesis:

- **OO:** There are ordinary objects like rocks, tigers, and tables. Such objects survive certain changes (e.g. moving through the air, losing a few parts) and fail to survive other changes (e.g. exploding into a million pieces); that is, such objects have ordinary *persistence conditions*.

Several interesting philosophical projects rest on **OO**.¹ Presumably, then, we’re not irrational to endorse **OO**.

Ontologists who seek to justify **OO** (“believers”) fall into one of three epistemic camps.

Conceptualists maintain that some mix of conceptual and/or semantic analysis justifies **OO**.²

Apologists maintain that philosophical argumentation justifies **OO**.³ And *perceptualists* maintain that perceptual experience justifies **OO**.⁴

¹ For instance, debates over criteria of identity (cf. Hirsch, 1982; Lowe, 1997; Wiggins, 2001; Williamson, 2013; Mooney, 2023), the dispute between endurantists and perdurantists (cf. Hawley, 2004), and discussions concerning the existence of extraordinary objects (cf. Sosa, 1999; Sider, 2001; Thomasson, 2007, 183-5; Fairchild & Hawthorne, 2018; Fairchild, 2019; 2022).

² Cf. Wiggins (2001), Hirsch (2010) and Thomasson (2014).

³ Cf. Heller (1990), Markosian (1998), Sider (2001), Hawthorne (2006), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), Carmichael (2019), and Fairchild (2019; 2022).

⁴ Cf. Korman (2015; 2024), Byrne (2019), and Hofweber (2019).

I contend that perceptualism has advantages over conceptualism and apologism. These advantages shall emerge once we consider how each epistemic camp handles claims about extraordinary objects such as *trog*s (mereological sums of tree trunks and dogs) and *incars* (objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages). Perceptualism, I argue, better accounts for certain differences between ordinary and extraordinary objects than conceptualism or apologism. This gives believers reason to endorse perceptualism.

Some believers may wish to endorse apologism or conceptualism alongside perceptualism. Indeed, I shall argue that apologists *must* endorse either perceptualism or conceptualism, and that an apologism which avails itself of perceptualism (rather than conceptualism) is clearly in better shape. It shall emerge, however, that most varieties of conceptualism fit uneasily with perceptualism. Since believers have reason to endorse perceptualism, then, they also have reason to be wary of conceptualism.

I first outline how perceptualists, conceptualists, and apologists handle claims about the existence and persistence of ordinary and extraordinary objects (§1-2). I then argue that perceptualism has advantages over conceptualism and apologism (§3). I close by arguing that endorsing perceptualism renders most varieties of conceptualism suspect (§4).

§1: Perceptualism

Virtually all philosophers of mind agree that perception justifies belief in ordinary things.⁵ Several ontologists endorse perceptualism as well. Thomas Hofweber writes:

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

⁵ Cf. Pollock (1974), Pryor (2000), Huemer (2001), Burge (2003), Schellenberg (2013), and Silins (Winter 2021) on perceptual justification. There is, of course, controversy as to why perception justifies such beliefs. Cf. Pryor (2000) and Dickie (2015, ch. 3) for some candidate explanations.

Alex Byrne concurs:

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

Finally, Daniel Korman agrees that “...it is easily (perceptually) knowable that there are chairs” (2024, 14).

Ontologists sometimes charge that our perception-based object beliefs (e.g. <There’s a rock before me>) have *defeaters*. For instance, some claim that the phenomenology of our experiences as of objects would remain the same whether or not there were objects (cf. Merricks, 2001, 2017; Rosen & Dorr, 2003; Sattig, 2017; Brenner, 2023). Others claim that our perception-based object beliefs are explanatorily disconnected from the object facts (cf. Heller, 1990, 44; Sider, 2001, 156-7; Korman, 2015, ch. 7; Fairchild & Hawthorne, 2018, §3).

I grant that perceptualism is viable only if such defeaters fail, but I won’t attempt to adjudicate such defeaters here. Perceptualists have responded to them at length elsewhere.⁶ I assume that the perceptualist’s responses aren’t so off-track as to definitively undermine their position’s viability. And my goal is to evaluate the believer’s epistemic options in light of perceptualism’s viability. Ardent skeptics of perceptualism, then, should read this paper’s arguments conditionally: if the relevant defeaters fail, then (i) believers have theoretical reason to endorse perceptualism, and (ii) endorsing it constrains the believer’s epistemic options.

I’ll soon argue that perceptualism has theoretical advantages over conceptualism and apologetism. My argument rests, in part, on the claim that perception fails to justify belief in extraordinary objects. Two worries beset this claim. First, consider trogs, mereological sums of

⁶ Cf. Korman (2015, ch. 11), Hofweber (2017; 2019, 35-8), and Byrne (2019) for responses to the worry about phenomenology. Cf. Korman (2015, ch. 7; 2019) and Hofweber (2019, 35-41) for responses to the worry about explanatory connections.

tree trunks and dogs. It's possible to see tree trunks and dogs "as single things" (imagine watching from afar as a brown dog sleeps on a brown tree trunk).⁷ Do such experiences justifiably permit us to countenance trogs? Plausibly, no. But we must explain why not. Second, consider incars, objects essentially co-located with cars inside of garages. The information perception delivers when cars are inside of garages is consistent with cars and incars. We might say that cars 'look just like' incars when they're inside of garages. How, then, could perception select between the two? And if perception cannot so select, then why think perception justifies belief in cars?

To address these worries, I'll first outline the sense in which, I contend, perception justifies belief in ordinary things. Any perceptualist should find my justificatory story amenable. After that, I'll show how this justificatory story fails to apply to entities like trogs and incars.

My justificatory story begins from the claim that our perceptual apparatus divides our visual field into *visual objects* (cf. Palmer, 1999, ch. 7; Scholl, 2001; Pylyshyn, 2003, 173; Carey, 2009, 69-87; Dickie, 2010; Murez & Recanati, 2016). Imogen Dickie characterizes visual objects as "...units of [perceptual] coherence... that can draw and hold attention without conceptual assistance" (Dickie, 2010, 303).⁸ Unpacking the notion of a 'unit of perceptual coherence', Brian Scholl writes that visual objects are "...*visual feature clusters* [which] are treated [by our perceptual apparatus] as objects of attention" (Scholl, 2001, 30, my italics).

Presumably, the 'visual feature clusters' that Scholl mentions are clusters of *perceptual attributives*, where a perceptual attributive is an aspect of an experience's representational contents which attributes a property to an individual.⁹ To illustrate: around (say) atoms arranged rockwise,

⁷ Compare with Byrne & Manzotti (2022, 342).

⁸ Cf. Wu (2014) for more on the science of attention.

⁹ Notice, contra Martin (2002) and Campbell (2002), that I've committed myself to the claim that perceptual experience has representational contents. I haven't, however, committed myself to the claim that the contents of experience are rich, à la Siegel (2010). At any rate, naïve realists will reject both claims. They must therefore characterize the notion of a 'visual object' differently than I have in the text. They have options – see Pylyshyn (2003,

our perceptual apparatus generates a representation one aspect of which includes a cluster of perceptual attributives such as grayness, roundness, and so forth. Our perceptual apparatus treats this cluster of attributives – this “rock-induced” (or “atoms arranged rockwise-induced”, if you like) visual object – as a coherent unit that can draw and sustain our selective attention. I’ll say that we’re “perceptually linked” with a visual object when we’re attending to it.

I assume we’re justifiably permitted to form perceptual demonstrative beliefs (“PDBs”) like <That’s gray and round> when perceptually linked with this rock-induced visual object. Notice this entails that we’re justifiably permitted to *directly coordinate* such PDBs. To directly coordinate such PDBs is to assume that (say) <That’s gray> and <That’s round> are about the same thing without forming an extra belief like <That₁ is identical to that₂> (cf. Campbell, 1988; Dickie, 2015, ch. 3; Clarke, 2022).

Generalizing, I maintain that we’re justifiably permitted to *treat visual objects as if they correspond to composite objects*. I cash out this phrase as follows:

- To treat a *visual object* X as if it corresponds to single composite object is to
 - (i) form PDBs like <That’s C> based on the C-ness perceptual attributives our perceptual apparatus delivers when perceptually linked with an X, and to
 - (ii) directly coordinate those PDBs.

We’re now able to justify **OO**.

First, suppose we receive redness and roundness-attributives as we attend to a rock-induced visual object. We’re justifiably permitted to form beliefs like <That’s round and red> based on such information (for we’re justifiably permitted to treat visual objects as if they correspond to composite objects). Our belief <That’s round and red> entails <There’s something round and red>, and thus the latter belief is also justified. This is a belief about the existence of an ordinary thing –

173). Cf. Quilty-Dunn & Green (2021) and the citations collection therein for more on the distinction between perceptual attribution and perceptual reference.

namely, a rock.

Now suppose someone throws this rock through the air. When we attend to the relevant rock-induced visual object, we receive a motion-attributive on whose basis we're justifiably permitted to believe <That's moving>. Moreover, <That's moving> is true only if <That survives over the course of its motion> is also true. For the experience that justifies <That's moving> involves a single perceptual link with a visual object, not multiple perceptual links. If multiple perceptual links were created and destroyed over the course of our experience, we would not think <That's moving>; we would think <*That's* right there>, and then <Now, *this* is right next to where *that* was previously>, and so on. We would 'see' one thing move a little bit, and then another thing move a little bit more, until the arc of apparent motion finished. Our experience isn't like this. Thus <That survives over the course of its motion> is justified.¹⁰

We're justifiably permitted to directly coordinate PDBs based on the attributives perception delivers when linked with this rock-induced visual object; thus, we're permitted to believe <That's red and round, and it survives over the course of its motion>. Since this PDB is about a rock, the perceptual demonstrative deployed therein refers to a rock. If we know what rocks are, we can infer that *that* [pointing at the rock] is a rock. So we can infer <There's a red, round rock, and it survives over the course of its motion>. And since this belief is justified, so too are the beliefs <There are rocks> and <Rocks can survive motion>. Thus the corresponding existence claim, "There are rocks," and the corresponding persistence claim, "Rocks can survive motion," are justified. Therefore, perception justifies **OO**.

We can use this method to justify many persistence claims about rocks (and other objects, of course). Around stationary rocks, we form beliefs like <That's stationary>. So we can infer that

¹⁰ Several (Scholl, 2007; Paul, 2010; Green, 2023) have noted that perception of motion and perception of persistence can come apart, but I take it that this isn't such a case.

rocks can survive sitting still from our justified belief <That's stationary>. When we chip off tiny bits of minerals from rocks, we think <That chipped>. So we can conclude that rocks can survive the loss of tiny bits of minerals. Finally, blowing a rock to smithereens severs our perceptual link with the rock, and there is little hope of rekindling that link in ordinary circumstances.¹¹ So we can conclude that something went out of existence upon blowing up; that is, rocks cannot survive being blown to bits.

Suppose a visual object X begins to scatter, recombine, and/or disappear randomly across our visual field. That visual objects regularly deliver stable arrays of attributives explains, in part, why we're permitted to treat them as if they correspond to composite objects. So when X begins to exhibit strange behaviors, we lose justification for treating it as if it corresponds to a composite object. Thus the presumption that a visual object corresponds to a composite object is defeasible. But we don't form bodies of perceptual demonstrative beliefs with wild abandon. Stable arrays of attributives almost always generate bodies of belief whose property attributions align well with the properties we take ordinary things to possess.

Now recall trops. Sometimes our perceptual apparatus generates a single, tree-trunk-and-dog-induced visual object in response to atoms so arranged. Not for long, though. The moment the dog starts after the mailman, our perceptual apparatus ceases to generate a single visual object and instead delivers two. Thus we lose whatever justification we would otherwise possess for treating this tree-trunk-and-dog-induced visual object as if it corresponds to a composite object.

Finally, incars. Imagine looking at a car as it leaves a garage. We're disposed to form beliefs like <That's red>, <That's rectangular>, and <That's moving> around cars leaving garages. Now

¹¹ According to my variety of perceptualism, perceptual links with rock-induced visual objects give us information about rocks themselves. As such, I'll sometimes replace phrases like 'perceptual links with rock-induced visual objects' with the pithier 'perceptual links with rocks'.

consider what our body of beliefs would look like if we entered perceptual links with incars: <That's stationary>, <That's moving>, <That's *shrinking*>, and <That's gone>. We're not disposed to form these kinds of beliefs around cars leaving garages, for our perceptual apparatus fails to deliver a shrinking-attributive as we watch cars leaving garages. We were perceptually linked with a car the entire time. So we're not disposed to enter perceptual links with incars.

Beliefs based on a perceptual link with a visual object are justified. In the absence of a perceptual link with a visual object, we're not perceptually justified in believing that an object is present. And since we enter perceptual links with ordinary, and not extraordinary objects, we're perceptually justified in believing that there are ordinary objects, and we're not perceptually justified in believing that there are extraordinary objects.

Perceptualism is viable and plausible. Moreover, my account allows us to identify several advantages that perceptualism has over conceptualism and apologism, advantages that compel believers to endorse perceptualism. Before getting to these advantages, we must first better understand conceptualism and apologism.

§2: Apologism and conceptualism

§2.1: Apologism

Apologists justify **OO** by philosophical argument. One of the most popular is the “vagueness argument” (cf. Lewis, 1986, 212-3; Sider, 2001, 120-32). According to this argument, the thesis that some but not all collections of atoms compose objects leads to an intolerable sort of vagueness. Its proponents thus conclude that that any collection of atoms compose an object – that is, such ontologists conclude that composition is “unrestricted”.¹² And unrestricted composition entails that

¹² By contrast, Cameron (2008), Sider (2013), and Cornell (2017) maintain that no collections of atoms compose objects, and Van Inwagen (1990), Markosian (1998), Merricks (2001), and Carmichael (2015) maintain that some (but not all) collections of atoms compose objects.

atoms arranged ordinary-object-wise compose objects.

Some ontologists also endorse “radical plenitude about coincidence”. Roughly, this is the view that for each object that exists, that object is co-located with innumerable other objects that differ in their persistence conditions.¹³ Plentitudinous ontologists sometimes argue for their view by citing theoretical virtues like unity, simplicity, and so on. Thus Maegan Fairchild and John Hawthorne write:

[O]ur metaphysical views are, at least in part, driven by a preference for powerful general principles. In this respect, we see metaphysics as very much like other fundamental sciences – in each case general principles provide compelling candidate explanations for a wealth of data... [R]adical plenitude about coincidence is attractive... [in part] because it promises a picture of the world likely characterized by powerful general principles (Fairchild & Hawthorne, 2018, 73).

If one already endorses radical plenitude, then one should also endorse the claim that there are rocks, incars, and so on.¹⁴

When it comes to justifying **OO**, however, apologism faces a problem – our justification for endorsing views like unrestricted composition and/or radical plenitude rests on whatever justification we possess for countenancing ordinary objects.¹⁵ Unrestricted composition entails **OO**, for instance, only if *composition sometimes occurs*. Presumably, our justification for the claim that composition sometimes occurs comes from the fact that we can justifiably believe that there are objects like rocks. Similarly, radical plenitude is the thesis that *for each object that exists*, that object is co-located with innumerable other objects that differ in their persistence conditions. To claim that rocks are co-located with innumerable other objects that differ in their persistence conditions, we must first have reason to countenance rocks.

Perhaps unrestricted composition or radical plenitude is true. But we must identify some

¹³ See also Heller (1990), Sider (2001), Hawthorne (2006), and Fairchild (2019) for defenses of plenitude.

¹⁴ Fairchild (2022, §4.2) provides a particularly instructive picture of apologism.

¹⁵ Compare with Korman (2015, 102-5).

prior source of justification for **OO** to endorse either thesis. Conceptualists and perceptualists provide such a source. So apologists must endorse some form of conceptualism or perceptualism to get their arguments off the ground.

§2.2: *Conceptualism*

Conceptualists justify **OO** by conceptual and/or semantic analysis. I'll outline three variants of conceptualism – those offered by David Wiggins, Eli Hirsch, and Amie Thomasson.

Wiggins writes that "...f is a substance-concept only if the grasp of f determines... what can and cannot befall any *x* in the extension of f, and what changes *x* tolerates without there ceasing to exist such a thing as *x*" (2001, 70). Once we grasp a concept like [ROCK], according to Wiggins, we thereby understand the changes that rocks can or cannot tolerate; for instance, we thereby understand that rocks are the sorts of entities that can survive moving through the air.

This cannot be the whole justificatory story. Wiggins has explained how we come to understand that rocks can survive motion. This permits us to believe claims like "Rocks, *if they exist*, can survive motion". We must say something more to justify the existence of rocks.

One might claim that "There are rocks" is justified because it withstands the process of reflective equilibrium, whereby we test our considered judgements against various thought experiments (e.g. could a rock survive teletransportation?), revise our judgements in light of what we learn from such thought experiments, and endorse whichever combination of claims about the target domain proves most coherent.¹⁶ Since most are confident that existence claims about rocks are true, few will withdraw them.

Alternatively, one could claim that intuition – perhaps in combination with certain

¹⁶ Rawls (1971) applied this method to the moral-political domain, but many metaphysicians have clearly been up to something similar. Philosophers of persistence, for instance, almost universally employ the method of testing considered judgements against various thought experiments. See Hirsch (1982), Parfit (1984), Johnston (1987), Lowe (1989), Wiggins (2001), and Mackie (2018).

perceptual qualities – justifies existence claims about rocks. Korman (himself a perceptualist) allows that intuition could serve as backup source of justification for **OO**.¹⁷ To illustrate, suppose we’re looking at atoms arranged rockwise. Korman writes:

We have perceptual knowledge that sensible qualities are distributed *thus*... And when we consider whether qualities distributed in that way are all borne by a single object, a [rock], we have the intuition that they are. This intuition, together with the perceptual and background beliefs about the distribution of qualities, would then serve as a reason to accept [that there are rocks] (Korman, 2015, 31).¹⁸

Intuition, on this view, supports claims like “There are rocks”.

Other conceptualists (“deflationists”) justify **OO** by reflecting on how we talk about the existence and persistence of objects.

Eli Hirsch justifies **OO** by appealing to the principle of interpretive charity. The principle of charity demands that our interpretations of linguistic utterances make those who utter them come out as reasonable as possible.¹⁹ And Hirsch writes that “...the most plausibly charitable interpretations of typical assertions in our community about the existence of physical objects makes these assertions come out true” (2010, 203).²⁰

For example, Hirsch would justify claims like “There are rocks” by observing that most speakers in our linguistic community assent to such claims. And considering this community-wide assent, Hirsch contends that an interpretation on which such claims come out true makes us out to be more reasonable than an interpretation on which they come out false. So, he argues, “There are

¹⁷ Korman (2015, 29-35)’s variety of perceptualism rests on Siegel (2010)’s “rich” view of experiential contents; he thinks that for those who reject the rich contents view, intuition could fill in the gaps left by experience. I discuss the prospects of endorsing both perceptualism and this intuition-aided variety of conceptualism in §4. Cf. Bealer (1992), Huemer (2001), and Bengson (2015) for more on the epistemology of intuition.

¹⁸ Korman also clearly believes that intuition justifies persistence claims: see his (2015, 23).

¹⁹ Hirsch also prioritizes what he calls ‘charity to perception’ (cf. his 2010, 149). Hirsch doesn’t locate the rationality-making force of perceptual reports in anything special about perception, though. This is a metasemantic principle of interpretation, just one that privileges certain pieces of language.

²⁰ For more on the principle of charity, see Lewis (1974, 1983). For Hirsch’s treatment of persistence, see his discussion of mereological essentialism (2010, chapter 9).

rocks” is true. Similar reasoning applies to the claim “Rocks can survive motion”. This, on Hirsch’s view, is what enables us to justifiably endorse **OO**.

Amie Thomasson argues that existence and persistence claims are true by virtue of the semantic rules of use governing object terms. She writes:

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

Thomasson thus maintains that we can justify **OO** by inspecting the rules of use governing those object terms used in existence and persistence claims.²¹ For instance, Thomasson contends that “There are rocks” is true because the rules governing expressions like ‘rock’ ensure that such expressions are appropriately applied around atoms arranged rockwise. And “Rocks can survive motion” is true, on her view, because the rules governing ‘rock’ ensure that such expressions are appropriately applied both before and after the motion of atoms arranged rockwise.

Hirsch and Thomasson argue that facts about language ensure the truth of existence and persistence claims. Both thus present a kind of language-based metaphysics of ordinary objects. But their metaphysical stories are clearly accompanied by epistemic stories concerning how we come to justifiably believe in ordinary things with ordinary persistence conditions. As such, deflationists justify **OO** by reflecting on facts about language.

Conceptualists disagree on the existence of extraordinary objects.

Thomasson thinks there are extraordinary objects. She writes:

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

²¹ Thomasson calls these rules ‘application’ and ‘coapplication conditions’; cf. her (2007, chs. 2-3) and (2014, ch. 2). Her hybrid approach to reference builds on Devitt & Sterelny (1999).

(Thomasson 2007, 184-5).

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

Hirsch maintains that the most charitable interpretation of our ontological language is one according to which "There are incars" is false.²²

Wiggins would likely be skeptical of the concept [INCAR] itself. He writes:

[I]f one were unconstrained in the invention of a substantial concept by which to represent that a thing persisted, one would be equally unconstrained in the invention of a substantial concept by which to represent that it failed to persist... We do not think of things like this (Wiggins 2001, 65).

Wiggins thus maintains that there are constraints on the sortal ["substantial"] concepts we can invent and deploy. What constraints? Elsewhere, Wiggins writes:

A conceptualism that aspires to the title of a modest and sober realism... must leave itself room to express all the proper reservations (concerning the lack of appropriate causal or explanatory principles, etc.) about the prospects of finding a genuinely sortal notion with the same extension *as half a horse plus a piece of river* (ibid., 149).

I take it Wiggins would have similar causal-explanatory reservations with [INCAR]. So Wiggins would maintain that we cannot justifiably claim "There are incars".

§3: Advantages

I've outlined how perceptualists, apologists, and conceptualists handle existence and persistence claims about ordinary and extraordinary things. I'll now argue that these differences lend perceptualism several advantages over conceptualism and apologetism.

§3.1: Explanatory shortcomings

²² Cf. Hirsch (2010, chapter 9).

When we consider each conceptualist's way of handling existence claims about incars, natural questions emerge – questions that perceptualism is well-poised to answer.

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

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

Hirsch maintains that we can pick between these ‘concepts of existence’. And, importantly, he holds that “...there is no use asking which [concept of existence] is metaphysically better or which better reflects objective reality” (Hirsch & Warren 2019, 4). For both concepts of existence correspond to distinct ontological languages, each of which can express the same facts.²³ Such languages are on a metaphysical par for Hirsch – we need only choose the one we want to speak.

Thomasson maintains that “There are Os” is true provided that the rules of use governing the object-term ‘O’ are satisfied. Since we can stipulate that the presence of a car inside of a garage is sufficient for application of the term ‘incar’, “There are incars” is true on Thomasson’s view. And indeed, for any consistent set of rules of use, we can stipulate that there is a term whose application is appropriate provided those rules are satisfied. So, Thomasson claims, we can set up rules for terms like ‘incar’, ‘car-slice’, ‘car-fusion’, etc., and thereby conclude that such terms successfully refer to objects.

My current charge applies to both Hirsch and Thomasson. While we can pick between

²³ Cf. Hirsch (2010, chapters 9-11).

different ontological languages on Hirsch's view, we in fact speak an ontological language that countenances cars and not incars. Further, ordinary speakers find themselves using terms like 'car', and not terms like 'incar', 'car-slice', 'car-fusion', and so on. The best explanation of these facts is that we enter perceptual links with cars, and not incars (nor car-slices, car-fusions, etc.). So, plausibly, we speak the ontological language we do – and use the object terms we do – because of the sorts of experiences we undergo.²⁴ So perceptualism is explanatorily more basic than deflationary variants of conceptualism.

Wiggins has reservations about concepts like [INCAR]. But we can make sense of [INCAR]'s application in claims like "If there are incars, then incars cannot survive leaving garages" – indeed, we might think such claims are true. So Wiggins would likely want to maintain that [INCAR] is, in some way, an *insubstantial* concept.

I agree. But we shouldn't leave [INCAR]'s conceptual inferiority a mystery where there's a plausible explanation of its inferiority. And perceptualism immediately explains why we think of [CAR] as a substantive concept, and [INCAR] as non-substantive: we see cars, and we don't see incars. So [CAR] is rooted in perceptual experience, and [INCAR] isn't.

Perhaps Wiggins could explain why [INCAR] is insubstantial by appealing to causal-explanatory considerations. I'm not opposed to such explanations – plausibly, they're downstream from the perceptualist's. Why might we expect [INCAR] not to be governed by the 'right kind' of explanatory and/or causal principles? Because incars (if they exist) fail to feature within explanations, causal or otherwise, of everyday phenomena. Why do incars fail to feature within such explanations? Because we fail to track incars in experience. Thus perceptualism is explanatorily more basic than Wiggins's variety of conceptualism.

²⁴ This could also explain why charity to perception is such an important metasemantic principle on Hirsch's account; see footnote 19.

§3.2: *Epistemic differences*

We see cars but not incars. So there are epistemological differences between cars and incars, and thus between claims about cars and incars – we come to grasp, justifiably believe, and know claims about cars and incars in different ways. Our account of how we justify **OO** ought to register these epistemological differences.

Wiggins and Hirsch each register certain epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars. Wiggins maintains that we cannot justifiably claim “There are incars” and Hirsch maintains that “There are incars” is false. However, Wiggins fails to fully explain why [INCAR] is defective. And Hirsch thinks that we could choose to speak a language according to which “There are incars” comes out true. So Wiggins and Hirsch leave the epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars mysterious.

Thomasson claims that satisfying the rules of use governing some object-term ‘O’ suffices for “There are Os” to be true. As I noted above, this commits Thomasson to the claim that both “There are cars” and “There are incars” are true. But, more importantly, this also means that “There are cars” is justified in just the same way that “There are incars” is justified. We can justifiably believe that there are both cars and incars, on Thomasson’s view, because we can justifiably believe that the rules of use governing the terms ‘car’ and ‘incar’ are satisfied. By justifying existence claims about cars and incars in the same way, Thomasson places claims about cars and incars on an epistemic par.²⁵

We shouldn’t place claims about cars and incars on an epistemic par. In the previous subsection, I argued that perceptualism is well-poised to answer questions that emerge when we consider how each variant of conceptualism handles claims about incars. Perceptualism secures

²⁵ Thomasson has argued elsewhere that a commitment to extraordinary objects isn’t objectionable; cf. her (2007, section 9.6). But this is not my present charge.

still other epistemic differences between claims about cars and incars.

According to perceptualists, persistence claims about cars are justified in a different way than persistence claims about incars (if such claims are justified at all). Since we enter perceptual links with cars, perception justifies existence and persistence claims about cars. But we don't enter perceptual links with incars. So perception fails to justify existence and persistence claims about incars.

It's open for perceptualists, alongside apologists, to justify the existence of extraordinary objects via philosophical argument (e.g. the arguments for plentitude and unrestricted composition from §2.1).²⁶ If any such arguments were successful, our justification for existence claims about incars would come from philosophical argumentation. And this is entirely suitable; philosophical argumentation seems the appropriate route for justifying the existence of incar-like theoretical extravagances.

There's also an epistemic difference between the concepts [CAR] and [INCAR] themselves. Suppose (alongside Wiggins) that grasping [CAR] and [INCAR] suffices for grasping the changes that both cars and incars can undergo. Grasping [CAR] involves understanding the basic situations under which [CAR] is appropriately applied. And here's one way we often come to such an understanding. First, we form PDBs about cars (<*That* is red and moving>, <*This* is blue and stationary>, etc.). Then, someone says to us "Those things, and things like them, are called 'cars'". We can come to know, on this basis, that [CAR] is appropriately applied to the referents of certain of our PDBs and to similar entities.

Sometimes, hearing a long description of what cars are ("Cars are hunks of metal with tires

²⁶ *Parity argumentation* – arguing that a commitment to some ordinary object or other commits one to some extraordinary object or other – is also popular; cf. Korman (2015, ch. 8), Fairchild & Hawthorne (2018), and Fairchild (2022). Alex Byrne (a perceptualist) and Riccardo Manzotti endorse the existence of scattered objects based on parity arguments (cf. their 2022, §4). See also Builes (2022) on arbitrariness considerations in ontology.

and engines, that people created to drive place to place...”) produces our grasp of [CAR]. There’s still a difference between how we come to grasp [CAR] and [INCAR]. Namely, the *only* way that we can come to grasp [INCAR] is through some description of what incars are. Since we don’t enter perceptual links with incars, we don’t form bodies of PDBs about incars. Pointing at cars inside of garages and telling us “Those things, and things like them, are called ‘incars’” will do little good in producing within us a grasp of [INCAR].

Even if grasping [CAR] suffices for grasping that cars can survive leaving garages, our grasp of [CAR] can come from experience. But our grasp of [INCAR] cannot come from experience. So we can come to grasp [CAR] and [INCAR] in different ways. This has downstream effects on our grasp of claims about cars and incars. Plausibly, the way that we grasp claims like “Cars can survive leaving garages” and “Incars cannot survive leaving garages” depends on the way that we grasp [CAR] and [INCAR]. Thus our epistemic access to claims about cars differs from our epistemic access to claims about incars.

§3.3: *Deflationism*

Hirsch argues that we could speak an ontological language that countenances either cars or incars. Thus, for Hirsch, debates about whether there are incars – or cars, for that matter – lack substance. This is why Hirsch calls his position ‘deflationary’. Thomasson is also a deflationist.²⁷ Recall her claim that “..., wherever we have a sortal with coherent [rules of use], and the [rules] are fulfilled, we may then... say that there is an object of that sort” (Thomasson 2007, 185). For both Hirsch and Thomasson, the meanings of our object-terms, and thus the truth-conditions of claims about the existence and persistence of objects, depend on our linguistic decisions.

Hirsch and Thomasson are still realists, as their positions are consistent with the thesis that

²⁷ Hirsch and Thomasson embrace the “deflationist” label: cf. Hirsch (2010, xiii) and Thomasson (2015, ch. 1).

“...the world consists of things whose existence and properties are independent of language or consciousness” (Hirsch 2010, 76). As deflationists, however, Hirsch’s and Thomasson’s positions foreclose debate about the existence and persistence of ordinary and extraordinary objects. There are perhaps practical reasons to reject talking in terms of extraordinary objects, but there’s no way to adjudicate whether some way of speaking is metaphysically more perspicuous than another.

Perceptualists aren’t committed to deflationism – perceptualists could accept or reject arguments for the existence of extraordinary objects. My view leaves these debates open; thus, it allows us to maintain that ontological debates are substantive. It’s better if our view concerning how we justify **OO** doesn’t foreclose metaphysical debates over extraordinary objects. So if we don’t want to be deflationists, we should endorse perceptualism over deflationary variants of conceptualism.

While Wiggins’s variant of conceptualism isn’t obviously deflationary or anti-realist, there’s still reason to think realists should prefer perceptualism.

Recall Wiggins’s contention that we come to understand the changes that rocks can tolerate by grasping [ROCK]. Thus Wiggins maintains that we must bring concepts to mind to parse our experiential world into persisting things.²⁸ But according to perceptualists, we’re not ‘carving the world’ into persisting objects; we just enter perceptual links with visual objects and form beliefs about their corresponding objects on perception’s basis. This picture assigns perception a more receptive role than Wiggins assigns it.

This isn’t to say that any view which entails that the mind does some ‘carving’ work is anti-realist – it’s just another metric we can use to judge the realist bona fides of any view. One can

²⁸ Cf. Wiggins (2001, 150-1); one can read Thomasson (2014, 109-12) in a similar light. See Campbell (2002, ch. 4) and Dickie (2015, 131-41) for criticisms. See also §4 for criticisms of the claim that grasping [ROCK] somehow provides us with a source of justification for **OO** independent of experience.

simultaneously maintain that there really are ordinary things and that our conceptual apparatus must do some work in making them available in experience. But realists should be less satisfied with a view according to which concepts must do this kind of work to justify **OO** than otherwise.

§3.4: Apologism, redux

Thus far, I've largely ignored apologism for reasons discussed in §2.1 – apologists need to endorse either conceptualism or apologism to get their view off the ground. But the advantages I've cited in perceptualism's favor apply equally well to apologism. The sorts of arguments and principles to which apologists appeal tell us nothing about why we think of [CAR] as somehow better than [INCAR]. And theses like unrestricted composition and plenitude entail that there are both ordinary and extraordinary things; thus, to appeal to such theses in justifying **OO** would have us place ordinary and extraordinary things on an epistemic par.²⁹ Endorsing perceptualism would allow apologists to account for these shortcomings.

Furthermore, apologists are often motivated by the thought that ontological disputes are substantive. This is precisely why they maintain that philosophical argumentation can lead us to ontological truths. (Recall Fairchild & Hawthorne: “[R]adical plenitude about coincidence is attractive... [in part] because it promises a picture of the world likely characterized by powerful general principles” (2018, 73).) Thus apologists are liable to find conceptualism inappropriate from the jump – it would be strange if investigating how we think and talk about objects led to ontological truths. And as I argued in §3.3, perceptualism secures a stronger form of realism than conceptualism.

Apologists, then, should endorse perceptualism.

²⁹ Some ontologists endorse arguments which issue in the existence of ordinary things and the nonexistence of extraordinary things; cf. Markosian (1998) and Carmichael (2015). Still, it's plausible that such ontologists require prior justification for **OO** to motivate their views.

§4: Can conceptualists endorse perceptualism?

I've argued that perceptualism has advantages over conceptualism and apologetism. This gives believers – apologetists and conceptualists included – reason to endorse perceptualism.

Apologetists should endorse perceptualism. So apologetists *can* endorse perceptualism, just as perceptualists *can* justify the existence of extraordinary objects via philosophical argument. Thus one might think that conceptualists *can* account for the explanatory and epistemic shortcomings I've discussed merely by endorsing perceptualism.

For conceptualists to endorse perceptualism without forfeiting their conceptualist credentials, they must make one of two claims:

- **PRIOR**: Conceptual-semantic resources explain, at least in part, why perception justifies **OO**.
- **SEPARATE**: Conceptual-semantic resources provide a source of justification for **OO** independent from perceptual experience.

Conceptualists who endorse **PRIOR** maintain that perceptualism is just a form of conceptualism in disguise. Those who endorse **SEPARATE** maintain that perceptualism and conceptualism provide believers with independent sources of justification for **OO**.

Conceptualists have defended **PRIOR** in the past, but perceptualists have good reason to reject it.³⁰ I've argued that perception justifies PDBs like <That's gray, and it can survive moving through the air> around gray rocks. If we know what rocks are, we can infer <There's a gray rock before me which can survive moving through the air>. Knowing what rocks are involves grasping the concept [ROCK]. But grasping [ROCK] plays no role in justifying PDBs like <That's gray, and it can survive moving through the air>; grasping [ROCK] merely lets us say that the referents of such beliefs are, in fact, rocks.

³⁰ Cf. footnote 28. See also Hawthorne (2009, 228-9) for perception-related difficulties with Hirsch-style deflationism.

On the face of things, then, perceptualism isn't a form of conceptualism in disguise. To show otherwise, one would need to demonstrate that conceptual mediation is involved in generating the experiences on whose basis we're justifiably permitted to form PDBs. This is an empirical claim, and a doubtful one at that. It's empirically plausible that our perceptual apparatus generates visual objects – clusters of perceptual attributives that can draw and sustain selective attention – absent conceptual mediation.³¹

Granted, philosophers of perception disagree as to where we should draw the line between perception and cognition.³² Some will therefore claim that perceptual experience is necessarily conceptual (cf. McDowell, 1996), and thus that **PRIOR** is true, whether or not we actively deploy concepts to “carve up reality”. But our question is whether Wiggins, Hirsch, and Thomasson can use their preferred conceptual-semantic resources to explain perception's justificatory force. Given that [ROCK] plays no role in justifying basic PDBs nor in generating those experiences which so justify, it's unclear how conceptualists could proceed. At the very least, conceptualists owe us a further explanation.

So much for **PRIOR**. How does **SEPARATE** fare?

Wiggins-inspired conceptualists may be able to endorse **SEPARATE**. (I say ‘Wiggins-inspired’ because Wiggins himself endorses **PRIOR**; recall his contention that concepts help perception ‘carve up the world’ into objects.) One might claim, for instance, that intuition and/or reflective equilibrium are sources of justification for **OO** independent from perception. Korman (2015, 29-35) allows for a mixed view of this kind. To those who have already endorsed

³¹ See the citations mentioned in my original explication of visual objects in §1. Another line of support for this claim comes from studies on visual attention; see, for instance, studies on amodal completion (cf. Rensink & Enns, 1998). See also the experiments on ‘object files’ in Kahneman et al. (1992), Scholl (2001), Driver et al. (2001), Noles et al. (2005), and Pylyshyn (2000; 2001; 2003, ch. 2; 2007). Carey (2009, 69-87), Dickie (2010; 2014), Murez & Recanati (2016), Green & Quilty-Dunn (2021), and Quilty-Dunn (2023) review some of the experimental results.

³² For more on this issue, see McDowell (1996), Sedivy (1998), Carey (2009), Burge (2009; 2022), Green (2020), Clarke & Beck (2023), and Block (2023).

perceptualism, however, such views aren't obvious. Perceptualism's viability makes it plausible that our beliefs about ordinary things survive the process of reflective equilibrium *because* they're based on perception, that we have such-and-such intuitions about ordinary objects *because* we see them. I won't attempt to argue these points here, though. If you want to endorse both perceptualism and conceptualism, this way of doing so is feasible – but it comes with some theoretical baggage.

It's trickier for deflationists to endorse **SEPARATE**.

Suppose Hirsch claims that perception and the principle of charity provide independent sources of justification for claims like “There are rocks”. Perceptualists maintain that “...whether there are [ordinary] objects at all is answered empirically” (Hofweber, 2019, 47): namely, by consulting perception. Thus, according to perceptualists, ontological questions about ordinary objects are empirical questions. So Hirsch-style deflationists who endorse perceptualism must accept that ontological questions about ordinary things are empirical questions that can also be settled via the principle of charity. But we don't think of other empirical questions this way. We wouldn't appeal to the principle of charity to determine whether black holes produce thermal radiation; indeed, such maneuvers would be positively inappropriate. This should make perceptualists wary of Hirsch's view.

One may suspect Thomasson fares better. Here's a rough, Thomassonian reconstruction of what astronomers are doing when they investigate whether black holes produce thermal radiation: they're investigating whether areas of space which satisfy the rules of use for 'black hole' produce thermal radiation. Thus, Thomasson might claim, ontological questions about ordinary objects aren't special. Perhaps all empirical inquiries possess the relevant semantic component.

This rejoinder misses the point. Suppose (contra our best observational equipment) we saw black holes producing thermal radiation. I say: the fact that we made such an observation is what,

in this scenario, justifies the claim “Black holes produce thermal radiation”. To avoid treating different empirical questions different ways, Thomassonians who endorse **SEPARATE** must say that observation *and* some semantic state of affairs provide us with separate sources of justification for this claim. What state of affairs? Perhaps that a region of space which satisfies the rules governing ‘black hole’ produces thermal radiation; perhaps that we recognize the appropriate rules are satisfied; I’m not sure. But it doesn’t matter. These sorts of answers obviously fail to provide us with *independent* justification for the claim “Black holes produce thermal radiation”. They are, at best, background conditions on observation so justifying, much like grasping [ROCK] is a background condition on perception’s justifying the claim “Rocks can survive motion”.

My objection to deflationists who endorse **SEPARATE** isn’t that epistemic overdetermination is itself problematic. It’s that deflationists who endorse **SEPARATE** are thereby committed to strange additional sources of justification for empirical claims.³³ Notice that apologists who endorse perceptualism face no such worry. It’s common epistemic practice to theoretically bolster empirical claims. Another way to justify the claim “Black holes produce thermal radiation” cites the fact that well-supported theoretical models predict it. So too is it unobjectionable to justify **OO** via both perception and philosophical argument.

Conceptualists – most notably deflationists – encounter difficulties when they attempt to endorse perceptualism. Thus believers not only have reason to endorse perceptualism. Our reason to endorse perceptualism gives us reason to be wary of most varieties of conceptualism.

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³³ Intuition-aided conceptualists may face a similar worry, as it seems strange to justify claims like “Black holes produce thermal radiation” via both observation and intuition. But I’m willing to grant that if an astronomer understands the relevant matters in sufficient detail, their so intuiting can give them extra justification for “Black holes produce thermal radiation”.

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