The Metaphysics of Everyday Life

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I hope that my title, "The Metaphysics of Everyday Life," brings to mind the title of the lively little book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which Sigmund Freud published in 1904. Although scientifically obsolete, this small volume describes numerous kinds of familiar phenomena that go unnoticed: Forgetting proper names; forgetting foreign words; making mistakes in reading and writing; concealing memories from childhood; mislaying things, and so on. These banal errors appear to be random but, according to Freud, they are bursting with psychological importance. What I find congenial in Freud is not his diagnosis of these little mistakes, but his finding consequence in occurrences that are usually overlooked as haphazard and purposeless. Whereas Freud saw the psychological significance of ordinary mistakes, I want to show the ontological significance of ordinary things that we encounter in everyday life.

Let me try to specify the target of my investigation. Some years ago, as some of you know, I argued for the legitimacy of what I called 'the commonsense conception of reality.' A "thin" version of this conception is universal: All recognizably human communities affirm the existence of medium-sized objects that endure through time, and all affirm the existence of persons with intentional states. The validity of the commonsense conception rests on the fact that we can derive its categories from any reasonably long stretch of experience that is possible for us.[1] We have no choice about using the commonsense conception; it cannot be given up. I now want to revisit that idea, but this time with a more metaphysical intent.

What the commonsense conception is a conception *of* is what I call 'the world as encountered.' The world as encountered includes what the commonsense conception purports to denote—the things that you talk about and interact with: material objects, other people, activities, processes, and so on. Experts in particle physics, as well as people with no formal schooling, take the existence of these things for granted when they are at home with their friends and relatives. I take the world as encountered—the locus

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[1] Derk Pereboom offers a kind of empirical transcendental argument along these lines.

of medium-sized objects that we experience—to present us with data for philosophizing. My aim is to set out and defend an ontology according to which much of the prephilosophical picture of the world remains recognizable. My view will be revisionary only when necessary.

One noticeable feature of the world as encountered is that it is populated by things—such as pianos, pacemakers, and paychecks—whose existence depends on there being persons with propositional attitudes. I call any object that could not exist in a world lacking beliefs, desires and intentions an 'intentional object.'[2] Intentional objects that we are familiar with include emails, kitchen utensils, precision instruments, and so on. Other communities may be familiar with other intentional objects; but all communities recognize many kinds of intentional objects—as well as other intentional phenomena like conventions, obligations, and so on. All artifacts and artworks, and most human activities (getting a job, going out to dinner, etc.), are intentional in this way: They could not exist or occur in a world without beliefs, desires, and intentions.

However, not all things in the world as encountered depend on intentionality. For example, planets and dinosaurs could—and did—exist in a world without beliefs, desires and intentions.[3] In the world as encountered, whether an object is intentional or not is often insignificant: Whether a ball is constituted by a piece of natural rubber or artificial rubber is usually not salient feature of it. My theory of the world as encountered allows for the distinction between intentional and nonintentional objects, but does not highlight it.

Part of my motivation for focusing on the shared world as encountered is my conviction that it is as real as the world of leptons and quarks is: we cannot make good

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[2] Note that I am not using 'intentional' in Brentano's sense.

[3] There is no ontological requirement of intentionality for their existence. If God exists, there may be a causal requirement of God's will for their existence, but that would not be relevant to the current point, which concerns the logical possibility of the existence of various objects. Whether God exists or not, if the theory of natural selection is correct, then the existence of primates, including human animals, is causally, but not ontologically dependent on intentionality. If my view of persons is correct, the existence of persons is ontologically dependent on intentionality: a world without beliefs, desires and intentions would be devoid of persons. x is ontologically dependent on y iff the existence of x logically entails the existence of y. x is causally dependent on y iff the existence of x causally entails the existence of y, where causal entailment is the condition that in every world with natural laws that we have, there is no x without y.

sense of a supposition that the world as encountered is a vast mirage. (All of our evidence for photons and electrons and quarks crucially depends on precision instruments, medium-sized objects in the world as encountered. So, we could not call into question the reality of the world as encountered without calling into question all the evidence that there are photons and electrons and quarks.) A complete and correct inventory of what there is, I believe, must include ordinary medium-sized objects—including persons, artifacts, artworks, economic items like bonds, legal documents like passports.

Another part of my motivation is that the world as encountered is vitally important to all of us; everyone has an interest in it (whatever other interests one may have). Yet a third part of my motivation is that by taking things in the world as encountered seriously, some of the deepest issues in metaphysics can be seen in a new light—e.g., questions about vagueness and the distinction between what is mind-independent and what is mind-dependent.

What I want to do here is, first, to begin to sketch out a metaphysics that I believe illuminates the shared world as encountered; second, to respond to a serious objection to my view; and finally, to consider how my view of the world as encountered can help recast two large issues in metaphysics.

Constitution and the World as Encountered

At the heart of my view is a single comprehensive metaphysical relation that unites items at different levels of reality into the objects that we experience in everyday life: the trees, the automobiles, the credit cards. I use the word 'constitution' to refer to this relation. A constituted object may be thought of as being at a higher level of reality than its constitutors.

Constitution, unlike identity, is a temporal relation: x may constitute y at one time but not at another. E.g., a human body may constitute a person at one time, but not at a later time (after the person has died, say). Ordinary material objects are constituted-at-t by other "lower-level" things. Constitution is irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive. My

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socks, which can survive darning, are constituted by different pieces of cloth at different times. The constituting pieces of cloth in turn are constituted by molecules, and so on down to subatomic particles.

My thesis is this: All concrete objects found in the world as encountered are constituted objects. Sometimes an ordinary object is constituted by another ordinary object—as when a landscape painting is constituted by a piece of canvass with paint on it—but ultimately all ordinary material objects are constituted by bunches of subatomic particles. As I construe it, constitution is not a part/whole relation: If x constitutes y at t, x is not part of y at t.[4] The identity of a constituted object is independent of the identity of its parts, which may change. Nor are the persistence conditions of a constituted object given by its parts or by the persistence conditions of its parts. Constituted objects have different essential properties (and different persistence conditions and different causal powers) from their lower-level constituters. E.g., my socks and the pieces of cloth that constitute them have different persistence conditions: The piece of cloth could survive being cut into a flat piece; my socks could not.

On the constitution view, reality comes in fundamentally different kinds. Each thing is of a primary kind essentially. There is no "mere thing" behind or underlying the instance of a primary kind. Objects related by constitution are of different primary kinds. Objects of different primary kinds may have different persistence conditions. (Famously, the lump of clay has different persistence conditions from the statue.) For primary-kinds F and G—when an F (say, a lump of clay) is in certain circumstances—G-favorable circumstances (say, statue-favorable circumstances)—a new thing of a different kind, a G (say, a statue), comes into existence. The distinction between intentional and nonintentional objects lies in the sort of circumstances a constitutor must be in to constitute an object of a certain kind. For example, statue-favorable circumstances are intentional: they include, e.g., artists with certain intentions; planet-favorable circumstances are not intentional: they include, e.g., a certain mass of material revolving around a sun. But both statues and planets are constituted objects.

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[4] S, 'constitutes' is not a synonym of 'composes' as mereologists use it.

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Every object has its primary kind essentially, but not every kind is a primary kind. E.g., *teacher* is not a primary kind; nor is puppy. Teachers may cease to be teachers without ceasing to exist (e.g., they may retire); so may puppies cease to be puppies without ceasing to exist (e.g., they may grow up). Constitution is a relation between things of different primary kinds. So, a person may acquire the property of being a teacher; but a person does not constitute a teacher since *teacher* is not a primary kind.

Alas, I do not have a theory of primary kinds, nor even an exhaustive list. Indeed, there could not be a complete list of primary kinds until the end of the world. New inventions create new primary kinds. But there is a test for a primary kind: x is of primary kind K only if: x is of kind K every moment of its existence and could not fail to be of kind K and continue to exist. If K is a primary kind, to lose the property of being a K is to lose existence altogether. When Gutenberg invented the printing press, I believe that he created a new primary kind—a kind that changed the course of history. Printing presses go out of existence when barbarians smash them; they do not just lose the property of being printing presses, and become something else: they go out of existence altogether.

Constitution brings into being new objects of higher-level primary kinds than what was there before. To take another example, when a certain combination of chemicals is in a certain environment, a thing of a new kind comes into existence: an organism. That particular combination of chemicals constitutes at t that particular organism. A world with the same kinds of chemicals but a different environment may lack organisms, and a world without organisms is ontologically different from a world with organisms. So, constitution makes an ontological difference.[5]

The combination of chemicals that in a certain environment constitutes an organism is itself constituted by a (mere) aggregate of chemicals. When an aggregate of chemicals comes together in a certain way (by bonding), chemicals of new kinds come

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[5] For greater detail, see my *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also the Book Symposium on *Persons and Bodies* in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 592-635, and my "On Making Things Up: Constitution and its Critics," *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming.

into existence. Indeed, if we descend down any chain of constitution relations, sooner or later we will come to aggregates as constitutors.

For example, a cathedral may be constituted by an aggregate of stones, pieces of wood, and pieces of glass. The identity conditions of aggregates are simple: Aggregate x is identical to aggregate y just in case exactly the same items are in aggregate x and aggregate y.[6] If the original pieces of stone, wood and glass in the cathedral-constituting aggregate were separated all over the world, they would still be the same aggregate.

The pieces of stone, wood and glass in the aggregate that constitutes the cathedral are in turn constituted by aggregates of molecules, which are ultimately constituted by aggregates of particles.[7] The aggregates of different kinds of things (like pieces of stone, wood and glass) have primary kinds by courtesy—an artificial primary kind that may be called 'stone/wood/glass pieces', for example.[8] Aggregates only play the role of constitutor; they are not real objects on their own.

None of the aggregates is identical to the cathedral, because each aggregate exists when the cathedral does not exist: the aggregate of the pieces of stone, wood, and glass, as I mentioned, exists when the pieces are scattered all over the world. If it it is merely possible that a exists when b does not exist, then a cannot be identical to b.   So, no aggregate is identical to the cathedral. The relation between the aggregate of pieces of stone, wood and glass and the cathedral at time t is constitution, not identity.

Although constitution is not identity, it is a unity-relation: the credit card constituted by a piece of plastic is a single credit card. The constituting piece of plastic has the property of being a credit card derivatively--in virtue of constituting something that has the property of being a credit card independently of its constitution relations.

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[6] Mereologists who endorse universal composition would consider what I'm calling 'aggregates' to be 'fusions' or 'sums.' Mereologists who believe that there are sums but do not endorse universal composition (e.g., Peter van Inwagen) distinguish between aggregates and sums.

[7] Perhaps there are no ultimate particles. In that case, the ultimate constituters will be portions of gunk. That possibility can be easily accommodated, but I'll just leave it aside.

[8] An aggregate of H_2O molecules has H_2O molecules as its primary kind; the atoms in the aggregate of H_2O molecules have hydrogen/oxygen atoms as their primary-kind. The difference between the aggregate of hydrogen atoms and oxygen atoms and the aggregate of H_2O molecules is itself a matter of constitution: When the aggregate of atoms is in H_2O-molecule-favorable circumstances, it constitutes an aggregate of H2O molecules.

You have the property of having brown eyes derivatively—in virtue of being constituted by a body that has brown eyes independently of its constitution relations. So, the unity produced by constitution allows two-way borrowing of properties—from constituted to constitutor, and from constitutor to constituted.   It is because constitution is a relation of unity (though not identity) that many properties are shared by both constitutor and constituted.[9]

   The constitution relation is a vague relation.[10] Although there are many varieties of vagueness, constitution is liable to particular types of indeterminacy: vagueness of spatial boundaries and vagueness of temporal boundaries. Many philosophers hold that objects and processes are not vague in themselves; they treat vagueness as solely a matter of our concepts and hold that there is no vagueness in reality. I differ. However, I will go this far: Although there are spatial points and temporal points at which it is indeterminate whether x exists *there*, the indeterminacy of x at those spatial and temporal points is parasitic on the determinacy of x's existence elsewhere.

Spatial vagueness: Consider a hair on your dog that is coming out. Does that hair help make up the dog or not? That is, is that hair (or the particles in it) a constituent of the dog? I think that the answer is that it is indeterminate whether that hair is a constituent of the dog. The dog's spatial boundaries are vague. The problem generalizes. Consider any ordinary object—your house, say. There are numerous aggregates of particles in the vicinity of your house only minutely different from each other, each of which is an equally good candidate for constituting the house. Hence, your house's spatial boundaries are vague—as are the spatial boundaries of every medium-sized object.

   Part of the idea of x's being spatially vague is that at any time that x exists, there is some volume that x covers. In that volume, there are some places—e.g., the place where the head joins the torso of the dog—where the dog definitely (but perhaps not

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[9] Not all properties may be had derivatively. Excluded are (a) properties expressed in English by locutions using 'essentially,' 'necessarily,' 'possibly', 'primary kind' and the like; (b) identity/constitution/existence properties; (c) properties rooted outside the times at which they are had; and (d) hybrid properties. For details, see *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 2.

[10] This is one reason to distinguish constitution from mereological composition. David Lewis: "If composition obeys a vague restriction, then it must sometimes be a vague matter whether composition takes place or not. And that is impossible." *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 212.

entirely) exists, and there are some spatial places—e.g., a meter away from the gravitational center of the dog at t—where the dog definitely does not exist; and there are some other spatial places—e.g., the place where the loose hair is—where it is indeterminate whether the dog exists there. Any primary kind, F, whose instances are in the world as encountered, has instances that exist at t such that there is some spatial place l, that is definitely within the area occupied by the F at t, and there is some other spatial place l', that is neither definitely within the area occupied by the F at t nor definitely outside the area occupied by the F at t. So, it is indeterminate whether the F exists at l' at t or not.

There is an aggregate of particles—call the aggregate 'a'—that contains all the particles in the dog including the particles in the errant hair. There is another aggregate of particles with exactly the same particles as the first aggregate with the exception of the particles contained in the errant hair; call the second aggregate 'b'. Both a and b satisfy all the conditions for constituting the dog. Is there a fact of the matter about which one actually does constitute the dog? I think not.

My opponents agree that the spatial boundaries of the dog are vague, but they trace the indeterminacy to indeterminacy in the concept 'dog.' On their view, the vagueness is just a matter of reference; we just have not decided whether the expression 'dog' should refer to a or to b. Although I shall argue against this conception of vagueness shortly, let me say here that on my view the vagueness is not exhausted by any indeterminacy in the concept 'dog.' The vagueness is traceable to the nonlinguistic relation of constitution.

On my view, then, the vagueness is de re: the vagueness in our concepts is a result (at least sometimes) of the vagueness in objects. Our concept of an F—where F is a primary-kind of a medium sized object—is a concept of a thing that lacks precise spatial boundaries; anything that falls under that concept in fact lacks precise spatial boundaries. Our concept of an F is not just an imprecise way of picking out something that is precise. What thing that 'F' picks out—e.g., the dog—is imprecise. This is what I

mean when I say that constitution is spatially vague. Every medium-sized object is vague in this way.

Temporal vagueness: Consider a model house that you build. At the time when you acquire the blocks and the inverted v-shaped piece for the roof out of which you plan to build the model house, there definitely is no model house (yet). When you present the completed model house to your daughter as a present, there definitely is a model house. Is there a precise moment in which the model house comes into existence? I believe that there is no precise answer.

Suppose that at t you finish building the model house. Let b be the aggregate of the blocks and the inverted v-shaped piece. Since b is in model-house-favorable circumstances, according to the Constitution View, there is a model house such that b constitutes it at t.

Now consider a slightly earlier time, t', when you had put the blocks together but had not yet put the roof on. At t', the constitutor b (consisting of all the blocks and the inverted v-shaped piece for the roof) definitely existed, but b was not in model-house-favorable circumstances at t' inasmuch as the flat piece was still on the floor then. Let b' be the aggregate of the blocks without the inverted v-shaped piece. Did the model house exist at t'? My answer is that it is indeterminate whether the model house existed at t'. The candidate constitutor, b', definitely existed at t', but what is indeterminate is whether b' constituted a model house at t'. We can give a necessary (but hardly sufficient) condition for the indeterminacy about whether b' constitutes a model house at t': It is indeterminate whether a model house exists at t' only if: there is something (viz., b') that exists at t' and there is some time t ($\neq$ t') such that a model house made by addition to b' does exist in the vicinity of b' at t.

On a constitutional approach to temporal vagueness, its being indeterminate whether x exists at t' requires that there is some other time, t, such that x definitely exists at t. Indeterminate existence is parasitic on determinate existence. So, if it is indeterminate that a exists at t', there is some other time, t, such that a (definitely) exists

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at t; hence, there is something definite that we can talk about when it say that it is indeterminate whether *it* exists at t'.[11]

There is an interesting epistemic asymmetry in this view: On the one hand, if, after the model house was completed, you removed the roof, we would know that it is indeterminate that the model house exists then. We would know this, because we know that the model house definitely existed before the roof was removed. But on the other hand, we cannot know at t', before the house is completed, that it is indeterminate whether b' constitutes a model-house then. We cannot know this, because we do not know at t' whether there ever definitely exists a model-house in the vicinity. If you had got bored at t' and had stopped building before putting the roof on top, then there would not have been a model-house that existed indeterminately at t'. There would have been no model-house at all. This is a consequence of the dependence of indeterminate existence on determinate existence.

"Surely," someone may object, "you were building something. What was it if not a model-house?" To which I reply: Building something is an intentional activity, subject to the phenomenon of "intentional inexistence." You can be building something that never gets built in the same way that you can hunt for something (like unicorns) never exist. If there is never definitely a model house in the vicinity, then there is never a time at which an aggregate indeterminately constitutes a model house in the vicinity.

Cases of temporal vagueness are not just confined to artifacts. Anything that comes into existence by means of a process is subject to this kind of indeterminacy. Temporal vagueness (as well as spatial vagueness) affects natural objects like animals as well. When does an animal come into existence? Is there an exact moment? No. A mammalian fertilized egg is not an animal. A fertilized egg is capable of twinning and producing two animals. If such a fertilized egg were an animal, then it would follow that one thing could be identical to two things. But it is logically impossible for one animal to

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[11] Thus, we do not need indeterminate identity statements that, as Gareth Evans showed, lead to contradiction when coupled with the thesis that there are vague objects.

be identical to two animals. So, an animal does not come into existence at fertilization.[12] Moreover, fertilization itself is not instantaneous; it too is a process. It takes time for the sperm to enter the egg. When a sperm is partly inside and partly outside an egg, it is indeterminate whether the egg has been fertilized.

Every kind of macroscopic entity in the natural world admits of borderline cases of existence. If F is a macro-primary-kind property (e.g., being a frog, being a table), then individuals that have F as their primary-kind property are temporally vague. No objects that we encounter in the world pop into existence or go out of existence instantaneously.   Again, I am not talking about our concepts, but rather about what our concepts are concepts *of*.   Our concepts are concepts of things that come into existence gradually. For any x, if x comes into existence gradually, then x has an indeterminate temporal boundary.[13]

In sum: Constitution is a vague relation that can accommodate the kinds of indeterminacy encountered in the world.[14]

An Objection Considered

Some philosophers worry that my view allows us simply to think things into existence. For example, Dean Zimmerman, one of my best critics, says, "Baker thinks we sometimes bring things into existence by thinking about them." As an example, he

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[12] Even Roman Catholic writers agree. See GEM Anscombe, "Were You a Zygote?" in *Philosophy and Practice*, ed A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge University Press, 1985): 111-115, and Norman M. Ford, *When Did I Begin?* (Cambridge University Press, 1988)..

[13] Let me try to fend off objections by noting three features of my view of vagueness: (i) Temporal indeterminacy stems, not from any indeterminacy in the existential quantifier, but in the indeterminacy of the instantiation of the primary-kind property, 'being a model-house.' The model house whose existence is indeterminate at t' does definitely exist at some other time t. So, I am not proposing to quantify over objects that never definitely exist.[13] (ii) For all I have said, only primary kinds whose instances are constituted are temporally vague. To extend the notion of temporal vagueness to unconstituted things like fundamental particles (if there are any), additional clauses would have to be added. Since all the items in the world as encountered are constituted, I can be neutral about extending the notion to fundamental particles (or to portions of gunk). (iii) My view of vagueness in the world as encountered, I hope, does not imply that there is vague identity. If an F* (definitely) exists at t, and it is indeterminate whether an F* exists at t', then there is (definitely) no identity between the F* (that exists at t) and any that exists at t'. 'It is indeterminate that x = y' is always false.

[14] Someone could accept my construal of constitution and accept that constitution is a vague relation, but reject my account of vagueness as de re. Such a philosopher could endorse the standard account of vagueness as a matter of our concepts. But see my arguments against the standard account later.

cites "a piece of conveniently shaped driftwood [that] becomes a coffee table by being brushed off and brought into the house."[15]

Not exactly. Even on my view, that's a little too quick. The piece of driftwood comes to constitute a table only in table-favorable circumstances, which include more than "being brushed off and brought into the house." The piece of driftwood comes to constitute a table in part by coming to be used in a certain already-established way. Granted, there is no exact moment at which the piece of driftwood comes to constitute a table (I've have endorsed temporal vagueness). But our practices and conventions, as well as our intentions, are what make one piece of driftwood constitute a table, and another piece of driftwood constitute a piece of art. If I saw a piece of driftwood and made up the word 'bonangle' on the spot, and thought to myself, "It would be nice if the world contained bonangles; I hereby make that piece of driftwood a bonangle," I would not have brought into existence a new thing, a bonangle; our conventions and practices do not have a place for bonangles. It is not *just* thinking that brings things into existence.

Although thinking, by itself, does not bring a new concrete thing into existence, some thought and talk, in the context of conventions and practices, can enlarge the field of an already-existing primary-kind property. E.g., *Being a sculpture* was already a primary-kind property when Duchamp produced *Fountain.* Interestingly, Zimmerman uses a reference to Duchamp's *Fountain* ("a urinal becomes a sculpture when hung on a wall in a museum and given a title")[16] as an example of how my view would allow objects to become artworks "simply by our thinking of them as such." But again, what made *Fountain* an artwork was not just "thinking of [it] as such." If it had not been presented (and as it happened, signed, 'R. Mutt') by someone like Duchamp at a certain point in the history of art (with all its conventions), that urinal would not have constituted an artwork at all. Again: This is a case, not of bringing into existence a new primary kind, but enlarging the field of a well-established primary kind.

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[15] Dean Zimmerman, "The Constitution of Persons by Bodies: A Critique of Lynne Rudder Baker's Theory of Material Constitution," *Philosophical Topics* 30 (2002): 333. (295-338).
[16] I take it that Zimmerman does not consider *Fountain* to be an artwork distinct from a urinal.

Now the difficulty pops up from the other side. If how we talk and interact plays a role in what exists, then—for example—how much change would be required for *being a president* to be a primary-kind property? "How differently would we have to talk and act," Zimmerman asks, "before G.W. Bush, the man, would come to coincide with another thing, a person (derivatively) who is (nonderivatively) commander-in-chief of the armed forces, etc., but who will outlive the man G.W. and always be president?"[17] How much change in the way that we talk would it take for *president* to be a primary-kind constituted at one time by George Washington, and at another time by Abraham Lincoln?[18]

My answer is that we cannot anticipate in advance what new primary kinds there may be. However, we have good reason to suspect that no change will make *president* a primary kind. Before considering these reasons, note that it is clear that *president* is not a primary kind now, that *being president* is at this time a property that persons acquire and lose. When President Kennedy was killed, the United States had a new president— LBJ. We did not have the same president constituted by a new person. (You can find this out by reading the newspapers and political science books.) So, at this time, *president* is not a primary kind. There are two reasons why I doubt that there will be any time at which *president* is a primary kind.

In the first place, if we consider the role that thought and talk have in bringing new primary kinds into existence—e.g., figuring out how to build a machine with movable type contributed to the printing press; deciding how to document citizenship contributed to passports—we will see that it is not a matter of transforming nonprimary kinds into primary kinds. The sort of talk and thought that can contribute to bringing a new primary kind into existence is not talk and thought about a kind that existed already as an old nonprimary kind (like *president*).

In the second place, it is difficult to imagine any human interest that would lead to conventions making *president* a primary kind. Our conventions are based on our

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[17] Zimmerman, 334

[18] The definition of a higher-order primary kind does not help determine which are the primary kinds in the first place. See my Reply to Pereboom in the Book Symposium in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 632-4.

interests, and I cannot imagine any human interest that would lead to conventions that would make *president* to be a primary kind. We choose what interests to have only within a limited range. We cannot just change our interests at will. I don't think that we could just decide to change our general interest in having shelter, or in being treated with dignity. I agree with the evolutionary psychologists to this extent: Our interests are not wholly malleable. So, I doubt that we could come to regard *president* as a primary kind. In that case, no change in the way that we talk would bring it about that *president* is a primary kind.

Zimmerman speaks of "powerful resistance to the idea that changes in our ways of talking about things, even coupled with simple changes in some of our nonverbal reactions to things, could by themselves bring any concrete physical object into existence."[19] I have two responses. First, although I do hold that thought and talk make an essential contribution to the existence of certain objects, I do not hold that thought and talk alone bring into existence any physical objects: conventions, practices, and pre-existing materials are also required. So, on my view, what brings concrete things into existence is not *just* "ways of talking about things, even coupled with simple changes in some of our nonverbal reactions to things." I do not think that we just conjure up new concrete physical objects of an afternoon.

Moreover, our intentional activity—which includes our thought and talk—contributes ontologically to the existence only of *intentional* physical objects. Given the definition of 'intentional object,' our role in the existence of such objects is assured. The only place for objection, I believe, lies in my assumption that there exist intentional physical objects in the first place. But I do not see how we can make sense of our experience without intentional physical objects like artifacts. Perhaps more significantly, intentional phenomena, including intentional physical objects, are ineliminable from the explanatory apparatus of many of the special sciences—e.g., economics, sociology, political science, epidemiology, traffic science, and the like. It seems to me safe to affirm as real what are in the explanatory apparatus of the sciences.

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[19] Zimmerman, 335.

My view is that there are many things in the world as encountered whose existence ontologically depends on intentional activity. No other view in sight begins to make metaphysical sense of the world as encountered—or even to take it seriously, except as something to be explained away. On the rival views, what we take—and cannot help taking—to be real is really something else.

A New Look at Two Old Issues

Attention to the world as encountered may shed light on two old issues: the nature of vagueness, and the theoretical merit (or lack of merit) of a mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction. Consideration of the world as encountered suggests two things: that vagueness cannot be merely a linguistic matter, and that the distinction between what is independent of all mental activity and what is not is much less significant than philosophers have thought.

1. Vagueness. Many philosophers are so averse to vagueness that they deny that it is really in the world at all.   The leading view among philosophers today of the appearance of vagueness is that it is not in world, but in our language.[20]   (I'll challenge the sharp distinction between language and the world in the next section.) David Lewis, for example, put it forcefully:

> "The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason it's vague where the outback begins is not that there's this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word 'outback.' Vagueness is semantic indecision."[21]

Lewis may be right about the outback, but I do not believe that we can account for vagueness generally as semantic indecision. I have two very simple one-step arguments

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[20] See papers in *Vagueness*, Delia Graff and Timothy Williamson, eds.(Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2002); *Vagueness: A Reader*, Rosanna Keefe and Peter Smith, eds. (Cambridge MA: MIT?Bradford, 1996). For an overview, see *Vagueness* by Timothy Williamson (London: Routledge, 1994).

[21] David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 212-213.

against those who deny that there's vagueness in reality, and locate all vagueness in our language or concepts. I'll take the alternative to the claim that all vagueness is linguistic vagueness to be the claim that there is de re vagueness—vagueness in objects that is not simply a product of how we decide to use our words.

Argument 1:

> 1. All vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision only if, for every case of vagueness, it is within our ability to eliminate it by making some semantic decision.
> 2. Much vagueness is ineliminable: it is not within our ability to eliminate it by making some semantic decision.
> ∴ 3. Not all vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision.

Premise 1: Those who argue that all vagueness is linguistic, in fact do argue that vagueness could be eliminated.[22] They say, e.g., that we could be precise about what is baldness—e.g., having fewer than n hairs on one's head—but we do not bother, because such specificity is not useful. The point of holding that all vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision (however the thesis is expressed) is that vagueness is held to be "up to us;" it is not in "the world as it is in itself." Well, if vagueness is up to us, we could eliminate it if we wanted to. If all vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision, then we could eliminate it by semantic decision.

Premise 2: We could not eliminate vagueness—even if we wanted to.[23] If we could, then for any predicate 'F' that is vague, we could we draw a line as the example of 'bald' (misleadingly) suggests. But any line (like having fewer than so-many hairs on one's head) reveals new vague predicates—in this case, 'is a hair'. (Is a broken follicle a hair?) Vagueness may be pushed around, but not eliminated, by our decisions.

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[22] See Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[23] The fact that vagueness is ineliminable explains why good judgment is such an important virtue. If vagueness were eliminable, then we would not need judges and juries; a computer algorithm could take their place.

16

(Interestingly, Bertrand Russell would have agreed: all natural language, he argued, is infected with vagueness, and hence is unsuitable for logic.[24])

A word may be vague in one of two ways: the items in the extension of the word may each be precise, but it may be indeterminate which of a range of individually-precise items is in the extension of the word. (The extension of a word includes all the things that the word applies to.) There is another way that a word can be vague, however: The items in the extension of the word may themselves be vague.[25] Not only do politically charged expressions (like 'sexual harrassment') have vague extensions,[26] but so do less charged words like 'gossip,' and uncharged words like 'paying attention' or the word 'vague' itself.[27] The extensions of such words are vague, not because we have failed to draw a line, but rather because there is no line to be drawn. To try to "sharpen" such words would be to lose them altogether. Therefore, not all vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision.[28] As we shall see, the vagueness in language cannot be isolated from vagueness in the world.

Argument 2:

1. If there is anything that exists or occurs in the world independently of our concepts, and does not have a precise beginning independently of our concepts, then there is de re vagueness.

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[24] For a critical discussion, see Williamson's *Vagueness*, pp. 52ff.

[25] Consider the concept of 'killing.' The concept of killing seems clear enough: a kills b if and only if a causes b's death. Killing does not even require an intention: lightning can kill. Here is a partly fictional case: A middle-aged professional woman (call her 'Jane') has an affair with a vain and famous man (call him 'Bill'), who is about to abandon Jane for a younger woman. Jane loves Bill and in her desperation, she takes a small revolver and goes to Bill's house—intending, as she says later, to kill herself in front of him. Bill grabs the gun; in the scuffle with both Bill's and Jane's hands on the gun, the gun goes off at close range. Bill is fatally shot. Did Jean kill the doctor? (This story is loosely based on my recollection of the killing of the celebrated "diet doctor", Dr. Tarnower by Jean Harris. Harris was convicted by a jury of murder.)

[26] Wittgenstein on rule-following comes to mind here. There are too many ways of harrassing that no one has yet thought of that may or may not end up in the extension of the concept.

[27] J.L. Austin pointed out, "'Vague' is itself vague." *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962): 125.

[28] I disagree with Theodore Sider argues that there is no vagueness in reality on the grounds that if there were, logical notions would have to be vague. I locate the vagueness in the world in the extensions of empirical concepts, not in logical concepts at all.

17

2. Natural processes occur in the world independently of our concepts and do not have precise beginnings, independently of our concepts.

∴ 3. There is de re vagueness.

Premise 1: Premise 1 is just a matter of definition. If something comes into existence, and there no precise instant before which it definitely failed to exist, and after which it definitely existed, then, by definition, it has a vague beginning.   If something has a vague beginning, then it is vague. If something vague exists independently of our concepts and lacks a precise beginning independently of our concepts, then its vagueness cannot be attributed to our concepts. If there is something in reality that is vague and whose vagueness cannot be attributed to our concepts, then there is de re vagueness.[29]

Premise 2: Premise 2 is a matter of taking special sciences—like astronomy and biology—at face value.   Astronomers and biologists take their domain to be natural processes that occur in nature, independently of our concepts—processes that would transpire in the absence of any of our concepts. The evolution of our solar system is an example of a natural process. Astronomers give us good reason to believe that our solar system evolved, and that its evolution was a natural process. If the best astronomy today is correct, then our solar system did not begin at a precise instant.

Everything that comes into being by a process (natural or artifactual) thus has a vague beginning. The coming-into-existence of our sun, for example, is vague: There is not a precise instant when it came into being. This absence of a precise beginning of a natural object like our sun, say, does not stem from the *concept* of a sun. The concept of a sun is supposed to take its cue from the kind of object that the sun is. Sometimes (as in the case of the sun), we use concepts to speak of things that are independent of the concepts used to refer to them.   The sun would have had a vague temporal boundary even if we (with our words and concepts) had never existed.   If astronomers are correct in saying that our solar system evolved over eons, then that's the way the world is, apart

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[29] It is noteworthy that David Lewis could not simply instantiate premise 1. His view is that everything that exists has precise edges; vagueness arises from the fact that we have not decided which of the precise objects to apply, say, 'outback' to.   So, on his view, we cannot straightforwardly make an assignment of ordinary objects like planets to a variable. Lewis would have to restate premise 1 in some way unkown to me.

from our language. If the sun has a vague temporal boundary that does not depend on our concepts, then there is de re vagueness.

Or consider biology: The best biology describes having a heart attack as a process, without a precise instant at which it starts or ends. Heart attacks kill people; concepts of heart attacks do not. Since heart attacks kill people, they are part of reality. Although they do not have precise beginnings, heart attacks occur in the world independently of our concepts. In that case, the vagueness attendant upon heart attacks is de re vagueness.

In sum: Everything in the natural world unfolds over time: Natural processes have no sharp cut-off points. If there are no sharp cut-off points in reality, then there is de re vagueness. The only alternative to de re vagueness that I can see is an implausible claim that the properties of natural processes themselves are just a matter of our language. Not only would such a claim be prima facie implausible, but also it would make a mockery of special sciences like astronomy and biology. This would be unattractive to realists of any stripe.

2. The mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction. I want to discuss this distinction, because many people who consider themselves to be realists take such a distinction to be the foundation of their view. For example, Ernest Sosa has said:

> "What the metaphysical realist is committed to holding is that there is an in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence, and that we can talk about such reality and its constituents by virtue of correspondence relations between our language (and/or our minds), on the one hand, and things-in-themselves and their intrinsic properties (including their relations), on the other."[30]

Although I agree that there is an "in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence," I do not believe a distinction between such in-itself reality and

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[30] Ernest Sosa, "Putnam's Pragmatic Realism," *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 605-26. Reprinted in *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 607-619. Quote is on p. 609.

everything else is a philosophically useful distinction—especially for understanding the world as encountered.   But before turning to the usefulness (or lack of it) of the distinction, let me expose an incoherent way to make the distinction.

The mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction is often taken to be a distinction between what is "up to nature" and what is "up to us." Such an equation is untenable if 'up to us' means 'what is optional for us' or 'what is under the control of human decision'. A distinction between what is mind-independent and what is optional for us is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. It is not exclusive: Almost all the states of affairs that are optional for us have mind-independent components: E.g., building a highway is optional for us, but requires all kinds of mind-independent materials. Nor is a distinction between what is mind-independent and what is optional for us exhaustive: Much of the world as encountered is neither mind-independent nor optional for us. Our interest in taking care of our children is not mind-independent, nor is it an interest that we could simply decide to change. Our being language users is neither mind-independent, nor "up to us." A biologically given interest is not optional, and in the example of taking care of children or of being a language user, not mind-independent either.   So, if we take 'mind-dependent' to mean 'what is optional for us' or 'what is up to us' then a distinction between what is mind-independent and what is mind-dependent is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Such a distinction is incoherent as a basis for metaphysics.

I suspect that 'mind-independent' is an example of what J.L. Austin called a 'trouser word:' It wears the pants in the family, and 'mind-dependent' must be defined in terms of it—as what is not mind-independent.   Any other construal of the distinction (e.g., as what is optional for us as opposed to what is "up to nature") is incoherent, as we have just seen. Taking 'mind-independent' to apply to anything that is part of "in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence," and 'mind-dependent' to be anything that is not mind-independent is coherent; but the line drawn by this distinction sheds no light—at least not on the world as encountered.

Artifacts are prominent in the world as encountered, but artifacts turn out to be mind-dependent on the coherent construal of the mind-independent/mind-dependent

distinction. This is so because artifacts are not part of in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence. Nothing would be a carburetor in a world without intentional activity.[31] But on the coherent construal of the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction, anything that is ontologically dependent on the existence of minds is mind-dependent. So restricting reality to what is mind-independent will not only eliminate language and everything that depends on language from reality, but also artifacts.

The portion of reality that is *excluded* from the "in-itself reality independent of our minds and even of our existence" excludes much of what we encounter: e.g., artifacts, artworks, economic items (certificates of deposit, bonds), consumer goods, documents. It also excludes such varied properties as being philanthropic, being in debt, being employed, being drunk, being conscientious, having a banking system, breaking a treaty, suspending habeas corpus, and on and on. Moreover, on the coherent construal of the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction, carburetors and dreams, statues and imaginings, and other subjective phenomena come out on the same ontological side. I am confident that it is basically wrong-headed to put artifacts and after-images in the same ontological category, and hence that the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction is itself misguided as a basis for metaphysics.

To reject the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction as the basis of metaphysics is to reject the idea that there is a sharp division between language and "the world." Without such a sharp division, the thesis that all vagueness is linguistic, and hence not de re, becomes problematic. The thesis that all vagueness is linguistic, and hence not de re, requires that language be isolable from the world, from genuine reality. But, of course, language is not isolable from the world.[32] The world of encounter is infected with language through and through. Suppose that we refrain from viewing reality through the lens of the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction. Then, on the one hand, the thesis that all vagueness is in language and thereby not in the world

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[31] See a lengthy discussion of artifacts (specifically, carburetors) in my *Explaining Attitudes: A Practical Approach to the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[32] I cannot resist an appeal to authority here. "Let us forget once and for all," said David Wiggins, "the very idea of some knowledge of language or meaning that is not knowledge of the world itself." David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance Renewed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 12.

makes no sense. And on the other hand, my thesis that there is de re vagueness is compatible with a thesis that much vagueness is also linguistic.

The significance of discarding the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction is this: What is de re need not be wholly independent of language. The world as encountered is full of examples. To take one example almost at random: The existence of credit cards depends on social and economic practices that require language, and de re features of credit cards inherit that dependence on language.

Metaphysical realists standardly think of reality in terms of mind-independence. I do not. Hence, I do not call myself a metaphysical realist, but a practical realist: Realist because I believe that there may exist objects and properties beyond our ability to recognize them; practical because I believe that the world as encountered—that part of reality that includes us, our language, and the things that we interact with—is ontologically significant. We shall make no headway on a philosophical understanding of the world as encountered if we frame our investigation globally in terms of mind-independence vs. mind-dependence.

Conclusion

Contemporary metaphysics is chock full of a priori commitments—such as commitments to the thesis that vagueness is wholly up to our decisions, and to the theoretical significance of the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction itself. Instead of starting with a priori metaphysical commitments, I prefer to start with what is at hand—with what we know and cannot seriously doubt—and try to think clearly about it as unencumbered with antecedent metaphysics as possible. I want the metaphysics to emerge from the reflection on the world, rather than the world to be squeezed into a preconceived metaphysical strait jacket. Using my preferred strategy, I have tried to show how the idea of constitution provides a metaphysical basis for a unified view that treats everyday life seriously.

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