

- *The Monist* 89 (2006): 313-330.

Everyday Concepts as a Guide to Reality

On September 11, 2001, as everyone knows, the towers of the World Trade Center in New York were attacked. I want to discuss this event in order to motivate a nonreductionist view of the extensions of everyday concepts. Next, I shall set out, and begin to defend, the particular view of nonreductionism that I favor—the Constitution View. Then, I shall consider two venerable metaphysical issues (the nature of vagueness and the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction) in light of the Constitution View. If the Constitution View is correct, then everyday concepts are a good guide to reality. My aim is to offer a metaphysical theory that acknowledges the genuine reality of what our everyday concepts (as well as our scientific concepts) are concepts *of*.

Motivation for Nonreductionism

Millions, perhaps billions, of people were horrified to see the World Trade Center towers collapse on September 11, 2001. Ontologically speaking, what happened when the towers came down? Here are three possibilities:

(1) Eliminativism: Strictly speaking, no towers ever existed: the word ‘tower’ is not a referring word. All that existed were simples arranged tower-wise. Sentences like ‘The towers fell’ are rephrased with plural quantification and the predicate ‘are arranged tower-wise.’ When the towers fell (as we say), the only change was in the arrangement of the particles. But nothing went out of existence. I associate this view with Peter van Inwagen and his camp.

(2) Reductionism: There were towers, but the towers were really just the matter that occupied spacetime points arranged tower-wise. The towers were, in other words, mereological sums of matter at those spacetime points. Any matter-filled spacetime points have sums; we have names for some of the sums that are arranged in certain ways (e.g., ‘towers’). All that really exist are matter at spacetime points and their sums arranged in various ways. ‘Tower’ is just a name we give to matter in a certain arrangement. Concepts like *tower* reflect our interests, and reality is independent of our interests. I associate this view with David Lewis.

(3) Nonreductionism: The apparent towers really existed in their own right, so to speak. Particles made up the towers, but the towers were not just identical to particles—or to mereological sums of particles—arranged tower-wise. I associate this last view with a number of philosophers. It is my view.

Philosophers may hold different of these views for different domains. (E.g., van Inwagen is an eliminativist with respect to towers and other inanimate complex objects, but not with respect to organisms.) Focussing on inanimate complex objects like the towers, I shall briefly compare and contrast the three views (or types of views), then turn to a more detailed elaboration of my version of nonreductionism. For convenience, I’ll use the term ‘particle’ as a dummy word for physical particles, matter at spacetime points, or simples, depending on the view in question.

First, consider an ontological comparison-and-contrast: On all three views, there were particles arranged tower-wise at 8:30 am, and those particles still existed at 10:00, but they were no longer arranged

tower-wise at 10:00. On the eliminativist and reductionist views, strictly speaking, nothing literally went out of existence between 8:30 and 10:00; there was only a change in the arrangement of particles. But on these views, ontologically speaking, there was no change in what exists—it just became inappropriate to apply our concept of ‘towers’ to the particles in their new arrangement. All the objects [or, in the case of van Inwagen, nonliving objects] that exist, according to both eliminativism and reductionism, are particles (matter at spacetime points or simples) arranged in certain ways. On the eliminativist and reductionist views, there is no *ontological* difference between the towers and the rubble.

By contrast, on the nonreductionist view, the collapse of the towers was a loss to reality, ontologically speaking. The change between 8:30 and 10:00 was more than a change in the arrangement of particles. Indeed, the eliminativist and reductionist may be right to insist particles and their fusions existed and are re-arranged. But according to the nonreductionist, there were objects that were not identical with fusions of particles and that went out of existence altogether when the towers collapsed. At the time of the collapse, the things that were towers literally went out of existence; they did not just lose the property of being towers and acquire the property of being rubble. The towers were not just fusions that changed shape; they were objects that once existed and then failed to exist. The contents of the world changed between 8:30 and 10:00; on the nonreductionist view, complete inventories of the world would include different objects at 8:30 and at 10:00. Only a nonreductionist approach allows the extensions of everyday concepts like *tower* to be ontologically significant.

Now turn to the semantic comparison-and-contrast: The difference between reductionism and eliminativism seems to be

semantic: the reductionist takes 'tower' to be a referring word, but the eliminativist does not.¹ Both eliminativist and reductionist take the sentence, 'There are towers' to be true. The eliminativist takes that sentence to be true in virtue of having a paraphrase that does not mention towers: 'There are some simples arranged towerwise.'² The paraphrase (putatively) expresses the same fact as the original sentence. The reductionist takes that sentence to be true as expressed; he does not need a paraphrase that does not mention towers. On the reductionist view, what a tower *is* is a fusion of particles (or simples) arranged in a certain way.³

Neither eliminativism nor reductionism can take everyday discourse at face value. First, consider eliminativism: The eliminativist requires odd paraphrases of much of everyday talk; speakers do not mean what they think that they mean. When they say, "The towers collapsed," eliminativist metaphysicians must supply a paraphrase: e.g., 'The simples that had one arrangement (tower-wise) now have another arrangement (rubble-wise).' The eliminativist cannot suppose that the sentence 'the towers collapsed' is both true and literally expresses the proposition that the towers collapsed. For the eliminativist, common nouns in everyday discourse disappear under analysis.

Now consider reductionism: The reductionist supposes that talk about the collapse of the towers is really just talk about the re-arrangement of particles. If we took everyday language at face value, we would not suppose that talk about towers is just talk about

¹ There is no ontological difference on the assumption that mereology is, as Lewis says, "ontologically innocent." Sums do not introduce new objects over and above the objects in their parts. *Parts of Classes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 81.

² cf. Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990): 109.

³ cf. David Lewis, *Parts of Classes*, p. 87.

particles. Towers are insured; particles aren't. Towers have security systems; particles don't. A reductionist would demur: Certain fusions of particles are insured and do have security systems. Such a reductionist would be saying, in effect, that what gets insured are particles-in-certain-*arrangements*. A nonreductionist would reply that in holding that what gets insured are particles-in-certain-arrangement, a reductionist has departed from what is ordinarily meant by 'tower:' We should not and would not apply our concept 'tower' to a collection of particles just like the ones in the twin towers and arranged in the same way, but which spontaneously coalesced in outer space. A random arrangement of particles—even if it happened to be shaped tower-wise—would not be a tower.

The nonreductionist, by contrast, takes the sentence 'The towers collapsed' to imply that in the past, there existed entities that were towers (whatever they were made of) and that these entities collapsed and went out of existence. Only nonreductionism takes our everyday discourse to be true on a face-value reading.

The semantic and ontological differences among the three views, I believe, give us *prima facie* reason to be nonreductionists about towers, and hence to be nonreductionists about the extensions of everyday concepts like *tower*. Only nonreductionism takes objects to have gone out of existence when the towers collapsed, and only nonreductionism takes our everyday discourse at face value. Let us now turn to the task of formulating a nonreductionist view that allows everyday concepts to be a guide to reality.

The World As Encountered: A Nonreductive Approach

The World Trade Center Towers were part of what I call 'the world as encountered.'" The world as encountered includes what our

everyday concepts (like tower) purport 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 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.

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

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 ‘intention-dependent object,’ or an ‘ID object.’⁴ ID objects that we are familiar with include passports, kitchen utensils, precision instruments, and so on. Different communities may be familiar with different kinds of ID objects; but all communities recognize many kinds of ID objects—as well as other intention-dependent or ID phenomena like conventions, obligations, and so on. All artifacts and artworks, and most human activities (getting a job, going out to dinner, etc.), are intention-dependent 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.⁵ In the world as encountered, whether an object is an ID object or not is often insignificant: It is usually irrelevant whether what constitutes a ball is a piece of natural rubber (i.e., not an ID object) or a piece of artificial rubber (i.e., an ID object). My theory of the world as encountered allows for the distinction between ID objects and others, but does not highlight it.

⁴ Note that I am not using ‘intentional’ in Brentano’s sense.

⁵ 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 .

If, ontologically speaking, towers really are towers and not just arrangements of particles, what is the relation between the twin towers and the collections of particles that made them up? My answer is: constitution. Constitution 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 and the people. These objects are irreducible to the particles that make them up. They are of higher levels of reality than the particles that constitute them.

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. A flag, as it is shot and tattered in battle, is 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*.⁶ 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

⁶ So, ‘constitutes’ is not a synonym of ‘composes’ as mereologists use it.

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 ID objects and nonID 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.

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.⁷

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 into existence.

⁷ 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: Identity and Individuation* 30 (2002): 31-51..

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*.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 is

⁸ 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.

⁹ Perhaps there are no ultimate particles. In that case, the ultimate constitutors will be portions of gunk. That possibility can be easily accommodated, but I’ll just leave it aside.

¹⁰ An aggregate of H₂O molecules has H₂O molecules as its primary kind; the atoms in the aggregate of H₂O molecules have hydrogen/oxygen atoms as their primary-kind. The difference between the aggregate of hydrogen atoms and oxygen atoms and the aggregate of H₂O molecules is itself a matter of constitution: When the aggregate of atoms is in H₂O-molecule-favorable circumstances, it constitutes an aggregate of H₂O molecules.

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. 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.¹¹

¹¹ Not all properties may be had derivatively. Excluded are (a) properties expressed canonically 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 (like being a marble statue). For details, see *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 2.

There are some controversial features of constitution. One is that constitution is a vague relation.¹² 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; such philosophers treat vagueness solely as a matter of our concepts and hold that there is no vagueness in reality. I differ. I believe that everything that comes into existence in the world as encountered comes into existence gradually. 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 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. So, constitution is a vague relation that can accommodate the kinds of indeterminacy encountered in the world.¹³

¹² 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.

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. (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.

In sum: I offer a nonreductive view of the world as encountered. According to the nonreductionist, the Twin Towers existed, but were not identical to the aggregate of particles that made them up. The relation between the towers and the aggregate of particles was one of constitution. Each of the towers was constituted by an aggregate of particles at the time of the attack. Unlike identity, constitution is a temporal relation: x may constitute y at one time but not at another. E.g., a certain aggregate of H₂O molecules may constitute a river at one time, but not at a later time (after some animals have drunk from the river, say). Ordinary material objects are constituted-at-t by other “lower-level” things. A painting may be constituted by a piece of wood with paint on it, which in turn is constituted by an aggregate of cellulose molecules; the aggregate of molecules in turn is constituted by aggregates of atoms, and so on.

Objections 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 cites “a piece of conveniently shaped driftwood [that] becomes a coffee table by being brushed off and brought into the house.”¹⁴

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

¹⁴ 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).

driftwood comes to constitute a table (I 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”)¹⁵ 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.

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

¹⁵ I take it that Zimmerman does not consider *Fountain* to be an artwork distinct from a urinal.

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?”¹⁶ 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?¹⁷

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 in the way that the “president” example suggests. The sort of talk and thought that can contribute to bringing a new

¹⁶ Zimmerman, 334.

¹⁷ 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.

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 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."¹⁸ 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—and this is my second response, our intentional activity contributes ontologically to the existence only of ID objects—

¹⁸ Zimmerman, 335.

objects that could not exist in the absence of beings with propositional attitudes. Given the definition of 'ID 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 ID objects in the first place. But I do not see how we can make sense of our experience without ID objects like artifacts. Perhaps more significantly, intentional phenomena, including ID 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.

My view is that there are many things in the world whose existence ontologically depends on intentional activity. No other view in sight begins to make metaphysical sense of the world that we encounter—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 what our everyday concepts are concepts *of* 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.¹⁹ (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.”²⁰

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 against those who deny that there’s vagueness in reality, and locate all vagueness in our language or concepts.

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.

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 212-213.

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.²¹ 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: But we could not eliminate vagueness—even if we wanted to.²² 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. (Interestingly, Bertrand Russell would have agreed: all natural language, he argued, is infected with vagueness, and hence (he thought) unsuitable for logic.²³)

A word may be vague in either of two ways: the items in the extension of the word may each be precise, but it may be

²¹ Epistemicists about vagueness do not hold that all vagueness is a matter of semantic indecision, but rather that vagueness is our ignorance of what our words mean. So this first argument may not apply to epistemicists; but I believe that the second argument does apply to epistemicists. See Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²² 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.

²³ For a critical discussion, see Williamson's *Vagueness*, pp. 52ff.

indeterminate which of a range of individually-precise items is in the extension of the word. There is another way that a word can be vague, however: The items in the extension of the word may themselves be vague.²⁴ Not only do politically charged expressions (like 'sexual harrassment') have extensions that are vague in this second sense,²⁵ but so do less charged words like 'gossip,' and uncharged words like 'paying attention' or the word 'vague' itself.²⁶ 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. 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 vagueness in objects that is not simply a product of how we decide to use our words.

²⁴ 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 'Jean') has an affair with a vain and famous man (call him 'Bill'), who is about to abandon Jean for a younger woman. Jean 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 Jean'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.)

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ J.L. Austin pointed out, "'Vague' is itself vague." *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962): 125.

2. Natural processes occur in the world independently of our concepts and do not have precise beginnings, independently of our concepts.
3. There is vagueness in objects that is not simply a product of how we decide to use our words.

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 ontological vagueness.²⁷

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.

²⁷ 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 unknown to me.

Everything that comes into being by a process (natural or artifactual) thus has a vague beginning. The sun, for example, 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 from our language. If the sun has a vague temporal boundary that does not depend on our concepts, then there is ontological 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 ontological vagueness. The only alternative to ontological 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 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 reported:

“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.”²⁸

²⁸ Ernest Sosa, “Putnam’s Pragmatic Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 605-26. Reprinted in *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, Jaegwon Kim and Ernest

But before turning to the usefulness (or lack of it) of the mind-independent/mind-dependent 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. Other construals of the distinction (e.g., as what is optional for us as opposed to what is “up to nature”) are incoherent,

Sosa, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 607-619. Quote is on p. 609.

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 we encounter it.

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.²⁹ So restricting reality to what is mind-independent will not only eliminate from reality everything that depends on language, 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, credit cards), 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 side of the ontological divide. I am confident that it is basically wrong-headed to put artifacts and after-images in the same ontological category, and hence I am also confident that the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction is itself misguided as a basis for metaphysics.

²⁹ See a lengthy discussion of artifacts (specifically, carburetors) in my *Explaining Attitudes: A Practical Approach to the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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 ontological, becomes problematic. The thesis that all vagueness is linguistic, and hence not ontological, requires that language be isolable from the world, from genuine reality. But, of course, language is not isolable from the world.³⁰ The world as we know it is infected with language through and through.

The significance of discarding the mind-independence/mind-dependence distinction is this: What really exists--what has ontological status--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 real features of credit cards inherit that dependence on language. Anyone who has ever lost a credit card knows that something real can not be found.

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.

³⁰ 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.

Conclusion

Contemporary metaphysics is chock full of a priori commitments—such as commitments to the thesis that vagueness is wholly a matter of semantic indecision, 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 taking everyday concepts as a guide to what's real.³¹

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³¹ This article descended from papers read at Erasmus University (Rotterdam) in October 2003, The 2004 Werkmeister Conference at Florida State University in January 2004 (with Ronald Mallon as commentator), Canisius College in April 2004. A preliminary version was discussed by a working group of philosophers from Erasmus University, the Universities of Nijmegen Delft, Eindhoven, and Utrecht, with Theo van Willigenburg, Frank Hindriks, and Mureen Sie as commentators. Thanks to all the participants. I am also grateful to David Hershenov for comments and to Gareth B. Matthews and Katherine Sonderegger for discussion of the matters at issue.