

**COMPOSITION, COLOCATION, AND METAONTOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**  
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Karen Bennett  
Cornell University

**1. ‘That’s a Stupid Question’**

Some of the things we metaphysicians think about strike others—and, in some moods, ourselves—as a trifle silly. Are there numbers? If I say that my shirt is blue, am I committed to the existence of a universal, namely blueness? If you have two objects, are you guaranteed to also have a third object entirely composed of the first two? And so on and so forth. “Who cares?” ask the neo-Carnapian naysayers,<sup>2</sup> “surely there is something deeply wrong with these questions”. Issues that have inspired particular ire include the dispute between perdurantists and endurantists, the dispute between presentists and eternalists, questions about the persistence conditions of particular kinds of objects, the question of whether there can be multiple objects in the same spatio-temporal location, and—the poster child of those who want to dismiss metaphysics—disputes about whether, and how often, mereological composition occurs. These disputes, they claim, are pointless wastes of time.

Clearly, though, if such a dismitter wants to make a serious point rather than just curmudgeonly noises, she needs to move beyond her gut reaction that these disputes are pointless. She needs to be explicit about just what exactly she thinks is wrong with them. After all, not just any reason for thinking that some question or debate is stupid is metaontologically interesting. You might think a question is stupid because you take it to be blindingly obvious what the right answer is. Or you might think a question is stupid because you are not yourself gripped by it. For example, I cannot get very excited about how many commas appear in the original manuscripts of Shakespeare’s plays, but it is not because I think the question is

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<sup>2</sup> The sorts of people I have in mind Hilary Putnam 1994; Eli Hirsch 2002a,b, 2005; Alan Sidelle 2002; Stephen Yablo 1998, 2000, forthcoming; Amie Thomasson forthcoming. And, of course, Carnap himself.

malformed, or that there is no answer, or anything like that. So what of metaontological interest might be meant by the claim that some metaphysical dispute is pointless? I shall continue to use ‘dismissivism’ as the generic label for the view that there is *something* deeply wrong with these debates.<sup>3</sup>

One crucial question, then, is what flavors dismissivism might come in. Another question is whether we should believe that any particular version of it is true. And a further question is how, at least roughly, we should go about deciding whether any particular version of it is true. I am going to address all three of those questions in this paper. I shall begin by distinguishing three different ways to dismiss metaphysical disputes, and offering a brief methodological suggestion about how to proceed. I shall then argue both that the second version of dismissivism is misguided, and that the third version may well be true. The paper thus aims to achieve three main tasks: to sort out some important preliminary methodological and taxonomic issues, to argue against what I shall call the ‘semanticist’ treatment of two particular metaphysical disputes, and to argue in favor of a different dismissive approach to those two disputes.

## 2. Three Kinds of Dismissivism

What, then, are the three versions of dismissivism? Consider a dispute about whether there are any Fs—whether there are, say, numbers, or perhaps mereological sums. Here is one thing a dismitter might have in mind when she says that that dispute is empty:

- (1) There is no fact of the matter about whether or not there are Fs. ‘There are Fs’ does not have a determinate truth-value.

Call this *antirealism*. I am not going to have a great deal to say about it in this paper. I do not know how exactly to argue against it, and I am not entirely sure what it means. ‘There are Fs’ might be vague or ambiguous in some way, in which case the *unprecisified* sentence might not have a determinate truth-value. But I am not entirely sure how it could be that a *precisified* version of the sentence does not have a truth-value. (Though see Yablo forthcoming for an interesting new strategy for making sense of this claim.) At any rate, I am not going to properly

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<sup>3</sup> Neither ‘skepticism’ nor ‘deflationism’ are appropriate as a *generic* label. ‘Skepticism’ carries epistemic connotations that are not appropriate for the first two views, and ‘deflationism’ does not comfortably fit the third, the elucidation of which is the primary goal of this paper.

address the question of whether there is a fact of the matter about the answers to metaphysical existence questions. I am going to dodge that question altogether.

Here is a second thing that a dismitter might have in mind when she brushes off the question about whether there any Fs:

(2) The dispute about whether there are Fs is purely verbal. The disputants assign different meanings to either the existential quantifier, the predicate 'F', or the negation operator, and are consequently just talking past each other.

Call this *semanticism*. Notice that it is not the same as the antirealism just sketched. Although antirealism arguably entails something in the ballpark of this claim, the converse does not hold. One can think that a dispute about whether there are Fs is purely verbal, and yet resist antirealism. First, one can think that the world itself is perfectly determinate, and that people just disagree about whether the meaning of 'there are Fs' is such that it truly applies to the world. (For more on this, see Hirsch 2002b, Sidelle 2002). Second, one can even think that the sentence 'there are Fs' *itself* has a determinate truth-value, despite thinking that some disputes about it are just verbal disputes. Doing so simply requires thinking that there is a fact of the matter about the correct use of the expressions in the sentence, and that one of the parties to the dispute is just wrong about the use of language.

Consider, for example, a dispute you might have with someone who insists upon using the English word 'telephone' to refer to leprechauns. Suppose that the two of you agree that the world contains certain sorts of communication devices, and does not contain little green people who hide gold at the end of rainbows. You say that there are telephones; he says that there are no telephones. Although this is paradigmatically a verbal dispute, you win. Facts about the correct use of the English expressions in the sentence, conjoined with facts about what sorts of entities we are presuming the world to contain, dictate that 'there are telephones' is determinately true.

Some semanticists, like Eli Hirsch (2002a,b, 2005) and Amie Thomasson (forthcoming), think that at least some of the relevant metaphysical disputes are like this.<sup>4</sup> They therefore claim that many metaphysical disputes can be settled by appeal to ordinary language. Deciding who is right simply requires deciding which of the disputants is speaking ordinary English. Other

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<sup>4</sup> Thomasson thinks that some metaphysical disputes face different difficulties. See her contribution to this volume.

semanticists, like Alan Sidelle (2002), deny that there is a clear fact of the matter about the English meanings of the expressions in the disputed sentence ‘there are Fs’.

I suspect that Sidelle is right about this, if only because it is far from obvious that ordinary English is coherent. Many putative ontological puzzles arise from the fact that our commonsense ontological beliefs conflict with each other. (That is certainly the case with the puzzle about colocation that I will discuss in some detail later.) If so, then deference to ordinary English will not dissolve the puzzles, *even if* the semanticist is right that there is nothing substantive at stake.<sup>5</sup> This is a tricky issue, however, and Hirsch does agree that ordinary English *appears* to contain conflicts.<sup>6</sup> Properly settling the matter would require settling questions in the philosophy of language that I will not take up here. I simply want to make clear that the link between the claim that many metaphysical disputes are purely semantic, and the claim that there is ‘no fact of the matter’ about the answers to them, is not straightforward. Semanticism and antirealism are independent positions. There can be verbal disputes even in cases in which there are facts of the matter both about what the world is like, and about the correct use of the expressions in the disputed sentences.

I will have quite a bit more to say about verbal disputes in due course. For now, though, I want to get a third option on the table. Begin by noticing that both of the dismissers thus far introduced agree that it would be epistemically<sup>7</sup> inappropriate to fight tooth and nail about whether there are Fs. Antirealists about Fs do not think that there is anything to fight about in the first place. And although semanticists might think there is something to fight about—

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<sup>5</sup> Sidelle agrees, saying that even on what he calls ‘the semantic approach’, none of the theories of material objects “can easily claim victory over the others. Each package represents a total reconciliation of our otherwise inconsistent cluster of particular judgements and theoretical views, each with some important ties to our usage and ‘deep convictions’” (2002, 135).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Hirsch agrees that puzzles about colocation arise from conflicts between the English meanings of sortal predicates like ‘lump’ and ‘statue,’ and the principle—which “ordinary people are inclined to accept” (2002a, 113)—that two things cannot wholly occupy the same place at the same time. And he makes the rather Sidelle-like remark that “we can interpret the English language in a way that makes the ordinary person’s assertion of the principle come out true and numerous ordinary assertions about the existence and identity of objects come out false, or we can interpret the language to the opposite effect” (2002a, 113). However, he claims that there is a principled way to decide which interpretation of English is correct. (I take it that his claim is not just that there is a principled way to decide what the right *consistent regimentation* of English is, but rather how English itself worked all along.) The correct interpretation of a language should give more weight to people’s reactions to particular cases than to their inclinations to endorse or reject general principles (113). The correct interpretation of English, then, is one that counts the principle false, and explains away peoples’ inclinations to accept it.

<sup>7</sup> The ‘epistemically’ helps mark what the issue is *not*. The claim shared by all three dismissivists is stronger than the mere claim that it is bad manners to fight over the existence of Fs, or that it is morally inappropriate to do so when there are children dying of AIDS, etc.

namely, the meaning of the sentence ‘there are Fs’ in English—they do not think it is worth fighting very *hard* about. However, one need not be either a semanticist or an anti-realist to claim that it is epistemically inappropriate to fight tooth and nail about whether there are Fs. One can think that there is a fact of the matter about whether or not there are any Fs, deny that disputes about the existence of Fs are verbal disputes, and nonetheless think that there is some *other* reason why it would be epistemically inappropriate to dig in one’s heels and spend a career defending the existence of Fs. All one has to do is say that

(3) ‘There are Fs’ is either true or false, and disputes about its truth-value are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false.

Call this epistemicism. In a couple of particular cases, I shall claim, there is little justification for believing one of the competing positions over the other. It is not clear that there are any grounds for choosing between them. Now, I am not quite going to fully defend this third sort of dismissivism about the relevant disputes, because I am not going to defend its explicitly realist component. But I am going to argue that the disputes in question are not verbal disputes, and my defense of the claim that there is little justification for believing either side will at least be compatible with as full-blooded a realism as you like. Really, then, I will be arguing that the weaker claim

(3′) Disputes about the truth-value of ‘there are Fs’ are not verbal disputes. But there is little justification for believing either that it is true or that it is false.

is correct about the relevant cases. (3′) is consistent with both epistemicism and anti-realism. I will nonetheless continue to make epistemicism the salient choice.

### **3. A Methodological Suggestion**

Before I start arguing this in earnest, however, I want to call attention to something. I have repeatedly been saying ‘in some cases’ and the like, and I have characterized the three forms of dismissivism in terms of the rejection of some *particular* dispute about the existence of Fs. This is important. At least on the face of it, it is perfectly possible to dismiss some metaphysical disputes and not others. Indeed, all the dismissers have their pet examples. For example, Sidelle and Hirsch focus on material objects (and Hirsch explicitly refrains from saying anything about abstract objects (2005)), while Yablo focuses on abstract objects. They are right to narrow their focus as they do, for there is no obvious reason to think that all metaphysical

debates must be on a par. To assume that they are, and that there is something *special* wrong with them *qua* metaphysical debates, requires taking the somewhat arbitrary boundaries between subdisciplines too seriously.

What I mean is this. For all I shall say here, it might be the case that there is something deeply wrong with most of philosophy—perhaps because it relies so heavily on *a priori* reasoning. The status of the *a priori* is a pressing issue that I will not address in this paper. All I am saying now is that there is little reason to think that there is some characteristic problem that afflicts *all and only metaphysics*. Any problem that afflicts *all* of metaphysics surely afflicts neighboring fields, such as epistemology, logic, and philosophy of language, as well. And any problem that afflicts *only* metaphysics may well only afflict certain particular debates. Thus not all of metaphysics has to stand or fall together. It is epistemically possible that some issues that metaphysicians talk about are well-formed and substantive, and others are not.

This point is not usually acknowledged, but it strikes me as both obvious and important. Having it on the table generates a methodological prescription: rather than making broad generalizations about the Status of Metaphysics, we need to look at the details of particular disputes. If we are open to the possibility that some metaphysical debates are nonsense and some are not, we are thereby open to the possibility that what makes them nonsense is not some general feature that makes them count as metaphysical issues in the first place, but rather some specific feature of that specific debate. Thus we need to give substantive consideration to specific disputes in order to decide whether or not they are one of the problematic ones. *We need to do metaphysics in order to do metametaphysics.*

So let us get some particular disputes on the table. One of the two that I will discuss is a favorite stalking horse of the dismissers. The other one has not been, but I suspect there is no real reason for that; I am quite sure that they would think it is bunk as well. After sketching the basic metaphysical issues, I will return to the metametaphysical ones. I will argue that—*contra* the semanticists—these are not verbal disputes, and that—*contra* most working metaphysicians—that there is nonetheless no compelling grounds for choosing between the competing positions.

## 4. Two Metaphysical Disputes

### 4.1 Constitution

The first dispute is about *material constitution*, and the familiar puzzles about whether objects can spatio-temporally coincide. On the table before me sits a clay statue. But the statue (Goliath) and the lump of clay from which it is made (Lumpl) appear to have different properties. Lumpl was on a shelf in my garage on Tuesday, but Goliath was not; I did not make Goliath until Thursday. And even if I create and destroy Lumpl and Goliath simultaneously (Gibbard 1975), they still have different modal properties. If I had squashed the statue into a ball while the clay was still wet, I would have destroyed the statue, but not the clay. In short, Lumpl and Goliath certainly appear to have different persistence conditions, and thus Leibniz's Law apparently entails that they are distinct objects. But how could that be? Surely two distinct objects cannot be in the same place at the same time!

Responses to this sort of puzzle are divided. In one camp are the people who reject the possibility of colocation, and make one of the various available moves to get out of the Leibniz's Law argument. I shall call such people *one-thingers*. In the other camp are those who are not moved by the outraged noises with which I ended the last paragraph. These people embrace the idea that there can be more than one thing in a place at a time, or even at all times during which it exists. I shall call such people *multi-thingers*, or *believers in colocation*. (Notice that this terminology is neutral about just how *many* things can be in a place.)

### 4.2. Composition

The second issue is about *composition*. Most of us believe in composite objects like tables, trees, and toasters. But some people argue that there are no such things—not because they do not believe in the external world, but rather because they think that composition never occurs. These people believe that there are simples,<sup>8</sup> and that those simples have various properties and stand in various interesting relations to each other. They just deny that they ever compose anything else. To what Peter van Inwagen calls the 'Special Composition Question'—

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<sup>8</sup> Or they believe in a smear of stuff, or something along those lines. I am not going to address the question of what would happen to such a view if the world turns out to be 'gunky'—if matter is infinitely divisible, with no 'bottom level'.

when do simples compose a larger thing?—they answer, ‘never’.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, they take themselves to avoid various puzzles that afflict those who do believe in composite objects—the problem of the many, the arbitrariness of any other answer to the Special Composition Question, and, indeed, the puzzle about colocation that I just introduced (van Inwagen 1990). They also avoid a version of the causal exclusion argument that they claim afflicts those who believe in composites (Merricks 2001).

Here, too, we have two camps. I shall call those who deny that there are any composite objects *compositional nihilists*, or just *nihilists*. I shall call those who say that there indeed are some composite objects *believers*. Note that the term ‘believer’ is intentionally neutral on the question of how *often* or *easy* composition is—that is, it is neutral on the question of whether unrestricted mereological composition is true. Both those who only believe in the sorts of objects that we ordinarily countenance, and those who think that there is a fusion of any objects whatsoever, count as believers in my sense.

As I am using the labels, ‘constitution’ is a one-one relation, and ‘composition’ is a one-many relation. The issue in the constitution case—the debate between the one-thinger and the multi-thinger—is about the relationship between single entities that at least seem to have different persistence conditions. The issue in the composition case—the debate between the nihilist and the believer—is about the relationship between pluralities and single things. It is about when and whether *many* things make up *one*.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.3 Preliminary Analogies

Nonetheless, there are clear connections between the two debates. For one thing, it is standard to claim that the issues about constitution only arise given belief in composites. The nihilist does not believe in *either* statues *or* lumps of clay, so surely dodges the puzzle about colocation altogether. (Whether this is right remains to be seen.) For another thing, that puzzle

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<sup>9</sup> Both van Inwagen and Merricks actually answer the special composition question by saying ‘only when they compose a life’. That is, both believe in living organisms, but no other composite objects. To keep the discussion simple, however, I will treat them as if they were straightforward nihilists.

<sup>10</sup> It is tempting to characterize the two issues by saying that composition is the relation between simples and mereological fusions, and constitution is the relation between fusions and ordinary objects. However, this does not do justice to the debate about whether composition ever occurs. That debate is not just about whether there are fusions, but about whether there are composite objects *of any kind*. Those would come to the same thing, of course, if the only form of composition is that defined by the axioms of classical mereology. But many people think that it is not. Every multi-thinger, note, thinks that it is not. Multi-tingers believe that ordinary objects like tables and chairs are composites—few think they are extended simples!—but deny that they are mereological fusions.

about colocation can be framed in mereological terms. The question is whether a mereological principle called *uniqueness* or *extensionality* is true—can the same parts compose more than one thing? The one-thinger says ‘no’; the multi-thinger says ‘yes’. So both issues can be framed in terms of composition: does composition ever occur? if so, does it adhere to uniqueness? However, I think that the similarities between the two issues run deeper than that they can be framed in a common vocabulary. There are structural analogies between them that can be metaontologically illuminating.

First, then, notice that in both the constitution and the composition cases, there is a high ontology side and a low ontology side. In the constitution case, the low ontology side is occupied by the one-thinger, and the high ontology side is occupied by the multi-thinger. In the composition case, the low ontology side is occupied by the nihilist, and the high ontology side is occupied by the believer. Second, notice that both debates are what I shall call *difference-minimizing*. In both cases, each side will try to play down their differences from their opponent. Everyone wants to minimize the gap in order to ensure that their view does not sound crazy, and that they too get the advantages of the other side. What this requires depends upon which side one is on. The high ontology side will downplay their extra ontology, and the low ontology side will ‘up-play’ their expressive power in order to be able to capture the claims made by the other side. Not all metaphysical disputes are like this. Not all metaphysical disputes are difference-minimizing; the disputes over constitution and composition belong to a *special class*. Everyone—well, almost everyone<sup>11</sup>—agrees on the basic data, and simply tries to account for it differently. The danger, of course, is that the more each side minimizes the differences in order to claim the other’s benefits, the less obvious it is that their disagreement matters all that much.

Here is the game plan for the rest of the paper. First, I will quickly sketch the sorts of thing that high-ontologists say to downplay their extra ontological commitments. I will suggest that it is taking their speeches too seriously that naturally generates the idea that the disputes are merely verbal—which, I shall argue at length, they are *not*. That is the negative argument

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<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions in both cases. The exception in the composition case is that a few high-ontologists (Cameron 2007, Parsons manuscript) refuse to downplay their ontological commitments. The exception in the constitution case is that at least one low-ontologist (Burke 1994) refuses to up-play his expressive power. I will mention these cases again when they are relevant. The important point for the moment is that a) the vast majority of discussion of these issues does treat them as difference-minimizing, and b) that is all that this paper about. My arguments are not intended to apply to those views about composition and constitution that do not difference-minimize.

against semanticism. I will then explore the other direction of difference-minimization, the ways in which the *low* ontology side tries to upplay their expressive power. I will suggest that looking at the issues from *this* direction gives rise to a rather different metaontological lesson. The right metaontological lesson is simply that, in these particular cases, there is little basis for choosing between the competing sides—even though they are not verbal disputes, and even assuming realism.

## 5. Difference Minimization I: Downplaying Excess Ontology

In both the constitution and composition cases, the high-ontologist is going to try to downplay the large numbers of objects she posits. She will say that they are in some sense *thin*, that her commitments are ‘ontologically innocent’, that the putatively extra objects are not really anything over and above what the low-ontologist already admits into his ontology—simples, or filled regions of space-time instantiating certain persistence conditions, or what have you. Clearly, she will deny that they are *identical* to anything the low ontologist already accepts—if so, she would simply be a low ontologist—but she will say that they are so tightly related that the somewhat tendentious<sup>12</sup> ‘nothing over and above’ locution is apt. In both cases, then, the high ontologist will say that objects are *easier to come by* than the low ontologist thinks they are, and will say that the low-ontologist is mistakenly setting the threshold for objecthood too high. Regardless of whether or not that is the right attitude to take, let us see how this strategy plays out in the two cases at hand.

The believer in composite objects will say that the composites are so closely connected to the simples standing in various relations to each other that countenancing them does not in fact bloat her ontology. She will say that the way in which simples ‘give rise to’ composite objects is nothing like the way that, say, my teakettle generates steam, or a machine in a factory extrudes plastic widgets. That is utterly the wrong analogy, the believer will say—and it is an implicit commitment to that analogy that leads the nihilist into his mistake. If he realized it was the wrong analogy, he would abandon his nihilism. Towards this end, the believer says:

Look, for there to be a table, nothing more is or could be required than that there be some simples arranged tablewise. That is, for there to be some simples

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<sup>12</sup> For example, van Inwagen reacts to Lewis’ use of the phrase in elucidating his claim that “mereology is innocent” (1991, 87) by asking, “what does ‘nothing over and above’ mean? This slippery phrase has had a lot of employment in philosophy, but what it means is never explained by its employers” (1994, 210).

arranged tablewise *just is* for there to be a table. There is no extra step, and no room for any wedge between the two. You nihilists seem to think that there is, and you're making a mistake.

That is how the believer wants to downplay the existence of composite objects.<sup>13</sup>

The multi-thinger *also* thinks objects are 'thin', and will make similar speeches. She believes that the many objects that share a spatio-temporal region are made of all the same matter, or have all of the same parts, or something along those lines,<sup>14</sup> and that there is some important sense in which the statue is really not anything over and above the lump. The multi-thinger will say that the way coinciding objects share a spatio-temporal location is not at all like the way you might try and fail to get your water bottle and your coffee cup to sit in just the same two-dimensional spot on your desk. That is utterly the wrong analogy, the multi-thinger will say—and it is an implicit commitment to that analogy that leads the one-thinger into his mistake. If he realized that it was the wrong analogy, he would abandon his one-thingism. Toward this end, the multi-thinger says (or at least *could* say; unlike the composition case, I have never actually heard anyone make this speech):

Look, for there to be multiple objects in a region, nothing more is or could be required than that the region be filled with matter, and that multiple sets of persistence conditions, or 'modal profiles,' are instantiated there. That is, for there to be multiple modal profiles instantiated in a region *just is* for there to be multiple objects there. There is no extra step, no room for any wedge between the instantiation of distinct modal profiles, and the existence of distinct objects. You one-thingers seem to think there is, and you are making a mistake.

That is how the multi-thinger wants to downplay the existence of colocated objects.

Now, there were an awful lot of metaphors in those speeches. What is really going on? The central point is that, in both cases, the high-ontologist offers what I shall call a 'linking principle'—a necessary conditional connecting the things the low-ontologist countenances to the things only the high-ontologist countenances.

Believer: necessarily, if there are simples arranged F-wise in region R, then there is an F in R.

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<sup>13</sup> Most believers, anyway. Recently a few have refused to do this, claiming instead that more *is* required—namely, that certain contingent mereological laws hold (Cameron 2007, Parsons manuscript). This view is extremely interesting but not widely shared, and it is not on the table for the rest of the paper. Cameron and Parsons are not difference minimizers.

<sup>14</sup> All multi-thingers will say *something* in this ballpark, but they will differ on the details. For example, whether one endorses the part-sharing claim depends upon the notion of 'part' in play. (See Koslicki forthcoming for a notion according to which colocated objects need *not* have all the same parts.)

Multi-thinger: necessarily, if there are multiple modal profiles instantiated in a region R, then there are multiple objects in R.<sup>15</sup>

Some high-ontologists might endorse biconditional versions of these principles, but the right-to-left direction introduces complexities that are irrelevant to the central issue.<sup>16</sup>

What matters is that the high-ontologist will say that it is necessary in the strongest sense that there is a table in a region if there are simples arranged tablewise there, and that it is necessary in the strongest sense that there is both a table and a distinct hunk of wood in a region if both a tablish and a hunk-of-woodish modal profile are instantiated there. The low-ontologist will reject these principles, and the high-ontologist will say that that is precisely their mistake. Their mistake is to think that something further would have to happen, that objects are harder to come by than they really are.

But the more seriously we take the high-ontologists' speeches, and the more we focus on the fight over the linking principles, the less it looks like anything of interest is going on here. It looks as though everyone agrees about the left-hand side of the conditional linking principles—that there are the simples arranged like so, or that certain modal profiles are instantiated in a region—and only disagrees about whether that entails the right-hand side. But especially in light of the high-ontologist's speechifying about the 'innocence' of the ontological commitments incurred by accepting the right-hand side, that does not look like a very exciting fight. This is where the semanticist gets his foot in the door. He says that if *that* is all that is going on, it looks as though these people are just bickering about what phrases like 'there is a table' mean. It looks as though everyone fully agrees on what the world is like, and just disagrees about which situations are worth describing as involving the existence of an object. Various heirs to Carnap and Putnam—Alan Sidelle (2002), Amie Thomasson (forthcoming), and, especially, Eli Hirsch

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<sup>15</sup> Note that the following linking conditional, which is more analogous to the believer's, does not capture the central point of disagreement between the one-thinger and the multi-thinger:

Necessarily, if an F-ish modal profile is instantiated in R, then there is an F in R.  
Most one-thingers will endorse this too. Lewis, for example, will happily say that there is a statue in R as well as that there is a lump of clay in R—it's just that he will say that the statue *is the* lump. So the *contested* linking principle is the one in the main text, which says that the instantiation of distinct modal profiles guarantees the existence of distinct material objects.

<sup>16</sup> In the composition case, the right-to-left direction would rule out the possibility of either extended simple Fs (Fs with no parts at all) or gunky Fs (with parts 'all the way down', not bottoming out in simples). In the constitution case, the right-to-left direction would rule out the possibility of spatio-temporally colocated objects that do not differ modally. Perhaps such things really are not possible, or perhaps the linking principles could be modified to remain neutral on such matters. I prefer to leave them as they are, but commit the high-ontologist to the left-to-right direction only.

(e.g. 2002a,b, 2005)—have vigorously defended this idea recently. I will focus on Hirsch. (Those readers who already reject semanticism, and are only interested in how I might motivate the epistemicist version of dismissivism, can skip ahead to section 6.)

## **6. Against Semanticism**

### 6.1 Hirsch's Notion of a Verbal Dispute

In a series of very interesting papers, Hirsch has argued for the semanticist version of dismissivism. He thinks that much of what passes for substantive metaphysical disagreement is really just semantic disagreement, including both of the disputes that I have introduced here. He has discussed the dispute about whether there are any composite objects (2002a, b, 2005) in more detail than the dispute about whether there can be two things in a place at a time (2002a, 112-113; 2005, 81-82). But he thinks that both are verbal disputes. He thinks that nihilists and believers, one-thingers and multi-thingers, are just talking past each other. They agree on what the world is like, and only disagree about how certain words work in English.

These metaphysical disputes, Hirsch points out, seem rather different from disputes about whether the Loch Ness monster exists, or whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. They are more like the dispute between the purist who says that only cocktails made of gin or vodka, dry vermouth, and perhaps an olive or two count as martinis, and the sorority girl who calls practically anything a martini as long as it served in the classic V-shaped glass. If these two are seated at a table on which such a glass contains some nonsense made of sour green apple liqueur, the latter will say that there is a martini there, and the former will deny it. This is a paradigm case of a verbal dispute. The disputants agree on all the facts, but disagree on how to use the word 'martini'. (The purist is of course right about the use of the word. Remember that there can be verbal disputes in which one side is straightforwardly mistaken!) Hirsch claims that this is precisely what is going on in the disputes over composition and collocation. The two sides agree on all the facts, in some sense of 'fact', and simply disagree about the truth-conditions of certain *sentences* like 'there is a composite object' or 'there are two objects in region R'.

Two important questions immediately arise. One is about which components of the disputed sentences are supposed to be the source of the trouble. This has received a fair amount of discussion, and everyone agrees that it has to be the quantifier expressions, not merely

predicates like ‘table’ (Dorr, 2005; Eklund forthcoming;<sup>17</sup> Hirsch 2002, forthcoming; Sider, forthcoming). I agree, and will not dwell on the point further. Instead, I want to focus my attention on the other question: what makes a dispute count as ‘merely verbal’? We must have a criterion at hand in order to decide whether or not the disputes about composition and constitution are verbal disputes.

Hirsch says that a dispute is verbal when the disputed sentences—whether (at the bar) ‘there is a martini on the table’ or (in the philosophy room) ‘there is a table’—are most charitably understood as having different truth conditions in the mouths of the disputants, so that both sides speak truly, despite uttering sentences that appear to contradict each other (2005, 72). He thus offers the following as a necessary condition on a dispute’s being verbal: “each side ought to acknowledge that there is a plausibly charitable interpretation of the language associated with the other side’s position which will make that position come out true” (2005, 82). He further offers the following as the “simplest paradigm” for meeting that necessary condition:

(H) a dispute over the truth of a sentence  $D$  is merely verbal if “there are two undisputed sentences  $U_1$  and  $U_2$ , one true and one false, such that one side holds that  $D$  is (*a priori* necessarily) equivalent to  $U_1$  and the other side holds that  $D$  is equivalent to  $U_2$ ” (2005, 83).

Note that (H) is explicitly supposed to be sufficient, not necessary (2005, 83); it is a way of guaranteeing that the necessary condition is met.

In the martini case, we are supposing that a classic V-shaped glass filled with a noxious green concoction sits on the table in front of us. The disputed sentence  $D$  is ‘there is a martini on the table’. The undisputedly true sentence  $U_1$  is ‘there is an alcoholic cocktail in a V-shaped glass on the table’, and the undisputedly false sentence  $U_2$  is ‘there is a mixture of gin or vodka, dry vermouth, and olives on the table’. Purists like me take  $D$  to be equivalent to  $U_2$ , and therefore say that  $D$  is false. People who run bars that claim to serve 50 kinds of martini take  $D$  to be equivalent to  $U_1$ , and therefore claim that  $D$  is true. They are simply talking past each other.

The martini case is nice and clean, as one would hope if the condition really captures the central notion of a verbal dispute. But what about the composition and constitution cases? Let us take a preliminary look at how they might be fitted into this mold.

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<sup>17</sup> Eklund (forthcoming) argues that semanticists like Hirsch will have to say that singular terms like names and demonstratives can also be the locus of verbal disputes.

In the composition case, let the disputed sentence  $D$  be ‘there is a table in region  $R$ ’.  $U_1$  is the undisputedly true ‘there are simples arranged tablewise in region  $R$ ’. It is less clear what  $U_2$  is supposed to be—to what undisputedly false sentence does the nihilist take  $D$  to be equivalent? I assume that it is supposed to be something like ‘there is an extra object in front of me, completely independent of the simples’. In the constitution case, let  $D$  be ‘there are (at least) two distinct objects in region  $R$ ’.  $U_1$  is something like ‘there are two sets of persistence conditions instantiated in  $R$ ’.  $U_2$  is again less clear; perhaps it is something like ‘there are two completely independent objects crammed into  $R$ ’. In both cases, the high ontologist says that  $D$  is true iff  $U_1$  is true, that  $U_1$  is clearly true, and concludes that  $D$  is true as well. The low ontologist, in contrast, says that  $D$  is true iff  $U_2$  is true, that  $U_2$  is clearly *false*, and concludes that  $D$  is therefore false as well.

This should all sound a tad familiar. Indeed, if the disputes really are over the linking conditionals from the previous section, then it follows that both are, by Hirsch’s lights, merely verbal. Disagreement about the status of those (one-way) conditionals entails disagreement about the status of Hirsch’s biconditionals. Let me make the connection fully explicit.  $U_1$  is what the high-ontologist thinks entails  $D$ .  $U_2$  is what the high-ontologist goes to some lengths to distance herself from, by means of her ontologically downplaying speeches. It is what *she* thinks that the *low-ontologist* thinks  $D$  entails. However, it is not clear that the low-ontologist in either case really *does* think that  $D$  entails  $U_2$ , nor even what exactly  $U_2$  is supposed to mean.

This leads me to a first, preliminary, worry about Hirsch’s claim that the disputes over composition and constitution are verbal. Because it is not clear that there is in either case an undisputed falsehood  $U_2$  to which the low ontologist takes  $D$  to be equivalent, it is not clear that these disputes meet his sufficient condition (H). If they do not, we have been given no reason to think that they are verbal disputes. It is not obvious how to modify (H) to yield a criterion that the composition and constitution disputes clearly do meet.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It is tempting to simply modify (H) to yield

(H\*) A dispute over the truth of a sentence  $D$  is merely verbal if there is an undisputedly true sentence  $U$  such that one side holds that  $D$  is (*a priori* necessarily) equivalent to  $U$ , and the other side denies this.

but this will not do. The problem is that (H) diagnoses a reason for the disagreement—there is an undisputedly false sentence with which one side takes the disputed sentence to be equivalent—and (H\*) does not. Thus, as Sarah McGrath pointed out to me, (H\*) is really only a condition on two parties disagreeing about the meaning of a sentence, not having a purely verbal dispute in some particular case. Two people can disagree on *both* the meaning of the sentence  $D$ , and on the facts. Imagine the purist denying the sorority girl’s claim that there is a martini on the

However, I propose to let this point slide. I shall assume that either they can be shown to meet (H) after all, or else that some satisfactorily modified version of (H) can be provided. I shall henceforth restrict my attention to the dispute over the connection between  $D$  and  $U_1$ , and let  $U_2$  quietly drop out of the picture. I can bracket this concern about whether the cases in question satisfy (H), because (H) is simply not sufficient for a dispute's being verbal anyway.

This, then, is my second and central objection to Hirsch's claim that the disputes over composition and constitution are verbal: (H) does not guarantee that a dispute is verbal. I shall make this point in two stages. The first stage simply involves noting that (H) itself says nothing about analyticity. It only requires that the  $D \leftrightarrow U_n$  equivalence be necessary and *a priori* in the mouth of one of the disputants. But presumably the relevant criterion should require that it also be *analytic* in the mouth of one of the disputants. Presumably the relevant criterion is not (H), but

(H<sub>A</sub>): A dispute over the truth of a sentence  $D$  is merely verbal if there are two undisputed sentences  $U_1$  and  $U_2$ , one true and one false, such that in one side's language  $D$  is *a priori*, necessarily, and analytically equivalent to  $U_1$ , and in the other side's language  $D$  is *a priori*, necessarily, and analytically equivalent to  $U_2$ .<sup>19</sup>

Surely it is central to the notion of a verbal dispute that the two parties disagree about the meaning of the disputed sentence. That requires (H<sub>A</sub>)—that the equivalences be analytic.

Why does Hirsch not require that the equivalences be analytic? I do not know. Perhaps he is trying to dissociate himself from his Carnapian roots, and the Quinean critiques thereof. It would seem, though, that anyone who is suspicious of the notion of analyticity would also be suspicious of the notion of a verbal dispute. If there is no viable analytic/synthetic distinction, there is also no viable distinction between verbal and factual disputes. More likely—though this is pure speculation on my part—Hirsch is instead so committed to the thought that necessity *is* analyticity that he thinks it would be redundant to add 'analytic'. At any rate, I take it to be clear that only (H<sub>A</sub>) could be a sufficient condition on a dispute's being merely verbal. The only real question is whether (H) entails it. If it does, then (H) is itself sufficient for a dispute to be merely verbal. If not, not. We here enter the second stage of the second objection.

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table, not because he disagrees with her about what 'martini' means—though he does—but because he thinks the glass is filled with colored water. Such a case meets (H\*), but it is not *only* a verbal dispute.

<sup>19</sup> I have also modified the "one side holds that..." phrasing, in order to avoid irrelevant concerns about the fact that people can be mistaken about the meanings of their terms. Hirsch is clearly interested in what *is* analytic or *a priori* in a language, not what a speaker of that language *takes to be* analytic or *a priori*.

The question is whether the necessary *a priori* conditionals that high-ontologists espouse must be understood as analytic. Is it *analytic* in the believer's language that if there are some simples arranged *F*wise in region *R*, there is an *F* in *R*? Is it *analytic* in the multi-thinger's language that if there are multiple modal profiles instantiated in a region *R*, then there are multiple objects in *R*? Hirsch must say yes. But the participants in the first order debates do not think that the relevant conditionals are analytic, and, indeed, there is strong reason to think that they *cannot* be. This is the heart of my problem with Hirsch's semanticism—his view requires that the linking principles be analytic in the high-ontologists' language, but they are not. In what remains of section 5, I shall argue that they are not. More accurately, I shall argue that there are forceful reasons, which Hirsch has not acknowledged, to think that they are not. As I argue this, I will for simplicity restrict my attention to the dispute about composition. Since it is a more natural fit for Hirsch's approach than the constitution case, doing so will streamline the discussion considerably. The constitution case will reappear in section 6.

### 6.2 The Linking Principles are Not Analytic

The linking principle 'if there are some simples arranged *F*wise in region *R*, there is an *F* in *R*' is not analytic in the language of the believer in composite objects. The key piece of my argument for this claim is the simple fact that the believer does not think that composites are identical to anything that the nihilist accepts. When she says that she believes in tables, she is saying that she believes in tables that are *numerically distinct* from the simples.<sup>20</sup> She does not believe that the word 'table' just relabels the simples; it is not coreferential with 'simples arranged tablewise'. As I have already pointed out, she of course does think that the table is *intimately related* to the simples arranged tablewise—that is the point of her ontologically downplaying speeches—but she does not think that the table *is* the simples arranged tablewise. Perhaps Hirsch has read too much into the misleading 'nothing over and above' talk endemic to those downplaying speeches. But the high-ontologist never had identity in mind.

Hirsch must acknowledge this point. To refuse to take the non-identity claim on board would be to refuse to take the debate on its own terms, and to question-beggingly refuse to let the

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<sup>20</sup> Not that the table is numerically distinct from *each* simple, which anyone will accept, but rather that the table is numerically distinct from the simples taken together. To anticipate the introduction of plural quantification in the next section, the claim is of the form  $\exists x[Tx \ \& \ \exists yy(T'yy \ \& \ x \neq yy)]$ , where *T* = 'is a table' and *T'* = 'arranged tablewise'.

genuine believer into the ring at all. Indeed, it is tempting to read Hirsch as doing just that. It is easy to read him as such an unrepentant—though closeted!—nihilist that he sees the debate about composition as being solely between two types of nihilist. One of them says that there are only simples bearing various relations to each other, that the word ‘table’ is intended to refer to a composite, and thus that ‘there is a table in  $R$ ’ is false. The other type of nihilist agrees about the ontology, but disagrees about the meaning of the predicate ‘table’. He says that there are only simples bearing various relations to each other, that the word ‘table’ refers to simples standing in some of those relations, and thus that ‘there is a table in  $R$ ’ is true. These two characters—who will reappear in section 6.1 under the names ‘revisionary’ and hermeneutic nihilist<sup>21</sup>—are *both nihilists*. The dispute between them *is* purely verbal; it is about the semantics of English words like ‘table’. However, it is not the debate that anyone is interested in. It certainly is not the debate between the nihilist and the believer.

Perhaps an analogy will help. Consider a dispute between a sceptic and a phenomenalist about the external world. The sceptic and the phenomenalist agree on the appearances; they agree on how the world *seems*. They also both agree that there are no material objects that are distinct from and causally responsible for those appearances. However, they disagree about what sentences are true in English. The skeptic says that ‘there is a table in region  $R$ ’ is false, despite the fact that we are indeed confronted with various robust appearances there. In contrast, the phenomenalist says that ‘table’ simply refers to certain robust patterns of table-appearances, and thus that the contested sentence is true. Now, this dispute is not completely uninteresting—it is, after all, basically the dispute about whether Berkeley is best thought of as denying the existence of material objects, or as holding a rather surprising reductive hypothesis about them—but it is not a substantive dispute about the nature of the world. It is certainly not the dispute that exercises epistemologists. Ditto the dispute between the two types of nihilist above. That is not a substantive dispute either, and it is not the one that exercises metaphysicians.

Nonetheless, it is extremely easy to read Hirsch as construing the debate between the believer and the nihilist in precisely these terms. Doing so makes sense of his occasional claim that the disputants ‘agree on all the facts’ (e.g. 2002, 58-59). And it does entail the analyticity of the relevant  $U \rightarrow D$ . ‘If there are simples arranged tablewise in  $R$ , there is a table in  $R$ ’ *is* analytic

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<sup>21</sup> It is an interesting further question how best to characterize Baxter-style ‘strong’ composition as identity (1988a, b; see Sider 2007). Is it the same as hermeneutic nihilism?

in the mouth of the second nihilist!<sup>22</sup> However, I would like to resist temptation here, and not interpret Hirsch as misunderstanding the debate in this way.

The question is whether ‘table’ must mean ‘simples arranged tablewise’ in order for ‘if there are simples arranged tablewise in  $R$ , there is a table in  $R$ ’ to come out analytic. Is there any way for Hirsch to argue that it is analytic in the mouth of the *genuine* believer? That is, is there any way for him to maintain that

(\*) if there are simples arranged tablewise in  $R$ , then there is a table in  $R$  that is numerically distinct from the simples arranged tablewise

is analytic in the believer’s language?

I do not see how. Saying that (\*) is analytic in the believer’s language amounts to saying that *we can define things into existence*. But surely an analytic claim cannot be existence-entailing in this way; surely the existence of a new object cannot follow *by meaning alone*.<sup>23</sup> Who knew ontological arguments were so easy?

Now, perhaps the problem is that I am taking the phrase ‘numerically distinct’ to contribute too much to the meaning of the sentence. That is, perhaps the significance of the claim that (\*) is analytic can be downplayed by taking ‘numerically distinct’ to be a semantically inert piece of throat-clearing. That would be to say that the believer in composite objects is really a hermeneutic nihilist with non-standard beliefs about the meaning of the identity symbol and the negation sign. While such a move would indeed detract from the shock value of the claim that we can define things into existence, it is not very plausible either. After all, the fact that the believer gets the same answers to basic math problems as everyone else would seem to suggest that ‘ $\sim$ ’ and ‘=’ are not semantically inert in her language. It consequently would appear that Hirsch is committed to the claim that (\*)’s purported analyticity entails that meaning alone is enough to conjure up the existence of tables.

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<sup>22</sup> And ‘if there are the right sort of robust table-appearances in  $R$ , then there is a table in  $R$ ’ is analytic in the mouth of the phenomenalist. It is not analytic in the mouth of the external world realist, however. The realist thinks that linking conditional *is* true, but it is contingent and *a posteriori*. The appearances are caused by, and provide good evidence for, the existence of the table. Note that Hirsch has to rely on this feature of the linking conditional to avoid saying that the realist and the sceptic are engaged in a verbal dispute.

<sup>23</sup> Here is a possible counterexample. Bob is a husband. Doesn’t the meaning of ‘husband’ analytically guarantee the existence of someone who is his wife? It is true that the meaning of the two predicates ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ are such that if there is something in the extension of one, there is something *else* in the extension of the other. However, the conditional is not genuinely existence-entailing in the troublesome sense. What is guaranteed is just that something has a certain property/instantiates the predicate ‘wife’—not whether it exists at all.

Here, then, is what I take to be the state of play. Hirsch wants to say that (H) is sufficient for a dispute's being verbal. To do so, he must say that it entails ( $H_A$ ). He needs to say that the high-ontologist's linking conditionals are analytically true in her language, and analytically false in the low-ontologist's language. This in turn requires claiming that it makes perfectly good sense for the high-ontologist to have the power to define things into existence. The anti-semanticist, in contrast, wants to say that the dispute between the high and low-ontologist's is substantive *despite* meeting (H). Neither party takes the linking conditionals to be analytic.

Let me be clear, as I wrap up this discussion, that there might for all I have said be many legitimate objections to the high-ontologists' linking conditionals. After all, she has to believe the anti-Humean claim that there are necessary connections between distinct existences, and arguably also has to believe in the synthetic *a priori*. (Whether she does or not depends upon whether the truth-values of the linking conditionals can be known at all—if not, they certainly cannot be known *a priori*. I shall be suggesting in section 9 that maybe they cannot be known.) Maybe there are serious objections here; maybe not. I simply ask you to notice that to argue against the high-ontologist on *these* sorts of grounds is not to argue for *semanticism*. It is to assume the opposite, and take a substantive stand on a substantive metaphysical issue. It is to say that the high-ontologist position is false.

## **7. Difference Minimization II: Up-playing Expressive Power**

Despite all this, I am increasingly inclined to agree with the semanticist that there is not a huge amount at stake in the disputes about composition and constitution. I suspect that it indeed is epistemically inappropriate to fight tooth and nail about whether there are tables, and whether they are colocated with distinct hunks of matter that constitute them. I suspect, that is, that the third version of the dismissive attitude is apt. To motivate this, I want to return to the idea that *both* low- and high-ontologists want to minimize their differences from their opponents. Forget the ways the high-ontologist tries to downplay her ontology. Let us look at the other direction—the ways in which the *low*-ontologist tries to increase, or 'up-play,' her expressive power. Both sections 7.1 and 7.2 are largely expository; the argumentative thread resumes in section 8.

### **7.1 The Nihilist**

First, composition—it should already be clear that the nihilist does not want to outright reject all our everyday talk about composite objects. Although the nihilist officially denies that there is a toaster in my kitchen, he thinks that the English sentence ‘there is a toaster in my kitchen’ nonetheless has a rather different status than ‘there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq’ or ‘the Loch Ness monster lives in my backyard.’ Similarly for claims about what my toaster is like—the nihilist will say that ‘my toaster is old’ is somehow or other better off than ‘my toaster is encrusted with diamonds’.

Nihilists have two basic strategies for accomplishing this, familiar from discussions of nominalism (Burgess and Rosen 1997, 6) and fictionalism (Stanley 2001), and mentioned in passing in the previous section. First, there is *revisionary* nihilism. The revisionary nihilist says that all claims about composite objects are strictly and literally false, but that some of them are nonetheless assertable, or quasi-true, or the like. A proposition about composites is quasi-true just in case it is appropriately associated with a different but related proposition that *is* strictly and literally true. Second, there is *hermeneutic* nihilism. The hermeneutic nihilist says that some claims about composite objects *are* strictly and literally true—but, *contra* appearances, they do not carry ontological commitment to composite objects.

The choice here turns on claims about the semantics of ordinary English. The question is whether a sentence like ‘there is a toaster in my kitchen’ expresses a false proposition  $P_1$  about the location of a composite object, or a true proposition  $P_2$  about the location of some simples. The hermeneutic nihilist thinks that the sentence expresses  $P_2$ , and is therefore true. The revisionary nihilist, in contrast, thinks that the sentence expresses  $P_1$ , and is therefore false, but is importantly related to  $P_2$  in some other way. Trenton Merricks is a revisionary nihilist (2001, esp.12). Van Inwagen appears to be a hermeneutic nihilist, and indeed titles a chapter of *Material Beings*, “Why the Proposed Answer to the Special Question, Radical Though It Is, Does not Contradict our Ordinary Beliefs” (1990).<sup>24</sup> (At any rate, this is how they would be classified if either were really a nihilist. See note 9.)

Nothing I have to say turns on the difference between revisionary and hermeneutic nihilism. It is, as I pointed out in section 5, a purely verbal difference. I simply want to strongly

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<sup>24</sup> Note that hermeneutic nihilism obviously requires a bit of fancy footwork. After all, how can ‘there is a toaster in my kitchen’ be literally true consistently with the central nihilist claim that *there are no toasters*? How, that is, can a hermeneutic nihilist state his nihilism? The answer has to be: by distinguishing between ordinary contexts and the much-vaunted ‘philosophy room’, and claiming that nihilism can only be stated in the latter.

emphasize that nihilists never just say, “there are no toasters; revise your breakfast plans.” All nihilists want to somehow recapture the claims that the believer takes to be true. Note that ‘recapturing’ these claims need not mean making them come out *true*; revolutionary recapturing counts as recapturing just as hermeneutic does. As long as they do not simply proclaim statements about composites false, and stop there, revolutionary nihilists are still up-playing their expressive power. They are still difference-minimizers.

Whether the nihilist’s recapturing is hermeneutic or revisionary, it relies on one central tool: plural quantification. This permits them to deny the existence of composite objects like toasters, while nonetheless accepting claims like ‘there are some simples arranged toaster-wise’. ‘Arranged toaster-wise’ is a non-distributive predicate.<sup>25</sup> The claim that some simples collectively satisfy it is not supposed to entail the existence of a single composite entity any more than “there are some people writing a play together” is supposed to entail the existence of a *single entity* that is doing the playwriting. To use George Boolos’ example, it does not seem like you are committed to the existence of a set *just* because you believe there are some Cheerios in your bowl. And as he puts it, “it is haywire to think that when you’re eating some Cheerios, you’re eating a *set*— what you’re doing is: eating THE CHEERIOS” (1984, 448).

Plural quantification has a variety of uses (see Linnebo 2004 for a nice overview), and is a handy device for anyone, nihilist or not, to have in his toolbox. For example, it provides a natural way to regiment ordinary English sentences like ‘George ate some Cheerios’ or ‘the chairs are arranged in rows’. It is also supposed to capture Geach-Kaplan sentences like ‘some critics only admire each other’ without quantifying over anything set-like. The feature that matters for the nihilist’s purposes is simply that plurally quantified sentences are not supposed to carry ontological commitment to anything more than the first order individuals themselves— not to sets, sums, nor composite objects of any kind. This is of course controversial (see Linnebo 2003, 2004), but I will grant the nihilist the point.

It is important to recognize, though, that the nihilist’s up-playing project is more complicated than has thus far been suggested. He needs to not only make sense of ‘there is a chair in my kitchen’, but also ‘the chairs are arranged in rows’. That is, he needs to be able to recapture sentences that apparently involve the satisfaction of plural predicates by composites.

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<sup>25</sup> A predicate P is non-distributive just in case it is possible for some things to satisfy P without each of the things individually satisfying P. Contrast ‘in the fridge’ with ‘forms a line’. The former is distributive; the latter is non-distributive.

But the nihilist appears to ‘use up’ plural quantification in paraphrasing away the apparent reference to chairs, and therefore appears to need some *further tool* with which to handle the predication. Indeed, such sentences look to the nihilist rather like Geach-Kaplan sentences look to the ordinary believer in critics.

This is not an isolated example; dealing with such cases is crucial to the nihilist’s ability to recapture scientific claims about the structure of the world. Scientists are very much in the business of explaining how bigger things are made of smaller things, and the smaller things are very often not themselves simple. Many (alleged) composites are (allegedly) composed of other (alleged) composites. The nihilist needs to be able to recapture explanations of, say, how water droplets come together to form thunderclouds, how molecular bonding works, and the distinction between single cellular and multicellular organisms. The nihilist’s translations need to *preserve compositional structure*. Making sense of multicellularity requires making sense of putative organisms that are putatively composed *of cells*; multicellularity is not a property directly instantiated by simples. Thus nihilists need to be able to say, not just that there are simples arranged multicellularly, but rather something closer to

((((((there are simples arranged atomwise) arranged moleculewise) arranged organellewise) arranged cellwise) arranged organwise) arranged...)).

Even that is obviously rather simplified; for example, I am ignoring important differences between types of subatomic particles. Clearly, apparently straightforward predicates like ‘arranged humanwise’ mask some complicated structure.

This is not supposed to be an objection to the nihilist. There are strategies available for dealing with these issues. Nihilists who are willing to countenance sets can supplement plural quantification over simples with plural quantification over sets. Alternatively, they can supplement plural quantification over simples with *plurally plural* or *perplural* quantification over simples (Hazen 1997; see Linnebo 2004, Uzquiano 2004 for the details). Perplural quantification stands to ordinary plural quantification as plural quantification stands to singular quantification.<sup>26</sup> It would permit the nihilist to not only paraphrase away talk of groups of simples, but of groups of groups of simples as well. And perhaps there are other options.

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<sup>26</sup> Roughly, a formal language with plural quantifiers supplements the standard apparatus of the predicate calculus with plural quantifiers and an ‘is one of’ predicate, which takes singular variables in its first argument place and plural variables in its second argument place. A formal language with perplural quantifiers further adds perplural quantifiers and an ‘are among’ predicate, which takes plural variables in its first argument place and perplural variables in its second argument place.

My point is not to raise a problem for nihilism (though see Uzquiano 2004), but rather to make clear that their paraphrase scheme cannot be as simple as they typically make out. This will become important later on. The upshot for the moment is just that nihilists will do whatever it takes to accommodate the same apparently true claims about putatively composite objects that the believer will. Importantly, *this is the only kind of nihilist on the table in what follows*. As it happens, all actual nihilists are of this kind. But if there were any nihilists who just sort of smiled and said that nothing remotely in the *ballpark* of talk about composites was true, they would not be in play in this paper.

## 7.2 The One-Thingers

A very similar game is played out in the case of constitution. Here, too, the low-ontologist up-plays her expressive power. Just as nihilists do not want to unapologetically reject all talk of ordinary objects, most one-thingers about the constitution question do not want to unapologetically reject our everyday talk about the persistence conditions of things. Here, unlike the case of nihilism, there is an important exception—Michael Burke (1994), whose view is adopted by Michael Rea (2000). But *most* one-thingers want to say that it is *true* that Lump1 would survive being squashed and that Goliath would not. What they instead deny is that those claims entail, *via* Leibniz’s Law, that Lump1 and Goliath are distinct. One way to do this is to deny or restrict Leibniz’s Law (à la Myro 1986),<sup>27</sup> but the much more popular—and more sensible!—strategy is to claim that *de re* modal contexts are referentially opaque.

David Lewis (1971, 1986) and Alan Gibbard (1975) defend somewhat different versions of this; I shall only discuss Lewis’ more familiar version—counterpart theory. As far as avoiding the argument for colocation is concerned, Lewis’ crucial move is not so much the details of counterpart theory—and certainly not his commitment to modal realism, eternalism, etc.—but rather his claim that modal predicates are, as Harold Noonan puts it, ‘Abelardian’ (1991). They pick out different properties in different contexts. For Lewis, the reason that ‘Lump1’ and ‘Goliath’ cannot be substituted *salva veritate* in the sentence ‘Lump1 would survive being squashed into a ball’ is because the predicate ‘would survive being squashed into a ball’ picks out a different property when attached to the name ‘Lump1’ than when attached to the name ‘Goliath’. Those names respectively emphasize the object’s lumpiness and statuesqueness,

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<sup>27</sup> C.f. also Gallois’ related view (2003), though he does not in fact restrict Leibniz’s Law.

and thereby pick out different counterpart relations. There is one object there that has some squashed counterparts in other worlds when tracked across worlds under a same-lump counterpart relation, but which does not have any squashed counterparts in other worlds when tracked across worlds under a same-statue counterpart relation. This is rather like saying that I am four feet from the window, but twelve feet from the door. The premises in the argument for colocation do not ascribe incompatible properties, and Leibniz's Law gets no purchase.

This is all extremely familiar. The important point is just that this is the most popular one-thinger line, and it is a line that preserves the apparently true claims about the persistence conditions of the statue and the lump. That is, the vast majority of one-thingers will help themselves to the same apparently true claims about persistence conditions that multi-thingers will. *This is the only kind of one-thinger on the table for the rest of the paper.* After all, this is the only kind of one-thinger who really engages in the difference-minimizing project as I laid it out earlier. This one-thinger works hard to upplay his expressive power, and claim that he can endorse our everyday intuitions about what changes certain sorts of thing can and cannot survive. Contrast Burke, who dodges the argument for colocation by claiming that Lump1 would *not* in fact survive being squashed into a ball (1994). The Burkean one-thinger does not difference-minimize, but instead throws out half of the 'data', as it were. I hereby set him aside, and for the rest of the paper will use 'one-thinger' as shorthand for 'difference-minimizing-non-Burkean-one-thinger'.

## 8. The Costs of Up-playing Expressive Power

Perhaps it is time to pause for a quick rundown of the analogies between the composition and constitution cases. In both the debates about composition and the debates about constitution/colocation,

- (1) There is a (putatively) low-ontology side and high-ontology side.
- (2) Both sides try to minimize their differences from their opponents.
  - (2a) The high-ontologist insists that her extra ontology is nothing over and above what the low-ontologist already accepts, and will say that the low-ontologist has too thick a notion of an object.
  - (2b) The low-ontologist tries to recapture most of the claims that the high-ontologist accepts.

In sections 4 and 5, I suggested that misunderstanding the high-ontologist's downplaying efforts can lead to semanticism, and argued that semanticism is misguided. So much for (2a). What I

want to argue now is that paying attention to (2b) naturally leads to the third sort of dismissive attitude about these disputes. We do not have justification—or at least not local justification—for believing either side. I want to make my way towards this conclusion by articulating two further analogies that only become visible upon reflection on the requirements of the low-ontologist’s up-playing project.

One is that in neither the composition or constitution case is it obvious that the low-ontologist’s view is simpler than the high-ontologist’s view. The other is that in both cases, the objections that the low-ontologist raises against their high-ontologist opponents have a sneaky way of reappearing on the low-ontology side.

(3) It is not obvious that the low-ontologist’s view is simpler than the high ontologist’s view.

(4) The problems for the high-ontologist rearise for the low-ontologist.

After briefly explaining claim (3) in this section, I will spend section 8 arguing for claim (4) in some detail. In section 9, I will better articulate the version of dismissivism to which these claims lead.

We get from (2b) to (3) by noticing that the low-ontologist cannot recapture the high-ontologist’s claims for free; doing so requires postulating a certain amount of machinery. The low-ontologist must either replace the high-ontologist’s ontology of objects with an ontology of properties, or else trade ontology for ideology. Either way, though, his view reflects the complexity of the high-ontologist’s view. He cannot automatically claim victory on the simplicity score.<sup>28</sup>

The point is quite straightforward in the constitution case. The only one-thinger on the table is the one who claims that modal claims are referentially opaque, and that many apparently incompatible modal predications are not incompatible after all. In the Lump/Goliath case, there is only one object, which is both possibly squashed into a ball qua lump and also not possibly squashed into a ball qua statue. The heart of this strategy is to say that the relatively straightforward predicate ‘being possibly squashed’ in fact hides a multiplicity of more complex predicates that pack in some reference to the kind. (Lewis, of course, will invoke counterpart-theoretical properties like *having a squashed counterpart under the lump-counterpart relation*.) Perhaps this requires that the one-thinger postulate a different complicated modal property for

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<sup>28</sup> For the thought that both ontological and ideological commitments can be counted when reckoning the simplicity of a theory, see Alan Baker 2004.

each object the multi-thinger countenances.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it just requires that she employ a different complicated modal predicate for each such object. That depends on broader questions about the viability of nominalism. What matters for my purposes is that the multi-thinger need not do *either*. Because she instead multiplies objects, she need not countenance these complicated properties *or* predicates. All she needs is *being possibly squashed*.

The composition case is a little bit more complicated. Recall that the nihilist wants to not only recapture relatively simple claims like ‘there is a toaster in my kitchen’, but also trickier claims like ‘the chairs are arranged in rows’, or ‘these paper clips form a chain’. So he needs to introduce clever techniques that allow him to talk about the very complicated, highly structured ways in which simples can be arranged. On the face of it, however, these very complicated predications of simples appear to commit nihilists to the claim that the simples collectively instantiate very complicated, highly structured properties. The simples collectively instantiate *((being arranged quarkwise) arranged atomwise) arranged moleculewise)*... At least, the nihilist is committed to the complex structured plural predicates themselves. Here again, however, the high-ontologist is not committed to any such thing. The believer need not countenance either these highly structured plural predicates, nor any properties that answer to them. She does not need to say that the simples *themselves* directly satisfy any such plural predicate or instantiate any such property. She can simply say that the simples directly satisfy ‘arranged quarkwise’—or whatever the smallest items composed from simples are. Then the *quarks* satisfy ‘arranged atomwise’, and so forth on up. It is *molecules* that get arranged into cells. So the believer does not need to countenance the highly structured properties or predicates of simples needed by the nihilist, any more than the multi-thinger needs to countenance the complex modal properties or predicates needed by the one thinger.

The point is simplest if nominalism is set to one side: in both the composition and constitution cases, the high-ontologist multiplies objects while the low-ontologist multiplies properties. But a similar point holds even for the strictest nominalist: she buys her way out of ontology with the coin of ideology. So even if the low-ontologist wins the battle of ontological commitment, he does not win the war of simplicity. On at least one way of reckoning simplicity, the two come out roughly on a par.

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<sup>29</sup> Again, I am setting aside the further question of just *how many* objects or properties should be countenanced.

This should cause us to raise an eyebrow, or at least the suspicion that perhaps not as much rests on the decision between the high and low ontology sides as we might have thought. It is a long way from an argument for the third version of the dismissive attitude, however. The claim in this section, and the point of analogy (3), is simply that we should *begin to be suspicious*, and should start to think carefully about what could justify us in preferring one side to the other.

More details in a moment. Before forging ahead towards what I take to be the right metaontological lesson here, I want to take one last quick look backwards. The fact that the low-ontologist must postulate these additional properties lets us see yet another problem with Hirsch's semanticist account. My primary conclusion in section 5 was that several large additional steps are required to get from the claim that the two sides are just arguing about  $U \rightarrow D$  linking conditionals like 'if there are simples arranged tablewise in  $R$ , there is a table in  $R$ ' to the claim that the disputes are merely verbal. Now I want to suggest that it is not even the case that the two sides really are arguing about those linking conditionals. In neither case is there a genuinely undisputed truth  $U$ .

Taking there to be one requires punning on phrases like 'being arranged tablewise' and 'would survive being squashed into a ball'. In neither the composition nor constitution case do the disputants agree on the meaning of the predicates that appear in  $U$ . The multi-thinger need not endorse anything like what the one-thinger means when *he* says that such-and-such a modal profile is instantiated in a place, because the multi-thinger need not countenance the complicated counterpart-theoretic properties/predicates that the one-thinger needs. Similarly, the believer in tables need not endorse anything like what the nihilist means when *he* says that there exist simples arranged tablewise, because the believer has no need to countenance the highly structured property/predicate collectively satisfied by simples that the nihilist needs. It is consequently not the case that everyone agrees on  $U$ , and simply disagrees about whether the rules of English are such that it entails  $D$ .

## **8. Problems Rearising for the Low-Ontologist**

Let us continue to move forward towards what I take to be the correct metaontological lesson here. Thus far, we have seen that the low-ontologist's desire to play up his expressive power leads him to postulate a highly structured property or predicate for each object that the

high-ontologist recognizes. This should lead us to wonder just how much rests on the decision between the high- and low-ontology sides, and just how much evidence we have for one over the other. At this point, it starts to feel as though we are just riding a see-saw—fewer objects, more properties; more objects, fewer properties. Or perhaps—smaller ontology, larger ideology; larger ontology, smaller ideology. Either way, it starts to feel as though we are just pushing a bump around under the carpet.

If that is really all we are doing, we should expect more than this rough parity. We should expect the same problems to arise for both sides. And indeed they do. This is analogy (4) between the composition and constitution disputes. In each case, the main challenges to the high-ontology side rearise for the low-ontology side. Now, I am not going to argue that it is in principle impossible for anyone to come up with a *new* challenge to the high-ontology side that does not rearise for the low-ontology side. I am not going to somehow argue that it is in principle impossible for anyone to come up with a sneaky new way of proving that, say, one-thingism is incoherent. I suppose that that is possible, though I certainly think it unlikely. What I will argue, though, is that many of the best-known arguments against the high-ontology side in fact rearise for the low-ontologist. I will begin by considering four arguments that the nihilist raises against the believer, and then turn to the main argument that the one-thinger raises against the multi-thinger. In each case, the traditional challenges to the high-ontology side have parallels on the low-ontology side.

First, consider van Inwagen's 'Special Composition Question'—when, if ever, do simples compose a composite object? One of van Inwagen's main arguments for nihilism is the conjunction of the claim that a) all of the nonextreme answers to the Special Composition Question are unacceptably arbitrary, with the claim that b) the extreme answer 'always' is not acceptable for other reasons (1990, 74-80). Nihilism is the only remaining option. However, the nihilist is actually threatened with arbitrariness just as much as the believer is. The nihilist does indeed a straightforward answer to the Special Composition Question, as well as to the closely related question 'when, if ever, do some things compose an F?', where F is a sortal or kind term. In both cases, the nihilist will say 'never'. But there is a question closely analogous to the second of those two, to which the nihilist does *not* have a straightforward answer—namely, 'when, if ever, are some things arranged Fwise?' Put the point this way: perhaps the believer has to say something about what the world has to be like to contain tables. However, the nihilist

*equally* needs to say something about what the world has to be like to contain simples arranged tablewise. If the believer should tell us when and how some simples compose a thing of kind *F*, the nihilist should tell us when and how some simples are arranged *F*-wise.

Secondly, and relatedly, consider the problem of the many (Geach 1980, Unger 1980). The concern is that countenancing composite objects requires countenancing an awful lot of them—in particular, that wherever there is an object of kind *F*, there are many minutely different objects of kind *F* that almost completely spatio-temporally overlap. Take any table *t*, and any of its constituent molecules *m*. Because *t* would survive the loss of *m*, and because an object *elsewhere* that was a duplicate of *t* except for *m* would also be a table, it looks as though *t* minus *m* must also count as a table. That entails that there are an awful lot of tables in almost the same region.

The nihilist allegedly avoids this issue. It is one of Unger's main reasons for nihilism, and although it is not one of van Inwagen's, he clearly thinks that it is a real problem for any view according to which there are composites—including his own view, which I have largely been ignoring, that there are composite organisms (1990, 216). However, both assume that it is *not* a problem for full-blown nihilism. This, I submit, is false. The problem of the many arises from the following two claims: a) that the property *being an F* supervenes on the properties of and relations among simples, and b) that certain minute differences in the supervenience base cannot make a difference to whether or not *being an F* is instantiated. But the nihilist endorses his own versions of those claims as well. He thinks that a) *being arranged F-wise* just is a relational property of simples, and thus trivially supervenes on the properties of and relations among simples, and b) that certain minute differences in the properties of and relations among the simples cannot make a difference to whether or not *being arranged F-wise* is instantiated.

The believer cannot, on the face of it, say that one arrangement of particles composes a table and another, almost entirely overlapping arrangement of particles does not. The nihilist similarly cannot, on the face of it, say that these simples collectively instantiate a complicated *arranged tablewise* property, and those simples—almost all of the same ones—do not. To make this more precise, let me introduce a notion of overlap among simples:

$Oaabb =_{df}$  there is exactly one *a* among the *aas* that is not also one of the *bbs*, and there is exactly one *b* among the *bbs* that is not also one of the *aas*.

(Obviously, there are other closely related forms of overlap, such as when each  $a$  is one of the  $b$ s, but there is a  $b$  that is not among the  $a$ s. However, we only need one clear notion of overlap to illustrate the point.) The nihilist's problem of the many arises in precisely the same way as the believer's problem of the many. The central claim is that if some  $xx$ s are arranged  $F$ wise, and the  $xx$ s overlap the  $yy$ s in the above sense, then the  $yy$ s must be arranged  $F$ wise as well:  $\forall xx \forall yy [(O_{xy} \& F_{xx}) \rightarrow F_{yy}]$ . Thus while the believer is apparently committed to the existence of many mostly overlapping  $F$ s, the nihilist is apparently committed to the existence of many mostly overlapping instantiations of *being arranged F-wise*. Where the believer has many mostly overlapping objects of the same kind, the nihilist has many mostly overlapping instantiations of the same property.

Third, consider the exclusion problem, or 'overdetermination argument', familiar from the philosophy of mind (see, e.g., Kim 1993, 1998). In that context, it is levied against both nonreductive physicalism and various forms of dualism. Trenton Merricks has levied a version of it against the believer in composition. The very quick gist is this: any putative effect of an event putatively involving a composite object would be fully accounted for by events involving the simples that putatively compose  $C$ .<sup>30</sup> So any such effect would be overdetermined. But ordinary door-closings, window-shatterings, and the like are not systematically overdetermined in this way. So if there were any composites, they would never cause anything; they would be mere epiphenomena.

There are many things to be said about this argument, particularly about the notion of overdetermination and the version of causal completeness upon which it relies. In fact, I myself do not think that the believer actually has any problem here, as long as they claim that composition is necessary whenever it occurs—that is, as long as they think that the conditionals linking the simples to the existence of a composite are necessarily true (see Bennett 2003 and forthcoming for details about the directly analogous philosophy of mind case).<sup>31</sup> But what I want

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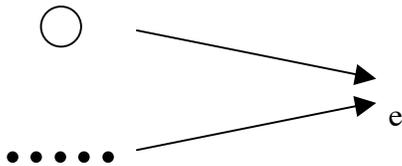
<sup>30</sup> Merricks actually commits himself to the view that *objects* rather than events are the causal relata (2001, 65-66), but I do not think he needs to do this.

<sup>31</sup> In the philosophy of mind case, I think that the exclusion problem is a nonissue for those who claim that the mental supervenes with metaphysical necessity on the physical (and, *a fortiori*, those who claim that the mental is realized by the physical). Physicalists have the tools to dodge the problem quite satisfactorily. Dualists, however, cannot avail themselves of this solution. The exclusion problem is therefore a serious threat to dualism—at least to those dualists who accept the completeness of physics—but is not a serious threat to nonreductive physicalism. The parallel here is that I think that only the believer who thinks that the linking conditionals are *contingent* (such as Parsons, forthcoming) faces a genuine problem about overdetermination.

to argue here is that *even if* it were a real problem for the believer, it would equally well be a problem for the nihilist. Here, too, nihilism does not help (see also Hudson 2003, Sartorio unpublished).

The point is quite similar to that about the problem of the many. Causal sufficiency for some effect seems like *being arranged tablewise* in that not just any minor difference among the simples can affect whether or not it is instantiated. Two events that differ only with respect to the involvement of one or two simples need not differ in whether or not they are causally sufficient for some effect.<sup>32</sup> Consider some simples that are arranged baseballwise, and which are such that the event of throwing them at a window is causally sufficient to shatter it. Now consider some other simples that overlap them in the sense defined just above. Not only are these other simples also arranged baseballwise, they are also arranged such that the event of throwing *them* at a window appears to be causally sufficient to shatter it. So it looks as though the shattering of the window is overdetermined in just the sense that Merricks is trying to avoid!<sup>33</sup>

Merricks is concerned about the causal competition that would exist between a baseball and the simples that compose it—that the baseball and its component simples would overdetermine their effects:



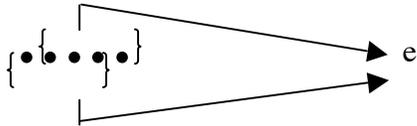
The *prima facie* problem for the believer

What I am suggesting is that Merricks should also be concerned about the causal competition *among the simples*.

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<sup>32</sup> Bear in mind that neither here nor in discussing the problem of the many have I said that the addition or subtraction of a simple *cannot* make a difference. I have only said that it *need* not, and that it often does not. The same applies to my discussion of the problem of the many.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this conclusion can be dodged by appeal to some notion of minimal causal sufficiency. The two ‘baseball’-throwings, after all, have what might be thought of as a single efficacious core. However, that is an artifact of the particularly simple notion of overlap that I have defined. Imagine assigning every other simple in the baseball region to one ‘group’, and the others to another. There are two interlocking but non-overlapping ‘groups’. It seems likely that both are causally sufficient for the shattering of the window (though there is no guarantee that any such general principle will hold in every case).



The *prima facie* problem for the nihilist

Insofar as there is a problem here for anyone, it is a problem for both sides.

Fourth, consider the claim that the nihilist has a straightforward solution to the puzzle about colocation. The thought is that since he does not believe in either lumps or statues, he certainly is not committed to the claim that a single spatio-temporal region can contain both a lump and a distinct statue. Since he does not believe in composites at all, he is not committed to countenancing colocated composites. However, as Matthew McGrath argues (2005), this is too quick. The nihilist's translation project—his attempt to up-play his expressive power—is not limited to simple claims like 'there is a table in R' or 'that table is red'. He also needs to translate claims like 'this is the same table that was in the kitchen yesterday'. He needs, that is, to translate our everyday claims about persistence into nihilistically acceptable terms. But then there will be corresponding properties collectively instantiated by the simples, and we have not been given any reason to think that they will all be compatible. In the location that the multi-thinger believer says is occupied by Lumpl and Goliath, for example, the nihilist will apparently say that there are some simples that are both arranged would-survive-being-squashed-wise and arranged would-not-survive-being-squashed-wise. In short, if the believer is threatened with commitment to multiple objects in a spatio-temporal region, the nihilist is threatened with commitment to simples that collectively instantiate incompatible persistence-condition-analogue properties.

Thus far we have four arguments against belief in composite objects, all of which rearise for the nihilist in only slightly modified form. Now, let me be very clear that I am neither claiming that the nihilist is in a worse position than the believer on any of these fronts, nor that there are no decent responses for either of them to make. All I am saying is that the same basic problems arise.

The same happens in the case of constitution. The biggest objection to the multi-thinger is what is known as the 'grounding problem'—how can coincident objects have different persistence conditions, given how otherwise similar they are? If Lumpl and Goliath have the same shape, size, mass, causal history, and so forth, it is not clear how they could differ in their

persistence conditions. What, if anything, grounds that difference? Clearly, the multi-thinger cannot say that persistence conditions strongly supervene on the shared categorical properties. The best they can do is say something like the following: wherever such-and-such categorical properties are instantiated, there is a statue and there is a distinct lump of clay. In each region where nonmodal property set  $N$  is instantiated, there is a thing that has modal property set  $M_1$  and a thing that has modal property set  $M_2$ .<sup>34</sup> I think there are some real problems with that answer (see my 2004). All I want to say here, though, is that it is starting to look to me like the one-thinger has to say something similar, and that the two answers will stand or fall together. They are equally satisfactory or unsatisfactory (*contra* my 2004).

Notice two claims that *both* sides make. First, both will agree in each region where  $N$  is instantiated, there is a thing that is  $M_1$  and a thing that is  $M_2$ . What the one-thinger says that the multi-thinger will deny is that each thing that is  $N$  is *itself* both  $M_1$  and  $M_2$ . But both agree that wherever there is  $N$ , something is  $M_1$  and something is  $M_2$ . Second, both will also say that in such a region,  $N$ ,  $M_1$ , and  $M_2$  are each instantiated once and once only. Not even a multi-thinger will say that  $N$  is instantiated *twice*. Doing so would lead to various absurdities of which she is occasionally unfairly accused. She would have to say, for example, that when both Lump1 and Goliath are placed on a scale, it should register four kilograms instead of the two that the one-thinger expects. So the multi-thinger, just like the one-thinger, will say that the nonmodal property set  $N$  is only instantiated once in that region.

So the only difference is that the one-thinger says that the  $M_1$  thing *is* the  $M_2$  thing, and the multithinger denies it. The only difference is the identity claim. But it is hard to see how that identity claim can matter to whether the grounding problem has any force. One way to see the issue here is to notice that it is an identity claim between *objects*, but the grounding problem is about the relationship between *properties*. The question is about the relationship between  $N$ ness and  $M_1$ ness, and between  $N$ ness and  $M_2$ ness. Another way to see the same worry is this—even the one-thinger needs to be able to explain how  $N$  can ground two different properties. After all, he says that it is in virtue of being  $N$  that the one object there is both  $M_1$  and  $M_2$ . Now, perhaps there is no problem here. In particular, perhaps the one-thinger can say that it is some subset of  $N$  that grounds  $M_1$ , and a different subset of  $N$  that grounds  $M_2$ . But if that sort of

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<sup>34</sup> The issues are not really only about nonmodal and modal properties, but it simplifies my discussion. See Fine 2003 and my 2004, 340-341.

response is satisfactory, the multi-thinger can surely avail herself of it as well.  $N$  and its subsets are instantiated once in the region; one of its subsets grounds the existence of an  $M_1$  thing, and a different subset of  $N$  grounds the existence of an  $M_2$  thing.

In short, the fact that both the one-thinger and the multi-thinger say that the instantiation of  $N$  grounds both the instantiation of  $M_1$  and of  $M_2$  means that either both or neither face the grounding problem. If this claim is enough for the one-thinger, it is enough for the multi-thinger too; if it is not enough for the multi-thinger, it is not enough for the one-thinger either.

## 9. The Third Dismissive Attitude

We have seen that in both the composition and constitution cases, the low-ontologist's view is no simpler than the high-ontologist's, and that it faces objections that parallel the ones he raises for the high-ontologist. What should we conclude from this? I suggest that we should conclude that we should dismiss these disputes by the third route. There do not appear to be any real grounds for choosing between the competing positions about either composition or constitution. We are not justified in believing either side. These are basically cases of *underdetermination of theory by evidence*.

Let me reiterate the two claims that I am *not* making. First, my claim is not that there is no real difference between the two sides. I am not claiming that they are notational variants or that the choice between them is a terminological one. Second, I am not saying that there is no fact of the matter about which side is right. Although I have not defended realism here, the third sort of dismissivism is fully *compatible* with realism. Assuming realism, the third dismitter's claim is that the problem is purely epistemic.<sup>35</sup> The third dismitter's claim is that there is very little basis for deciding between nihilism and belief in composite objects, or between one-thingism and multi-thingism—even assuming that one and only one position in each pair is correct. I recognize, of course, that verificationists will say that this is incoherent. They will say that if our available evidence cannot decide between the positions, then there cannot be a real difference between them. I am assuming that verificationism is false. Notice in particular that

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<sup>35</sup> Since underdetermination arguments are used against scientific realism, it might be thought that it should here be used against metaphysical realism. But it is important to see that such arguments at best support the disjunctive conclusion: either that there is no fact of the matter, *or* that the fact of the matter is not knowable by means of the available evidence. Again, I am not arguing against anti-realism here. I am basically arguing for the disjunction, and making the epistemicist option salient.

the bump-pushing metaphor does not require verificationism, and indeed is more apt without it. We do not need to assume that there are no different locations under the carpet in order to claim that it is pointless to push the bump around.

My suggestion that these are cases in which the available evidence does not settle which side is correct should not be particularly surprising, given that I have argued that these debates are ‘difference-minimizing’. They are debates in which everyone takes the data to be largely the same. All the participants want to somehow preserve our ordinary judgements of persistence, of sameness and difference, of what there is and isn’t. Note, then, that one way to resist the lessons I am drawing is to say that it is a mistake to difference-minimize. In particular, one way for a low-ontologist to resist is to embrace his view with a braver heart, and *stop trying to say everything the other side says!* Perhaps Burke is right to deny that Lump1 would survive being squashed into a ball; perhaps the nihilist should give up translating talk of composites. Perhaps the multi-thinger should not downplay her ontology, and perhaps the believer in composites should deny that the linking conditionals are necessary (as Cameron 2007 and Parsons manuscript do). It is the difference-minimization that leads to the odd epistemic impasse.

Not all metaphysical disputes are difference-minimizing. For example, I for one doubt that either the dispute between actualists and possibilists, or the dispute between presentists and eternalists, is difference-minimizing. But I do not want these passing remarks to commit me to any particular claims about the status of other disputes. After all, it can be quite hard to decide whether it really is the case that a dispute is difference-minimizing, whether the same objections arise against both sides, and so forth. Indeed, it has been among my main aims in this paper to argue that not all metaphysical disputes are on a par, and it will take substantive work in first-order metaphysics to decide which disputes should be treated in which way. I have argued that epistemicism is appropriate for some. Perhaps semanticism is appropriate for others. Perhaps—almost certainly—some should not be dismissed at all.

This is a crucial point. I have emphasized throughout that we need to look at the substantive details of particular debates. Metametaphysics must be done from within metaphysics, not by means of broad proclamations from without. Consequently, I do not think that the literature on the metaphysics of material objects is pointless. Far from it. That work was required to see what the important arguments are, and to decide whether or not they in fact rearise for both sides. Section 8 is central to the positive claim of this paper—that epistemicism

is a reasonable attitude to take towards the disputes about composition and constitution—and it entirely consists of straightforward, first-order metaphysics. My claim, then, is not that work on the metaphysics of material objects is pointless, but rather that *we have more or less done it already*. In these particular debates, I suspect that we are rapidly coming towards the end of inquiry. There is not a whole lot more to be said. Of course, as I have already admitted, I cannot claim that it is in principle impossible for some clever soul to come up with an entirely new line of reasoning. But it strikes me as much more likely that all that remains is for us to finish tidying up our understanding of the various packages—clarifying which views incur which costs, and dodge which bullets.

And what then? Here, in closing, let me finally make explicit something at which I have thus far only hinted. I have not said that there are *no* grounds for choosing between the competing positions; I have only said that there are *few* grounds for choosing—and that there are no *local* grounds for choosing. For all I have said here, then, it remains open that there may be some broader theoretical grounds that can justify our choice. Consider choosing between two empirically equivalent scientific theories. Scientific realists who think that there is a real choice to be made can perhaps do so by appeal to nonempirical criteria—the simplicity and elegance of the overall picture, for example. Similarly for the sorts of ‘metaphysically equivalent’ theories that I have been discussing. For example, *if* it can successfully be argued that a) the low-ontology views really are compatible with a strict nominalism, and are not committed to an ontology of properties that mirrors their opponent’s ontology of objects, b) ontological simplicity is a guide to truth, and c) ideological simplicity is not, then we would be justified in believing nihilism and one-thingism. But that sort of argument is a long way from the kind of highly localized fighting at close quarters that characterizes a lot of the literature on these issues. The upshot, then, is really that—at least for these particular disputes—such localized fighting cannot be expected to get us anywhere. The epistemic impasse can only be broken, if it can be broken at all, by reflection on broader theoretical and methodological questions.

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