Ordinary Theories of Ordinary Objects

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1. Introduction

Familiar puzzles about ordinary objects illustrate how poor is our grasp on something like a theory of ordinary objects — at least not on an ordinary theory of ordinary objects. In what follows, I want to focus on the mereological dimension of such a theory to see how far we might get. If such a coherent theory there be, current wisdom suggests that it will have to depart from common sense to at least some degree. At one extreme, some philosophers suggest that the best theory of ordinary objects is one according to which there are no such things (Nihilism). At another extreme, some posit an ontologically inflationary theory (Universalism) that nevertheless deflates our ordinary notions of objects. Theories in between seem pathologically incapable of solving the puzzles.

Several questions arise here. What do we want out of — and why do we need — a theory of ordinary objects? How should we evaluate candidate theories? Is there any hope for a nascent moderate theory of ordinary objects. I think the answer to this latter question depends crucially on how we answer the former two. I address these questions in section 2.

Section 3 addresses the putative problems with moderate theories of composition. Because mereological moderation posits compositional distinctions, the moderate seems obliged to tell us something about those distinctions. The puzzles prove how difficult such details are. Refusing to answer embarrassing puzzle questions only constitutes further embarrassment: how could there possibly be brute and secret facts about which collection of simples composes the cat on the mat? Epistemicism looks as awkward as ad hoc ontological decision-making. A remedy suggests itself: when answers prove difficult, deny the sense of the questions. If moderation licenses answers to unanswerable questions, moderation must go: composition is immoderate.

This line of thought is rather hasty. Moderation should only be turned back if it demands impossible — not merely difficult — answers. Sense must be made of ‘impossible’ in this context. The intrepid moderate might not blush easily at the usual challenges. Perhaps there is nothing general we can say about composition. There might simply be brute mereological facts. Immoderates press the thought that any moderate theory of composition, like brute facts, must be intolerably arbitrary. But this seems ironic. For immoderation is not a positive theory: it leaves us yet with a choice between Nihilism and Universalism, a choice that may well strike us as itself intolerably arbitrary. I outline this kind of defense in section 4.

In the final section, I suggest that the puzzles need not be seen as setting the agenda for a theory of ordinary objects — whether the solving the puzzles is philosophically obligatory can be coherently seen as a subjective matter. We can have such a theory without having to say anything about the puzzles. Indeed, it is not even clear

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1 Many people helped me clarify and work through the ideas in this paper: participants of my session at the 2005 Pacific APA, especially my commentator Ted Sider, helped me sort out what I had in mind in §6. An anonymous referee for The Monist provided some useful criticism on an earlier draft and L.A. Paul gave me some much appreciated encouragement and stylistic advice. Thanks most of all (as usual) to the Columbia Metaphysicist Society — Andrea Borghini, Chris Haufe, Giuliano Torrengo, Achille Varzi, and Neil Williams — for commenting on drafts and entertaining sustained discussion regarding these issues.

2 For one, mereology (in the opinion of many) bears on these other metaphysical questions; for two, even if mereology is seen as an isolated province of a putative theory of ordinary objects, it will likely be regarded as the seat of many of the problems.
whether we need to say anything about whether saying anything is even possible. That is work for an account of metaphysical methodology — and urgent work at that. Even reflective metaphysicists\(^3\) with realist commitments can take an internal critique of metaphysics as motivation to engage in that work.

2.

Dilemma for any theory of ordinary objects: either it implies moderate restrictions on compositions or it doesn't. If it doesn't, then it's not a ordinary theory of objects. If it does, it's hopeless as a theory of ordinary objects (having to posit implausibly precise restrictions on composition, on pain of ontological vagueness). One (concessive) response to this dilemma is to start thinking 'ordinary' in a pejorative sense — as in uncareful, unsystematic. What's really the case is that all collections of objects compose further objects, or none do, that they're all parts of only one objects (the universe), (or whatever).

3. MOTIVATING THEORY CONSTRUCTION

Unsuspecting philosophy students are frequently baffled into thinking they know very little about ordinary objects. "Take this chair," discussions start; "Perhaps you think you know lots about it, but what do you really know? What are its parts? What makes them parts? What if I chip a little bit off — is it the same chair? Is the chair the same as the metal that composes it?" Tentative answers can easily be shot down. The students' (surprising) apparent ignorance is of course forgiven as uncovering deep issues surrounding theories of objects. Their ignorance motivates the investigation: It seems we have work to do. . . .

Of course, I overstate the case; I start with this caricatured pedagogical scene for two reasons. First, it illustrates of a sort of crossing of cultures. There is the initiated professional philosopher: interested in such abstruse, unordinary topics as the metaphysics of ordinary objects. There is the uninitiated student: still (somehow) part of "ordinary life" but willing to take seriously (for a term, at least) the philosopher's peculiar preoccupations. Second, it helps motivate the radical (or anyway abstruse philosophical) project. Positive arguments for different sorts of "anti-realism" (or superficially similar "radical" theses) often seem to draw upon claims and intuitions that seem a good deal less secure than the "common-sense" intuitions they aim to replace, especially to the uninitiated (Miller 2002, 19–22). The philosopher's pointed questions apparently demonstrate just how weak our intuitions are — they easily succumb under the "dialectical pressure" of the puzzles. Far from possessing a comprehensive theory of ordinary objects, such puzzles show that the intuitions we might

\(^3\) A minor terminological plea: this term has always seemed to me more apt than the standard 'metaphysician' — I move we change it.
call upon in constructing such a theory are themselves confused or contradictory. We need to do better. The metaphysics class takes its task (in part) as seeing to this need.

4. Troubles with Moderation

A likely source of trouble for the moderate concerns spelling out moderation’s specifics. We must, as is now customary in such discussions, consider Peter van Inwagen’s ‘Special Composition Question’ (SCQ): When is it the case that some xs compose a y? (van Inwagen 1990, 30). Has this question a simple and informative answer? Or, as van Inwagen puts it, supposing we had certain objects, the xs, what we do “to get the xs to compose something” (31)?

In preparation for van Inwagen’s preferred (radical) answer, he considers a number of prima facie plausible alternative answers (1990, §3, §6). Each proposal admits of intuitive counterexamples: positing objects to whose non-existence we are antecedently committed or failing to provide objects to whose existence we are committed. Consider Contact as a representative answer to the SCQ: the xs compose something just in case they are in contact (§3). Does this answer seem plausible? Do we, by putting some things in contact, bring something new into existence? Or have we “merely rearranged the furniture of the earth without adding to it” (35)?

One might suspect that there is no answer to these questions laid up in heaven, and that how we answer them — assuming they’re worth answering — is going to be simply a matter of which of various alternative conventions we adopt. But I think that we can see that there are at least some cases in which mere contact is not sufficient for the production of a new object. (van Inwagen 1990, 35, my italics)

I suppose it must be in some metaphorical sense that van Inwagen imagines we can see these facts. Perhaps we appreciate that Contact is at odds with our pre-philosophical ontological intuitions. Suppose we shake hands: “Does a new thing at that moment come into existence, a thing shaped like a statue of two people shaking hands, a thing which has you and me as parts and which will perish when we cease to be in contact? Is there any object that fits just exactly into the region of space that you and I jointly occupy? Not in my view” (35). Similar reflection supposedly teaches us the same lesson. “Therefore, the relation the xs come into contact at t is not (for it is not even coextensive with) the relation the xs begin at t to compose something” (37).

Theses sorts of considerations seem to me somewhat inconclusive. Part of the point of developing a systematic mereology is to replace our motley (perhaps inconsistent) intuitions with a general and

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4 Some philosophers, however, find in the uninitiated culture an implicit theory waiting to be articulated: “Our culture possesses a single ordinary, commonsense, or “folk” conceptual scheme which has certain ontological presuppositions. Foremost among these presuppositions is the idea that there are enduring things, or individual substances. . . .” (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1997, 1).

5 James van Cleve (1986) capitalizes on our intuitions that there are at least some scattered objects in arguing against intuitive mereology. Prima facie plausible restrictions on composition (e.g., that objects’ parts not be “scattered” or display some degree of continuity) do not stand up in general. We do, it seems, admit of some scattered objects — Hawaii, the letter ‘i’, a freshly-turned hourglass —, and “once some scattered wholes have been admitted, there is no principled way of excluding the rest” (quoted in Hudson 2001; van Cleve 1986).
coherent account. I’m not certain about what the folk will say about these cases. Radicals cannot reasonably insist that the folk have to account for every folk intuition when they themselves advocate such revisionary accounts. All that is required, I think, for a moderate theory to count as an ordinary (or folk) theory, is that it be largely coextensive with the deliverances of ordinary intuitions.

4.1. Epistemological Worries

The critic of folk mereology can approach the issue from a different angle. Consider a thought experiment originally due to Putnam (recently adapted by Dorr and Rosen 2000): we have in region R three mereologically simple atoms, A, B, and C. Suppose that A and B are stuck together somehow while C floats free (2000, 151). How many objects does R contain? This will be a point of some contention. Dorr and Rosen focus on three answers:

The most natural answer is probably four: the atoms A, B and C, and the dyadic “molecule” A + B. Naïve common sense apparently has it that small things sometimes come together to form larger things. . . . The connection between A and B in our example is meant to be an example of the sort of relation that suffices for composition by commonsensical standards. (152)

We may take this as representative of a moderate account. And while there are many “radical” or “immoderate” accounts, only two count as immoderate in our technical sense. The Nihilist denies that composition ever occurs: for any xs, it is never the case that there is a further thing they compose. For the Nihilist, R contains only three objects: the simples A, B, and C. The Universalist denies that composition ever fails to occur: for any xs, it is always the case that there is a further thing they compose. For the Universalist, R contains seven objects: three simples and four composite objects (A + B, B + C, A + C, and A + B + C).

So the question is which account is correct. How might we decide? As Dorr and Rosen point out: “The question is neither straightforwardly empirical nor straightforwardly conceptual” (155). Does the answer depend on the meaning we assign (or discover) to the word ‘part’? Could we define ‘part’ in such a way as to automatically rule out all but one proposal? Perhaps, but until such a compelling analysis is presented, the standoff remains.

Nor can it be resolved by straightforward empirical means. Let R be located in the midst of our finest laboratory. The question is whether A and B (or A and C) together compose a single thing. Can you

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6 My informal, anecdotal surveys suggest general resistance to regarding people as parts (in any strict sense). Another source of resistance to regarding our greeting as inaugurating a new object involves that object’s brief and fragile existence. The same intuition applies to billiard balls briefly coming into contact. Glue the billiard balls together and intuitions shift the other way, often to a lesser degree when people are so fastened. (See van Inwagen 1990, 58).

7 Let R be otherwise empty in the sense that there is nothing else in R that does not overlap A, B, or C).

8 Van Inwagen, for example, is what Dorr refers to as an “organicist”, believing that the xs only compose a further thing if their activity constitutes a life — that may be “radical”, but it is not in my terminology “immoderate”: for on his account some things compose a further thing while some do not.

9 I shall henceforth (and quite unfairly) treat van Inwagen as a Nihilist, since I am here more concerned with The Denial than The Proposed Answer and because he offers perhaps the most complete and sustained defense of the basics of the Nihilist line.

10 As David Lewis puts it, “I say that whenever there are some things, they have a fusion. Whenever! It doesn’t matter how many or disparate or scattered or unrelated they are.... So I am committed to all manner of unheard-of things: trout-turkeys, fusions of individuals and classes, all the world’s styrofoam, and many, many more” (Lewis 1991, 79–80).
tell just by looking? That is hard to believe. Those who disagree with you — the nihilist and the universalist, let us say — have eyes in their head that work every bit as well as yours. (155)

The foregoing points begin to look like trouble not only for the moderate, but for immoderates as well. How could there be a fact of the matter here if we have no conception of how to resolve the dispute?

It may be that this line of thought too eagerly dismisses conceptual analysis. The moderate might try contending that the Universalist’s recognition of “queer fusions” just gets wrong our concept of composition. Change the concept if you wish, but don’t pretend that what results is the correct account of composition. For his part, van Inwagen insists that differences do not devolve from conceptual disagreement. His opponents, he says, just “think that composition is a much more common phenomenon than I do. For all that, they and I employ the same concept of composition: we mean the same thing by mereological terms like ’part’, ’whole’, ’sum’, and ’compose’” (van Inwagen 1993, 710).

Nihilists who advocate an “error-theory” (where the predicate ’is a composite object’ is systematically empty) may face the challenge of explaining how it is we could even grasp their view. As Tennant writes:

it would be especially difficult to make out a sense in which any primitive predicate could have a current meaning, in continuing established usage, and yet fail to be satisfied by any individual(s) whatsoever. How could one learn the fragment of language in question? How would one come to grasp a sense for the predicate if one were (as the view maintains) systematically in error in all one’s basic judgements involving the predicates in question? (Tennant 1997, 70)

The moderate might just insist (and offer reasons for insisting) on some or other account of what it is for some xs to compose a further thing that comports with the intuitions that A and B compose a further thing while A and C (for example) do not.12 Such intuitive agreement vindicates the theory. Common sense suffices to refute the opposing views.

Invocations of “common sense” seem to have little philosophical truck with radicals.13 Even if it is able to offer resistance to other radical philosophical positions (Cartesian skepticism, free will incompatibilism, &c.), Dorr and Rosen note that when the Universalist asks of the objects in R:

“Are you sure you haven’t forgotten something? What about A + C? etc., the commonsensical response is not, “What are you talking about? There is no such thing!” It is rather much more equivocal. It may even take the form: “Well, if you count that as a thing, then I suppose there must be seven things in R after all.” (Dorr and Rosen 2000, 156)

11 Luckily, van Inwagen is an “organicist” and thinks that the predicate ’is a composite’ object has a non-empty extension (even if it is far more empty than do the folk). It is an open question whether true Nihilists are error-theorists in this sense or whether they attribute the systematic falsity of our assertions about composite objects to “a failure of our primitive predicates to express genuine properties” (Tennant 1997, 69).

12 Something like this approach is adopted by Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997).

13 Not least with those who reject the existence of any such faculty or body of knowledge (see van Inwagen 1990, 103). Others might regard its widespread admission as emblematic of its failure to substantiate philosophical opinion. Tom Stoppard has one of his characters remark derisively that the possession of common sense was a virtue unique among virtues in that everyone is supposed to have it (“Jumpers”).

14 Of course, properly tutored common sense should follow Abraham Lincoln’s answer to the riddle: ”How many legs has a dog got if you call a tail a leg? The answer, said, Lincoln, and he was right, is four, because calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it one” (van Inwagen 1990, 8).
Whether common sense is especially wish-washy on mereological issues, seems to me to be both up for debate and irrelevant to the status of moderation.\textsuperscript{15} Common sense may not exhibit much stability in the face of certain kinds of dialectical pressure. But it is not obvious that moderate theories with a large degree of extensional overlap with common sense cannot withstand it.

A related challenge sees material objects as “epiphenomenal”. If the character of ordinary objects supervenes on the character and relations of their parts, then it seems that the whole is in some sense \textit{nothing more} — or, in the parlance of our times, “nothing over and above” — than its parts. Sharpening this line, we might say that whatever causes we ordinary attribute to an object are explained by the collective activity of that objects’ parts. The folk say that a baseball shatters a window.

But the cause of the shattering is the atoms, “acting in concert”. Hence, “if the baseball exists, it does not cause the shattering of the window” (Merricks 2001, 57). We might say, following Kim (2000), that there is no “further causal work left” for the baseball. And it is a short step from reduction and causal inertness to eliminativism.\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{4.2. The Non-Arbitrariness of Composition}

Let us rejoin the puzzles by considering a version of Unger’s (1980) “Problem of the Many”. Take some ordinary composite object: the famous Tibbles the Cat, say. According to the moderate, since Tibbles is composite, there is a certain set of simples whose members compose Tibbles.\textsuperscript{17} This set is only one of a large number of similar (largely overlapping) but distinct sets of simples which differ from each other by only a few supposedly non-crucial simples. We need something like a selection principle to pick out the “real” Tibbles from all those Tibbles look-alikes — all those things that are Tibbles-plus-a-little or Tibbles-minus-a-little — but any selection principle looks like it will be “intolerably arbitrary”. Whatever causal relation makes Tibbles’ parts add up to Tibbles is enjoyed (at least to some degree) by the members of these Tibbles+ and Tibbles– sets. Without a principled way to say which set corresponds to Tibbles, we have many cats on our hands contrary to our assumption that there was just one. Faced with this absurdity, we identify the offending assumption as the existence of at least one composite cat. Nothing else seems to do.\textsuperscript{18} Alternatively, we can see the puzzle

\textsuperscript{15} Much depends on how such issues are broached. Suppose that instead of pushing the dizzying Cartesian line, we motivate skepticism in a piecemeal fashion. You think you know where your car is or that that’s a barn? Are you sure? Do you know it hasn’t been stolen or that the building there is not part of a movie set? Common sense responses to such Pyrrhonian strategies are likewise (at best) “equivocal” (see Fogelin 1994, Chapter 10).

\textsuperscript{16} I cannot consider Merricks’ many careful arguments here, except to point out that claims about causal overdetermination seem far from settled. More proximate issues remain.

\textsuperscript{17} Perhaps the moderate will deny this (anticipating what is coming). As van Inwagen writes: “No set is the set that contains just the simples that compose me or the set that contains just the simples that compose anything having proper parts. This is because parthood and composition are vague notions” (van Inwagen 1990, 217). Entering vagueness into the fray, however, would take us way too far afield.

\textsuperscript{18} So goes the thought. Of course, there are many purported solutions that I shall not here survey. And whether the problem is seen as a \textit{reductio} at all depends on one’s willingness to accept the conclusion. David Lewis bites the bullet (not surprising, as a Universalist), but tries to candy-coat it for the non-believers by suggesting that the because of their extensive overlap, the many cats are \textit{almost} one: “they would make good pets — especially since 1001 of them will not eat you out of house and home!” (Lewis 1993, 171).
as a dilemma: on the one hand, any mereological principle according to which we get the “right number of objects” is intolerably arbitrary; on the other hand, a more even-handed principle has us counting too many cats. But if given to choose, say the radicals, we must choose the workable theory, dispensing with commonsensical intuitions.

A similar way of putting these considerations gets expressed in that famous passage in Lewis (1986). The folk intuitions about mereology have it that composition is moderately restricted. But moderate restrictions are invariably vague. Take the Outback. It seems incredible to suggest that it has any definite boundaries. For many grains of sand, there’s just no saying whether they are parts of the Outback — same for Tibbles, and well nigh any object we can think of (if we look closely enough).

Let us suppose with Lewis that vague existence is not only strange, but absurd; and let us suppose that vague restrictions on composition imply vague existence. Two central issues remain. One, do the intuitive desiderata for a theory of composition demand that composition is not only moderately restricted, but only vaguely so? And two, if the intuitive desiderata cannot be met, is unrestricted composition the compulsory alternative?

Even if we grant both that moderate composition restrictions (of a certain sort) are necessarily vague and thus incoherent, the correct upshot of the argument should simply be that moderation is unsupportable. Putting the question in terms of moderate restrictions on an otherwise promiscuous mereology suggests that if the restrictions have to go we should be left with our default position: Universalism. That is too fast. We did not begin with a promiscuous theory which we subsequently restricted: we began with a moderate theory, which Lewis has purportedly shown to be unsupportable.

This, of course, is no great defense of the moderate. To block the argument, she must either show that moderation need not be vague or that vague objects are acceptable (Parsons 1987; van Inwagen 1990). Of course, moderation tout court need not give rise to vague restrictions: a technically “moderate” theory might have it that the xs compose a y just in case the xs are prime in number. Lewis’ point is that a moderate theory of composition which fits our intuitive desiderata must be vague. Moderates who believe that the correct answer to the SCQ will be a causal relation seem to open themselves up to this claim, some embracing vague objects. I shall leave them aside here.

If immoderate answers to the SCQ are precise, why are precise moderate answers trouble? Why could composition not be, as Markosian suggests, “brutal” — why could it not be that “whenever composition occurs . . . it is just a ‘brute fact’ that the relevant objects compose something, and whenever composition fails to occur, this too is just a ‘brute fact’ (Markosian 1998, 214)? Say the

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19 This too can be resisted. I consider compositional epistemicism shortly.
immoderates: positing that many “brute facts” is just implausible. We might identify a sort of meta-
mereological principle governing answers to the SCQ. Horgan, for example, describes what he calls
the Non- Arbitrariness of Composition Principle (NAOC):

There cannot be a body of specific compositional facts that are collectively disconnected and
unsystematic, and are individually unexplainable. Such arbitrariness is not possible in the mind-
independent discourse-independent world. (Horgan 1993, 695)

It is not entirely clear what counts as disconnected or unsystematic, as both these notions admit of
degree. But the intuition is plain: reasonable mereologies are to minimize bruteness. Better to have a
far-reaching and systematic mereology than a collection of brute facts. Lewis’ and Unger’s arguments
seem to rule out a different kind of arbitrariness. Even minimally brute theories of composition are
still too brute, for they must posit precise distinctions where it seems distinctions would be intolerably
arbitrary. Yet the alternative vagueness is unworkable — so composition is immoderate. Systematic
answers to the SCQ trump arbitrary commonsensical mereological decrees. As Horgan writes, “in
metaphysical theory construction, the NAOC principle takes precedence over preserving our
ordinary, pre-theoretic, ontological beliefs — especially of statements expressing those beliefs can be
paraphrased into a more austere idiom” (Horgan 1993, 695).

What is the source of the presumption that mereological facts may not be disconnected and
unsystematic? While certainly common, I would not say that it is obviously true. In its defense we
might rehearse the usual methodological precepts about theoretical simplicity, but that doesn’t seem
quite on the right track: NAOC seems to express the necessity of mereological simplicity, not merely
its defeasible presumption. Horgan has in mind the mind-independence of mereology. Prima facie,
mereology has ontological consequences — and what there is is never a matter of mere stipulation.
Composition, thus, must never be a matter of stipulation. A reasonable theory of composition might
have it that we can bring items into existence by rearranging old ones (say, by fixing bricks together or
fusing lumps of clay), but it will never be that we may “bring objects into existence” by rewriting
mereology.

Fine. But the moderate wants nothing to do with the business of ontological stipulation. Neither
do the folk. Let us not presume that the folk are in fact wrong solely on methodological grounds —
arbitrary theory choice, after all, may nevertheless be for a correct, non-arbitrary theory. The operative
intuition in the problem of the many is not that our choosing a selection principle would be arbitrary,
but that any principle we might choose would be arbitrary in a way the world is just not. What could
possibly make it the case that this hair was a part of Tibbles the cat while this ever so similar hair is
not?

Sympathizers with epistemicism or “brutality” may deny sense to this question, but the issue does
not go away. Perhaps a better tack is to deny the difference between a collection of unsystematic facts
that stand alone as brute and a collection of facts that are implied by a general (though at bottom

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20 Why? Perhaps that is supposed to be a brute fact.
equally) brute theory. What makes moderate compositional facts intolerably arbitrary and immoderate compositional facts not? Replies the immoderate: even if ‘intolerably arbitrary’ is vague, there are still clear cases of it. There may be facts about what there is, but among those facts is surely not a description of Tibbles’ unique boundary. Most of the world just isn’t divided up for us like that. So goes the thought.

5. The Arbitrariness of Mereological Immoderation

Supposing we find moderate theories wanting, how shall we settle the debate between the two candidate immoderate theories? Is the debate even genuine. Dorr and Rosen consider and reject a way of making out this intuition. Says the Universalist to the Nihilist: “When you say ‘There are only three objects in R,’ what you mean is expressed in my language by the sentence ‘Considering only the atoms, there are only three things in R.’ … In order for me to say in my language what you say in yours, I must make the restriction to atoms explicit. But when I do, I agree wholeheartedly with what you say” (Dorr and Rosen 2000, 167). Likewise, the Nihilist may reinterpret the Universalist’s proclamations as falling “within the scope of a tacit operator”: were Universalism true, then there would be the seven objects you claim there to be (167). Dorr and Rosen rightly reject these attempts at bringing purportedly conflicting theories into congruence. For each camp may reject the respective translation attempt — “who are you to tell me that my quantifiers are restricted?”, “who are you to tell me that my claims are prefixed by a tacit operator?” (168). But their conclusion comes rather quickly: “The availability of these responses rules out the idea that the dispute must be merely verbal. If the Universalist and the Nihilist respond in these ways, then we have no option but to take them at their word” (168).

Never mind what the disputants say about their positions — what of the positions themselves? One has a vague sense that Nihilism and Universalism are singing the same song in different keys. They are obviously alike in their immoderation. Arguments for Universalism are easily adapted (or serve just as well) as arguments for Nihilism. Lewis understands his reflections on the Outback example as showing not that there is no one thing that is the Outback, but many things, all good candidates for the title. Note how little Nihilism differs on this count: there’s no saying where the Outback begins an ends because there’s no one collection of grains of sand which composes the referent of ‘the Outback’ (because no collection of xs compose anything). Unger’s problem of the many can be adduced in support of Nihilism or Universalism. The point is that salient mereological boundaries disappear either way: they might be swamped out of salience or there might be no mereological boundaries at all.

Nihilism and Universalism resemble each other also in their ability to offer us consolation for our folk-intuitions lost. If there are no ordinary objects, paraphrase can provide the semblance of a folk-semantics for ordinary claims like “there are two fine chairs in the next room” (so long as such claims are not made in a spirit of metaphysical rigor). If there are “too many” ordinary objects, we can
remember that we do not ordinarily speak with our quantifiers “wide open”: trout-turkeys can be ignored as ontologically inconsequential (Lewis 1991). Our ignoring them doesn’t make them go away. Either way, the immoderate has a story to tell about how we get our ordinary statements to come out as true (or true enough). In one case we are inventing boundaries, in the other, ignoring them. As Nelson Goodman remarked about a different (though related) matter: to stress all syllables is to stress none (Goodman 1978, 8).

“NO IT IS NOT!”, replies the immoderate.21 There is a difference between the theories — a metaphysical difference. Indeed, I think that this winds up as a problem for the immoderate. For all their similarities (their immoderacy, simplicity, ability to console the folk, &c.), Nihilism and Universalism involve wildly different ontologies. On one theory, composition is fictional; on the other ubiquitous. Nihilism is the paradigm of a desert landscape ontology (only simples) while Universalism is up to its neck in ontological commitments (simples plus unrestricted fusions of simples). Ontological consequence is what gives Horgan’s point bite — arbitrariness only seems a worry if composition is not ontologically innocent (a claim Lewis denies in propounding the “ontological innocence” of mereology). If there are ontological consequences at stake, the decision between Nihilism and Universalism — for all its practical inconsequence — cannot be made by the flip of a coin. The ontologically serious must insist on a non-arbitrary decision between the two theories. But what could make it?

Again, we must be careful not to recoil simply from methodological arbitrariness. I am not so foolish as to suggest that there are no considerations to decide between Nihilism and Universalism: there are serious (though I don’t think decisive) arguments against each. Nihilists deny that I exist though I feel myself (for roughly Cartesian reasons) strongly inclined to believe the contrary. But of course there’s a story to tell: perhaps all “I’m” convinced of is that there’s some thinking going on (i.e., that some simples are interacting in a certain complex way, in response to the activities of other collections of simples, &c.). At the end of the day, I’m not much more opposed to this sort of hand-waving than I am to apologies for the existence of many thinking beings right on top of me, all thinking (roughly?) the same thoughts. Other considerations seem decisive but irrelevant. Had I to choose an immoderate position, I would incline toward Nihilism simply because it means that my intuitions about how many cats there are on the mat is off by one instead of $\aleph_0$. Or perhaps temporal parts look plausible and tacit quantifier restriction easier than paraphrase. Others are likely to have more subtle reasons perhaps arising from broader theoretical considerations. Does Universalism get us out of insisting that the existence of simples is metaphysically necessary? Does Nihilism avoid needless ontological clutter? But I wonder if whatever is said really does anything to avoid the charge of arbitrariness. Do any of the theoretical preferences really address the substance of the counter-charge of arbitrariness? It looks like bad conscience for the immoderate to give up defense of Nihilism or Universalism and convert to epistemicism: if it is acceptable that of one of Nihilism or Universalism is

21 [footnote suppressed].
brutally and unknowably true, why is it intolerably arbitrary for a *moderate theory* to posit brute facts. We might forgive a moderate for sorites-mongering on ‘intolerably arbitrary’ in response.

All this, I think, is represents more than thinly veiled worry about metaphysics overstepping its bounds — it is more like a *tu quoque* from equally metaphysically serious mereological moderates. Rendered in Lewisean cadences, we might put the point against immoderation thusly:

> What is this theory such that for any xs it is either never the case or always the case (we don’t know which) that they compose any further thing? No restrictions on composition can be moderate (for otherwise they would be arbitrary). But if they are immoderate, we are left with an arbitrary choice still. So immoderation cannot serve the intuitions that motivate it. So immoderation would be gratuitous.

That might put the moderates and immoderates in the same boat. It’s another question whether one side of the boat is in deeper water.

What does deadlock (or common quandary) show? Often nothing. Or perhaps only that we are not smart or creative enough to see our way past the envisioned options. The negative theses that these options exhaust the possible or plausible positions we could take on a matter and that there are no other considerations relevant to the dispute are very difficult to substantiate. Putnam’s insistence that there are multiple ways of applying certain metaphysical concepts (Putnam 1989) relies on viewing certain disputes as insuperable. But insuperability — perhaps itself an objective, modal notion — can seem distant. Perhaps we have to be agnostically pluralist.

6. **Methodological Norms**

I want to begin by asking after the norms commonly taken for granted which guide our construction of metaphysical theories and govern their evaluation. Success in a task depends on the goals set forth. So much is commonplace. I find that the norms governing such goals are often placed above discussion (if mentioned at all).

6.1. **Folk Mereology and Moderation**

Back to the metaphysics students and their nascent theory. By and large, they think like philosophers talk outside the philosophy room. They begin from “common sense”, “pre-philosophical” or “untutored” intuitions. From this hodgepodge of intuitive “data”, we attempt to develop something like a “folk-theory” of mereology or ontology. A natural starting strategy would be to adopt a (naïvely) scientific approach: generalize from empirical data. What results is not so much a product or general characterization of our intuitions, as a deeper metaphysical explanation of the intuitions themselves — so goes the thought. Of course, our intuitive data in this case are not straightforwardly empirical. We might thus wonder in what sense they are data at all. Setting aside the question of their epistemic status, we confront the problem of disagreement. It is not as though we have some collection of

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22 Of course, every class has its share of radicals who are all too happy to bite bullets of a variety of flavors, just as ordinary folk are sometimes surprisingly willing to say things like “tables are nothing but swarms of atoms.” The generalities I mention are only partially supported by anecdotal evidence.
uncontroversial facts to make sense of. Undertaking the construction of a folk-mereology immediately confronts the difficulty of intuitive disagreement about when some things compose a further thing. To whose intuitions do we look? What do we say is wrong with the people who disagree? What abilities or credentials do they lack?

Such preliminary difficulties might prompt us to call into question the very possibility of a science of mereology. The mereological skeptic can turn pointed questions regarding constituencies into a challenge to the whole project this way: Divergence of judgment on these matters suggests that the judgments have no basis in fact, especially when we have no account of error. What pass for facts about composition are really conventions; saying so absolves us from having to account for the disagreement in terms of malfunction. And well that it does, as there is absolutely no naturalistic faculty we might point to as the malfunctioning one. One is reminded of J. L. Mackie’s (1977) argument for an error theory for ethics. Widespread disagreement about first-order judgments within a theory suggests a dearth of facts underlying the theory. The first-order disagreement motivates a second-order account for that disagreement. Certain first-order moral claims (specific claims about what is right and wrong) carry with them aspirations to truth and objectivity — the accompanying thought, say, that what makes those claims true is some moral fact independent of our cognizing. But the more disagreement, the shakier such thoughts seem. It becomes incumbent on the defender of objectivity to give an account of why our judgments can differ to the extent they do.

Even if such wrinkles were ironed out, puzzles and challenges for the nascent folk theory loom. Let us for now set aside internal strife and questions of methodology and focus on just one point of agreement for the folk. Ordinarily, you and I talk as if some things compose further things. Some bricks compose the Washington Monument, some atoms compose me; other things compose no further thing. There is nothing which I and the Washington Monument together compose. If I am a part of anything, it is only in a figurative sense. We might generalize from this (and a large class of similar intuitions) the Moderation of Composition. Call a theory of composition moderate if it posits the existence of some composite objects but not as many as it might. If there is such theory of folk-mereology, moderation would doubtless be a component. And what a plausible component!

It turns out, however, that moderation is also a central target for those opposed to “folk-mereology”. Moderation is often seen as at the root of — or at least somehow implicated — in the puzzles. Cast it away and one casts away a central pillar of an “ordinary” theory of ordinary objects.

6.2. Anomaly and Revolution

Paradox or puzzlement often precedes revolutionary change in science. So it often is in philosophy. The sort of puzzles behind the pointed questions mentioned above are the philosophical testing grounds for any serious discourse about material objects — and the tests have not gone well.

Failed tests usually point to failing theories — but not always and not immediately. When Michelson and Morley attempted to use their interferometer to detect the earth’s motion through the
elusive but theoretically handy luminiferous ether, their “null result” was taken as a refutation of the ether’s existence. But of course, they did not straightforwardly discover that there is no ether; rather that if there is, we are stationary with respect to it (perhaps that we drag some of it around with us). They wrote: “It appears, from all that precedes, reasonably certain that if there be any relative motion between the earth and the luminiferous ether, it must be small” (Michelson and Morley 1887, 341). That conflicts with other beliefs — to wit, that we Earthlings are presently whirling around the sun at a decent clip and that it would be surprising if (at least some of) the ether was being dragged around with us. Michelson and Morley’s famous paper closes with some lines of thought for improving the experiment, but that optimism looks misplaced in hindsight. The recalcitrance of the puzzle paved the way for the more radical, but theoretically sound alternatives of Lorenz and Einstein.

There is a temptation to see this eliminativist episode as analogous to the pedagogical episode outlined above. Puzzlement besets a certain commonsensical view (or a motley collection of intuitions) in each case. If Maxwell is right that light is a wave, it must be a wave in something — the assumption of the ether, in the context of such a theory of light, is eminently natural. Once assumed, though, questions naturally arise. When answers stand at odds with other secure beliefs, we become forced to give up our natural belief in a medium for light and a preferred reference frame. Likewise, if sentences like ‘I cannot afford those expensive chairs’ are true, it seems that there must be something that I cannot afford. Semantics recapitulates ontology; interest in the former implies interest (or at least commitment to) the latter. As in the case of the ether, we (naturally?) want to know more about the items that make our sentences true. Weird metaphysical questions about chairs are only seen as pointed in retrospect, once we appreciate the difficulty of answers. But supposing we do appreciate that difficulty, should our response to ordinary objects be — analogously — to reject them?

Radicals may well balk at the existential presumption in the first place. What makes it so obvious that there are such things as chairs? The opacity of the existential idiom is legend, the relevance of its alternative “technical conceptions” in question. Perhaps chairs are like wrinkles in rugs or warm smiles: often uncarefully claimed to exist, but somehow better understood as features of objects (or collections of objects) rather than “objects in their own right”. The problem with our untutored intuitions about objects stems from thinking that there is anything much to say about them in the first place. If you thought there were facts about ordinary objects’ mereological extent (what parts an object has), think again: in fact there are no ordinary objects. Or maybe there are, but there are loads more than you might ever have thought — and the objects you think you are acquainted with are unordinary in that they overlap countless other distinct objects. Either way, nothing quite like a theory of ordinary objects looks particularly close to hand. The right theory of ordinary objects — like the right theory of the luminiferous ether is an error theory (or anyway, radically at odds with what we though a folk theory would look like).

And yet our intuitions about ordinary objects are to some degree recalcitrant — to the degree, at least, that would be replacement theories engage in various kinds of apologetic projects designed to
show how little the theories really contravene ordinary intuitions (properly understood). Thus arises a sort of tension in theories purporting to be revolutionary but which recommend themselves, in part, by according with something like common-sense. Prima facie radical theories which might in one breath deny the existence of ordinary objects and purport to be the theory of ordinary objects in the next.

Anomaly alone need not prompt revolution. "If an anomaly is to evoke crisis," Kuhn writes, "it must usually be more than just an anomaly. There are always difficulties somewhere in the paradigm-nature fit; most of them are set right sooner or later, often by processes that could not have been foreseen" (Kuhn 1962, 82). Crisis befalls theories when the anomalies are seen as besetting explicit and fundamental features of the theory “as the problem of ether drag did for those who accepted Maxwell’s theory” (82). In other cases, anomaly interferes with the practical functioning of our theory. Such seems not to be the case for folk-mereology, as we apparently get along reasonably well without a finely articulated philosophical semantics for our ordinary utterances (those, anyway, we deem to be of importance) or an accompanying ontology. What, specifically, is behind the puzzles? What is the fundamental problem with moderate mereology?

6.3. *Norms and Theory Evaluation*

At this point, however, one might wonder: why do we need a theory of ordinary objects? Perhaps the question often goes unasked because it is taken to express an anti-philosophical disposition that should be discouraged. Consider the likely fate of the skeptical student who presses this question in class. Metaphysics doesn’t tell us much about how to bake bread or fly planes; rather, it is of purely intellectual interest. Skeptical scenarios, after all, don’t have to seem pressing to make skepticism an interesting (if not “serious”) problem. Hence, a loose sense of “need”: we don’t need a theory of ordinary objects like we need culinary or aeronautical knowledge. But then, it’s not clear that we need any of these in a strict sense (nor even what a strict sense of ‘need’ amounts to). Do we need a physical theory that unifies general relativity and quantum mechanics? Is this a pursuit in which we should invest significant sums of money? Well, the response comes: philosophy is cheap. People are free to pursue whatever theories they want. Fair enough. I imagine, however, that something more is wanted.

We “need” one because there are unsolved problems concerning ordinary objects. Those problems ought to be solved.

The skeptical student’s rolling her eyes in response to this suggestion can be taken in several ways. For one, she might deem the questions boring: who cares about which ship is the original ship? (I’d rather be playing ping-pong.) For two, she might suspect that they have no substantive answers (perhaps fueling her desire to waive the whole enterprise). Or she might grant sense to the questions but simply find them irrelevant to the task at hand: these are not the questions we should be worried about.

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23 For an extensive treatment of questions regarding democratic constraints of scientific inquiry, see (Kitcher 2001).
This highlights a normative dimension to theory construction in general. Successful theories are to provide answers to questions. Which questions? A tempting first response is unacceptably subjective: a successful theory answers whatever questions its practitioners set out for it. Prima facie, such a stance poses difficulties for making sense of scientific project.24

Often times perceived success depends on our estimation of how well it answers a certain class of relevant questions. Evaluation of the resultant theory depends on how well those aims have been satisfied (according to some standard or other). The loose sense of ‘need’ answers better to the strict sense of ‘want’. Do we all want a theory of ordinary objects for the same reasons (supposing we want one at all)? Reasonable theories need not be called upon to answer every question one might have about a certain domain. Not to say that we would not count it a virtue for a theory to answer more questions — but not answering all should not count as a vice.

Consider a simple example. Suppose that marine biologists have a worked out an eminently satisfactory theory of manatees (those sea mammals supposedly mistaken for mermaids in days of yore). Suppose too that whatever such theories might say, they don’t say anything about the “Problem of Manatee fission” or the “manatee and its constituting manatee-flesh”. Never heard of those problems I bet: no worries, they’re just the manatee-versions of the Ship of Theseus and the Statue and the Clay. 25 And while those problems might be more awkward to set up than their familiar counterparts, I have the clear intuition that they are problems nonetheless if the counterparts are.

Why is the theory of manatees none the worse for its silence about these issues?26 Maybe it is worse, if only slightly. Compare: A theory of manatees clearly does not suffer for not treating questions about bivalves: they’re just not what it’s about. The case of the puzzles is different. Questions about manatee fission are not completely irrelevant to manatees: they concern manatees (perhaps their very existence), after all.

Which kinds of questions? How should we answer them? The answer to the first question bears on the issue of whether a theory of material objects counts as a theory of ordinary objects; the answer to the second, on whether the theory might count as an ordinary theory. Let us start with what we know about ordinary objects (if anything) and ask what we should want out of a theory of them.

Whether our theory should solve the problems depends on whether we want them solved. Call this the ‘aims-optional’ approach. Perhaps it leaves room for a sort of ontological relativism: to each an

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24 Not everyone, of course, will regard this as reason to give up on the claim. Indeed, even those friendly to the thought that science has shown objective progress may deny the implication.
25 see Burke, Chisholm, Johnston, Noonan,
26 The extent to which I suppose this to be the case varies with my reluctance to confront real marine biologists about this failing (or better, inversely with well they’d be impressed by being pressed on such issues).
ontology according to his or her whims. Neutral evaluation becomes impossible — or at least hypothetical. A second alternative — call it the ‘aims-obligatory’ approach — holds firm to the claim that meeting certain desiderata is compulsory. In order for a theory of so and so to be regarded as a success (or a contender), it must attend to this and that problem and provide such and such an account. In order for a theory of ordinary objects to be regarded as a success, we must say what such a theory ought to accomplish.

But what could bear on this question? Perhaps we could obviate this prima facie worry by pursuing a third way. Metaphysical theories are necessarily interwoven. A theory of ordinary objects will be but a part of a larger, comprehensive whole, not properly evaluable by itself. Component theories will themselves be comprehensive in the sense that they will provide an answer to each answerable question, not simply to a chosen few. Call this the ‘TOE’ approach (for ‘theory of everything’). While the TOEists’ point about theoretical interconnections should be well taken, such an approach simply postpones resolving the normative issue. Or rather, it turns that issue into a sort of epistemological one. For the challenge shifts from specifying what goals we should acknowledge — the goal is simply to say “everything we can” —, to determining what specifically those goals are, separating the legitimate goals from the illegitimate. For example, should the theory have to say which things are ‘to the left’ or ‘heavy’? Of course not: nonsensical or vague goals need not be met. But this determination will not always be so obvious. The normative question remains: which problems should we solve and which should we dissolve or set aside?

The normative question remains even when we shift away from disputes about problems and pseudo-problems. A conservative approach holds that a theory of ordinary objects ought to provide a semantics for commonly-uttered statements about ordinary objects. Aside from potentially collapsing back into the above dispute, there is room for dissent about whether a semantics is needed and how far it should go. What one expects seems to depend on one’s culture: folk or philosopher. As van Inwagen puts it, philosophers want (ought to want) a semantics “according to which the material-object count-nouns of ordinary speech (‘table’, and so on) have non-empty extensions and these extensions contribute to the determination of the truth-values of the sentences in which the nouns occur in straightforward Tarskian fashion. People who have not been trained in philosophy do not want this — for more or less the same reason that people who have not been trained in physics ‘do not want’ a theory of gravity that is consistent with quantum mechanics” (van Inwagen 1993, 710). Philosophical training, in van Inwagen’s opinion, aside from imbuing such desires (conditional on whether one is interested in material objects), impels a particular kind of ontological project. “Philosophers who want such a semantics will, perforce, want an ontology of the material world that supplies objects to fall within the extensions of the material-object count-nouns of ordinary speech.” They will want “an ontology of composite material objects” according to which the particulate objects compose those “material-object count-nouns of ordinary speech” (710). The fortune of our semantics rests on those of our ontology.
Now even after receiving large doses of philosophical training, we may wish to separate the business of providing a semantics for ordinary statements about ordinary material objects (statements made by ordinary people or philosophers outside the “philosophy room”) from that of ontological investigation. For many, however, divorcing ontology from semantics will seem like a last resort, permissible only under extreme metaphysical duress. Such judgments — about what we regard to be ordinary objects, what claims we are willing to accept, how far we are willing to adjust our prima facie commitments, how many brute facts we allow — carry with them certain irreducibly normative commitments. Philosophical training, like training in physics, can show us likely avenues of exploration, but suggesting that it not only impels us down one or another of these avenues but also specifies character of our perambulations strains credulity.

Perhaps the foregoing will be seen as overblown, reactionary, or unhelpful. The real question is how, in the context of some rough set of shared norms for philosophical investigation, we should proceed. After all, there seems to be fairly wide agreement about how we ought to approach ontological disputes. The disputes seem to make sense, the reasons for accepting certain theories seem to be reasons, not just to the philosopher, but also to the careful and reflective participant in “ordinary life”. The desiderata for a theory of ordinary objects can be sketched in outline and in context: a true and informative account of the features of ordinary objects we care about, in whose favor we can appreciate a certain amount of evidence (of whatever favored sort). That is, after all, something like what we want from a theory of anything.

I hope to sketch some cause for concern about whether this philosophical project (according to certain widely-shared norms) can be carried off. Let us, then, start down the road as sketched, returning to the issue of normativity as it arises. To shorten the journey, we’ll need to lighten the load. I want to consider only the mereological dimension to the metaphysics of objects. Let us simply grant as uncontroversial that whatever else a theory of ordinary objects says, it will say something about their parts (a fully satisfactory theory will likely be seen as having to say rather more than this). I am interested in whether an ordinary theory of ordinary objects can even get off the ground. It may happen that the only sustainable theory of ordinary objects is a radically “unordinary” one.

7. Alternatives?

There is a certain temptation to chalk all this up as so much metaphysics (in the pejorative sense). There are bigger philosophical fish to fry. Metaphysicists will be unimpressed with such moves. Their detractors will be unimpressed with their being unimpressed (and so on). Can anything productive come out of this standoff?

Mark Johnston sees metaphysics in the pejorative sense as consisting in “a confused conception of what legitimates our practices; confused because metaphysics in this sense is a series of pictures of the world as containing various independent demands for our practices, when the only real legitimation of those practices consists in showing their worthiness to survive on the testing ground of everyday life”
(Johnston 1997, 85). Critics may in response point to the opacity of such demonstrations of worthiness. Just what is this everyday testing ground? How shall we spot success? Pilots are said to identify good landings as those they can walk away from. Perhaps we should follow this piece of aeronautical wisdom and identify a practice’s “worthiness” with its longevity. Really worthy practices must be robust enough to survive a variety of circumstances. And how should we judge robustness? Is it ability to survive testing in the warp and woof of “ordinary life” — in bars, factories, supermarkets, and cocktail party conversation? Is that everyday life?

The metaphysicist worries that our practices are completely neutral with respect to the underlying metaphysics of ordinary objects. Our practices suffice to render ordinary statements true enough (if “strictly false”) — especially if such statements can be translated into the “austere idiom” of choice. Well that such translations are possible, lest scientists (or the folk, more generally) respond with worse than a yawn. In seeking a theory of ordinary objects, we look to make a stand on issues not decided by our practices; we look to solve all the puzzles, answer all the challenges, say all there is to say.

As I suggested earlier, whether one ought to accept this characterization of the desiderata for a theory of ordinary objects (or anything else) is an open question — one that looks to be without a factual answer. We need only look to examples of other established scientific theories to see that no theory seeks to answer every question about its subject matter. Not every puzzle is worthy of attention. Is it obvious that the mereological puzzles are? Many say yes: Metaphysics is not science. Metaphysicists ask after the synthetic a priori. Metaphysical theories are rational reconstructions of how the world really is — they represent the facts that underlie our ordinary claims about the world.

“But why all this creative reconstruction, all this make believe?” (Quine 1969, 75). Is it credible that there are all these facts “laid up in heaven”? The considerations of the previous section — though far from decisive — sway me toward thinking that there is no deciding these matters in quite the way many suppose they demand deciding. It is hard to see how — other than by offering a rational reconstruction of certain intuitions, discoveries, and practices — they could be decided at all. Whether one reconstruction strikes us as superior to others depends on which intuitions, discoveries, and practices we deem worthy of sustaining and whether the resultant picture brings us sufficient quiet. Encouraging a bifurcation between everyday/ordinary life and “philosophical” life strikes me as the wrong move. It is a mistake to think that the notion of “worth” is any more settled in philosophy than it is in “ordinary life”.

There is, of course, much more to say about the details and defense of this line. What results? What questions should we be interested in answering, if not the puzzles? What is our theory of ordinary objects? Which is Theseus’ ship? How could there not be such facts? I don’t know. But not knowing — and not knowing whether there is anything to know — doesn’t seem to me less satisfying than assuming a position that offers an answer. Perhaps an ethical comparison is apt. There being

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moral truths (of some kind) is compatible with there being moral dilemmas. The threat dilemmas pose — and how far they motivate theoretical innovation or revision — depends on how prominent they are in our thinking and acting. As for the other questions a theory of ordinary objects might answer, we might (ironically) look to the immoderates for assistance. Immoderates are notoriously silent about the details of paraphrase into a “moderate” language. Perhaps when we settle the details of such paraphrases, we will have settled on what deserves the title of an ‘ordinary theory of ordinary objects’.

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