

Mereological Idealism*

Kenneth L. Pearce
Valparaiso University

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As Democritus used to say, [composite objects]
exist by convention, not by nature.

Leibniz to De Volder, 20 June 1703¹

One of the central questions of mereology – the theory of parts and wholes – is what Peter van Inwagen has dubbed the ‘Special Composition Question’: “in what circumstances do things add up to or compose something? When does unity arise out of plurality?” (van Inwagen 1990, 31). Van Inwagen distinguishes between ‘moderate’ answers to this question, which say that composition occurs sometimes, and ‘extreme’ answers which say that composition occurs always (mereological universalism) or never (mereological nihilism). Commonsense clearly takes a moderate approach, but philosophers have found serious difficulties with moderate answers to the Special Composition Question, and especially with those answers that seek to approximate commonsense.

In this paper, I defend a classical solution to this problem: “it is the mind that maketh each thing to be one” (Berkeley [1744] 1948–1957, §356).² According to this view, which I call ‘mereological idealism,’ it is when a plurality is unified in thought under a concept that a unified whole comes to exist. After explaining the view in more detail, I show how it escapes three standard arguments against commonsense answers to the Special Composition Question.³

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1. Lodge 2013, 264–265, translation modified.

2. Berkeley is quoting Aristotle *De Anima*, Γ6 430b5–6. Context makes clear that Berkeley does mean this quote as an endorsement of mereological idealism, but Aristotle does not. (Aristotle is talking about the mind’s activity in unifying the subject and predicate into a judgment.) In other work, I defend the attribution of different versions of the view I here dub ‘mereological idealism’ to Berkeley (Pearce, forthcoming[b], ch. 6) and Leibniz (Pearce, forthcoming[c]). Other plausible candidates for mereological idealists in the history of Western philosophy include Kant and C. I. Lewis.

3. Koistinen and Repo 2002 have previously suggested that treating ordinary objects as Leibnizian/Kantian phenomena could solve the problem of the many. To be clear, in classifying

1 Mereological Idealism Explained

1.1 The Unifying Power of Thought

Pretheoretically, we are all inclined to affirm that my desk is a really existing composite object. The desk, being of the Ikea variety, may have come into existence when I assembled the parts in the appropriate arrangement. On the other hand, we are not pretheoretically inclined to recognize the existence of an object composed of my left ear and the Eiffel Tower.

One might at first think that this is because my left ear is far away from and/or not attached to the Eiffel Tower, but in fact (as is well-known) we do not intuitively treat attachment as a sufficient condition for composition, and it is doubtful whether we even consistently treat it as a necessary condition. Suppose I put on a sweater. I put my arms and head through the holes, thereby ‘fastening’ the sweater to myself in pretty much the same way the pieces of the desk are fastened together, yet I do not thereby create a composite object made up of myself and the sweater (cf. van Inwagen 1990, §6). Attachment is therefore not sufficient for composition.

The case of the desk casts doubt on the necessity of attachment for composition, for there is some evidence that plain language regards the desk as existing prior to assembly. After all, Ikea markets its product as a *desk* (some assembly required), and not as a collection of desk parts or a build-your-own-desk kit. This suggests that, at least according to Ikea, the desk existed before I put it together.

There is one very obvious difference between my desk and the alleged object composed of my left ear and the Eiffel Tower: the former object falls under a sortal concept we possess, and the latter does not (cf. Lewis 1986, 213). Accordingly we (in thought) group the desk pieces together into a unified object and call it ‘desk’. According to mereological idealism, it is this fact that explains why the desk parts form a whole while my left ear and the Eiffel Tower do not.

My thought of the desk is a singular representation. That representation is, however, *of* or *about* what, independently of my thought, is a multitude of objects, or perhaps an undifferentiated stuff. It is the concept *desk*, under which those things or that stuff fall(s), that is responsible for the unity of my representation.⁴ This is no different from the way we can deploy the concept *crowd* to construct a singular representation of a multitude of humans. When a mind has a unified representation that is of or about many objects, I say

mereological idealism among the commonsense answers, I am *not* claiming that commonsense endorses mereological idealism; I am only claiming that mereological idealism is consistent with commonsense judgments about what composite objects there are.

4. In what follows, I assume for simplicity an ontology of mereological atoms. The adaptation of my view to a stuff ontology or a priority monist ontology, where the mind would be understood as carving objects out of the world rather than building them up from parts, is relatively straightforward. Andrew Jaeger and Trenton Merricks asked about the compatibility of this approach with a ‘gunky’ ontology – i.e., one on which every object, no matter how small, has proper parts. Mereological idealism is compatible with such an ontology if, but only if, there are infinitely many unifying acts of apprehension, covering every level of composition.

that those objects are *co-apprehended* by that mind in that representation. According to mereological idealism, it is the co-apprehension of the desk-parts under the concept *desk* that is responsible for the existence of the desk. This is true not only for artifacts like the desk, but for composite objects of every kind.

1.2 Thinking Things Into Being?

Mereological idealism is neutral regarding the nature of the fundamental reality that is put together, or carved up, into composite objects. Accordingly, it is compatible with, but does not presuppose, *fundamental idealism*, the view that all of fundamental reality is mental.⁵ Still, mereological idealism is clearly a form of idealism: it is an idealism about composite objects. According to mereological idealism, composite objects owe their existence to the thoughts that are about them.

The robustly idealistic nature of this thesis gives rise to a dilemma. On the one hand, if our mental activity is responsible for the real existence of objects, this would seem to give us bizarre, almost magical, powers, apparently including instantaneous action at a distance. On the other hand, if our mental activity doesn't create really existing objects (but only objects 'existing' in some weak sense, like fictionalia), then mereological idealism collapses into eliminativism, the view that (many) familiar objects do not really exist. In fact, this dilemma is a false one, for the mereological idealist can hold that our mental activity creates really existing objects without attributing any spooky powers to us. Explaining how this can be so will help us to clarify exactly how minds create composite objects.

Suppose I look up into the sky and see a particular pattern of white against the blue background and classify it as a cloud. Suppose further that no one had previously seen this particular cloud. It seems that the mereological idealist is claiming that simply by looking up into the sky and deploying the concept *cloud* I *do something* to those water molecules such that they come to form a cloud. Yet it is quite implausible to suppose that, merely by sitting on the ground and thinking, I could act on the water molecules in this way and create an object in the sky.

I respond that in the described scenario I do indeed do something to the water molecules, but only in an extremely weak sense of the phrase 'do something to'. What I do to the water molecules is think about them. I do not in any way alter the quantity or configuration of matter and energy in that cloud-shaped region of the universe. I don't transmit a magic 'thought signal' to the cloud. I simply think about it, and the thinking all happens here, in my head. *Being thought of* is a classic example of what traditional (pre-Fregean) logicians called an *extrinsic denomination*: although it is a predicate applied to the water molecules, the applicability of the predicate does not depend at all on

5. Thus on the mereological idealist reading of Berkeley, the fundamental reality is the sequence of individual ideas had by individual perceivers, and on the mereological idealist reading of Leibniz the fundamental reality is the infinity of (mind-like) monads. (See above, note 2.)

the intrinsic state of those molecules. To use a more recent bit of jargon, when the molecules begin to be thought of by me they undergo a mere Cambridge change.

If, however, my co-apprehension of the water molecules under my concept *cloud* brings about no intrinsic change in the water molecules how can it bring it about that the molecules compose a cloud? It can do this by adding the last requisite for the existence of a cloud: a thinking being who applies the concept *cloud* to that plurality. The concept *cloud* is (roughly) the concept of a white, gray, or black fluffy-looking object in the the sky capable, under appropriate circumstances, of producing precipitation. If some form of content externalism is true, then perhaps the concept *cloud* includes the underlying physical reality (relations among water molecules) that gives rise to these directly observable features.⁶ The real existence of the cloud is due partly to the employment of the concept *cloud* by thinkers and partly to the arrangement of water molecules in such a way that the concept is properly applied. When I apprehend the molecules under the concept *cloud*, the second requisite, the arrangement of molecules, is already in place. I add the first requisite, the employment of the concept *cloud*, and thereby bring it about that a cloud composed of those molecules exists.

In fact, this kind of creation of objects is not so exotic as might first appear. There is independent reason to suppose that dependence on human conventions is a widespread feature of ordinary objects. Thus, for instance, the existence of a statue depends on its relation to the art world, and the existence of a flag or a dollar bill depends on various political arrangements (see Baker 2000, ch. 2; 2007, 32-66). If this is the right way of thinking about statues and other artworks, then the dependence on convention for ‘found object’ art will be very similar to what I have said about the cloud. The artist creates the artwork without making any intrinsic alteration to the underlying material (the found object). She may change the object’s position, or cause a plaque with a title to be placed in front of it, but even these things are not strictly necessary to create the artwork. What is required is that the artist somehow brings about an alteration in how people consider the object. Once the object comes to be appropriately related to the human social practice of art, the object constitutes an artwork, and an artwork thereby begins to exist.⁷

Dean Zimmerman complains that theories of artifacts of this sort commit us to implausible instances of “speaking things into being” (Zimmerman 2002, 333-335).⁸ What I am suggesting is that we can and should embrace this sort of *thinking* (not speaking) things into being, not only for artifacts, but for composite objects in general. Our ability to influence what there is by means of our thought is not some sort of spooky, supernatural power we have; it stems from the fact that the co-apprehension of the constituent parts is a metaphysically

6. Something like this happens in Leibniz’s version of mereological idealism. It is, however, not due to content externalism, but rather to unconscious representation. Again, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(c\)](#).

7. For further discussion of this type of case, see Korman 2010, §7.

8. For Baker’s response, see Baker 2007, 43-44.

necessary condition for the existence of a composite object.

1.3 Existence and Reality

Mereological idealism does not involve belief in magical powers. Just as our conventions, intentions, and ways of thinking can create money and endow it with economic powers, or create statues and endow them with aesthetic powers, so our ways of thinking create composite objects more generally. This can be done, in each case, without intrinsic alteration to the constituent parts, and hence without acting on them in any robust sense. It might be thought, however, that precisely because these objects can be created without any intrinsic alteration to the pre-existing reality from which they are composed, we have fallen on the other horn of the dilemma, denying the real existence of composite objects.

Here the mereological idealist, like idealists of other sorts, will be well-advised to give a somewhat deflationary analysis of *real existence*. However, if the analysis is *too* deflationary we will overshoot our target and fall into mereological universalism, the view that any arbitrary collection of objects composes a whole. The answer I favor is as follows.

First, existence is cheap. Everything exists. *There is* a certain fictional detective named ‘Holmes’ and *there are* some objects accepted by the mereological universalist and rejected by the mereological idealist (cf. Schaffer 2009, §2.1). In order to accept this last claim while (consistently) taking the side of the mereological idealist, it is necessary to attach some significance to the word ‘real’ in the phrase ‘real existence’. In other words, we must say that only some of those things that exist are real, and the additional entities posited by the universalist are not real.⁹

Philosophers sometimes use the word ‘real’ to mean ‘mind-independent’. It is in this sense that realism contrasts with idealism. On this interpretation of ‘reality,’ I do indeed deny the reality of composite objects like desks. I do not find this troubling, since this is a technical philosophical use of ‘real’/‘reality’ and not a plain language one.

Our ordinary concept of *reality* has its home in the distinction between dreams, hallucinations, and sensory illusions, on the one side, and ordinary waking perceptions on the other. It is equally at home in the distinction between fictional and non-fictional narratives, and the objects therein. Similarly, *real* contrasts with *imaginary*.

The distinction we mark out by our concept *reality* has empirical and pragmatic significance. When you tell a child ‘ghosts aren’t real,’ the point is that she shouldn’t expect to see any ghosts, and she needn’t be afraid of them or take precautions against them. Of course there’s a perfectly ordinary sense in which *there are* ghosts – Casper is one and Marley is another. But the ghosts

9. This kind of distinction between existence and reality is employed by both Berkeley and Leibniz. For Berkeley, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §6.7. For Leibniz, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(c\)](#), §3.

are only on TV and in storybooks. None of the ghosts is real, so you can be assured that none of them will (really) float into your bedroom at night.

We ordinarily assume that this distinction also has metaphysical significance. In navigating the world, in forming predictions and expectations about experience, we give a sort of privilege to the real which we deny to the dreamed, hallucinated, illusory, or fictitious. We ordinarily suppose that the reason for the success of this strategy is that the objects we label 'real' are somehow more objective or fundamental, less dependent on the peculiarities of a single individual, than those we regard as unreal.

Many of the relevant criteria here come in degrees, and in fact in different contexts we draw the distinction between the real and the unreal in different places. For instance, in a context where the possibility that I may be dreaming or hallucinating is salient, a rainbow I am seeing may be described as 'real' if a normal waking human observer in my situation would see it. In another context, we may say that rainbows generally are merely optical illusions and not real objects.

The mereological idealist can maintain that ordinary objects are in the ordinary sense real, while the universalist's exotica are imaginary. Undeniably, the concepts whereby ordinary objects are unified are concepts we in fact use to navigate the world, they are useful for predicting experience and guiding action, and they are not peculiar to one individual. Furthermore, although almost everyone admits that these plain language concepts are to some degree arbitrary and non-joint-carving, mereological idealism does nothing to undermine our pre-theoretical confidence that they allow us to track fundamental reality better than we would if we replaced them with concepts corresponding to the universalist's exotic objects. We can also distinguish between those cases in which the concepts are tracking the underlying reality correctly (the constituents are actually related as the concepts require) from those in which the application of the concept is incorrect, and call only the former 'real'.

Mereological idealism is the view that composite objects exist because their constituent parts are co-apprehended by a mind under a concept. This is indeed a way of affirming – not denying – the existence of such objects. In the philosophical sense of 'real' in which 'real' contrasts with 'ideal' or 'mind-dependent', this is obviously a way of denying the reality of composite objects. However, in the ordinary sense of 'real' on which 'real' contrasts with 'dreamed,' 'imagined,' 'fictitious,' etc., mereological idealism can maintain the reality of familiar composite objects while denying the reality of the exotic composite objects introduced by the universalist. Real composite objects are those which are created by the correct application of reasonably joint-carving concepts which are successfully employed by a community for the purpose of predicting experience and guiding action.

2 Two Objections

Mereological idealism secures the existence and reality of the composite objects recognized by commonsense without admitting the universalist's exotica. It does this by making composite objects mind-dependent. Yet this dependence does not involve attributing any spooky powers to minds; it merely rests on a particular account of the existence conditions for composite objects.

There are two serious objections to this view. First, like other versions of idealism, it faces difficulties in accounting for objects that are not thought of.¹⁰ Second, contrary to my protestations of neutrality about fundamental ontology, it appears that to avoid circularity the mereological idealist must take a controversial stand regarding the metaphysics of mind: the denial that the mental depends on the physical. Both objections can be answered.

2.1 Unthought Objects

So far, I have used examples of objects that are co-apprehended perceptually: the desk is perceived *as* a desk, and the cloud is perceived *as* a cloud, and the constituents are thereby unified. Actual sensory perception is a simplifying assumption here, but given my definition of co-apprehension it is clearly not necessary. Any mental representation will suffice. So long as we are able to have some thoughts that are about some particular object, we are able to unify that object. So, for the mereological idealist, the problem is not a problem of unperceived composite objects, but of *unthought* composite objects.

Still, it certainly seems there are such things. For instance, surely there is some individual boulder on Mars such that no one has ever thought of *that very boulder* (individually).¹¹

In fact, however, we must be very careful how we formulate this claim. For instance, it cannot be the case that we introduce a name, 'The Unthought Boulder,' which names some particular boulder, for then whoever understood the name would be thinking of that boulder, contrary to the supposition that the boulder is unthought.

Of course, the description 'the unthought boulder' does not designate one individual boulder. So suppose we keep our thoughts general and say, among all the Martian boulders, there are some that are unthought. But note that this general thought is *about* Martian boulders, and it applies a unifying concept to them. What this shows is that the problem arises from the assumption that the mental unification requires *singular* representation of an individual object. We can, however, dispense with this assumption while retaining mereological idealism. In the very formation of the question, *are there unthought Martian boulders?*, we have a thought that is about all of the Martian boulders. This thought carves up the mass-energy in the Mars-shaped region in a certain way,

¹⁰. I thank Tyron Goldschmidt, Thomas Hofweber, and Michael Bench-Capon for pressing this objection.

¹¹. This example is due to Michael Bench-Capon.

and this suffices for the existence of all the Martian boulders, including those that are not objects of singular thought.

But didn't the Martian boulders exist *before* we thought about them? And won't they continue to exist when we stop thinking about them, or even if we cease to exist? Yes, for we have no difficulty thinking of past or future objects, any more than we have difficulty thinking about far away objects. Accordingly, we can unify past and future Martian boulders, just as easily as present Martian boulders. In fact, we have done so by considering the questions in this paragraph.¹²

If there hadn't been any minds, would there still have been boulders? A defender of mereological idealism who accepted the standard possible worlds semantics for subjunctive conditionals would be in a position to give an affirmative answer to this question, patterned after the answers to the previous questions: we have no difficulty thinking about merely possible objects and, accordingly, we are able to unify the merely possible boulders, so there are boulders in nearby possible worlds that lack minds. However, I myself reject the possible worlds semantics. In my view, the fact that the existence of boulders is partly grounded in facts about minds entails that if there hadn't been any minds there would not have been any boulders. The evaluation of the conditional does not depend on possible worlds or merely possible objects (see Pearce, [forthcoming\[a\]](#)). This is a conclusion I'm willing to accept: the existence of boulders, and other composite objects, requires someone, somewhere, somewhen, who co-apprehends their constituent parts.

2.2 Mind and Body

According to mereological idealism, all composite objects depend on mental activity for their unity and existence. Thus, on pain of circularity, it cannot be the case that all mental activity depends on composite objects. However, the bodies of conscious beings are composite objects. Accordingly, mereological idealism appears to jeopardize the dependence of mind on body.

It is true that mereological idealism rules out certain views on the metaphysics of mind. However, it does not rule out all brands of physicalism. Depending on the other metaphysical views with which mereological idealism is combined, the mereological idealist could consistently hold either that *all mental activity depends on physical events* or that *each mind depends on an associated body* (or both).

To preserve the first view, note that there are plenty of physical events in the human-shaped region I occupy (including some especially important events in a certain brain-shaped subregion thereof) that can be described without reference to any composite objects. The mereological idealist is free to take these

12. This response fits most neatly with an eternalist/B theoretic philosophy of time, which I in fact endorse. However, all that the response strictly speaking requires is that what was the case in the distant past may have depended on what was going to be the case today. Anyone who holds that future-tensed propositions have truth values would seem to be committed to this possibility.

microphysical events as the ontological basis for my mental activity, including the activity that unifies composite objects such as my body and brain.

This secures the dependence of mental activity on physical events. Regarding the mind itself, one could take it to be a simple (i.e., non-composite) object that somehow emerges from the relevant pattern of physical activity. This, however, would not make the mind depend on the *body*. A philosopher who wanted to combine mereological idealism with *that* thesis would need to resort to more complicated and controversial moves. Nevertheless, it can be done. Suppose that, although the individual unifying acts of apprehending pluralities under concepts are prior to the existence of composite objects, nevertheless the mind itself, as subject of those acts, is actually dependent on this same unifying activity. On such a view, the mind would be understood as unifying itself by its self-apprehension.¹³ (To put the matter less paradoxically: the acts of apprehension responsible for unifying the mind into an object would themselves be included as parts of the mind. There is no circularity here, any more than there is a circularity in the view that the screws that hold the desk together are themselves parts of the desk they hold together.) One might hold that this unifying self-apprehension necessarily depends on an apprehension of oneself as a physical being, and hence depends on a (metaphysically) prior unifying apprehension of one's body.¹⁴

Of course, the mereological idealist is also free to reject the dependence of the mental on the physical altogether. Although mereological idealism is not completely independent of questions about the relationship of mind to body, it is consistent with a wide range of views.

3 The Argument from Vagueness

We turn now to the ability of mereological idealism to handle standard objections to moderate views in mereology, beginning with the argument from vagueness. According to David Lewis, any attempt to follow commonsense in determining when composition occurs will lead to unacceptable metaphysical vagueness. Lewis's argument can be given as follows:

1. It is possible to satisfy our pretheoretical intuitions about composition (even approximately) only if composition is vague.
 2. If composition were vague, then existence would be vague.
 3. Vague existence is impossible.
- Therefore,
4. Our pretheoretical intuitions about composition cannot be satisfied (even approximately).

13. There is some evidence that Berkeley at least toyed with such a view. See Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §7.3.

14. Depending on exactly how the unifying activity is understood, similar strategies might also allow for claims of mind-body identity.

Lewis defends premise 1 of this argument by noting that our pretheoretical intuitions about composition take into account such criteria as contrast with surroundings, adjacency, attachment, and joint action (Lewis 1986, 211). However, all of these criteria are vague, and it is also unclear how they are to be weighed against one another. Hence commonsense is committed to vague composition. This, Lewis claims, leads to vague existence: if it is indeterminate whether a certain group of objects gives rise to a composite object, then it is indeterminate whether a certain composite object exists. But vague existence is impossible.

In denying vague existence, Lewis certainly does not mean to deny that sentences beginning with ‘There is/exists an object such that . . .’ may be vague. Rather, he means to claim that, whenever such a sentence is vague, it is because no object which determinately satisfies the description in the ellipsis exists, but there is at least one object such that it is indeterminate whether that object satisfies the description. In other words, all vagueness occurs at the level of the application of concepts or descriptions to objects, and not at the level of objects to which concepts or descriptions may be applied (cf. van Inwagen 1990, 271-273; Hawley 2002; Hirsch 2002, 65-66).¹⁵

I am prepared to grant premises 1 and 3.¹⁶ The mereological idealist is, however, in an excellent position to reject premise 2.

Nearly everyone agrees that it might be indeterminate whether ‘someone is bald’ is true, since it is indeterminate exactly what numbers and arrangements of hairs suffice for baldness. If there is no vague existence, then we must conclude that, when this sentence is indeterminate, there is a determinately existing person such that it is indeterminate whether that person is bald. The parallel move for vague composition would be this: it is indeterminate whether there is an object composed of all and only the members of some set S . Since vague existence is impossible, we must conclude that there (determinately) exists some object such that it is indeterminate whether that object is exactly composed of the members of S (cf. Baker 2007, ch. 6; Donnelly 2009; Noonan 2010; Carmichael 2011).

The mereological universalist will resist this move because she denies that the existence of a whole is anything over and above the existence of its parts.¹⁷ This, however, is precisely where the proponent of restricted composition parts ways with the universalist. The proponent of restricted composition holds that something more is required. Depending on the nature of this additional requirement, the determinate existence of the composite object may be secured despite the vagueness of composition (Merricks 2005, §5; 2007).

According to mereological idealism, the existence of a composite object requires that some things be co-apprehended by a mind under some concept, and

15. Theodore Sider’s influential rendering of the argument relies instead on the claim that the logical vocabulary is not a source of vagueness. From this assumption Sider derives the claim that it cannot be indeterminate how many objects there are (Sider 2001, 127-130).

16. But for an argument against premise 1, see Nolan 2006, and for arguments against premise 3, see van Inwagen 1990, §19; Hawley 2002.

17. On the interpretation of the phrase ‘nothing over and above’ here, see Sider 2015.

thereby unified. There is no reason why it should not be determinately true that such a unifying act of apprehension occurs although it is indeterminate exactly which objects are thereby unified. For instance, it may be determinately true that I co-apprehend some water molecules under my concept *cloud* although there are particular water molecules such that it is indeterminate whether they are included in my act of apprehension. Premise 2 is false.

Our concepts do not precisely determine which molecules are part of a given cloud, or exactly where one cloud ends and another begins. This is the case with familiar objects generally: when my fingers are on the keyboard, there will be certain electrons such that it is indeterminate whether those electrons belong to my fingers or the keyboard or neither. However, it seems that there are also cases where our concepts do not determine whether the object exists at all.

This problem does not in fact arise for the mereological idealist. First, in order to wonder whether *that* is a cloud, I must unify *that* in thought under some concept (perhaps the general concept *physical object*) and thereby bring a composite object into existence. Accordingly, in this type of case the thing determinately exists, though it may be indeterminate whether it is a cloud.

In another kind of case, it may be indeterminate whether the accepted concepts of the community authorize the unification. As a result, some individuals may perform the unifying apprehension while other similarly situated individuals do not. This, however, is not a case of vague existence. The object determinately exists, since some minds apprehend it in a unified way. Rather, it is indeterminate whether the object is *real*. If I see a patch of sky a little paler than the rest of the blue, and this paler shade is caused by the presence of some water molecules, and I apply my concept *cloud*, it may be indeterminate whether I am seeing a real cloud or an illusion, since it is indeterminate whether the molecules are dense enough for my unification of those molecules into a cloud to be correct.

The vagueness of reality, as understood in mereological idealism, does not give rise to the problems faced by vague existence. Reality is not tied up with quantification in the way existence is, since we can quantify over dreamed, hallucinated, and illusory objects. Accordingly, mereological idealism escapes the argument from vagueness.

4 The Argument from Overdetermination

According to Trenton Merricks, an ontology that includes inanimate macrophysical objects leads to widespread and unacceptable causal overdetermination. Merricks asks us to consider an event we would ordinarily describe as a baseball shattering a window. A complete microphysical causal explanation of this event is possible. Accordingly, positing a baseball (in addition to the particles arranged baseball-wise) is purely superfluous: there is nothing left for the baseball to do that is not already done by its particles (Merricks 2003, ch.

3).¹⁸

There is, however, something for the baseball to do that is not done by its particles: shattering the window. The particles do not shatter the window. The particles interact with certain other particles bringing about various changes in their position and momentum. It thereby happens that a certain collection of molecules is no longer arranged in such a way as to be correctly unified under our concept *window*. But to say that the particles arranged baseball-wise, rather than the baseball, do the shattering confusedly mixes and matches distinct levels of causal explanation.¹⁹

Consider the following vivid example, due to Leibniz:

[Imagine that,] in explaining a great prince's victory in taking some important place, a historian were to say it was because small particles of gunpowder, released by the touch of a spark, went off with a speed capable of impelling a hard, heavy body against the walls of the place, while the branches of the particles of copper in the cannon were so well interlaced as not to be pulled apart by that speed – instead of showing how the conqueror's foresight made him choose the appropriate time and means, and how his power overcame all obstacles (Leibniz [1686] 1998, §19).

To take a more modern example, imagine (if you can) an explanation of the 2008 recession given in terms of the motion of electrons in bank and stock market computers. This is a mistake about the kind of explanation appropriate to the kinds of entities and events involved in the explanandum. When the explanandum is the outcome of a military campaign, an explanation in terms of military strategy and tactics is appropriate. When the explanandum is an economic event, an economic explanation is appropriate.

Commonsense takes these to be causal explanations and supposes that they are sometimes correct. The superior strategy of Leibniz's prince in the deployment of his cannons caused the city to fall, and so explains the prince's victory. The widespread issuance of subprime mortgages was a contributing cause of the recession, and so partly explains it (cf. Baker 2007, ch. 5).

These explanations can be endorsed without problematic overdetermination if we refrain from confusing the involved objects. The price of a stock is not identical to the physical state of any collection of electrons, and its plummeting requires a different kind of cause than the changes in state of the electrons. Similarly, the window is not identical to its constituent particles. Hence the explanation of the window and its shattering requires something more than the explanation of the motion of those particles.

Merricks recognizes the possibility of this kind of approach and argues that it should be rejected because it violates the following principle:

18. A very similar argument can be found in the Sautrāntika school of Buddhism. See Finnigan, this volume.

19. Similarly, Yang 2013 uses an interventionist theory of causation to argue that the baseball and its atoms cannot belong to the same 'causal system' and hence cannot give rise to problematic overdetermination.

If some objects cause events $v_1 \dots v_n$ and $v_1 \dots v_n$ compose event V, then those objects cause V (Merricks 2003, 64).

If the above observations about levels of explanation are correct, then Merricks' principle is false. The mereological idealist is in a position to give a plausible account of the varieties of non-fundamental causation that violate the principle. Unsurprisingly, it is an idealist account. Our conceptualizing activity creates the world of money, banks, stock prices, and subprime mortgages. This conceptualizing likewise gives rise to the causal relations among them. The causal powers of these objects are built into the concepts that unify them.²⁰

Merricks objects²¹ to this strategy that the distinction of levels here is surely not absolute: in appropriate circumstances, fundamental particles might cause the shattering of the window (or some other macro effect) in such a way that the shattering lacked any macro cause describable by means of our ordinary concepts.

There certainly must be a sense in which this is true. For instance, physicists have actually constructed instruments capable of registering the presence of a single particle. There must be some sense in which the instrument's reading is caused by that single particle. On the other hand, plain language shows some ambivalence about how best to describe situations like this. For instance, if a very fragile window shattered because of a slight difference in air pressure between the inside and outside of the house, one might say that the window shattered *spontaneously*, indicating that it lacked the sort of cause usually expected in our conceptual scheme for macro objects. One might say this even if one believed that there was a micro-physical explanation in terms of collisions between molecules.

This latter claim, that the shattering of the window is in this case spontaneous, is in my view the more metaphysically accurate one. In the case described, although the shattering of the window is constituted by events which have causes, that event itself is strictly speaking causeless. Nevertheless, the shattering of the window can be given an explanation which is partly causal: we can explain the shattering of the window by specifying the more fundamental events from which it is constituted, and *those* events can be explained causally. Mereological idealism thus provides an explanation of the ambivalence of plain language with regard to 'spontaneous' events that can be given microphysical causal explanations. This also provides a reasonable account of what we should say about the physicist's apparatus: within the world of baseballs and windows (i.e., the world of classical physics), the behavior of the apparatus cannot be explained. It is only in the more fundamental terms of quantum physics that the event can be properly understood. But this is just to say that, within our ordinary (classical) conceptual scheme the event lacks a cause.

20. The reader of footnotes will by now be unsurprised to learn that I attribute a view of this sort to Berkeley (Pearce, [forthcoming\[b\]](#), §9.3). Baker also emphasizes the ways in which human intentions give rise to the causal powers of many constituted objects (Baker 2000, 20-21, 33-35; 2007, ch. 5).

21. Personal correspondence, August 21, 2015.

Ordinary composite objects, like windows, baseballs, and cannons, are just as much a creation of our concepts as more abstract things like mortgages. Hence the causal powers of baseballs are owing to the concept *baseball* which unites the underlying particles into an object. If the objects are to be real, then conceptualizing them in this way, including attributing to them these sorts of causal powers, must help us track changes in the underlying reality in such a way as to navigate the world successfully. Again, mereological idealism casts no doubt on our pre-theoretical belief that this criterion is satisfied by our attribution to baseballs of the power to break windows.

Just as mereological idealism is independent of fundamental idealism, so this kind of idealism about non-fundamental causation is independent of idealism about fundamental causation. The mereological idealist is free to hold a conception of fundamental causation that is as robustly realist as you like.

5 The Argument from Alternative Conceptual Schemes

It is absurd to suppose that, when a tree stands in a yard and nothing unusual occurs, the sentence ‘there is a thing in the yard that keeps gaining and losing branches’ is true, for trees do not usually gain and lose branches. Yet it is possible to construct a concept, *shmree*, which unifies the entire tree during the daytime, but only the trunk at night. Thus, if mereological idealism is true, I can bring it about that there is an object in the yard which gains and loses branches merely by constructing the concept *shmree* and applying it to the appropriate bit of reality. But this is absurd.²²

In response, consider the sentence, “there is a thing imagined by Pearce which stands in the yard and keeps gaining and losing branches.” Since I am thinking about shmrees, this sentence is true. I do not believe its use of the quantifier is in any way deviant.

Of course, there aren’t *really* any shmrees, and this is why the mereological universalist is mistaken. Shmrees are simply objects imagined by some philosophers. Again, though, the word ‘really’ is not redundant here. Imaginary shmrees do exist.

The concept *shmree* does take some bit of reality to be a certain way; there are metaphysical conditions for the existence of shmrees. It follows, by the account of reality I have given above, that the unreality of shmrees is due merely to the fact that the concept *shmree* is not actually employed by a community as part of a successful scheme for navigating and understanding the world.

Now suppose the concept *shmree* was actually employed by some community. Suppose this community employs a language that looks just like English except for the use of the word ‘shmree’. Call this language ‘Shmrenglish’.

Suppose that a speaker of Shmrenglish asserts, ‘shmrees are real’ and a

22. This example is borrowed from Eli Hirsch who deploys it in a somewhat different context (Hirsch 2002, 62-63).

speaker of English asserts, ‘the things Shmrenglish-speakers call “shmrees” are not real’. Do they disagree?

I maintain that they do. The use of the word ‘real’ in English is partly normative. To evaluate an experience or an object as real is to determine that it ought to be employed as a guide to thought and action in the way that ordinary waking experiences are but dream experiences aren’t. One who asserts ‘phlogiston is not real’ is judging that employing the concept *phlogiston* is not a good way of navigating and understanding the world. (This, we ordinarily suppose, is because the concept *phlogiston* does not track the underlying fundamental reality well.) Similarly, an English speaker who asserts ‘the things Shmrenglish-speakers call “shmrees” are not real’ is judging the Shmrenglish-speakers’ concept *shmree* to be defective as a tool for navigating and understanding the world. The Shmrenglish speaker who asserts ‘shmrees are real’ disagrees with this assertion.

Mereological idealism is thus not totally deflationary of debates between alternative conceptual schemes. Mereological idealism is a substantive thesis about the manner of existence of composite objects. This thesis states that all such objects possess mind-dependent existence, and in that sense it is a form of metaphysical idealism. The account of reality I have given is a partly normative/pragmatic one, and in this sense my approach to debates about what really exists may be regarded as modestly deflationary. However, such debates do not, on this view, simply come down to facts about how ordinary (non-philosophical) English speakers use words, for these disputes necessarily raise the question of which concepts we *ought* to employ.²³ If one of our aims is getting at the underlying fundamental reality then the question of which concepts we ought to employ will involve both practical and theoretical considerations.²⁴

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²³. On philosophy as an inquiry into the concepts we ought to employ, see Haslanger 2014.

²⁴. This paper benefited from discussions with Andrew Jaeger, Tyron Goldschmidt, Thomas Hofweber, Michael Bench-Capon, Trenton Merricks, and Sandra Visser.

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