

Metaphysical Ambitions in the Ontology of Objects

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The subject matter of Thomas Hofweber's rich and rewarding *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics* (OAM) is the ontology of mathematical objects, properties, facts, and ordinary objects. Most of Hofweber's book is dedicated to developing a unified solution to structurally similar ontological puzzles about natural numbers, properties, and facts. On the one hand, questions about the existence of these things are considered to be hard, philosophical questions that have led to long-standing debates in metaphysics. Answering them would mean substantive progress in philosophy. On the other hand, questions about the existence of these things are considered to be easy, non-philosophical questions that seem to be settled outside of philosophy. That there are numbers, for instance, seems to follow immediately from the established mathematical claim that there are infinitely many prime numbers. So there is no work left for philosophy.

In response to the puzzles, Hofweber distinguishes between different ways of understanding a given domain of discourse. According to *internalism*, the singular terms in the domain are used non-referentially and the quantifiers are used non-objectually, whereas according to *externalism*, the singular terms in the domain are used referentially and the quantifiers are used objectually. Hofweber argues carefully for internalism concerning ordinary and scientific talk about natural numbers, properties, and facts, while construing ontological questions about these things in metaphysics according to externalism. His detailed accounts of the respective domains of discourse yield a unified conciliatory solution to the ontological puzzles. On the one hand, questions about the existence of natural numbers, properties, and facts have easy answers outside of philosophy, as internalism is true about non-philosophical domains of discourse. On the other hand, questions about the existence of natural numbers, properties, and facts are difficult when approached in metaphysics, as here existence questions are to be understood as external questions. Since existence claims on the internal reading do not imply existence claims on the external reading, the initial puzzles dissolve. The externally understood ontological questions thus mark special domains of inquiry. These questions are left open by non-philosophical parts of inquiry, and hence there is room for metaphysical ambitions in the ontology of natural numbers, properties, and facts.

Ordinary objects, such as trees and tables, have a very different status in Hofweber's picture. Hofweber does not uncover a further internal-external divide in thought and talk about ordinary objects, but subscribes instead to the standard view that talk about ordinary objects outside as well as inside of philosophy is externalist. On this basis, he argues that the question of whether there are any ordinary objects is

answered outside of philosophy, and hence that this ontological question, in contrast to the ontological questions about natural numbers, properties, and facts, is not in the domain of metaphysics.

In this discussion note, I shall focus on Hofweber's path to this conclusion. His considerations along this path may be understood as a response to an ontological puzzle about ordinary objects, which *prima facie* has much in common with his puzzles about numbers, properties, and facts, although Hofweber does not address the similarity explicitly. I shall begin by stating the puzzle. Then I shall argue that Hofweber's remarks in response to the puzzle are insufficient to solve it. I shall suggest, finally, that a natural way of developing his remarks into a full-blown response to the puzzle leaves the ontological question about objects to be settled in metaphysics, contrary to Hofweber's desired conclusion.

1 A puzzle about objects

Do ordinary objects, such as trees and tables, exist? This ontological question raises a puzzle with a similar structure as the ontological puzzles raised by natural numbers, properties, and facts. On the one hand, the ontological question about objects seems to have an easy answer that does not depend on metaphysical considerations. On the other hand, the question seems to be difficult and to require metaphysical treatment. Let us look at both of these views of the question more closely.

According to the first view, the ontological question about objects has an easy and non-metaphysical answer. Suppose I encounter a scene with a table-shaped arrangement of qualities. Upon perceiving this scene, I form the belief that there is a table in front of me. As it seems reasonable to trust perception to deliver evidence for the existence of ordinary objects, the ontological question about objects seems to be settled easily and outside of philosophy. Skeptical attacks on the perceptual justification of our object-beliefs are often resisted in a broadly Moorean fashion. Given how basic a source of information perception is, it will be more reasonable to reject the premises in a skeptical argument against our entitlement to our perceptual beliefs, than to accept the argument's conclusion, even if we cannot identify the skeptic's mistake. In particular, it would be absurd to hold that metaphysical considerations should have the power to trump empirical considerations when it comes to answering the question of the existence of ordinary objects, convincing us that in fact there are none. As Hofweber puts it (OAM: 201; 294-5), metaphysics must be *modest* with respect to our ordinary and scientific empirical evidence in favor of ordinary objects.¹

According to the second view, the ontological question about objects is difficult and requires metaphysical work. One way of undermining our trust in our perceptual object-beliefs is to argue that our ordinary representation of a scene with a table-shaped arrangement of qualities as containing a table is a biological and cultural accident. Instead of taking there to be a table in the scene, we might have taken there to be nothing but partless atoms arranged in the shape of a table, and hence we

¹ Cf. Sattig 2015: chapter 2.

might have believed the scene to contain no mereologically complex objects at all. A reason that we believe there to be a table is that we have an innate disposition to perceive arrangements of qualitative properties, which are sufficiently contrasted from the environment, as being instantiated by a single object. Moreover, it is adaptive for creatures like us to perceive the world in this way. Finally, there are (at least partly) cultural causes of our possessing certain kind terms, such as *table*. These considerations are meant to show that facts about object-composition play no role in the explanation of our perceptual object-beliefs—that the way the world is really divided into objects has nothing to do with how we represent it to be divided. But without an explanatory link between our object-beliefs and the object-facts they represent it would be a matter of luck if biological and cultural factors led us to beliefs that represent the world correctly. And since we should not believe that we got lucky, we should not trust our perceptual beliefs about which objects exist.²

This debunking challenge is unconvincing, though. For we have not been given a reason to accept that the biological and cultural explanation of our perceptual object-beliefs is the *ultimate* explanation. For the purpose of debunking our perceptual object-beliefs it will not be sufficient to trace the origin of these beliefs to some prior biological and cultural conditions. For it is *prima facie* plausible to expect that natural selection favors cognitive faculties, such as vision, that produce true beliefs, since true beliefs about one's environment are useful for survival. Evolutionary or cultural considerations by themselves do not raise a skeptical worry.³

A deeper challenge to perception as a source of justification for beliefs about the existence of objects concerns the epistemological status of metaphysical questions about the nature of composition. A central metaphysical question about composition is the question under which conditions a plurality of objects compose a further object.⁴ There is a metaphysical debate between compositionists, who believe that pluralities of smaller objects at least sometimes compose a bigger object, and (mereological) nihilists, who believe that no plurality of simple, partless objects ever compose a complex object. It is orthodoxy in metaphysics that the debated question about composition is not an empirical question. According to the standard position, we are not perceptually sensitive to such deep compositional differences. Suppose that I have the perceptual belief that there is a table in front of me, and assume that I have this belief in a world containing ordinary objects, including tables. Hofweber assumes that I am entitled to my perceptual table-belief only if the belief *tracks* the fact that there is a table in front of me, where tracking is understood as counterfactual dependence of the belief on the facts (OAM: 194-5). So I can trust my belief only if the following counterfactual is true:

(T1) If there were no table in front of me, then I would not perceptually believe that there is a table in front of me.

² Cf. Korman 2014.

³ Cf. White 2010.

⁴ See van Inwagen 1990.

Given this tracking requirement, the perceptual justification of my table-belief faces the following nihilist challenge. I cannot trust my perceptual table-belief because it does not track a table-fact—(T1) is false—because in an alternative, nihilist scenario, in which there are tablewise arranged particles but no table in front of me, I would still have the perceptual belief that there is a table in front of me. Moreover, that I would still have that belief, instead of believing that there is only a plurality of particles, may be explained by appeal to biological and cultural factors. Accordingly, to establish the existence of ordinary objects is a distinctly metaphysical task.⁵

We end up with a puzzle in the ontology of objects that is similar to Hofweber's puzzles about natural numbers, properties, and facts, along the dimensions he characterizes in chapter 1 of OAM. While Hofweber does not address this analogy explicitly, he is aware of the tension, and he responds to it. I shall now have a critical look at his response.

2 Solving the puzzle

The puzzle is that while we should be able to trust perception to deliver evidence for the existence of tables, perception can be challenged as a source of justification for beliefs about tables by metaphysical considerations about table-composition. Hofweber responds to the puzzle by defending the truth of (T1), on the grounds that the closest scenario in which there is no table in front of me is one where the table is gone together with its constituting matter, and hence a scenario which contains no tablewise arranged particles, either. In this empty-room scenario I would not believe, on the basis of perception, that there is a table in front of me. So my table-belief does track a table-fact. I take Hofweber to agree that in the particle-involving nihilist scenario I would still have the table-belief. It is an alternative that I cannot rule out perceptually. But this inability does not defeat the perceptual justification of my actual table-belief, as the nihilist alternative is not a relevant alternative. It is too distant from the actual world to require to be ruled out.⁶

Hofweber's response is insufficient to solve the puzzle. I have perceptual evidence for my belief that there is a table in front of me. This belief implies (subtle

⁵ Sider (2013) considers a dogmatist response, according to which the nihilist's challenge may be dismissed as a mere variant of the more familiar skeptical challenge involving exotic brain in vat scenarios. Sider rejects this response on the grounds that the nihilist's challenge is more serious: "The nihilist's challenge differs from the skeptical one in that, intuitively, it is a real contender to be believed, whereas the brain in a vat hypothesis is a mere possibility—something that is hard to independently rule out but for which we have no positive evidence" (2013: 262).

⁶ Given that compositionality about ordinary objects is a necessary truth, as the thesis is usually intended by its defenders, the following conditional has an impossible antecedent: if there were particles in front of me that were arranged tablewise but did not compose anything, I would still believe that there is a table in front of me. To take this conditional seriously, Hofweber must therefore accept that counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are non-trivial. Possible scenarios are not enough to do epistemology of metaphysics. We need to take into account impossible scenarios, as well.

issues about composition aside) that there is a mereologically complex object of the kind *table* in front of me. And the latter belief implies that there are tablewise arranged things in front of me, and that these things compose an object of the kind *table*. If, as one might find plausible, my perceptual justification for my ordinary table-belief *transmits* to beliefs implied by the table-belief, then I am also perceptually justified in holding the belief that there are tablewise arranged things in front of me, and that these things compose an object of the kind *table*.⁷ Given Hofweber's counterfactual tracking requirement, I have perceptual justification for the second conjunct of this belief only if the following counterfactual is true:

(T2) If the tablewise arranged things in front of me did not compose an object of the kind *table*, then I would not perceptually believe that there is a table in front of me.

On the natural reading of (T2), the closest world, in which the tablewise arranged things in front of me do not compose a table, is a world in which these things are still around and arranged tablewise.⁸ Since I would, in this scenario, still believe, on the basis of perception, that there is a table in front of me, my metaphysical belief about table-composition does not track the facts perceptually, and hence I cannot trust perception as a reason for holding this belief. Owing to the transmissibility of perceptual justification, however, my metaphysical belief about table-composition is perceptually justified because my ordinary table-belief is. Contradiction.⁹

Hofweber's defense of (T1) leaves the transmissibility problem untouched. How could his defense be extended to alleviate this worry? Given Hofweber's starting point, it would be natural to restrict transmissibility, and to hold that the sensory evidence we have for certain ordinary beliefs transmits to some but not all known consequences of that belief. One might find it plausible that some of the consequences of my ordinary perceptual beliefs are just too distant to inherit the positive warrant the sensory evidence confers upon these beliefs. Metaphysical consequences of ordinary table-beliefs are of this type. Just as my perceptual basis for believing that there is a table in front of me does not support the belief that there is a mind-independent reality, so this perceptual basis does not support the belief that the tablewise arranged things in front of me compose a table.¹⁰

This failure of transmissibility of perceptual justification to known metaphysical consequences may be spelled out in terms of a shift in which alternatives to what is believed are sufficiently close to be relevant, and hence sufficiently close to require exclusion by the available perceptual evidence. For one's

⁷ See Dretske 2005: 14-16 on transmissibility.

⁸ The reading of (T2), on which the empty-room world is closest strikes me as an artificial reading involving "metaphysical backtracking": if the tablewise arranged things in front of me did not compose a table, it would have to be because they are not even arranged tablewise or do not even exist.

⁹ This puzzle has the same shape as the familiar skeptical puzzle based on the transmission of evidential warrant. As pointed out in *n.* 5, though, the types of alternative scenario involved may be considered as being significantly different.

¹⁰ Cf. Dretske 2005: 15.

belief that p to be perceptually justified, one must be able perceptually to exclude not all, but only all relevant alternatives to p . As I am able perceptually to exclude all relevant alternatives to there being a table in front of me—(T1) is true—the perceptual justification of my table-belief is not threatened. As I am not able perceptually to exclude all relevant alternatives to the tablewise arranged things in front of me composing a table—(T2) is false—my composition-belief is not perceptually justified. Perceptual justification of a belief does not transmit to all known consequences of that belief because some consequences introduce relevant alternatives that are too remote for the perceptual evidence to exclude.

This sort of maneuver is perfectly familiar in discussions of Cartesian skepticism, but it has not been sufficiently explored as a response to our ontological puzzle about objects. What it yields is an elegant conciliatory solution. Do ordinary objects exist? There are two equally plausible but conflicting views of the status of this ontological question. On the one hand, the question seems to have an easy and non-philosophical answer based on perceptual evidence. On the other hand, the question seems to be a difficult, non-empirical question in metaphysics. As it turns out, these answers need not stand in conflict. Perception provides good reasons for believing that tables and trees exist. While these beliefs have metaphysical consequences, the latter are not justified perceptually. Instead, theoretical work in metaphysics is required to support them.

This is a natural destination on the path on which Hofweber starts out. But it is not where he desires to end up. For he claims that when it comes to determining whether mereologically complex objects exist, metaphysics has no role to play. It is perception that settles all “primary” issues in the ontology of ordinary objects. What I have tried to show is that it is unclear how Hofweber’s defense of our perception-based entitlement to our beliefs about the existence of ordinary objects should lead to this conclusion. I see his remarks as suggesting a very different conclusion instead, namely, that metaphysical questions about composition are inferentially cut off from our ordinary perceptual beliefs. If removing the ontology of ordinary objects from the domain of metaphysics is Hofweber’s priority, then he must argue for this view in a different way than by appeal to belief-tracking and counterfactuals such as (T1). He must argue that there is some sort of explanatory link between facts concerning the principles of composition—principles of the sort studied in the seminar room—and our perceptual faculties. If the explanatory link is understood in terms of counterpossible conditionals, he must defend the truth of (T2). But this is an immensely challenging project that Hofweber does not even begin to pursue in the book.¹¹ He thus faces a dilemma: either he accepts my suggested development of his remarks, avails himself to a conciliatory solution to the puzzle about objects, but recognizes the need for metaphysical work in the ontology of objects. Or he rejects my suggested development of his remarks, deprives metaphysics of any responsibilities in the ontology of objects, but leaves the puzzle about objects unanswered.

I would like to conclude on a constructive note and recommend the first option. Hofweber offers a beautiful picture of natural numbers, properties, and facts.

¹¹ For an attempt, see Korman 2015: chapter 7.

The entities in these different categories raise similar ontological puzzles. While these puzzles present their individual challenges, Hofweber proposes conciliatory responses of the same type, where the crux of each solution is that ordinary and scientific existence claims have no consequences for metaphysical issues about existence. Hofweber sees the ontology of ordinary objects as an exception to this pattern. But he need not. There is an analogous puzzle in the ontology of objects, which also permits a conciliatory response: the perceptual justification of ordinary and scientific existence claims about objects does not transmit to these claims' metaphysical consequences about the existence of objects. While this solution is supported by epistemological instead of linguistic considerations, it shares the neo-Carnapian spirit of Hofweber's solutions to the other puzzles. Why not embrace the elegant symmetry of the completely conciliatory approach and graciously concede room for metaphysical ambitions in the ontology of objects?¹²

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¹² I am grateful to Dan Korman and Tobias Wilsch for helpful comments on this paper.