E-LOGOS – Electronic Journal for Philosophy 2015, Vol. 22(2) 30–46
ISSN 1211-0442 (DOI: 10.18267/j.e-logos.421),Peer-reviewed article
Journal homepage: e-logos.vse.cz

A New Conception of Ordinary Objects and the Role of their Identities in Perception

Jacob Caldwell[1]

Abstrakt: This paper levels two charges against our current, mildly hylomorphic conception of ordinary objects: that it contains a logically faulty understanding of matter and an equally problematic treatment of identity; reification is the kernel of both. With the help of McDaniel and Wittgenstein, I construct a suitable critique of the ordinary object and its respective ontology, laying the groundwork for a new ontology of the ordinary object. The discussion of concepts and McDowell at the conclusion of the project acts as a lynchpin, connecting our subjective understanding of our experience with the objects of our experience.

Keywords: ordinary objects, hylomorphism, identity, reification, McDaniel, Wittgenstein.

[1] *The College of Wooster, 1189 Beall Ave, Wooster, OH 44691, USA, Jcaldwell16@wooster.edu*

"Thinking and understanding are thought to be a form of perceiving" (DA III.427a.20-21)

0.1 Introductory Remarks

In this paper, I will argue that our current understanding of ordinary objects needs revision, for it takes as given the "empirical identity" of the object (how we would answer the question *what is it?*) to be a part of the object itself, or intrinsic to it. This conception of ordinary objects, when taken to its logical terminus, threatens us with the vertigo-inducing possibility of co-location, and thus we are lead to embrace counter-intuitive ontologies such as eliminativism. These "evasive maneuvers," as I read them, are both unsuccessful and unnecessary. Not only do we have some reason to doubt the success of eliminativism, but we also have reason to doubt the conception of ordinary objects from which these evasive maneuvers derive their relevance and reason for being.

In addition to arguing that "object" is a relative term, I will deny that empirical identity is a component of the object, and thus part of the object of perception at all, contenting instead that rather than reifying identity, we must conceive of it as of a *similar* relation to objects as the relation words have to their meanings – empirical identity is a feature of *our cognition* of the object, just as the string of letters c-a-t means "living four-legged thing with pointy ears" (I do not consent to that definition for reasons that will become clear later, though how you properly define cat is really not the point here), and to have that semantic content in experience is just to have an understanding of the thing signified by "c-a-t."[2] Of my two-part conception of ordinary objects, this second, vaguely semiological part, the identity-object relation, will be especially useful for resolving various mereological puzzles such as the Ship of Theseus.

Such a conception of identity may itself be puzzling: if identity isn't part of the object of our perception, is it then ideal (which is to say, not real)? I think not. There is clearly something *public* about identity: not only do our perceptions seem to corroborate identities, but it can also be obvious when an identity is misapplied (such as calling a parrot an elephant). Identity can also change from person to person and not be "wrong," or given a certain context while there is no apparent change in the object itself, which is an issue I will return to later in the project. Furthermore, we don't seem to have any trouble at all with the semantic content of words being public and thus objective, and if, as I argue, this is alike in enough relevant ways to identity, then we shouldn't have a problem with identity's "quasi-ideal" (or by the same reasoning, "quasi-real") nature either.

Since, as I shall argue, problems of co-location arise when identities are reified (that is, treated like an object, assimilated *to* the object, or made intrinsic to the object), to have an unproblematic conception of ordinary objects in the relevant sense demands no possibility of reification. This can be achieved by disentangling and divorcing identity from objects *in addition* to putting the content of identity[3] and semantic content (or the meaning of a word) in the same ontological category.

---

[2] *Granted, there are some ways in which "objects : identities :: words : semantic content" is not perfectly analogous. For example, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one. This is not the case with the object-identity relation, for reasons that will become clear much later. Of course, am not claiming that the object-identity and word-semantic content relation is analogical, but merely helpful similarity.*

[3] *Meaning, for example, what it is to be a cat.*

What do I mean by object? I am tempted to say, at least stipulatively, that an object is exactly what we mean when we refer to objects in ordinary language. I am apprehensive of beginning this project with a strict and properly philosophical definition of "object," for that could, in many important ways, prejudice and corrupt the project. I will begin my discussion of objects in section one with Aristotle, because of the foundational nature of his metaphysics.

0.2 Problems in Empirical Identity

The following problems are examples of some of the difficulties currently experienced by philosophers. They also serve as "appetizers" for the following discussions. I hope that, by the paper's conclusion, we will be able to answer them satisfactorily.

The Statue of David

Imagine Michelangelo's statue, standing *contraposto*, sling resting loosely on his shoulder, casually deflecting your gaze off his cheek, off in his own world. The statue is what we call an "ordinary object," which is just what comes to mind, as if by common sense, when we talk about objects in ordinary language. It's difficult to deny that David exists. However, what about the marble that composes him: his "primary cause?" Does the marble exist too? Surely the answer is 'yes!' But this leaves us in a tricky situation: how do we defuse the seeming impossibility that there are two objects, the marble and the statue, co-located[4] identically in space-time? Generally, there are three ways. The first is to simply say that the marble is identical to David, which is to say that the identity of the object (David) is identical to its composition, in which case, "the marble" and "David" are interchangeable. The second way is to argue that David doesn't exist. In fact, the marble doesn't exist either. What we are seeing is not a hallucination, but it is not a proper object either – the object of our perception is a colony of "simples" or "atoms" *arranged statuewise* (this answer is known as *eliminativism*). And finally, the third way of answering is to claim that, yes, the marble exists, and the statue exists, and this is actually not a problem; there is nothing contradictory about it. Something seems fishy about all three of these answers, but what?

The Ship of Theseus

Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur, founder of Athens, and famous Greek hero, had made a deal with the Athenians, wherein if his mission to Crete were successful, the Athenians would honor Apollo every year by sailing his ship to Delos on a sort of holy pilgrimage. Thus, in order to maintain the ship's seaworthiness, the Athenians would replace planks and bits of the hull as needed. Presumably, at some point in time, there remained no part of the ship that was original; the whole thing was at least "second-generation." The question is, then, is the ship still "Theseus'

[4] Co-location is often mistakenly (though not without reason) understood as "overlapping objects." While this isn't necessarily false, co-location is better understood as a mereological condition in which two discrete objects share the same parts, which is to say, are identical in terms of constitution but remain distinct.

> Ship?" Again, there are several ways this puzzle is typically answered. One way is, of course, 'yes,' because while the individual parts may change over time, the identity of the ship, being different from the wooden planks, endures. Another, 'no,' because Theseus' Ship is a particular ordinary object with a particular set of parts, and so even a single change would result in a different object no longer identical with the original, which was properly Theseus'. Again, I find there to be something unsettling about these answers.

What follows can be understood as an autopsy of the ordinary object and report/diagnosis of what allows such problems as the ones above to arise in the first place. If successful, then we will not only have solutions to the paradoxes, we also will be vaccinating ourselves from other such cases arising.

1.0 Aristotle's Hylomorphism

The things that we encounter and interact with in everyday experience, chairs, automobiles, cats, etc., are objects (so that we won't be diverted from our project at hand, let us just assume these to be objects and bracket all questions regarding subtleties such as whether this implies materialism, for a cat is conscious and also an object). Objects are particulars of Aristotelian "substance," so that what is true of substance also should be true of objects (and thus, Aristotle's work on substance is also indirectly about objects). In book II.2 of *De Anima* he writes that "substance is so spoken of in three ways… and of these cases one is form, another matter, and the third the product of the two, and of these matter is potentiality and form actuality." When we describe an object such as a bronze sphere, "we describe both the matter by saying it is bronze, and the form by saying it is such and such a figure" (Met. 1033b1-5), that is, "sphericalness." The trajectory of this project, if it is to be presented as coherently and naturally as possible, demands that I explain these ways of description out of order.

1.1 Objects qua Matter and Form

The third way Aristotle gives us for understanding objects is most important, for it is the way that offers a complete description, something along the lines of the "definition," that of the object *qua* matter and form. What's more, while it wouldn't be incorrect to say that "the bronze sphere is bronze" in the sense that "the bronze sphere is *made or composed* of bronze," Aristotle argues that it would be incorrect to identify an object by its composition alone, for "the statue is not stone but of stone" (Met. 1033a7). Similarly, the healthy man is not said to be an unhealthy man (for the unhealthy man and medicine is what constitutes the healthy man), nor is a house said to be bricks, but rather *of* bricks. Thus, the dichotomy between the object's form, "helmet," and the object's composition, "bronze," is not merely a grammatical rule that we observe, but a logical gap – the matter is logically distinct from the form (identity).

1.2 Form

Form is "the essence of each thing" (Met. 1032a30-1032b5). Many forms preexist their objects, at least when speaking of things produced through craft, such as swords or houses. That is to say that a craftperson does not simply set out to build a house by placing bricks in one wanton arrangement after another until it takes such a shape that permits one to live inside – no, the craftperson sets out to build a house with some idea of "houseness" directing their construction. These considerations in mind, we can proceed with Aristotelian "form" being roughly synonymous with "concept," which itself is roughly the sense in which I use "identity." Thus,

for our purposes, Aristotelean form is merely an archaic synonym of identity, and I shall use "identity" and "concept" in such a way for the remainder of the paper.

There is no ambiguity that the Aristotelian notion of form is not the Platonic one, from which he spends much of books VII and XIII distancing himself. Rather, forms or concepts are empirically derived and "forms (taken in the sense in which some maintain the existence of forms, i.e. if they are something apart from the individuals) [are] useless with regard both to comings-to-be and to substances; and the forms need not, for this reason at least, be self-subsistent substances" (Met. 1033b26-29).

1.3 Matter

Aristotelian matter is understood as the primary cause of objects, or "that out of which as a constituent a thing comes to be" (Phys. 194b20-25). Thus, we can say that bronze is the primary cause of a helmet, and therefore the helmet's matter is bronze. Furthermore, Aristotle writes that "matter is something relative to something, for the matter varies with the form" (Phys. 194b7). The ambiguity of this passage, however, throws a wrench into the machine. Clearly Aristotle is importing a relativism of *some* kind, but there are two ways in which it could manifest.

1.31

The first, the *ontological interpretation*, asserts that matter *actually does* constitute the object, but the activity of constitution is, as it were, a necessary condition for being matter. As a result, when we say that the matter of a helmet is bronze, we are saying that *bronze is matter insofar as it is materially constituting a helmet*, or more generally, matter is only matter when composing and not being composed. This interpretation implies what we might call *matter-relativism*, which means that matter *cannot* be an object *a priori*, for it cannot be constituted and constituting simultaneously, which is to say, the work done by bronze is either that of the object or the matter, but never both simultaneously.

1.32

The second is the *linguistic interpretation*, wherein "matter" is simply what we call primary causes, but it would be wrong to say that the parts are not themselves also objects. While it would be somehow wrong to call the bronze that constitutes the bronze helmet anything other than the helmet's matter – it wouldn't make sense (it would be confusing) to speak otherwise of "parts," given the way we use language. But, this is not to say that the bronze is not itself an object, bust simply an object acting in a certain way. The linguistic interpretation, in which "matter" is a designation and not an ontological status, allows what we may call *matter-absolutism* (where the object's matter is simultaneously itself an object).

1.4 Where to go from here

Take the following remark from Aristotle: "the statue is not stone but *of* stone [emphasis added]" (Met. 1033a5-10). Depending on which interpretation we use, this sentence could mean either:

i. (ontological) the statue, the object, is composed of matter (stone) which is not an object
ii. (linguistic) the statue, the object, is composed of matter (stone) which is itself an object, and it is only called matter in this regard because at this time the particular stone we are talking about happens to be composing

What is at stake here is whether the ontological status of "matter" actually changes depending on our scope or "level of magnification?" If the ontological interpretation is correct, then yes. If not, and the linguistic interpretation is correct, then no. What I shall now begin to argue is not that Aristotle really meant one interpretation or another, but, separating the inventor from the invention, that the ontological interpretation is the one we ought to accept because the linguistic interpretation and matter-absolutism is logically untenable.

1.5 Matter-Relativism versus Absolutism and the Reification of Description

According to the ontological interpretation, "matter" is by definition not itself an object. How could it be? Objects are unions of matter and form; matter is necessarily *part* of the object, not the object itself. Again, that is why we say that "the house is not stone but *of* stone." Were I to treat matter as an object itself, then I would have implicitly given up matter-relativism in favor of matter-absolutism, wherein matter is still matter whether it is constituting or being constituted, i.e., whether it is constituting an object or is itself an object. It follows from this that matter is *always* an object. This point is of critical importance for us. When we reify matter, which is to say, when we "objectify" matter, we are committing ourselves to matter-absolutism and vise-versa.

Matter-absolutism may be attractive on an intuitive level for some (given the role of science and scientism in our modern intellectual lives), for we would want to say that a house exists, and so does the bricks it's composed of, and so does the clay that composes the bricks, and so the molecules, and so the atoms, and the quarks, and so on and so forth. All of these things exist, and they are individual objects whether we are speaking of them as constituting or being constituted. This is precisely what I am denying.

Stating an object's matter is just one way to describe the object. Matter-absolutism entails that if it is possible that matter of an object could itself be an object upon "zooming in," then it *is always* an object. But this means that we are assimilating "matter," one part of an object, to the object itself, for under matter-relativism, an atom could either be an object or a part (depending on scope), but under matter-absolutism, the atom is never not an object. Since the difference between being an object or not an object is, in this particular instance, the difference between the thing being constituted or the thing constituting respectively, to say that at any given time only one of these two ways of describing obtains is to calcify the ontological status of the thing being described. This is, by definition, reification. Therefore, matter-absolutism commits us to reifying our descriptions.

In the following sections, I shall attempt to demonstrate the problems with reifying descriptions, and why we ought to avoid it. If matter-absolutism entails description reification (I have argued that it does), then so too we ought to reject matter-absolutism.

2.0 Matter-Absolutism implies Co-location

From a cursory glance, matter-absolutism seems far less pernicious than I am making it out to be – in fact, it may even seem intuitive, because it's entirely consistent with way we think about the world normally: any given object, a table, a cat, a painting, is composed of smaller objects, atoms. However, the consistent application of matter-absolutism gets us into significant mereological problems. Take Michelangelo's *David*. The statue is an object, but the marble that composes the object is also an object (and if we deny this, then we cannot be matter-absolutists). The marble is shaped in such a way – as it happens, exactly the same way the Statue of David

is shaped. Thus, two objects that both physically exist are co-located (which is to say, they are, somehow, discrete objects that share the same parts).

It becomes even more problematic, however, when one tries to solve the problem in the way that seems most natural by claiming that the marble and the statue are actually the same object – distinguishing between them is redundant. To this, we can object that the marble has properties that the statue does not, such as persistence conditions. For example, the marble, unlike the statue, could survive being smashed to pieces. If the two objects were identical (and thus actually be only one object), then they must share all their properties (which follows from them sharing all the same parts). However, since there are unshared properties, they cannot be identical. Thus, we've only worsened the original problem of co-location by making such an appeal.

It would seem, then, that the only way to hold matter-absolutism, as opposed to matter-relativism, without falling into of co-location troubles is to deny the existence of one of the objects. However, there are only a small handful of ways to do this: one is to say that the object is the thing being constituted and never the thing constituting, but this is matter-relativism! The second is to simply arbitrarily decide which is object and non-object, but of course that would be arbitrary and thus highly objectionable. The third is to say the reverse of the first, that the object is never the thing constituted and always the thing constituting.

This third option may seem attractive to some, but I shall argue that we shouldn't accept it, and this is why: to say this third option would translate, in ordinary language, to saying that "David" is not a discrete object – he is nothing more than his parts, *and* that the thing's being David is determined by the parts (which are objects). This defense of matter-absolutism, in which 'David' is merely the identity, determined by objective (in the sense of the quality of being an object) parts, is what is called *composition as identity*. The Statue of David *is* the marble, or the house *is* the bricks, but David or the house are just identities, not objects themselves, so that there is nothing more to the thing before us than its parts. Philosopher Kris McDaniel offers a compelling and trenchant objection to the thesis.

2.1 McDaniel Against Composition as Identity

The argument of McDaniel's article *Against Composition as Identity* begins with an exposition of "Leibniz's Law," also known as the law of the identity of indiscernibles, which states that for any objects *x* and *y* to be identical, all of their predicates must be shared. He then takes us to his own creation, the "Plural Duplication Principle" (or PDP), which is the logical conclusion of the combination of (i), the thesis that the whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts, and (ii), the plural analogue of Leibniz's Law, which states that "just as individuals can be identical with individuals, pluralities can be identical with pluralities" if and only if *all* the predicated properties are held commonly. The PDP is formulated as "for any *x*s, *w*, and *z*, if the *x*s compose *w*, then *z* is a duplicate of *w* iff there are some *y*s that are plural duplicates of the *x*s and compose *z*" (McDaniel 129). That is to say that *w* is identical to *s* if and only if the parts of *w* (the *x*s) are identical to the parts of *z* (the *y*s).

At first, this might seem plausible. The fields of two farmers are identical iff the individual plots of land that compose the fields are identical. Furthermore, if we were to describe the plots of land in their entirety, we would just be offering a description of the field as a whole, which, of course, is the thesis of composition as identity. "Anyone who is a friend of composition as identity," writes McDaniel, "should accept PDP" (129). However, the next premise in his argument states that "if PDP is true, then *strongly emergent properties* are impossible" (130). McDaniel's tripartite definition of strongly emergent properties states that *F* is a strongly

emergent property iff "(i) *F* is a perfectly natural property, (ii) *F* can be exemplified by composite material objects, and (iii) *F* does not locally supervene on the perfectly natural properties and relations exemplified by only atomic material objects" (131). We can summarize McDaniel's full argument:

1. The Composition as Identity Thesis (CIT) requires the PDP to obtain
2. If the PDP obtained, then strongly emergent properties would be impossible
3. Strongly emergent properties *are* possible
4. Therefore the PDP cannot obtain
5. Therefore the CIT cannot obtain

To defend the claim that strongly emergent properties actually do exist, McDaniel appeals to the "Philosophical Zombie" argument within the *qualia* debate, which contends that it is conceivable that a zombie who is atomically identical to its non-zombie doppelganger could mimic in every way the behavior of a normal human person and yet lack ability to actually experience phenomena in the world as a subject in the same way a normal human person would. McDaniel is aware that this argument is controversial and unpopular; there are some who argue that *qualia* and the capacity for qualitative experience actually do supervene on the material composition of the brain (in which case, not only would an atomically identical zombie be able to have *qualia*, but also *qualia* wouldn't be strongly emergent. However, McDaniel says that if we come down on this side of the *qualia* debate, we could still appeal to quantum theory, wherein the state of the entire physical universe is a natural property of itself, but cannot be reduced to the quantum swervings that constitute it, in which case, the whole physical state of the universe would be strongly emergent (132).

3.0 Eliminativism and Matter-Absolutism

There is a fourth way that one might respond to the co-location problem caused by a commitment to matter-absolutism, and that is, ironically, to deny that any ordinary objects exist at all; there are only the microphysical, indivisible objects, mereological simples.

It is very important that we do not misunderstand what mereological eliminativism entails. It is not idealism – something that Merricks is expressedly clear about. Saying that "there are no statues" is not at all to say that when someone sees a statue, they are having a hallucination or not really seeing anything at all; eliminativism does not, at least in this sense, deny the independent persistence and perdurance of objects of perception. Rather, the eliminativist project holds that we are mistaken to say that the object we perceive is actually itself an object, for this claim is metaphysically untenable – more correctly, the "object" is actually mereological 'simples' *arranged statuewise* (Merricks 2). The mistake we make is not *whether* we perceive, but *what* we perceive.

However, as Merricks discusses, *mereological simples arranged statuewise* is not such a bad thing. The objects posited by the so-called "Folk-Ontologist" behave in much the same if not identical ways to simples arranged objectwise. "[Simples] arranged statuewise," he says, "cause the visual and other sensations the folk ontologist thinks are caused by statues. Indeed, atoms arranged statuewise can do just about anything normally attributed to statues" (Merricks 9). For example, both have centers of gravity, both are physically extended, and both can be "purchased at auctions." We might think, then, if an ordinary object and simples arranged objectwise are ostensibly physically and phenomenologically equivalent, what makes the distinction a meaningful one?

The thesis that there are no statues or lamp-posts or other ordinary objects is a product of another thesis that such ordinary objects have parts, or are "composite objects." Presumably, any metaphysics of composition that is true for one composite is true for all composites. Now, all composite objects are either completely composed by their parts (the definition of "composite object), or *incompletely* composed by their parts, in which case, it would be absurd to call the object a composite, or even a definitive object at all. This basic principle, which me might call the *principle of objective persistence* or POP, that objects are either sufficiently constituted by their parts or not proper objects, is both implicit and central to the mereologist's project.

Mereological Eliminativists such as Merricks argue for their position by denying that what we think of as ordinary objects satisfy the criterion given in the first prong of POP (that the object is completely composed of its parts), and support this claim by employing Sorites arguments or "games" such as God and the Statue of David:

"Imagine that God agrees to play the 'Sorites Game' with that statue. We annihilate David's atoms, one at a time… and after each annihilation ask God whether David still exists. After the first, God would say, presumably, 'yes, David still exists'. We then annihilate a second atom and ask the same question. Again God would presumably say 'yes'. At some point in the process God will shift from saying 'yes' to saying 'no', thus showing that a single annihilation takes David from determinately existing to determinately not existing" (Merricks 32).

If an object is composed of its parts, then surely (as the reasoning appears to go), the having of said parts can be a sufficient condition for being the object, in which case, removing any of the parts ought to result in the "de-objectification" of the object. However, as the sorites arguments demonstrate, it is at best unobvious that there is any such point where an object is determinately de-objectified. Thus, after transposing the above conditional, the object cannot really be an object, modus ponens.[5]

Mereological Permissivists, on the other hand, claim the opposite – that our ordinary objects *are*, in fact, constituted by their parts. Thus, the mereological permissivist ought to accept, at least without too much fussing about, the PDP discussed by Kris McDaniel.

Both of these views, while their conclusions are contrary, do seem to agree upon one thing, which is the thing above that we called the POP. Objects, so the mereologist will say, are divisible. And what's more, if an object is divisible, then those parts are objects and they must constitute the larger object. The truth of this basic thesis is required in order for the conclusion that there are no statues (in which Merricks reasons from the impossibility of any object satisfying this thesis to eliminativism), as well as the conclusion that there are "trout-turkeys"[6] (in which we reason that since objects *do* satisfy this thesis, it would be arbitrary and wrong to simply stop at there being ordinary objects, but there are extraordinary objects as well!).

3.1 POP and the Reification of Identity

[5] Merricks has three to four (depending on whether you consider implicit arguments his own) arguments for eliminativism, but in the interest of space, I am only including the Sorites argument because it sufficiently demonstrates the principle that is, as I say above, implicit and central to the eliminativist project, so that to list other arguments would be superfluous.

[6] Varzi, Achille, "Mereology," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

My own position is to reject the POP altogether - the keystone of both mereological positions. But why? Doesn't it seem fairly uncontroversial that objects are divisible? Doesn't it also seem intuitive that the parts of objects exist even whether they are constituting their "bigger" object or not? The POP, implies a disjunction of which only one arm can be true. Again, take the example of David. Either David is a composite and the object's identity as 'David' is sufficiently determined by its parts (which is to say, composition is identity), or the identity of 'David' does not obtain, and the object of perception is actually a colony of simple objects with the identity of 'simples arranged Davidwise.'

Thus, we can see eliminativism as a doctrine about the proper understanding of the object of perception, arguing in favor of the second arm of the disjunction. My rejection of the POP, as well as eliminativism and permissivism *modus tollens*, consists in the observation that the POP reifies identities, and the thesis that reifying identities is wrong. To reify an identity is simply to treat an identity as an object, which occurs when we make identity and constitution equivalent or mutually determining, or any instance of assimilating the identity to the object and vice-versa. The activity itself of reifying identity takes the form of certain instances of an assertoric language game, where one says that "this thing *is* David" or "this thing *is* simples arranged Davidwise;" instead of simply reporting one's experience, the person is commenting on the status of the object itself.[7] I shall argue that any instance of the relevant instances of language game, in which identity is assigned to an object (one possible description (*qua* identity) being selected over another), is wrong, because (as I will soon explain) identity is not a feature of *things*, whether objects or colonies of objects. Thus it is absurd to play that language game, for reify identity is to commit oneself to a faulty conception of ordinary objects (i.e. one that understands identity as a proper part of the object).

3.2 End of Section Three, Commentary on the Trajectory of the Project:

In section 1, I claimed that we can interpret Aristotle in two ways: either matter-relativism, or matter-absolutism. In section 2, I began to systematically reject matter-absolutism by undermining each way in which we could formulate it so that it wouldn't be logically absurd. In rejecting the POP, I will have dismissed the final way in which we could render matter-absolutism in a tenable way. Thus, in rejecting matter-absolutism, we accept the other disjunct, matter-relativism.

4.0 Wittgenstein, Duck-rabbits, and Form

In book XI, section II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces us to a drawing he calls the "duck-rabbit," which, depending on the way one views it, can be either a duck or a rabbit. Wittgenstein questions, in response, "do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way?" (PI 212). Surely there is no change in the object of perception, the drawing, but at the same time, there is – its identity changes, which is to say, it can be a duck at one time and a rabbit at another. Wittgenstein says he is "inclined to say the former" (212). But how is this even possible?

---

[7] What I am arguing is not that this language game is necessarily wrong; certainly, it must be possible for it to obtain in some circumstances, for otherwise it would be very difficult for the content of our speech about objects to have truth value at all. The reason that this language game is wrong when speaking about identity, however, is that its object (identity) is not actually part of the object, and thus it ontologically mishandles what it is about.

"To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state," he says, in pursuit of an answer to his own question (212). Interpretation of the object of perception comes afterword, but this phenomenon doesn't seem to be like that – we don't see the object as a duck-rabbit and then deliberate about its identity, finally concluding that it is one or the other – our perception and recognition of the object as a duck or a rabbit is somehow simultaneous; it appears, prima facie, to be part of the very activity of perceiving, rather than post-perception contemplation.[8]

I would like to bracket the question of the mechanics of this, for an answer at this time would lead us away prematurely from the implications of "seeing-as." For now, let's reconsider Aristotle. Remember how Aristotelian hylomorphism understands the object (helmet) as the unity of matter (bronze) and form (concept of the helmet, or "helmetness"); the object has *both* matter and form. Now consider the duck-rabbit. Its matter is the lines and dots, but what is its form? Surely it can't be both duckness *and* rabbitness? We might rework the argument from illusion to suit our purposes:

1. If the identity of the object of my perception can change without any change in the object of my perception itself, then the identity cannot be, strictly speaking, part of the object of my perception
2. The identity of the duck-rabbit *can* change without any change in the object
3. Therefore the identity I perceive cannot be part of the object

This suggests something contrary to what Aristotle's hylomorphism seems to suggest, which is that the form or identity of an object (in this case, the duck-rabbit), is somehow internal to the object, which is to say, it is a property of the object and not the viewer; a bronze helmet is still a bronze helmet whether its viewer recognizes it or not. But are we to tell the man who sees a rabbit rather than a duck that he is wrong? Why would he be? And for that matter, are we to tell the man who sees the duck rather than the rabbit that he is correct? To do either one of these things would imply that the act of recognition, in this case, is a cognitive judgment about the external world, like seeing that there are eleven books on the shelf and not twelve. But it's not just the case that we can have two different people see it two different ways, for we could have just one person be able to say, just by willing it to be so, *now it's a duck – and now it's a rabbit*, and have the same level of certainty each time. Wittgenstein doesn't believe that we are actually perceiving the form or the identity of the object *in* the object, but rather, we perceive the object *as x or y*, its identity being an "aspect" of our perception.

In another example, Wittgenstein describes seeing a simple right-triangle with its hypotenuse acting as its base. Our first reaction, apparently, is to say "ah, it's a triangle," but as Wittgenstein notes, we could also recognize the triangle as "a triangular hole, a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on its shorter side of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things" (200). Are we to say that the person who sees a triangle that was knocked over onto its hypotenuse is seeing wrongly? Are they really seeing the same thing as all the people who see every other way of seeing the triangle? Another example: Wittgenstein draws a lovely smiley face for us, which we immediately recognize. But then he turns the paper 180˚ and presents it to the person who has just entered the room – who doesn't recognize the drawing. Are we to say that this person saw something different than the others did?

[8] *More on this in section 5.0*

If the identity of the object of perception is not *in* the object, then where could it be?

4.1 Seeing-As

Thus, it would be wrong to say that the duck-rabbit is a duck or a rabbit. Instead, we must say that "I am seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck, or duckly, or *qua* duck." The object itself has no identity independent of our perception, because, identity (or form, concept, etc.) *is simply one way to describe the object*. "Objective" (in the sense of 'regarding the object') identity is necessarily social. Clearly, then, to assimilate an object to its identity (just one of the ways we describe the objects we see), is mistaken, for it treats the object as an identity, which is to reify by definition: *the object is its identity![9] The identity is a property of the object!* Just as Aristotle remarks, "that which *is* may be so called in several ways" (MP 1003a.33-34), so describing an object by listing its matter or parts is another method of description. To list the spatio-temporal relations of the object is, as well, to describe the object. But of course, none of these descriptions *really are* the object, they are just descriptions.

However, like with identity, to assimilate the object to its matter or to its relations is to reify that description by definition. Remember now the POP and its role in all mereological projects. *Either an object is sufficiently constituted by its parts or it is not a proper object.* Thus, David is David because he has the necessary "David Parts," or the statue isn't David. However, clearly this is to assimilate the parts of David to David himself, which is to reify the description of David as "being composed of marble shaped in such a way." The POP, then, is problematic because it requires for an object to be legitimate (for it and its components to be objects simultaneously) the systematic reification of our descriptions of the object, which itself implies that identity is a feature of the object itself and not otherwise. In other words, the POP implies matter-absolutism.

4.2 Merricks' Objection

My position, that of matter-relativism, allows us to say that an object can legitimately be a statue, and, without contradiction, that the statue can be constituted by marble. Unlike the eliminativists, we do not find it necessary to deny the existence of the object(s); we can maintain our ordinary objects by refusing to grant that something can be an object *qua* matter, which is just to say that constituting and being constituted logically exclude each other. Merricks (and surely others), however, finds the rejection of the objectivity (object-ness) of the marble but not the statue "objectionably arbitrary" (41). There is no reason above all others (which is to say, no non-arbitrary reason) that would lead us to accept one object but reject another; there is only the desire to avoid co-location. To be only *partially* eliminative is tantamount to being *partially* consistent (which is to say, inconsistent).

Merricks, objecting in this way, further demonstrates the source of his misunderstanding. He is, of course, right to think that the statue and the marble would be co-located if they were both objects simultaneously. However, this implies matter-absolutism, which, as I have tried to argue, is problematic, for it entails the reification of description. We must not think of the statue and the marble as different objects – they are only different descriptions for the same object. When the object is the statue (when we see the object *qua* statue), the marble is only matter and not itself an object. Again, remember Aristotle: "that which *is* may be so called in several ways" (MP 1003a.33-34). To say "the statue is composed of marble" is only to describe the object's

[9] *In a roughly co-extensional way.*

matter, but to simply say "the statue," we refer to the object, for "it is right to call all things after their ends," the particulars of form/identity/concept (DA 416b.23).

4.3 End of Section 4, Further Commentary on the Trajectory of the Project

Having argued for the incorrectness of identity being a feature of the object and therefore the incorrectness of the POP, I have completed my refutation of matter-absolutism and furnished sufficient grounds for accepting matter-relativism. However, having accepted matter-relativism and segregated object and identity, I have thrown the object itself into an abyss of sorts.

An object is not its identity. Nor is object its matter or parts, for that would allow for two different objects co-located identically in space-time. And clearly and object is not its relations, for relations are predicated of objects (which is to say, means of description), and not objects themselves *a priori*. You may think to yourself, "what, then, is left for an object to be," but please, resist this temptation, for this question is ill-conceived! Any way of linguistically understanding objects risks reifying our descriptions, because to linguistically understand is to assign a description, and then it is a natural trajectory to continue and say *ah, if the object isn't x, y, or z, then it must be a!* But *a* is itself a description! And this means that to say that object *A* is *a* is to conflate the two! Thus, the reification of our descriptions.

The negative part of this project must come to an end and the positive part must begin, in which I will do my best to re-establish the object's honor and place in our ordinary experience.

5.0 Identity, Idealism, and Quasi-Idealism (Conventionalism)

To repeat, Wittgenstein believes that we really are seeing something different even though the object hasn't changed. This conclusion provides a great deal of insight into the strength of the role that our concepts play in our perceptual acts. It would seem that it is not identity that determines experience, i.e., it is not that the drawing is a duck that it is experienced as a duck, but rather, *experience determines identity*, which is to say that the drawing is at one time a duck and another time a rabbit *only* because that the time that it is a duck it is being experienced "duckly," and at the time where it is a rabbit it is being experienced "rabbitly." And it is likely the case that if the duck-rabbit is unique, it is only in the sense that the thesis that experience determines and thus precedes identity is more obvious than usual. Through extrapolation, we can see that what makes a lamp-post a lamp-post is that I experience the object "lamp-postly" or *qua* lamp-post. The reason that it is difficult to see a lamp-post as anything else, and thus why it doesn't seem to support the existence-determines-identity-thesis, is that we have no concept of an object that is shaped exactly like a lamp-post but isn't a lamp-post.

But if the identity of the object can we willed to be different by the perceiver, which is to say, determined by the subject, does this subjectify identity? Furthermore, is *this* to say that the identity we see doesn't actually exist, or is just a projection of the mind? Is identity *ideal*?

It is counter-intuitive to say that identity is subjective (in the sense that it is fully private). Just by personal reflection, there does indeed seem to be some *public* nature to identity, for not only can we can use identity to refer to things in the world, but our perceptions of identity do often seem to corroborate and align (almost everyone sees a lamp-post as a lamp-post). At the very least, it would seem wrong to say that identity is private. But how could this be, if identity is not, strictly speaking, objective?

This next step is crucial to the project's success. First, remember that the identity of an object is the concept by which it would be named. Now, the fact that you can recognize an object in ordinary experience, which is to say, apply a concept to the object, but do so without

consciously deliberating over whether the object of perception satisfies the application conditions of a concept (what we might call active or spontaneous exercise of reason) seems to suggest that the concepts we use (identities) are not simply "'dog' = hairy, four-legged creature with a waggy tail." We don't seem to reflect on our experience and judge which concept fits all the particulars of the object, at which point, recognition occurs – *No!* – we recognize things passively, even automatically. In ordinary experience, recognition, the moment that you identify the object of your perception, is a conscious, rational activity. There are of course instances when we struggle or fail to "recognize" something, but these do not refute my claim, for what I have claimed is that when recognition occurs, it is passive. The cases where we wonder what a thing is clearly are not cases of recognition, and cases where we try to remember what a thing is implies that we already have recognized it, because we often say things like "oh, I know I've seen that before somewhere, but what is it again?", thus we have some lingering phenomenological concept of it.

In order to bridge the gap between the objects we perceive and their presence in our spontaneous reason, I would like to suggest that the concepts we use in ordinary experience are not lists of qualities or necessary conditions arranged in certain ways (analytic concepts), but rather, their content is phenomenological. The concept of 'dog' is really just our understanding or imagining of the qualia of the object we call a dog, and what we tend to call categories (such as the category of 'cat'), those analytic mappings of qualities used to precisely determine whether or not a concept can be properly applied, are often *abstractions* of our empirical concepts. To say then that ordinary experience involves the application of concepts is misleading, for what I am arguing is that the 'concept' is best understood as the experience itself, held in our minds through memory. If the concept and identity of a cat is just what the experience of the object we call 'cat' is like, then when we recognize something as a cat, we're having an experience that bears enough familial resemblance to our past experiences of objects that we also called cats. There is nothing active or spontaneous about recognition, nor is spontaneity required – only the passive reception of experience. Since experience is what constitutes the concept, we are not just receiving the experience, but we are receiving the concept as well.

If an experience is an objective one, then we can all have it, all other things being equal. Thus, labeling objective experiences is to conventionally associate, like the signifier and signified, the objective experience and the identity. This means that we can agree upon a thing's identity, because it is the convention to identify an object in a certain way, relative to our cultural, historical, and social locations, even though the identity itself is not part of the object, just like the meaning of the word is not necessarily contained in the letters, but rather, just arbitrarily coupled. Identity is a kind of semantic content.

Consider George Braques and Pablo Picasso, and respectively, *The Portuguese* and *Ma Jolie*. We can recognize automatically that the paintings are of the same kind, or are partly describable in the same way (analytic cubism), not because we have an analytical category that allows us to judge all incoming sense-data and then decide whether the thing is analytic cubism or otherwise. What allows us to account for the immediate, passive recognition of the two paintings as stylistically identical is that the content of our concept of the style is ultimately a phenomenological one and not a linguistic/analytic one. Thus, to apply the concept or identity in recognition is to re-experience the concept. Returning to the question of public vs. private – the objective component of our experiences (that their object is something independent of us), by virtue of being objective, is public. The *experience* of a doglike object: this is what our concept of 'dog' is, and thus what the identity of 'dog' is. So empirical identity, in much the same way as the semantic content of words, is public (we can be wrong about it), and yet is a feature not of the world, but of our own subjectivity (the experience of properties like "square-

shapedness" is not part of the object, but merely determined by the object), hence its quasi-ideal (or if you prefer, quasi-real) nature; the objects of our experience are external to us, and our experiences of the objects, internal. But since the empirical identities of the objects are simply what it's like to experience the object, everyone can, in principle, have the same or functionally equivalent empirical concepts because our experiences of the external world necessarily have objectivity features.

5.1 McDowell

What I have claimed about empirical identity and its role in our understanding of the object is supported by the work of John McDowell. In his book *Mind and World*, he rescues direct realism and the possibility of making judgments about the world from an apparent dilemma, the respective horns of which are posed by Garrett Evans and Donald Davidson: either there is no friction between our capacities of judgment and the world that they allegedly judge, or, when we introduce friction by limiting the freedom of our reason, we are faced with an infinite regress of justification. (I will, in order to avoid restating McDowell's own work and conserve precious space, assume McDowell's analysis to obtain). We can escape this dilemma, he says, but only if we understand our own experience to already have content when it is experienced (it is not supplied by us, but rather, part of the experience itself), for that then allows us to judge our experiences, and use our experiences as foundations for other judgments.

What we must conclude secondarily, then, is that the spontaneity of our reason, which is to say, the nature of how we apply and analyze our concepts, has both active and passive components. The active component is what we typically understand *judgment* to be: a careful consideration of something, like when we are asked a question, or when we realize that something is not what it appears to be. However, we may ask, in what way is our reason *passive*?

"According to the position I am recommending," writes McDowell, "conceptual capacities are already operative in experience itself… having things appear in a certain way is already itself a mode of actual operation of conceptual capacities" (McDowell 62). When we recognize a lamp-post automatically, without any apparent judgment of the object, we have exercised a concept, but passively. What I have argued is that the reason this is possible is that our concepts of objects in the world are not analytic (which is to say that their content is not purely intellectual or "conceptual" in the conventional sense of the word), but phenomenological, which means they can be found in our receptivity. In fact, it is a mischaracterization to say that we *apply* concepts of empirical identity at all (at least in ordinary experience), for application seems to suggest *activity* (as opposed to passivity). We might say instead that our conceptualization of experience is more mechanical, in the same way that we understand a word the instant it is uttered.

When McDowell writes that the "content of experience is conceptual," we can also say that the content of *some part* of the conceptual is experiential (61). This is true at least in the passive exercise of our concepts. But spontaneity is also fully compatible with the vision I have been describing. Remember the example of the triangle—that we could see it as a triangle on its hypotenuse, or as a triangle standing on its leg but tipped over, or as an arrow, etc. Consider when Wittgenstein says that "the expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged" (196), "aspect," here, referring to each way we can see the triangle *as* something, echoing his earlier words. But, "to see this aspect of the triangle demands *imagination*," or in our terminology, spontaneity: the spontaneous exercise of a concept with phenomenological content (207).

Concluding Remarks

We may now respond to the two problems posed at the start of this paper: those of David and the Ship of Theseus. Regarding David: David and the marble both exist, but only David is an object, for he is being constituted and by the marble, while constituting nothing himself. There is no co-location, for the marble is not an object, but a description of an object, just as the identity of 'David' is. The statue is identified as David (which is to say, described as) insofar as the subject's experience of the statue conforms to her phenomenological concept of what it is for an object to be David. Regarding the Ship of Theseus: to say that the ship is not the same is only trivially true, for while its matter has been replaced over time, its identity has endured, and that is because the way the ship is experienced remains the same, and thus the same concept/identity – remember, identity is extrinsic to the object, and thus doesn't *necessarily* depend upon the object's matter (though arguably is derived from the sense-data of the object's matter); all that is required is that the object is experienced in the same way, for the identity of an object is just the way we describe our experience of it.

The mereologists and I both agree that the conventional understanding of ordinary objects needs to change, but after that, there is only discord. After concurring with the Aristotelian picture of ordinary objects as a union of matter and form, I then argued is objects have parts (which is to say, divisibility), and we needn't embrace co-location in order to accept that the parts can be different from the object and vice-versa, but merely matter-relativism. Next, I severed the identity of the object from the object itself, arguing instead that the relation of empirical identity to the object is similar to the relation between the semantic content of a word and the word itself. Thus identity doesn't have to be a feature of (which is to say, intrinsic to) the object, but rather, identity is extrinsic, though "real" nevertheless. Lastly, after proposing a revised account of empirical concepts as phenomenological in content rather than analytical, I tried to demonstrate how a quasi-semiological understanding of ordinary objects is likely for the best, for in easily allowing us to achieve a satisfying degree of "friction" between our concepts and the world, thus securing the possibility of legitimate judgments, it also demonstrates how inextricable our concepts and objects are entangled in ordinary experience.

Wittgenstein writes at the end of the *Tractatus* that that about which we cannot speak, we must remain silent. This is not to say that identity is intrinsic to the object yet unknowable to us – there is but the extrinsic identity, nevertheless, it is real. It is simply to say that we must be aware of the nature of identity, and consequently, the absurdity of asserting objects to be one identity and not another. I propose we must be satisfied with identity as experience, and capitulating to our contingent (in the sense of contextual and dependent on us) descriptions of non-contextual and non-contingent (in the sense of independent of us) objects.

Appendix: The Objection from Natural Kinds, or Analytic verses Empirical Concepts

I have argued for an anti-essentialist conclusion that the identity of ordinary objects is not, as it were, *received* in perception like properties such as "blue-ness," but is *supplied* by our recognition of the object – it is a feature of our cognition. This is what allows us to see a drawing as at one moment a duck, and then another, a rabbit. We can recognize the same object in different ways because our reason is spontaneous, which is just to say that it is actively exercised as opposed to passively triggered. However, there seem to be some cases that defy this conception of identity: the natural kinds, such as gold or water. With the duck-rabbit, if one

sees it as one thing rather than another (if one identifies it one way or another), one is not wrong. But wouldn't be true of a lead brick if I were to point at it and say *this here is gold*.

A natural kind is an object with an absolute identity (such that it holds in all possible worlds), so when you have the identity, you have the object and vice-versa. Something is called "gold" (identity) if and only if it has 79 protons (object). Similarly, something is only called "water" if and only if it is a molecule consisting of two discrete protons attached to an oxygen atom by hydrogen bonding. Strict rules such as these allows us to be essentialist about the identity of the object, and therefore, my project has a leak.

I strongly believe that this objection is ill-conceived. Remember, this project is concerned with *empirical* identity, which I have defined as the phenomenology of the object (or objects), this phenomenology in turn forming the content of our empirical concepts, which are found in *both* active (spontaneous) and passive (receptive) judgment. It is true that gold is, by definition, an element consisting of atoms with 79 protons. But it seems to me that this is not at all the same kind of identity of which I have been speaking, for it functions *analytically*: gold is necessarily an atom with 79 protons for that is the definition of gold. But the fact that "gold" has 79 protons does not affect the way we experience the objects we correctly call gold. As Quine writes, "scientific discoveries of species essence do not constitute a 'change of meaning.'"[10]

We must distinguish what I have been calling 'empirical concepts' and 'empirical identity' from 'analytic concepts' and 'analytic identity.' The analytic identity of gold may be "79 protons," but as I briefly mentioned in section 5.0, we do not actively judge the object of our perception by an analytic concept *prior* to recognition. It's the experience of the object itself that makes us recognize the object as something known to us. Thus, the empirical identity/concept of gold is not necessarily the same as the analytic identity/concept of gold. Since this project has only been about the former while the objection is about the latter, the objection misses its mark of undermining the project's anti-essentialist leanings.

Furthermore, I believe that this reply also can serve as a response to the possible objection that when one sees the duck-rabbit as a rabbit, they're just *mis*perceiving. For the point really is that in order for recognition to take place at all, there needs to be some concept had by the perceiver. To say that even though the perceiver recognized a duck when the object was really a rabbit, besides reifying descriptions, also confuses analytic identity with empirical identity, in the same way that they would be confused by a person who informed another perceiver that what she thought was silver was actually dirty platinum.

References

Aristotle. "De Anima." *A New Aristotle Reader*. Ed. J.L. Ackrill. Princeton University Press, 1989.

Aristotle. "Metaphysics." *A New Aristotle Reader*. Ed. J.L. Ackrill. Princeton University Press, 1989.

Aristotle. "Physics." *A New Aristotle Reader*. Ed. J.L. Ackrill. Princeton University Press, 1989.

McDaniel, Kris. "Against Composition as Identity." *Analysis* Vol. 86.2 (2008): 128-133.

McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Merricks, Trenton. *Objects and Persons.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001. Sections I.21-I.91, II xi.

[4] *Quoted in Mellor, D.H. "Natural Kinds." The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Dec. 1977), pp. 299-312., 300.*