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CRAWFORD L. ELDER

FAMILIAR OBJECTS
AND THEIR SHADOWS



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Familiar Objects and their Shadows

Crawford L. Elder

University of Connecticut



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FAMILIAR OBJECTS AND THEIR SHADOWS

Most contemporary metaphysicians are sceptical about the reality of familiar objects such as dogs and trees, people and desks, cells and stars. They prefer an ontology of the spatially tiny or temporally tiny. Tiny microparticles "dogwise arranged" explain the appearance, they say, that there are dogs; microparticles obeying microphysics collectively cause anything that a baseball appears to cause; temporal stages collectively sustain the illusion of enduring objects that persist across changes. Crawford L. Elder argues that all such attempts to "explain away" familiar objects project downwards, on to the tiny entities, structures and features of familiar objects themselves. He contends that sceptical metaphysicians are thus employing shadows of familiar objects, while denying that the entities which cast those shadows really exist. He argues that the shadows are indeed really there, because their sources – familiar objects – are mind-independently real.

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*To the memory of
J. N. Findlay (1903–1987)
my philosophical father*

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Two false friends of an ontology of familiar objects	7
1.1 The point of affirming kind-sameness	9
1.2 The point of affirming numerical persistence	12
1.3 Pushmipullyu representations	13
1.4 Explosivism	19
1.5 Conventionalism	25
1.6 Summing up	28
2 Conventionalism as ontological relativism	30
2.1 Sameness and objects	32
2.2 The “softness” of sameness in kind and numerical sameness	36
2.3 Carving out strange kinds	39
2.4 Carving out strange individuals	44
2.5 The world onto which we project kind-sameness and persistence	48
2.6 We who project kind-sameness and persistence	52
3 Realism about material objects: persistence, persistence conditions, and natural kinds	54
3.1 Realism and mind-independent persistence conditions	55
3.2 Nonqualitative persistence conditions?	57
3.3 Qualitative persistence conditions	60
3.4 Apparent departures from a natural kind	62
3.5 Infimae species	66
4 Ontological preference for the temporally small	70
4.1 An explosion of temporal counterpart relations?	72
4.2 Restricting the t-counterpart relations that <i>really</i> obtain: first attempt	76

Contents

4.3	Restricting the t-counterpart relations that <i>really</i> obtain: second attempt	79
4.4	"Nonsupervenient" t-counterpart relations	81
4.5	Motivations for exdurantism	83
5	Ontological preference for microphysical causes	88
5.1	Three threats to mental causation	88
5.2	Causation and exceptionless laws	90
5.3	Causation, invariance, and beliefs and desires	93
5.4	Causal exclusion I: complex events at the level of the microparticles	100
5.5	Causal exclusion II: complex events at the level of neurochemistry	107
5.6	The problem of mental quausation	112
6	Ontological preference for the spatially small	114
6.1	Just where does "dogwise arrangement" obtain?	118
6.2	Causal competition between dogs and microparticles dogwise arranged	124
6.3	Why "more and less different from" is not defined over the microphysical events that subvene dog behaviors	128
6.4	Chains of causation involving microparticle events	131
6.5	Summing up	137
7	A third false friend of familiar objects: universal mereological composition	139
7.1	The Sider/Lewis argument for UMC	142
7.2	Two forms of UMC objects, two forms of strangeness	148
7.3	The properties that characterize UMC objects	151
7.4	Why contrariety fails to obtain	158
7.5	UMC and mereological essentialism	162
8	Concluding Hegelian postscript	166
8.1	Hegel and contemporary scepticism about familiar objects	166
8.2	Hegel on property-identity: the crucial place of graded contrast with contraries	168
8.3	Objections to the Hegelian position	181
	<i>Appendix: "Mutually interfering" dimensions of difference</i>	190
	<i>References</i>	195
	<i>Index</i>	200

Introduction

In general, contemporary metaphysics is deeply sceptical of the familiar objects in which common sense believes. It is far more ready to attribute reality to entities that are much smaller – to the particles and wave packets and strings which microphysics treats as real, or to the “mereological simples” for which philosophical reflection provides some support. Any such view must find some way of explaining why there appear to be familiar medium-sized objects in the world. Many metaphysicians suppose that we can do just that. We can explain why it appears that the microparticles of the world compose familiar objects, why it appears that these objects persist across careers in which they lose and gain component microparticles, and why it appears that these objects have and exercise causal powers. The main business of this book is to argue that leading examples of such reductive explanations fail. For time and again such explanations project downwards, onto the small entities of the preferred ontology, structures and relations and features that properly belong to familiar objects. Such projection is harmless so long as one allows that there also are, in addition to the small entities, the familiar objects that form the starting point of the projection. But if – as is generally the case – the aim is to expunge familiar objects from ontology, the invocation of such structures and relations and features is illegitimate. The opponents of familiar objects are then helping themselves to shadows cast downwards, onto the level of the preferred small entities, while denying that the sources of these shadows exist.

The metaphysical position which this book is intended to support is that at least many of the familiar objects that common sense recognizes are mind-independently real. The book begins with a chapter that undertakes to refute two false friends of this common-sense ontology. The first is the modal conventionalist, who holds

that the general ways in which nature's kinds are marked out from one another, and the general ways in which persistences of members of those kinds are delimited, are fixed by the "descriptive content" and "referential intentions" that we associate with our sortals and matter-names. Such a view fails to treat as mind-independently real the phenomena of sameness in kind and of persistence across time. It therefore falls short of *realism* about familiar objects (indeed about any objects) since it makes the natures that objects share with others of their kind, and the careers which each individually traces out, be functions of our cognitive and linguistic practices. The other false friend is the explosivist, who is happy to award mind-independent reality to the familiar objects of common sense, but who cheapens that award – indeed nullifies it – by awarding reality likewise to every imaginable crosscutting of the world's individuals and kinds. The modal conventionalist thinks that nothing is required of the world in order for our general ways of tracing persistences and detecting kind-samenesses to be correct; the explosivist thinks that nothing *special* is required, since any general ways of doing this cannot fail to track real persistings and real samenesses in kind. Chapter 1 argues that neither conventionalism nor explosivism embodies an adequate understanding of the ways that our talk about sameness in kind, and about numerical persistence across time, functions in our cognitive economy.

Chapter 2 deals further with modal conventionalism. Of the two false friends of common-sense ontology, conventionalism and explosivism, conventionalism has been the more influential, and so deserves the more protracted treatment. One form which conventionalism has assumed is a view that might aptly be labeled "ontological relativism." Chapter 2 examines one arresting argument for ontological relativism, and contends that that argument fails. More radically, chapter 2 argues that any argument for ontological relativism must fail – that the view is conceptually untenable.

Between them, chapters 1 and 2 raise serious objections against the main currently prevailing forms of antirealism about material objects. Chapter 3 then sets forth a realist position on material objects. It articulates the connections between realism about the *existence* of material objects and realism about the two forms of *sameness* discussed in chapter 1, and shows what a realist ontology that incorporates all three elements must look like.

The book then turns to the opponents of common-sense ontology. As puzzles such as the ship of Theseus have made vivid for millennia, familiar objects, if real at all, seem to survive across a messy variety of alterations – and not just of loss and gain of component particles, but of hard-to-delimit qualitative alteration. Here the desire for a cleaner ontology may motivate an ontological preference for entities that are *temporally* smaller than familiar objects appear to be – for temporal stages, each of which lasts no longer than the shortest possible physical change. Such temporally tiny entities can explain away the appearance that there are familiar objects that persist over long careers by serving as the truth-makers for claims expressing that appearance. If a temporal stage of the right qualitative character stands in temporal counterpart relations to other stages having the right qualitative character, then, say stage theorists, a sentence that asserts or presupposes the persisting of a familiar object can be rendered true. But I argue that temporal counterpart relations – if they are not going to saddle us with an explosivist account of the world's persistences – constitute an illegitimate projection downward from the careers and powers of familiar objects.

The second group of opponents are the causal exclusionists. From the time of Plato's Eleatic stranger it has seemed plausible that familiar objects, if real, must be capable of bringing about effects. But any familiar object is wholly composed of entities that, spatially, are vastly smaller – in particular, the microparticles of physics. If physics is closed and complete, it may seem, then, that the several doings of the component microparticles must between them cause anything which the familiar object may be said to cause. We have apparent overdetermination, which is apparently intolerable, and the apparent victory goes to the microparticles. But to which microparticles? When, I shall argue, microparticles are grouped in the ways relevant for awarding them efficacy over the effects that common-sense attributes to familiar objects, they are grouped in ways that illegitimately project downwards, from the level of the familiar objects themselves. Causal exclusion arguments, focused on familiar objects, generally fail. They fail in particular for the apparent exclusion of mental causation. Mental causation is the case I shall use to focus the debate about whether a familiar object's microparticles steal away the apparent efficacy of that familiar object. That is, I shall discuss whether beliefs and desires – states of that most familiar of familiar

objects, a person – genuinely cause behavioral outcomes. But I will indicate how the argument generalizes to the cases of other familiar objects.

The third group of opponents are the sceptics about composition. It seems secure, to these opponents, that tiny entities entirely occupy any volume in which common sense supposes a familiar object to be present. But is there also the one large object which these entities seem to compose? These philosophers begin with uncertainty about what, in general, composition might amount to, and proceed to scepticism about whether there objectively is any such phenomenon at all. It unquestionably appears that microparticles compose such (relatively) large objects as dogs and trees and desks – but that appearance may amount to no more than that the microparticles themselves are “dogwise” (or “treewise” or “deskwise”) arranged. I argue that such adverbial arrangements are a projection downwards from familiar objects. They are, indeed, perfectly real *if* the objects from which the projection proceeds are themselves real. That is, there is a genuine phenomenon of microparticles’ being dogwise or treewise or deskwise arranged, if this phenomenon just amounts to the fact that those microparticles jointly occupy (and are confined to) the entire volume in which a dog or tree or desk exists. If that sort of fact obtains, indeed, it likewise provides the analysis of what it is for those microparticles to *compose* a dog or tree or desk. But the opponents in this third group want to explain away, rather than affirm, the reality of such familiar objects. And if familiar objects do not really exist, the phenomena of dogwise or deskwise arrangedness are purely imaginary.

A fourth group of opponents thinks that composition is not something which microparticles owe to the reality of the familiar objects within which they are found, but something that they possess in their own right. Indeed any plurality of entities whatever composes something, says this fourth group. Composition is a “free lunch” (in Armstrong’s phrase), which comes automatically with the bare existence of the components. This is the doctrine of universal mereological composition (UMC). The proponent of this doctrine qualifies as a third false friend of the ontology of common sense. The proponent appears to be a *friend* because, at any moment at which common sense supposes a familiar object to exist, she will find a mereological sum of microparticles that occupies just that volume which common sense supposes the familiar object to occupy (with the small qualification

that the mereological sum will have relatively precise boundaries, while the familiar object apparently has vague boundaries). But the proponent of UMC is a *false* friend, not just because of her explosivist commitments, but because, as I shall argue, her stand-ins for familiar objects are compositionally brittle, while familiar objects themselves are compositionally flexible. That is, across the phases of its existence, a familiar object might have incorporated different microparticles from those that it did; not so, I argue, the mereological sum of microparticles that is located where that familiar object is. UMC is a false doctrine, I shall argue. The composed objects which it countenances would in general be characterized only by certain structural properties, properties that fail to contrast to greater and lesser degree with their own proper contraries. But determinate contrast-with-contraries is constitutive of the very identity of any genuine property.

The argument of this book is defensive. The book identifies inadequacies in contemporary attempts to “explain away” familiar objects, attempts intended to show that *no* familiar objects really exist. Some readers may find themselves wishing to see positive arguments *in favor of* familiar objects. As responses to the contemporary opponents of familiar objects, these would be arguments to the effect that *some* familiar objects are perfectly real – not necessarily that every familiar object posited by common sense, or by one of the special sciences, is real. I will offer no argument for that more limited conclusion, because I believe that any such argument would be question-begging: it would have to proceed from premises that assume that at least some familiar objects exist. For the proponent of familiar objects, as I see matters, the situation is exactly that of Neurath’s boat. We can suspect individual planks of rot, can remove them and examine them, and can even replace them if need be. But we do this while afloat on the boat – while standing on other planks. There can be no systematic justification for standing-on-planks-in-general-and-as-such.

The history of post-Cartesian philosophy of course contains many efforts at establishing the reality of familiar objects – objects such as trees and dogs, stars and cells, perhaps even desks and pencils. These arguments all proceed from premises, allegedly more secure than the conclusions to be established: that *we* exist, and engage in various cognitive and perhaps practical activities. But if we ourselves are familiar objects – human organisms, say – and if our featured

activities engage and are directed at other familiar objects, then these arguments are question-begging in just the way I have indicated. The only alternative is to start from a picture of ourselves as transcendental egos, and to secure the existence of familiar objects by virtue of their relation to transcendental mental activity. This runs counter to the naturalist position, to which I subscribe, that we are objects *in* the world of familiar objects, distinguished mainly by the history of natural selection that has fashioned us. Beyond that, the only reality which such an argument can deduce for familiar objects is a mind-conferred, mind-dependent reality.

Not here. The thesis of this book is that familiar objects – at least some of them – are mind-independently real. Their detractors seek to impugn the ontological status of familiar objects by using shadows which those objects cast, while denying that the shadows have a source.

1

Two false friends of an ontology of familiar objects

Judgements asserting one or another of two kinds of sameness are crucial, I shall argue, both for our practical mastery of the world and for our theoretical understanding of it. On the one hand, there are judgements saying that one object is the same in kind as other objects, or that some matter is the same in kind as matter found elsewhere. On the other hand, there are judgements saying that the object in front of us is numerically the same object, or that the matter is the very same matter, as we encountered earlier or will encounter later.

In making these judgements we call upon observation and understanding. In order to affirm sameness in kind, we must observe that various similarities obtain between one object and others, or between matter here and matter elsewhere. In order to affirm persistence across a single episode of observation, we must observe that an object (or some matter) has moved continuously, while retaining largely the same features, and in order to affirm persistence across separate episodes, we must observe that the object (or the matter) now before us presents features appropriately related to those observed in an object (or some matter) encountered at other times. But we must also understand *which sorts* of similarities indicate sameness in kind, *which sorts* of relations mark out persistences. We must understand, for example, that sameness in chemical microstructure indicates sameness in kind, as between two portions of matter, while sameness in color does not, and neither do sameness in heft or in location. We must understand that specific sorts of sameness or change are to be expected in a persisting object of the kind to which the object observed earlier and the object observed later belong, and specific spatiotemporal relations to the place of the earlier observation.

To speak of a cognitive performance as a case of understanding is to say that it can fail as well as succeed: where understandings occur, misunderstandings are possible. Just what is required of the world, in