

Daniel Z. Korman, *Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 272, £ 40.00, ISBN 9780198732532

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In *Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary*, a book remarkable for its clarity and originality, Daniel Korman defends our commonsense judgements about which objects there are in fact (tables, trunks, cars).

By ‘objects’, Korman means “*material objects*, that is, entities that are made of stuff, have locations, and can move throughout space” (p.25). Many surprising answers have indeed been given to one of the central questions in material-object metaphysics: what kinds of objects are there? And manifold responses to the debates over the metaphysics of material objects seem particularly at odds with our intuitions and beliefs regarding the world around us. Thus Korman’s aim, which he calls a *conservative* view, is “to defend the view that, when it comes to which highly visible objects there are right before our eyes, things are more or less the way they seem” (p.1).

He counters a wide variety of arguments advanced by his mainly revisionary and – despite appearances – prevailing opponents, which fall into two broad categories: *eliminativists* and *permissivists*. The former want to deny the existence of most of the ordinary objects in our ordinary world, whereas the latter argue that there are far more highly visible macroscopic objects that escape our notice.

The book is articulated into three parts that are preceded by a brief but comprehensive introduction and followed by a recapitulatory conclusion. It is further arranged in twelve chapters, each preceded by a remarkably symbolic and sharp illustration by Dana Zemack.

The first part, which includes chapters 2 and 3, presents an overview of the positions and arguments that define material-object metaphysics. In chapter 2, Korman sketches six influential arguments that have brought so many philosophers to abandon conservatism in favour of eliminativism and permissivism. He begins by delineating the debunking arguments, according to which there is no explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are and the facts about them. He goes on to outline the arbitrariness

arguments, which are based on the idea that there is no ontologically significant difference between certain ordinary (e.g. islands) and extraordinary objects (e.g. incars, i.e. cars that cannot leave the garage). Then he turns to the argument from vagueness, which illustrates that either every plurality of objects composes something or none do; this is followed by the overdetermination arguments, which aim to establish that ordinary objects do not exist since there is no explanatory work for them to do that is not already being done by their microscopic parts. Korman then sketches the problem of material constitution, which justifies eliminating ordinary objects because they give rise to the tension between our intuitions about the persistence conditions of constituted objects and our intuitions about which objects are identical to them. Finally, Korman comes the problem of the many, according to which it would be arbitrary to give a definite finite answer to the question of how many entities a given situation contains.

Chapter 3 focuses on discussing the different varieties of eliminativism and permissivism that exist and the sort of conservative view that the author intends to defend throughout the remainder of the book. Permissive accounts are those according to which there are plenty of highly visible extraordinary objects that ordinarily escape our notice. The author characterizes his two main permissivist targets: universalism and plenitude. Universalism is the thesis that, for any plurality of objects (e.g. a dog and a trunk), there is a single object that is composed of their conjunction (e.g. a trog). However, this thesis does not specify which “kinds” of objects there are. Korman then considers and expresses arguments against three ways that might lead one to think that universalism is trivial. The doctrine of plenitude is even more permissive than universalism, since it entails it. In addition to delivering objects with extraordinary mereological profiles, plenitude delivers objects with extraordinary temporal and modal profiles. Eliminativist views, on the contrary, are those that dispose of a wide range of ordinary objects. Eliminativism comes into two varieties: nihilistic and nonnihilistic. The former typically holds that all objects are mereologically simple: there are no composite objects. What exists are only microscopic simples, namely partless entities. The latter supports the idea that some ordinary objects do not exist, without necessarily denying that there are composites at all. However – Korman underlines –

eliminativism does not claim that “fundamentally speaking” there are no ordinary objects, and he proceeds by objecting to two ways of arguing that eliminativism is trivially false. Finally, the author sets forth his own view: conservatism. Conservative accounts are “views on which there are such ordinary objects as tables, dogs, and tree trunks but no such extraordinary objects as trogs, incars, and snowdiscalls” (p.23). It is a view then on what objects do exist and what do not, but it remains neutral on many other issues about objects. It is, in fact, compatible with different views of persistence conditions of objects and their mind-dependency, with different theories on which objects exist, with different ways of understanding the status of debates on them and a variety of methodological outlooks.

The second part, which includes chapters 4 to 7, is dedicated to the articulation and defence of Korman’s arguments from counterexamples, against revisionary approaches like eliminativism and permissivism. He sets out to show that revisionary views are far from being compatible with our ordinary beliefs and intuitions. Chapter 4 first addresses the objection that Korman’s arguments from counterexamples are question-begging against revisionists. The author explains that they are not intrinsically so since they do not presuppose or assume what they try to state. They are nevertheless dialectically question-begging since opponent arguments take as premises things that they firmly deny. But, he clarifies, they are still worth discussing. In the rest of the chapter, Korman examines intuitions: what they are and if they are universal. This is because he takes for granted that “experience and intuition supply at least defeasible justification” (p.31). He provides a defence of this idea against those revisionists who, on the contrary, have taken their arguments to be entirely compatible with ordinary belief. Lastly, he moves objections to Eli Hirsh’s argument from charity and Amie Thomasson’s argument from analytic entailments.

Chapter 5 develops a clear, articulated and innovative critique of compatibilism in its hermeneutic versions. According to this account, the arguments from counterexamples rest on an equivocation: one premise is true only on its ordinary reading, whereas the other is true only on its ontological reading. If we have heard both premises at the same reading, the arguments would fail. Korman meticulously argues against varieties of compatibilism, showing that they rely on the substantive

linguistic and psychological hypothesis that we are prone to hear different readings of the premises in ontological and ordinary discussions, hypothesis which is “implausible, unmotivated, and indefensible” (p.45). In chapter 6, Korman analyses compatibilist accounts which do not address the hypothesis that was just mentioned. These accounts simply introduce a specialized language, “Ontologese”, in which familiar expressions (e.g. ‘exist’) are read as having a new technical meaning. Such revolutionary views grant that the arguments from counterexamples work, but they can still accept deep counterparts of eliminativism and permissivism, where ‘exist’ is understood in this new sense. But the problem with these views – Korman observes – is that they are not well anchored, so ontologists should be agnostic about what does and does not exist in such peculiar meanings (“existo”). This leads to skepticism also on the compatibility of such claims with ordinary discourse and ordinary belief. Chapter 7, which deals with the debunkers, points out that although universalism and nihilism are revisionary, debunkers do not feel threatened by arguments from counterexamples because our ordinary beliefs about which objects there are have a disreputable source. Our object beliefs are driven by what is useful for us to believe and not by what is actually out there (which is entirely independent of our beliefs). Korman first develops this account in detail. He then considers the permissivist response, which is destined to self-defeat according to him – unless it finds a way to accept an explanatory connection between our object beliefs and the object facts. Finally, he shows that conservatism has resources to resist the debunking arguments, so that it can go further “rejecting permissivism and eliminativism on the strength of the experiences and intuitions that drive the arguments from counterexamples” (p.123).

In the third part of the book, Korman examines some of the most influential arguments against conservatism. He aims to show that it is not ultimately defeated by them. He begins by dealing, in chapter 8, with the argument from arbitrariness. According to this argument, there is no ontologically significant difference between certain ordinary and extraordinary objects, so that it would be totally arbitrary to include in our ontology the former but not the latter. Korman argues against four broad categories of arbitrariness arguments, showing that the ordinary and extraordinary objects at stake are radically different. Chapter 9

is an “opinionated overview of the various options available to conservatives for resisting the argument [from vagueness]” (p.160). Korman's preferred way of resisting the argument is to deny that there cannot be borderline cases of compositions. He adds also – at the end of the chapter – that the reasoning behind the argument from vagueness rules out the most natural account of things like languages, games, concepts, symphonies, fictional characters, and so on, according to which they are abstract artefacts. Finally, in chapters 10 to 12, Korman faces the arguments used by eliminativists to show that accepting ordinary objects forces a commitment to one or another absurdity. In chapter 10, he addresses the overdetermination argument, arguing that there is more to it than meets the eye, and showing how to resist the epistemic argument that lies at their core. Chapter 11 is dedicated to defending a pluralist response to the arguments from material constitution and to answering the grounding problem that arises for those kinds of responses. Lastly, – in chapter 12 – Korman shows how a pluralist response can also defeat the problem of the many.

Objects: Nothing Out of the Ordinary ultimately provides an innovative defence of our everyday intuitive view about what there is. Korman defends his conservative position by trying to convince his revisionary rivals that their theses truly go against our natural beliefs and intuitions about what exists; that it is not merely by a biological or cultural accident that we divide the world the way that we do; and finally, that there are ways to resist arguments against conservatism. In doing all this, the author also fills in some of the gaps in the literature by exploring a largely uncharted territory regarding commonly shared debunking and arbitrariness arguments and attempting to substantiate the controversial hypotheses that guarantee the compatibilist strategies. In conclusion, Korman definitely succeeds in his intent of making the case that “there is far more to be said for the conservative view than is ordinarily supposed and that it deserves to be taken seriously alongside the dominant permissivist and eliminativist approaches” (p.227).