

# There are vague objects (in any sense in which there are ordinary objects)

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Ordinary objects are vague, because either (i) composition is restricted, or (ii) there really are no such objects (but we still want to talk about them), or (iii) because such objects are not metaphysically (independently of us) distinguishable from other “extra-ordinary” objects. In any sense in which there are ordinary objects, they are vague.

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## 1.

The metaphysical debate concerning the criteria of *composition* is about what counts as an object and what does not. Friends of *restricted* composition argue that, for instance, Tibbles the cat is an object, and friends of a less restricted composition even accept that the Eiffel Tower is an object. Both claim that not any aggregate of fundamental basic building blocks of our universe (let us call them ‘atoms’) make up an object. On this view, it has to be accepted that composition, being restricted, entails that objects such as Tibbles or the Eiffel Tower are vague, for any restriction on composition has to be a vague one (Van Inwagen 1990; Lewis 1986, 212–213). Indeed, since it is a vague matter to determine spatial and temporal boundaries of ordinary objects (Is this molecule a part of Tibbles or is it a part of the surrounding environment? When exactly does Tibbles cease to exist?), it is a vague matter whether composition takes place or not, which means that it is vague whether there exists a certain mereological sum or not. In general, any theory that restricts composition has to face the problem of where to draw the limits of the restriction.

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One reason to reject restricted composition is to avoid this commitment to there being vague objects. Let us see if this is a good reason.

There are two ways to embrace *unrestricted* composition. First, the *all-thingist* strategy says that since composition is unrestricted, *all* things that you can get by patching together any atoms, however spatio-temporally scattered and seemingly unrelated, count as objects. For instance, there is an object, we may call it ‘Bernard’, that is the top half of the Eiffel Tower, the seven fish in my aquarium today, and a particular naturally cat-like shaped rock on Mars. Alternatively, the *nihilist* strategy prefers to avoid restricted composition by claiming that composition *never* takes place (rather than *always*, as the allthingist would have it). Thus, not only there are no Bernard-like objects, but there are no objects at all. Let us examine these strategies in turn.

## 2.

Let me start with the nihilist (such as, for example, Heller 1990). For the nihilist, since there are no cat-like or table-like objects, our ordinary existential quantifier that is supposed to have all these familiar objects in its domain does not really range over anything—its domain is empty. But this is only true if we require that the quantifier should range over things that exist independently of us, but there is no reason to claim something like this. According to a nihilist such as Heller, it is strictly speaking true that there are no table-like ordinary objects, but according to looser “ordinary” quantification it is true that there *are* ordinary objects, but these are not independent objects, they are our *conventions*. Strictly speaking, there is in front of me only a bunch of atoms spread across a space-time region, but for practical purposes I follow the convention that such a distribution of atoms is a table. (Heller’s favourite example is Manhattan: strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Manhattan, there is only matter distributed across a certain region of space-time, but we decided one day to call this portion of matter ‘Manhattan’, and so Manhattan is (no more than) a human convention.) The basic idea is simply that the way we see the world as being cut up into cats, tables, people, clouds, and so on, is a genuinely human-dependent way—I can easily imagine there being different intelligent beings in our world that would not cut up the world (the space-time regions filled with atoms) in the same way we do, maybe because their sensorial apparatus would not be similar to ours,<sup>1</sup> or for other reasons.

<sup>1</sup> So where we see a certain portion of matter as standing out from its environment, because, say, of its shape and colour, they do not see anything like that because they only discriminate between different filled regions of space-time according to their temperature,

Now, it seems clear and obvious that as far as the nihilist view allows for a sense in which there are ordinary objects, the view has to accept that they are *vague*—simply because our language, our concepts and our conventions (that is, our ways of cutting up the world into pieces such as tables) are vague. So, a nihilist who wants to find a way of talking about ordinary objects has to accept that they are vague, since even if she does not do it in the Hellerian fashion, she will have to provide some other characterisation of them, that will necessarily be human-dependent. So, embracing unrestricted composition in the nihilist way does not help one to avoid that ordinary objects are vague, in any good sense in which there are such objects at all. (It would take a really hard-core nihilist who would completely deny the possibility of talking about cats and tables to avoid vague objects, by insisting that there are not any.)

### 3.

Let us now consider the *allthingist* view. As we have already seen above, the allthingist says that since composition is unrestricted, *all* things that you can get by patching together any atoms, however spatio-temporally scattered and seemingly unrelated, count as objects, even “weird” objects such as Bernard. Here, there is plenty for our quantifier to range over. But now, consider Bernard: according to the allthingist view, Bernard exists independently on any human activities or concerns; but is it an ordinary object? Is it an object like my table? No. Granted, my table is included in the domain of quantification of the quantifier that has also Bernard in its domain. But *not* vice versa: if we want to have a domain that includes *ordinary* objects, my table will be in it, while Bernard will not. What this shows is that if one is an allthingist, one will need to make an additional distinction between “wide” quantification and “ordinary” quantification—if one wants to be able to accommodate talk about ordinary objects.<sup>2</sup> And then it is easily seen that any way the “ordinary” domain will be specified will be such that ordinary objects will be vague in very much the same way this was the case for the nihilist. Somehow, the allthingist will need to select ordinary objects among all of the objects there are, which yields vagueness in the same way restricted composition yields vagueness, and since any such selection will be human-

for instance.

<sup>2</sup> If she does not care about accommodating talk of ordinary objects (and the nihilist could go that way too), then she would be insisting on a strict sense of ‘there is’, and denying that there is any other good sense of it, and so, accordingly, there would be no vague objects. But, I take it that any view should be able to accommodate for my claim that I am sitting at a table. Even if it denies, like the nihilist has it, the real existence of the table, it must allow me to say such things, even if only in a loose sense.

dependent, ordinary objects will be vague exactly as there are vague for the nihilist.

#### 4.

Of course, I have not showed, nor tried to show, that there are metaphysically vague objects, in the usual sense of ‘metaphysically vague’. Rather, I tried to show that *in any sense* in which the different views can say that there are ordinary objects like Tibbles or a table, they have to accept that these objects *are vague*. This is interesting because, as mentioned above, one of the reasons to reject restricted composition is precisely to avoid commitment to vague objects. But of course, unlike under the restricted composition view, the vagueness here is not metaphysical (human-independent) but comes from us—*because ordinary objects “come from us”*.

So, ordinary objects are vague, but only because either (i) composition is restricted, or (ii) there really are no such objects (but we still want to talk about them), or (iii) because such objects are not metaphysically (independently of us) distinguishable from other “extra-ordinary” objects, such as Bernard. In any sense in which there are ordinary objects, they are vague.

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