

“Criteria of Identity and the Problems of Metaphysics”

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One of the most important threads running through Jonathan Lowe’s work involves highlighting the importance of sortal terms and concepts in establishing reference and the truth-conditions of metaphysical claims. I’ll call ‘sortalism’ the view that consists in three claims:

1. Sortal terms and concepts are (generally¹) associated with semantic principles that supply criteria of application and criteria of individuation and identity for anything that is to fall under them.
2. Individuals may only be referred to, (re-)identified, and counted by (explicitly or tacitly) employing a sortal.
3. Individuals **a** and **b** can only be identical if they are of sorts with the same criteria of identity, and they meet those criteria.²

While the sortalist view has often been neglected or rejected (on my side of the Atlantic at least), I think it is one of the most potentially important views in contemporary metaphysics. I won’t undertake to defend it directly here (though I defend a form of it elsewhere)—instead, I want to demonstrate the importance and attractiveness of the view by showing its power to resolve or dissolve some of the central problems of metaphysics.

Many of the classic problems of metaphysics arise as problems for making sense of our common-sense world-view according to which there are such ordinary objects as sticks and stones, tables and chairs, dogs and persons. Another thread running through Jonathan’s recent work involves defending an ontology of ordinary objects (2005). These two threads are related in two ways. First, the sortalist view tells against reductive views of ordinary objects. For on this view, if (for example) **a** is a statue and **b** is a mereological sum of bronze atoms, **a** cannot be identical to **b** given the different criteria of identity for statues versus sums of atoms. This anti-reductionism gives us reason to take the sorts of our common sense ontology seriously, without assuming they can simply be reduced to more ‘basic’ scientific or metaphysical sorts.

Of course sortalism as I have described it above does not in itself preclude *eliminativism* about ordinary objects and sorts.³ But—this is the second way in which the two threads above are related—it does give us powerful tools with which to answer many of the eliminativists’ arguments against ordinary objects. Jonathan has recently confronted three of these central arguments: those based in causal redundancy,

¹ That is, apart from primitive sortals, which Lowe thinks there must be.

² (For otherwise, if we allowed that $a=b$ where a has different identity criteria than b , there would be possible circumstances in which a would survive but b would not, which (given the identity claim) would amount to circumstances in which a would survive but a would not (*Kinds of Being* 56-7).

³ Though I have argued elsewhere that a form of the view that includes the idea that sortal terms are associated with *application conditions* as well as identity conditions can be used against most eliminativisms by showing that, e.g., those who accept particles arranged statuewise do not succeed at ‘eliminating’ statues from their ontology. But that is part of a much longer story.

vagueness, and spatial coincidence. Rather than repeating those here, I wish to add to them, showing how the sortalist view gives us the means to respond to three more arguments wielded against ordinary objects: those based in the demand for a uniform answer to the special composition question, those arising from worries that a common sense ontology is inconsistent with or a rival to a scientific ontology, and those based in considerations of parsimony. This should not only add to the defense of ordinary objects, but also help demonstrate the power of the sortalist position to dissolve or resolve a number of central problems of metaphysics.

1. The Thing about “Things”

Some of the most important consequences of the sortalist view become evident when we notice, as Jonathan does, that terms such as ‘thing’, ‘object’, and the like—in their most general use as entirely ‘neutral’ terms—are not genuine sortal terms. Instead, ‘thing’ and the like typically function as ‘dummy sortals’—that is, as placeholders that may be substituted with any genuine sortal term, but which do not themselves prescribe criteria of identity. As Jonathan puts it:

...the noun ‘thing’—though superficially a count noun in that it admits of a plural form, ‘things’—has no criterion of identity associated with it, is not a genuine sortal. (*Kinds of Being*, 12)

As a result, it does not even make sense to ask how many ‘things’ there are in a given situation, if ‘thing’ is being used in this neutral sense:

...there are ways of counting the number of *men* or *tables* or *books* in a given room, but no way of counting the number of *red things* there are: and this is not because there *is* such a number but one beyond our powers of determining... but because it apparently does not even make sense to speak of such a number until the *sort(s)* of red thing one is to count have been specified. (*Kinds of Being*, 10).

Moreover, when we combine this with the view that individuals can only be referred to as individuals of a given sort or kind, this also entails that phrases like ‘that thing’:

...cannot be used unambiguously to pick out some identifiable individual either as an object of knowledge or as an object of reference. Thus, if I point my finger in the direction of my desk and say, with referential intent, ‘That *thing* is brown’, I shall by no means have expressed a proposition with determinate meaning... and this is because my words have left it quite indeterminate what *sort* of thing I am supposedly referring to—a desk, a portion of wood, a surface, or what not (all of which sorts of things carry different criteria of identity). (*Kinds of Being*, 12).

In sum, then, where ‘thing’ is being used in this ‘neutral’ way, as a mere place-holder for substitutable sortals, claims about how many ‘things’ there are in a certain situation are not complete or truth-evaluable, since identity conditions for ‘thing’ and thus truth-conditions for ‘there are N things’ are left unspecified. Moreover, claims about there being some ‘thing’, or about that ‘thing’ before me are not truth-evaluable, since ‘thing’ is incapable of establishing reference. To form a claim that *is* complete and truth-evaluable we must substitute the placeholder term ‘thing’ with some (one or more) genuine sortal such as ‘fork’ or ‘elephant’.

This semantic point is crucially important, since a great many debates in metaphysics, from those concerning co-location, to parsimony, to composition are typically phrased in terms of neutral claims and questions about the existence and number

of ‘things’. (How can there be two or more ‘things’ composed of these parts? How many ‘things’ are there according to each theory? When do simple things compose some other (composite) thing?) Others, as I shall argue (including claims of rivalry between a scientific and common sense ontology) covertly appeal to such ‘neutral’ ‘thingly’ claims. So if ‘thing’ is really used ‘neutrally’ in attempts to state these debates, that should raise our suspicions that the claims involved are incomplete, not truth-evaluable, so that the corresponding metaphysical questions are ill-formed and unanswerable, and apparently competing answers to them do not really conflict.

That’s the general idea, though the argument is not quite as simple as that, since there are in fact a variety of uses of ‘thing’. Nonetheless, I think it is far from accidental that a non-sortal, category-neutral term like ‘thing’ is almost uniformly invoked in stating metaphysical debates.

Certainly in normal English we often treat claims involving ‘thing’ as truth-evaluable, as, e.g., when I might claim that there is something in my shoe, or nothing up my sleeve, or brag about how many things I got for Christmas, or play the party memory game ‘name the things that were on the tray’.

One way in which claims involving ‘thing’ or ‘object’ may be made truth-evaluable is if the speaker in fact uses them sortally, associating them with at least high-level application and identity conditions outlining what it would take for there to be an *object* or *thing* in a given situation, and under what conditions we would have the same object or thing again. There are, I think, some (perhaps quite vague) criteria of identity often associated with these terms (perhaps including medium-sized lumps of stuff well bonded together but independently mobile from surrounding stuff...), enabling us to say how many objects were on the tray, or declare that after all there was nothing in my shoe (my sock was just folded up). Even these, however, vary drastically by context (e.g. consider “there is something in my eye” and “there is nothing in the fridge”).

Given the role of ‘thing’ and ‘object’ as dummy sortals, we can also make sense of what I will call ‘covering’ uses according to which if *any* substitution instance of a claim that there is ‘some *thing*’ with a sortal is true, we can infer that there is (in the covering sense) some *thing*. On this use, ‘object’ and ‘thing’ are guaranteed to apply given the application of any genuine (first-order) sortal term if any sortal term applies—i.e. if there is a fork or an elephant or a movie or a protest—that analytically entails that ‘thing’ applies (that there is some thing in the garbage disposal or standing on one leg or showing at the theater or happening on Main Street). (Clearly there may also be more or less restricted covering uses that, e.g., license the inference that ‘there is some thing’ only from the application of certain sortals—say those for substances rather than events or processes—and some restrictions in fact may be required to avoid paradox). Claims of nonexistence (there is no thing here) are trickier to handle on a covering model—they are clearly false if any sortal applies; perhaps one can say they are true if no possible sortal applies. At any rate, the crucial thing to notice is that on the covering use, since the rules for applying ‘thing’ and ‘object’ on this model depend on those for applying individual sortals, the individual sortals must be supposed to have application conditions that don’t themselves appeal to the existence of some *thing* in the relevant situation if covering claims about whether or not there is some thing are to be truth-evaluable.

If we take on board the basic sortalist position, along with this understanding of the various uses of ‘thing’, some of the central arguments against ordinary objects look very different.

2. The Special Composition Question

The Special Composition Question is (roughly) the question of when several simple(r) things add up to, or compose some other thing (van Inwagen 1990, 31).⁴ More formally, using the device of a plural referring expression (“the xs”), we can ask it as: “When is it true that there is some y, such that the xs compose y?”. Attempts to answer the special composition question have resulted in a variety of arguments against ordinary objects, e.g. Peter van Inwagen argues at length that the only non-arbitrary, plausible answer to this question is that there is some y such that the xs compose y “if and only if the activity of the xs constitutes a life” (1990, 90), thus leading him to deny the existence of inanimate macroscopic material objects, holding that simples and organisms are the only physical objects (1990, 98), while Terence Horgan and Matjaž Potrč argue that the best answer is to say that composition never occurs “because there is only *one* real object, viz. the blobject” (2000, 266)—similarly denying ordinary objects.

The primary reason that considering the special composition question so often leads to rejecting ordinary objects is that, as Jonathan has pointed out, “commonsense ontology implicitly rejects altogether the idea that there is just *one* composition principle” (“How are Ordinary Objects Possible”, 7). That is, commonsense ontology is apparently in conflict with the idea that the special composition question has a *uniform* answer providing a *single* (non-disjunctive) answer to the question of when there is some y such that the xs compose y, which can be stated without restriction to xs and/or ys of particular kinds, and so offering the same answer for any xs and ys whatsoever). For different sorts of ordinary objects (e.g. sand castles, collages, and dogs) seem to follow different compositional principles. Certainly it is clear that none of the uniform answers van Inwagen canvasses (including various strengths of bonding, universalism, nihilism, and his own organicism) can provide anything like a commonsense ontology.

But why should we need a uniform, completely general answer to the Special Composition Question? Even if there is no completely *general*, uniform answer to the Special Composition Question that will yield an ontology of tables, chairs, sticks and stones, it certainly seems that a highly disjunctive, non-uniform answer could easily provide us an ontology that includes ordinary composite objects by providing diverse principles of composition for the diverse sorts of things we seem to be surrounded by—e.g. particles of sand form a sandcastle if they are intentionally maintained in a certain spatial arrangement; pieces of paper form a collage if they are intentionally conjoined with glue for aesthetic purposes; cells form a dog if they constitute a life originating from a certain genetic origin.⁵

⁴ van Inwagen (1990, 287n14) credits H. Scott Hestevolt (1980-81) with introducing the Special Composition Question to contemporary philosophical discussion.

⁵ Sanford is not alone in suspecting that the problem with arguments from composition lies in assuming that there must be one single, uniform, non-arbitrary answer to the Special Composition Question. Ned Markosian (1998) argues that there is no true (uniform) non-trivial answer to the Special Composition Question, so that composition must just be taken as a brute fact. Eli Hirsch (1993) characterizes van Inwagen’s search for a uniform answer to the Special Composition Question as based on seeking a non-arbitrary concept of existence, but denies that there is such a concept.

Van Inwagen provides two objections against any such disjunctive answers. “Series”-style answers, as he calls them, he claims (1) are either circular or dissolve into a uniform answer and (2) interfere with the transitivity of parthood. I have argued elsewhere that these are far from decisive, and to save time, I won’t go into the details here, since I think the real action is elsewhere. The most serious and oft-invoked reasons for rejecting non-uniform answers do not lie in these technical reservations, but rather in general worries that such answers would be “disgracefully messy” (van Inwagen 1990, 66), hopelessly arbitrary, or *ad hoc*. The worry is that such answers, if they are to take account of all the ways common sense allows that some sorts of object may compose others, would involve allowing, e.g., that if pieces of paper are glued together, they may compose an object, whereas if persons are so fastened they do not. So, it is said, such answers must be unacceptably arbitrary, for “what could justify such discrimination?” (1990, 69).

As Horgan and Potrč (2000) put it, van Inwagen’s treatment of the Special Composition Question (SCQ) suggests that there is a tension between “(1) finding a systematic, general answer to the SCQ, and (2) adopting an ontology that conforms reasonably well to our pre-theoretic beliefs, and our scientifically informed beliefs, about what kinds of physical objects there are” (2000, 259). Given that tension, Horgan and Potrč agree that satisfying (1) the so-called “principle of the non-arbitrariness of composition” is far more important than preserving (2) “the posits of common sense and science”. (Indeed Horgan (1993) argues that satisfying (1) itself requires that we reject organisms as well as artifacts, and thus accept an ontology still sparser than van Inwagen’s).

The desire to find a non-arbitrary, non *ad hoc* answer seems fair enough at first glance. But are these really legitimate demands that should incline us to reject all non-uniform answers to the Special Composition Question (and with them, reject an ontology of common sense objects)? To determine whether they are, we need to step back to investigate some of the presuppositions behind the way the Special Composition Question is posed, and what it would take for it to be answerable in its completely general form.

The Special Composition Question asks “When is it true that $\exists y$ (the *x*s compose *y*) (van Inwagen 1990, 30)?” Thus, it is a certain kind of existence question posed in quantificational terms, requiring us to say, of various situations (e.g. when atoms are arranged baseballwise, when two people’s hands are glued together, etc.), whether or not there is ‘some *y*’ in that situation—that is, some *one y*—or one ‘thing’—composed by those *x*s.

But how are we to understand the question of whether the *x*s compose some ‘thing’ here, or claims that there is or is not a ‘thing’ composed by these simpler things? If ‘thing’ here is supposed to be used ‘neutrally’, that is, not as a sortal term, then following Jonathan’s insights, we can see that the question itself of whether there is ‘anything whatsoever’ there, composed by these things, is an ill-formed, incomplete question to which no straightforward answer (posed in the same terms as the question, e.g. ‘there is something composed by these things’, ‘there is no thing composed by these things’) expresses a complete proposition or is truth-evaluable (just as ‘this thing is brown’ does not express any complete, truth-evaluable proposition (Lowe 1989, 12)). The failure to find an answer that yields the objects of common sense is no reflection on

the issue of whether or not those objects exist, but only reflects the fact that the question is ill-formed.

Given the use of ‘thing’ as a ‘dummy sortal’, we can see that the question may be answerable if we substitute for ‘thing’ some sortal term such as ‘table’, ‘boat’, or ‘sandcastle’, and for ‘[simpler] things’ some such sortal term as ‘planks’ or ‘grains of sand’. Such specific composition questions, as David Sanford has pointed out, are perfectly well-formed and answerable even if the generic question (involving ‘things’) is not. But if that is the only way that questions of composition can be well-formed and meaningful, then the demand to find a completely general, non-disjunctive, sort-neutral answer to the special composition question is illegitimate. Instead, all we should expect is a variety of answers for a variety of different substitutions of sortals (for both ‘y’ and ‘the xs’). But such answers seem perfectly compatible with accepting an ontology of ordinary objects, and so if that is the best that can be expected—indeed the only sort of well-formed answers to well-formed questions in the vicinity of the special composition question—then accusations that such answers are ‘hopelessly messy’ ‘arbitrary’ or ‘*ad hoc*’ are out of place, and can play no role in forcing on us a supposedly perfectly general uniform answer as part of an argument for eliminating ordinary objects.

But what of the sortal and covering uses of ‘thing’ that I acknowledged above *can* make questions about ‘things’ answerable, and claims about them truth-evaluable? Certainly the question may be truth-evaluable if ‘thing’ is used sortally; that is, if the speaker associates it with application and identity criteria outlining what it would take for there to be (one or more) *thing* in a given situation, and under what conditions we would have the same thing again. But this would be a relatively uninteresting semantic point about the eliminativist’s own (proposed or presupposed) use of the language, not a surprising claim about the world, and the Special Composition Question could not be used to seriously deny the existence of ordinary objects. Moreover, all disputes about composition would turn out to either involve participants talking past each other (by using ‘thing’ differently), or at best be conceivable as shallow disputes about the best way of turning the term into a sortal (not as deep disputes about what there is) (cf. Sidelle 2002, 141-2; cf. Hirsch 2002b, 106). Thus those who take the Special Composition Question seriously generally reject this interpretation of it in no uncertain terms. As van Inwagen writes:

Many philosophers... have insisted, despite repeated protests on my part, on describing my position in words like these: “Van Inwagen says that tables are not real”; “...not true objects”; “...not actually *things*”... These are words that darken counsel. They are, in fact, perfectly meaningless. My position vis-à-vis tables and other inanimate objects is simply that there *are* none. (1990, 99)

Similarly, if we ask, using ‘thing’ in a covering sense, whether there is some ‘thing’ composed here, that must be evaluated by considering various substitutions of sortals, so that we ask whether, e.g., a table, a boat, or a sandcastle is composed here, and if the answer (according to the separate sortal-relative compositional principle) is ‘yes’ in at least one such case—as seems clear given the use of the ordinary principles in question—it must be true that there is some ‘thing’ composed here. The eliminativist may, of course, deny that any sandcastle is composed (when grains of sand are properly arranged)—but the question is: on what grounds, and why should we accept that denial? The grounds are typically based in denials that there is any *thing* or *object* composed

there at all (Merricks 2001, 15-16; cf. van Inwagen 1990, e.g. 104). But that can't be appealed to on the covering use of 'thing' (since the truth-conditions for that claim depend on those for 'there is some sandcastle composed there'). Nor can we appeal to the need for a uniform principle of composition that will cover all 'things'. And, it seems, according to the standardly associated criteria of application, conditions in which grains of sand are properly arranged are perfectly sufficient conditions for the application of the sortal 'sandcastle'.

In short, if we take 'thing' in the Special Composition Question neutrally, the question is unanswerable; if we take it a sortal or covering sense that makes it answerable, arguments against the existence of sandcastles, tables, and other ordinary objects based on using the Special Composition Question begin to unravel.

3. Rivalry with Science

The divergence between the world-descriptions provided by physical science and common sense has led to some of the oldest and most persistent arguments for eliminating ordinary objects. For if, as some have thought, the descriptions of science compete with those of common sense, given their superior epistemic credentials (it is said) the scientific descriptions surely win out, and we must accept that common sense descriptions of the world as containing solid rocks, green grass, or sweet strawberries, apply to nothing.

There are, in fact, two distinct forms that such arguments can take. The stronger form—inspired but apparently not endorsed by the astronomer Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington—alleges that there is a *conflict* between the descriptions or claims of common sense and those of physical science, a conflict that physical science wins. A slightly weaker form of argument, popularized by Wilfrid Sellars, holds that while the two images may not strictly be said to *conflict*, there is nonetheless a *rivalry* between them, as each purports to offer *the* true and complete description of the world. Thus again, if the two are rivals, surely (it is said) the scientific view must win out at the expense of the common sense view, and we must deny the existence of ordinary objects in favor of an ontology sanctioned by physical science. I will treat these two arguments in turn.

The idea that the descriptions of the world furnished by physical science conflict with those of common sense was popularized by Eddington's famous discussion of the "two tables":

Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me—two tables, two chairs, two pens... One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world... It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all it is *substantial*...

Table No.2 is my scientific table... My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. (1928, ix-x)

The descriptions of the 'table of science', Eddington emphasizes, do not merely *differ* from the descriptions of the 'table of common sense', they *conflict* with it in various ways, e.g. that common sense table is 'substantial' and solid, while the scientific table is "nearly all empty space" (1928, x) and so neither substantial nor solid.

In order to demonstrate a conflict, however, one must show that the two descriptions are talking *about the same thing*, with one asserting that it is, say, solid, and the other denying that it is solid. But what is the alleged thing that common sense asserts, and science denies, is solid? If ‘thing’ alone, in its neutral use, is not a sortal term, then, on the sortalist view, it cannot enable us to establish reference to something, about which science and common sense may then disagree. For either side to make a definite claim, they must employ some sortal term capable of establishing what is being talked about (and attributed or denied solidity).

The natural sortal to use (and that Eddington uses) is “table”. But as Susan Stebbing argues, it is absurd to speak of the object of scientific description (supposedly in competition with the familiar table) as a ‘table’ at all: “I venture to suggest that it is as absurd to say that there is a scientific table as to say that there is a familiar electron or a familiar quantum...” (1958, 58). Certainly scientific theories do not use sortals such as ‘table’, and according to the sortalist view, if the scientific view and manifest image are using sortals of different categories (associated with different identity conditions), we may not identify the ‘things’ picked out by the two descriptions—and so we can’t say that the views conflict in what they say about *the same thing*.

One could try to find a common term utilized in both scientific and common sense descriptions, e.g., ‘physical object’. This, like ‘thing’, seems to be typically used non-sortally, although it may be used as a sortal if it is associated with application and identity conditions. Yet even if the term ‘physical object’ or indeed ‘thing’ is used as a sortal in some common sense contexts, instead of speaking of a ‘thing’ or ‘physical object’ here at all, physics would speak of a great many subatomic particles in fields of force. But we cannot switch the discussion to these terms, for about such subatomic particles, common sense says nothing, and thus cannot be held to assert that they are (jointly) solid, colored, etc. In short, the conceptual frameworks and ontologies of common sense and physical science are so different that it is hard to find a common conceptual ground enabling them to pick out the same ‘things’ and ascribe them conflicting properties.⁶

Wilfrid Sellars acknowledges the difficulties of trying to find a direct *conflict* between the two views, and develops a different form of argument that the precedence of what he calls the “scientific image” might require us to reject the ontological claims of a refined common sense (the “manifest image”). For, as Sellars describes it, both images purport to provide “*the true and, in principle, complete, account of man-in-the-world*”

⁶ This does not, of course, rule out the idea that in some limited contexts the results of something like scientific inquiry can conflict with (and overrule) claims that might count as common sense—provided that it is clear that both *are* talking about the same things and using a predicate with the same sense. Thus, to use the familiar example, it is plausible that the common sense claim that the earth is flat—if understood in the sense of claiming that the extended mass of land and water we live on has a continuous roughly planar surface and edges off of which one could fall, if one ventured too far—was contradicted by the discovery that the earth in fact lacks edges, but is an oblate spheroid. So similarly, the “common sense” claim that eating non-fat foods helps one avoid getting fat⁶ is contradicted by apparent scientific claims in recent diet books. But in both of these cases, we pretty clearly have common sense and scientific discovery speaking of the same things, in the same terms (and if they are not, the case for a conflict evaporates). This is precisely not the case regarding common sense claims about there being tables, chairs, and tennis balls, and the claims of contemporary physics couched in terms of waves and particles. So the existence of some conflicts, and even cases in which supposedly ‘common sense’ claims have been overturned by scientific ones, does nothing to show that claims about the existence of ordinary objects conflict with and have been overturned by modern physics.

(1963/1991, 25). The inability to identify the objects of the images, combined with the claim of each to completeness, jointly make the case for a rivalry between the images. Moreover, since both purport to be true and complete, any account which attempted to incorporate *both* the manifest and scientific images “would contain a redundancy” (1963/1991, 31).⁷ Given this choice, Sellars argues that we should choose the scientific image, since it provides a “*more* intelligible”, and more explanatory, account of what there is (1963/1991, 29).

But it is hard to see what it could mean for any ‘image’ or representation to purport “to constitute *the* true and, in principle, *complete*, account of man-in-the-world” (Sellars 1963/1991, 25)—or why, if any image did make such claims for itself, we should be at all inclined to accept them.

The sortalist position gives us independent reason to doubt that either *could* legitimately purport to provide a *complete* account of what there is. We cannot legitimately say that each of the two images provide rivals to the claim to offer complete accounts of what ‘things’ there are, where ‘thing’ is being used neutrally. For if ‘thing’ is not being used as a sortal term, it does not come associated with the identity criteria needed for counting, and so we cannot in principle answer the question whether a given list covers *all* of the things there are or if there might be *more*. So we have serious reason to doubt that such neutral uses of ‘thing’ could be used in claims of either image to offer a ‘complete’ account of what things there are that could be held to rival that of the other.

Given the use of ‘thing’ as a dummy sortal, each could replace ‘thing’ with one or more sortals from its own framework, but then clearly neither is purporting to offer a complete account of ‘things’, but only of entities *of those sorts or categories*. But (if purporting to be true and complete) they only even purport to rule out other accounts that are done *in the same terms*, purporting to provide a complete account of things *of the same sort or sorts* as those of other accounts. Do the manifest image and the scientific image compete for completeness in this way? It seems not. For the manifest image and scientific image are each concerned with different categories of entities, and employ different characteristic sortal terms. So even if each purports to be complete in *some* sense (i.e. offering a complete account of things *of those sorts*), they still do not purport to be complete in any way that would make them compete.

Sortal uses of ‘thing’ clearly won’t help bolster claims to absolute completeness either, since, if ‘thing’ is being used as a sortal, even if we have a complete account of ‘things’ in that sense, it does not rule out there being entities of other sorts (or corresponding to other sortal uses of ‘thing’).

One could attempt to form a more complete account of what there is using ‘thing’ in a covering sense, by quantifying over all categories, and considering whether each of them has compliants. Complicated issues arise about whether this is possible, but we need not address them here, for even if such a move is possible, it will not help revive a rivalry. For the manifest image and the scientific image do *not* employ all possible categorial terms—or even a large portion of actual such terms. Such images, in fact, are distinguished from each other in terms of the sortal and categorial terms each employs, with the manifest image omitting terms for imperceptible fundamental particles and the

⁷ The claim of a ‘redundancy’ here seems closely analogous to claims that positing ordinary objects *and* scientific objects (or ‘simples’) is implausible, for surely there is really ‘nothing over and above’ or ‘in addition to’ the simples—claims to which I have responded in §4.1 above.

like, and the scientific image omitting terms for artifacts, social objects, and the like. Since each explicitly limits its range of discussion to a small portion of the actual categorial terms available, there is no question of either purporting to offer a complete account by first surveying all categorial terms and then enumerating all instances of each. And if each uses ‘thing’ in a covering sense that presupposes a different range of sortals, their resulting accounts of what things there are cannot be true rivals.

In sum, the supposed rivalry between scientific and manifest image accounts of what there is can only arise based on the assumption that each ‘image’ purports to offer (at least in principle) a true and *complete* account of what there is (Sellars 1963, 20). But properly understood, neither such ‘image’ (with its own characteristic sortal terms) can really purport to offer a ‘complete’ account of what there is. So there is at least no obvious sense in which either the scientific image or the manifest image may legitimately purport to be ‘complete’ in a way that would rule out the other.

Thus both kinds of argument from competition with a scientific ontology at bottom rely on the idea that such a generic, category-neutral use of ‘thing’ can be made sense of. Arguments that there is a conflict between common-sense and scientific ontologies relied on the idea that we could make category-neutral reference to some ‘thing’ about which they give conflicting reports, and arguments for a rivalry rely on the idea that both images may provide category-neutral yet complete inventories of what ‘things’ exist.

4. Parsimony

The final battle in arguments against ordinary objects generally takes place on the grounds of parsimony. For those who accept a common sense ontology, it is often alleged, offer a less parsimonious ontology than do those who accept only simples, or organisms and simples, a blobject, or even just the entities of a scientific ontology. Addressing arguments based on parsimony fully would take more space than remains, and more premises than the simple sortalism described above provides. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that even that simple sortalism problematizes standard claims that one ontology is more parsimonious, and so preferable, to another.

The very idea of parsimony is the idea of positing *fewer things* to do the same (explanatory) work elsewhere done with many. Thus the idea of parsimony relies on the idea of *counting*, and questions of parsimony can only arise where entities can reasonably be counted up (so that the numbers of entities posited by different theories can be compared). This is fine when we can ask *how many* murderers or *how many* subatomic particles a certain theory requires to account for the evidence.

But again, the sortalist view entails that questions involving counting, e.g. ‘how many things are there?’ presuppose a category or categories of entity to be counted. For counting claims rely on identity claims, the truth-conditions for which are, according to the sortalist view, category-relative (cf. Dummett 1973/1981, 74; Geach 1962/1980, 63). Comparisons of how many ‘things’ the realist and eliminativist about ordinary objects each countenance, thus cannot be done if ‘thing’ here is being used neutrally (not as a sortal term). Indeed, we have good reason to think that on the alleged neutral use of ‘thing’, ‘how many things are there’ is an ill-formed, unanswerable question, and good reason to be suspicious of bare claims of relative parsimony based on thinking that one theory is committed to the existence of more ‘things’ than another.

But what of the truth-evaluable uses of ‘thing’? If ‘thing’ is being used as a sortal term, the different ‘counts’ provided by the realist and eliminativist seem to be just the products of turning ‘thing’ into a sortal in different ways (by associating it with different application conditions); they are not comparable counts done in the same terms, and the different sums merely reflect differences in the semantics presupposed for the term ‘thing’, not serious metaphysical differences that make one theory preferable to another.

One might attempt to make use of the covering sense of ‘thing’, and count things up by serially substituting for ‘thing’ multiple sortals such as “atom”, “lump”, and “statue”. Note, however that, in order for there to be a true comparison between countings of any kind, *the same* sortals must be used in one count as another, otherwise we can no more meaningfully say that there are more things on one theory than another than we can say that a class with 31 members has more students than a class with 25 members when the former is counted using base 8 arithmetic, and the latter using base 10.

So suppose we give both the eliminativist and the realist about ordinary objects the same sortals (these, just being *terms*, the eliminativist can hardly refuse—or if she does refuse the terms, the theories cannot be compared in terms of parsimony and the argument from parsimony cannot be made), with the same application and identity conditions. Does the eliminativist’s ‘count’ of things using a sense of ‘thing’ that ‘covers’ these sortals now really come out lower, providing a genuinely more parsimonious theory? That rests on the question of whether the eliminativist can legitimately deny that, on her theory, there are chairs—given that there are particles ‘arranged chairwise’ and that, in the ordinary sense of the term (employed with its standard application conditions), it seems that ordinary speakers would affirm “there are chairs (there)” in just the same circumstances as those in which the eliminativist would affirm that there are particles arranged chairwise (there).

Recall that the eliminativist can’t deny that there is a chair here on grounds of denying that there is any *thing* composed here since, on the covering use of ‘thing’, the truth of ‘there is some thing here’ can’t be evaluated independently of claims like ‘there is some chair’ here. So the challenge for the eliminativist is to say just what conditions for there being a chair here are supposedly not met in a situation in which particles are arranged chairwise—and to do so without relying on claims that there is no ‘thing’, or changing the meaning of ‘chair’ in a way that would make the dispute between eliminativists and realists merely verbal.

5. Conclusion

The sortalist position is based on simple semantic theses that—if accepted—have enormous ramifications for metaphysics. For a great many of the debates about metaphysics—including, but not limited to those mentioned above—bottom out in debates about how many ‘things’ there are in a given location or according to a given theory, whether there is some ‘thing’ present or surviving, and so on. Once we note the propensity of such claims to be ill-formed, and take the time to carefully evaluate the interpretive options, the metaphysical debates that rely on such disputes over whether there is some ‘thing’ present or how many ‘things’ there are look very different indeed.

Here I have not attempted to defend sortalism. Those who reject it would of course reject its conclusions as well, but I hope to have made evident even to them the

central role the supposedly neutral notion of a ‘thing’ plays in a variety of metaphysical debates, and the vast potential importance of the sortalist view for reexamining problems throughout metaphysics. To a more neutral audience, I may hope also to have demonstrated one particularly important use of the sortalist position: that it may provide a uniform diagnosis of the problems behind several arguments against ordinary objects, and the beginnings of a defense of a common sense ontology.