OVERDETERMINATION AND THE EPISTEMIC ARGUMENT

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ABSTRACT: The overdetermination argument that Merricks advances for the elimination of ordinary objects aims to show that an event, such as the shattering of a window, can never be determined by two independent causes, such as a baseball on the one hand and a collection of atoms arranged baseballwise on the other. And if this is so, then baseballs do not exist. In a previous article, I suggested a novel way to resist that argument. However, Merricks also advances an epistemic argument, which aims to show that we should suspend our belief in the existence of baseballs. I resorted to Korman's reconstruction of the epistemic argument, in order to deny one of its premises. But my interpretation of the logical structure of the argument was incorrect, since I treated its mere conditionals as if they were biconditionals. Here I would like to correct my mistake, by providing a new refutation of the epistemic argument.

KEYWORDS: Overdetermination; Ordinary Objects; Eliminativism; Causality; Events; Epistemic Argument.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a previous article[1], I argued that Merrick's overdetermination argument can be resisted by claiming that the causal relation only obtains between the events that objects undergo, not between the objects themselves. I also discussed Merrick's epistemic argument, as Korman presents it, and I attempted to resist it by denying its first premise. However, I reconstructed that argument in an incorrect way, since I treated the merely conditional premises as if they were biconditionals.[2] Here I would like to correct my mistake, by revisiting Korman's

[1] Orensanz (2022).

[2] Thanks to Daniel Z. Korman for pointing this out to me.

formulation of the epistemic argument, as well as how it was originally formulated by Merricks.

As a side note, I would like to suggest that despite my mistake in relation to the epistemic argument, I believe that the solution that I offered for the overdetermination argument still stands. For this reason, I don't think it's necessary to revisit here what I said about the overdetermination argument. It will suffice to say just a few words about it. The idea behind the overdetermination argument is that if ordinary objects exist, then whatever they cause will be overdetermined, since their atoms acting in concert will cause the same event. But since there are grounds for claiming that the effects are not overdetermined, it follows that ordinary objects do not exist. For example, if baseballs exist, then the shattering of a certain window will be overdetermined by a baseball, on the one hand, and a plurality of atoms arranged baseballwise, on the other. But the shattering of the window is not overdetermined, so the conclusion is that baseballs do not exist. There are different ways to resist the overdetermination argument. What I suggested is that, following Bunge's ideas on causation, one may declare that the cause-effect relation is never an object-event relation, instead it is always an event-event relation.[3] In other words, objects cannot be causes, only events can be causes. In this sense, what causes the shattering of the window is not the baseball itself (an object), but rather the impact of the baseball (an event). And this event is also undergone by the atoms arranged baseballwise. To use an analogy, just as a clay statue and the piece of clay that constitute it can share the same reddish color, so too a baseball and a plurality of atoms arranged baseballwise can undergo the same cause.[4] There is only one impact, undergone by the baseball and the atoms arranged baseballwise, so there is only one cause. But this does not entail that the baseball does not exist. This being so, the overdetermination argument has been successfully resisted.

What was not successful was my attempt to resist the other argument that

[3] See especially Bunge (1959, 1977, 2006, 2010).

[4] In using this analogy, I'm not committing myself to the idea that the piece of clay and the statue are indeed two different objects. I'm merely saying that if it makes sense to claim that they are different objects that share some properties (such as a certain color), then it also makes sense to claim that they can undergo the same event. Whether or not the piece of clay and the statue are indeed the same object is an issue that I can't discuss at length here. That being said, what I'm indeed committing myself to here is the idea that a baseball is not identical to the atoms that compose it.

Merricks advances, his epistemic argument. In a nutshell, the epistemic argument suggests that we should remain agnostic about the existence of ordinary objects, because we do not have any good reasons for believing in them. More precisely, if we have good reasons for believing in baseballs, then those reasons must be either perceptual or purely philosophical. But since we have neither, it follows that we do not have good reasons at all for believing in baseballs. And if that is the case, then we shouldn't believe in them.

In the next section I will revisit Korman's version of the epistemic argument, and I will show the mistake that I had previously made regarding its logical structure. Having corrected my mistake, I will indicate which premise I believe should be denied in order to resist the argument. In the section after that one, I will offer some comments on Merricks' original version of the argument, and I will propose a reconstruction that differs from Korman's. I will then argue that two of its premises can be denied. Specifically, I will show that we have good perceptual reasons, as well as good philosophical reasons, for believing in the existence of ordinary objects such as baseballs.

2. REVISITING KORMAN'S **VERSION** OF THE ARGUMENT

Here is how Korman presents Merricks' epistemic argument:

> (OD8) One should believe that an event is overdetermined by A and B only if one is justified in believing in A and B themselves.
>
> (OD9) We are justified in believing in baseballs only if we are *perceptually* justified in believing in baseballs.
>
> (OD10) No one is perceptually justified in believing in trogs.
>
> (OD11) We are perceptually justified in believing in baseballs only if we are also perceptually justified in believing in trogs.
>
> (OD12) So, we are not perceptually justified in believing in baseballs.
>
> (OD13) So, we should not believe that any events are overdetermined by a baseball and atoms arranged baseballwise. (Korman, 2015: 196)

In my previous article, I had incorrectly reconstructed that argument like so:

(OD8) $e \leftrightarrow (a \wedge b)$
(OD9) $b \leftrightarrow p$
(OD10) $\neg t$
(OD11) $p \leftrightarrow t$

(OD12) ¬p
(OD13) ¬e

I incorrectly interpreted three premises here: OD8, OD9, and OD11. I thought they were biconditionals, but they're mere conditionals instead.[5] The correct symbolization of the argument is the following one:

(OD8) e → (a ∧ b)
(OD9) b → p
(OD10) ¬t
(OD11) p → t
(OD12) ¬p
(OD13) ¬e

This being said, I have no objections against OD8. Its denial would amount to claiming that one can believe that an event is overdetermined by A and B without being justified in believing in A and B themselves. But I don't see how this could be the case, so I'm instead inclined to simply accept that OD8 is true. The assessment of OD9 is a different story. Korman accepts it, while Sider seems to deny it.[6] As for myself, I believe that it's true. But I would like to point out that being perceptually justified in believing in baseballs does not preclude being justified in believing in them for purely philosophical reasons as well. These two options are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I will argue later that we have both perceptual and philosophical reasons for believing in ordinary objects such as baseballs. As for OD10, I acknowledge that it's debatable, and that one might reasonably deny it. But, for my part, I'm inclined to agree with Korman that OD10 is true. The culprit is OD11. All things considered, the denial of OD11 seems like the best option here, so I agree with Korman once again. I am perceptually justified in believing in baseballs even if I am not perceptually justified in believing in trogs. However, as I will argue later, my reasons for denying OD11 are different from Korman's. In the next section I will discuss Merricks comments on the epistemic argument, and I will suggest that two of its premises can be reasonably denied.

[5] If the reader is curious as to why I made such a mistake, the only thing that I can say is that for some reason, whenever I read the phrase "only if" it seems to me that it means "if and only if". That being said, I believe that I have learned my lesson here, and I will not make the same mistake in the future.
[6] See Sider (2003).

3. PERCEPTUAL REASONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL REASONS

Merricks argues that we have no good reason for believing in ordinary objects such as baseballs, because if we did, then that reason would have to be either perceptual or purely philosophical. But since we have neither, it follows that we have no good reason at all for believing in such objects. In his own words:

> Our ordinary reason for believing in baseballs is simply that, so it seems, we can just see them (or feel them or otherwise sense them). Similarly, our ordinary reason for believing in statues is that we can just see them. But we saw in Chapter 1 (§II) that 'just seeing a statue' is not really a good reason to believe that atoms arranged statuewise compose a statue. Likewise, 'just seeing a baseball' is not a good reason to believe that atoms arranged baseballwise compose a baseball. So it turns out that our ordinary reasons for believing in baseballs aren't good reasons. So unless we have some extraordinary reasons, we have no good reason at all to believe in baseballs. And if we have no good reason to believe in baseballs, then we shouldn't believe in them. (That is, we should either withhold belief or positively disbelieve in them.) (Merricks, 2001: 73)

Merricks' argument, as I see it, runs as follows:

(EA1) If we have good reasons for believing that baseballs exist, then those reasons will be either ordinary (perceptual) reasons or extraordinary (philosophical) reasons.

(EA2) There are no good ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in baseballs.

(EA3) There are no good extraordinary (philosophical) reasons for believing in baseballs.

(EA4) So, we have no good reason for believing in baseballs.

(EA5) If so, then we shouldn't believe that baseballs exist.

(EA6) So, we shouldn't believe that baseballs exist.[7]

Formally, the argument looks like this:

(EA1) $p \rightarrow (q \vee r)$

(EA2) $\neg q$

(EA3) $\neg r$

[7] Here is a more exact (yet more verbose) formulation of the first premise: (EA1) If we have good reasons for believing in baseballs, then: either our ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in baseballs are good reasons for believing in baseballs, or our extraordinary (philosophical) reasons for believing in baseballs are good reasons for believing in baseballs.

(EA4) ¬p
(EA5) ¬p → ¬s
(EA6) ¬s

EA1 can only be false if we have a good reason for believing that baseballs exist, but that the reason in question is neither perceptual nor philosophical. For example, someone might argue that we have practical reasons for believing in baseballs and other ordinary objects, since we need to take their existence for granted in our everyday lives. Although that line of defense is not inconceivable, I will not pursue it here. Instead, I will simply accept that EA1 is true, if only for the sake of discussion.

EA2, on the other hand, seems much more questionable. One might argue that we do indeed have good perceptual reasons for believing in baseballs, since we can just see them. However, as we saw in the preceding quote, Merricks has a response to that claim, and he offers further support for EA2, as I will discuss later.

EA3 is also questionable. But, once again, Merricks has a response for whoever wishes to deny it that premise. He suggests that few purely philosophical reasons for the existence of baseballs have been published in the literature, and those that have are either question-begging or otherwise faulty in some other way. More on this later.

EA4 cannot be false unless one of the preceding premises is false. And I already conceded that EA1 is true. That meas that EA4 can only be false if either EA2 or EA3 is false. In other words, one can't deny EA4 without also denying either EA2 or EA3, or both.

There is, however, one last (albeit desperate) strategy, which is to deny EA5. Whoever chooses this option will concede that we have no good reason to believe in baseballs, but that we should still believe that they exist. In other words, the idea would be the following: just because I have no *good* reasons for believing in baseballs, that doesn't mean that I shouldn't believe in them, because I might have *bad* reasons for believing in them. Now, a bad reason is still a *reason*, however faulty it may be. I might believe in baseballs and other ordinary objects simply because I'm stubborn. Or perhaps I believe that baseballs exist because, while I was hallucinating after a considerable intake of psychedelic drugs, it seemed to me that a certain baseball, and not merely some atoms arranged baseballwise,

spoke to me. Or maybe I'm a member of a religious sect that claims, in its scriptures, that baseballs exist. These are all *bad* reasons for believing in baseballs, but they're bad *reasons* nonetheless. However, for my part, I don't think that the denial of EA5 is an advisable strategy. So, I concede that EA5 is true. With the preceding in mind, if I wish to resist Merrick's epistemic argument, I will have to deny EA2, or EA3, or both.

4. MERRICKS' DEFENSE OF EA2

Merricks claims that we have no perceptual reasons for believing in baseballs because if we did, then we would also have perceptual reasons for believing in trogs, and he says that the latter is not the case. More precisely, he says that whether or not composition occurs is not an empirical question. As he explains:

> Whether atoms arranged my-neighbour's-dogwise and the-top-half-of-the-tree-in-my-backyardwise compose something is not a straightforwardly empirical question. By the same token, whether atoms arranged statuewise compose something (a statue) is not straightforwardly empirical. In part this is because, as with the dog&treetop, my visual evidence would be the same whether or not the atoms arranged statuewise composed something. (Merricks, 2001: 9)

It seems to me that the argument that underlies the preceding quote can be reconstructed in the following way, in which EA2 is the conclusion:

(EA7) Whether atoms arranged baseballwise compose a statue is analogous to whether atoms arranged trogwise compose a trog.

(EA8) If so, then: if there are no good ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in trogs, then there are no good ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in baseballs.

(EA9) There are no good ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in trogs.

(EA2) So, there are no good ordinary (perceptual) reasons for believing in baseballs.

The idea behind EA7 is that the existence of baseballs is comparable to the existence of trogs. Our visual evidence would be the same whether or not atoms arranged basballwise compose a baseball, and it would also be the same whether or not atoms arranged trogwise composed a trog. EA8 says that if the preceding is the case, then it would be arbitrary to say that we have good perceptual reasons for believing in baseballs but not in trogs. EA9 is based on the idea that whether or not trogs exists is not something that can be settled by empirical means, since

our visual evidence would be the same whether or not some atoms arranged trogwise composed a trog. Given these three premises, EA2 follows as the conclusion of the argument.

I deny EA7, for the following reason: while there are such things as collections of atoms arranged baseballwise, there is no such thing as a collection of atoms arranged trogwise. Atoms are never arranged like that. This is something that neither Merricks nor Korman has pointed out. But I believe that it would be in the interest of eliminativists and conservatives alike to emphasize this point, because to concede that there are such things as atoms arranged trogwise falls short of embracing permissivism. Let me explain why. Imagine a molecule of water and a molecule of oxygen, separated from each other. Now suppose that I ask someone, let's call him Bill, how many molecules are there in total, and what their chemical formulas are. I expect Bill to say that there are just two: a molecule of H_2O, and a molecule of O_2. However, to my surprise, Bill says that there are at least three: the ones that I just mentioned, plus a molecule of ozone, O_3. He reasons as follows: there is one atom of oxygen in the H_2O molecule, and two atoms of oxygen in the O_2 molecule, so there's a total of three oxygen atoms. And, three oxygen atoms compose an ozone molecule. Bill's reasoning is thus that if there are three oxygen atoms, then there is an ozone molecule that they compose, no matter if they are connected to each other or not. But Bill is wrong. It's true that the chemical formula for ozone is O_3. And it's also true that the water molecule has one oxygen atom, and that the oxygen molecule has two. Yet these atoms, in this scenario, are not connected to each other by chemical bonds. There are no atoms arranged ozonewise in this scenario. A trog would be comparable to Bill's ozone molecule. There is a collection of atoms arranged treewise on the one hand, and there is a collection of atoms arranged dogwise on the other. But the atoms arranged treewise are not connected to the atoms arranged dogwise. So, baseballs are not analogous to trogs.

One last point, regarding the denial of EA2. In my previous article, I argued that the overdetermination argument can be resisted by claiming that only events, not objects, can be causes. I also argued that according to Bunge, strictly speaking one does not perceive objects but rather the events that such objects undergo. It might seem that this contradicts my denial of EA2. But it does not, since one can claim that EA2 is false because we have ordinary (perceptual) reasons for

believing in baseballs, not because we perceive baseballs themselves, but rather because we perceive the events that baseballs undergo. EA2 is false, so the epistemic argument fails. In the next section I will discuss Merricks' defense of EA3, and I will show how it can be resisted.

5. MERRICKS' DEFENSE OF EA3

According to EA3, there are no good philosophical reasons for believing in baseballs. More precisely, Merricks suggests that none of the available philosophical reasons for believing in baseballs are *good* reasons for believing in such objects. As he says:

> there is very little out there by way of positive, non-question-begging arguments for the existence of baseballs. After all, their existence is generally taken for granted. (Merricks, 2001: 76)

An example of a blatantly question-begging argument would be the following one:

(QB1) Baseballs exist.

(QB2) So, baseballs exist.

Formally, that argument looks like this:

(QB1) p

(QB2) p

But notice that the problem here does not involve the validity of the argument, since it is indeed logically valid. As Lowe explains:

> An argument for a conclusion *p* that had *p* as its only premise would be blatantly question-begging, but it does not contain an invalid step: for *p* certainly entails *p*. (Lowe, 2011: 25)

The problem with question-begging arguments, as I see it, is that they can be easily resisted, since all it takes to deny the conclusion is to deny the premise that states the same thing. Just as one can merely claim that baseballs exist (as in QB1), someone else may just as easily claim that they don't. If neither party offers any reasons for, or against, the existence of baseballs, then the discussion ends in a stalemate. A non question-begging argument for the existence of baseballs, by contrast, should not contain the premise that baseballs exist. With that in mind, I would now like to advance the following argument:

(NQB1) If no argument for the elimination of baseballs is sound, then

baseballs exist.

(NQB2) No argument for the elimination of baseballs is sound.

(NQB3) So, baseballs exist.

The preceding argument is not question-begging. Whoever wishes to resist it cannot do so by simply claiming that baseballs do not exist, because the conclusion has not been duplicated in one of the premises. In order to resist it, either the first or the second premise must be false.[8] NQB1 can only be false if the antecedent is true while the consequent is false. In other words, it must be true that no argument for the elimination of baseballs is sound, and it must also be false that baseballs exist. If Merricks is right in his characterization of what a good philosophical reason is, then whoever chooses to deny NBQ1 does not, and cannot, have any good philosophical reason for claiming that baseballs do not exist.

A more promising strategy for eliminativists is to deny NQB2. All that it takes is to formulate at least one sound argument for the elimination of baseballs. And eliminativists believe that they have advanced many such arguments in the past, such as the sorites paradox, the paradox of the Ship of Theseus, and the problem of the many, among others. But I suggest that none of these arguments are sound, each of them contains at least one false premise.[9]

Having advanced the preceding non-question begging argument for the existence of baseballs, I would now like to advance another argument, which explicitly targets premise EA3:

(EA10) If there is at least one sound and non-question begging argument for the existence of baseballs, then it is not the case that there are no good extraordinary (philosophical) reasons for believing in baseballs.

(EA11) There is at least one sound and non-question begging argument for the existence of baseballs

(¬EA3) So, it is not the case that there are no good extraordinary (philosophical) reasons for believing in baseballs.

This being so, EA3 is false, and the epistemic argument fails.

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[8] But not both, since if one of them is false, then the other one must be true.

[9] This article is not the place to discuss these other arguments in detail, but see Korman (2020) on the options available for resisting each and every one of them.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a previous article, I discussed two arguments advanced by Merricks for the elimination of ordinary objects: his overdetermination argument and his epistemic argument. I had incorrectly interpreted the logical structure of the latter. Here I have corrected my mistake, and I have indicated how the epistemic argument can be resisted. Specifically, I have argued that we have good perceptual reasons as well as good philosophical reasons for believing in ordinary objects.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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