Eliminativism and Gunk

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RESUMEN

El eliminativismo acerca de los objetos materiales macroscópicos afirma que no necesitamos incluir a las mesas en nuestra ontología, y que cualquier función que cumplan, práctica o teórica, puede ser realizada también por "átomos dispuestos en forma de mesa". Esta manera de caracterizar el eliminativismo se enfrenta a la objeción de que si no hay "átomos", es decir si no hay simples o partículas últimas en el mundo, tampoco hay entidades que puedan ser "dispuestas en forma de mesa". En este artículo, analizo varias estrategias a disposición del eliminativista para responder a esta objeción, y concluyo mostrando que de hecho la objeción yerra y no es una amenaza para el eliminativismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *objetos ordinarios, eliminativismo, simples, contingentismo*.

ABSTRACT

Eliminativism about macroscopic material objects claims that we do not need to include tables in our ontology, and that any job – practical or theoretical – they have to do can be done by 'atoms arranged tablewise'. This way of introducing eliminativism faces the worry that if there are no 'atoms', that is, if there are no simples and the world is 'gunky', there are no suitable entities to be 'arranged tablewise'. In this article, I discuss various strategies the eliminativist can have to face this objection, and I conclude by showing that the objection is actually misdirected and does not threaten eliminativism at all.

KEYWORDS: *Ordinary Objects, Eliminativism, Gunk, Simples, Contingentism*.

I

There is not one eliminativism, but many. Eliminativists are like a family: they often disagree on the details and even on important issues, but they all abide by the same general idea that "less is more", or perhaps more accurately, that "less is enough". Their ideology is roughly this: we should not postulate the existence of something if we do not *really* need it. For instance, the kind of eliminativism I will be concerned with in this article, i.e. eliminativism about ordinary macroscopic material objects, is

the view that we don't need to postulate the existence of many things like tables, planets, mountains, shoes, and so on. There are various versions of such an eliminativist view that can be found, for instance, in Unger (1979), Van Inwagen (1990), Heller (1990), and Merricks (2001). The common idea to all such eliminativist strategies is that without having to postulate the entities at hand, we already have all we need to account for all phenomena that need to be accounted for: for instance, we do not need tables because we have 'atoms arranged tablewise'. This latter claim will be the focus of this article. But eliminativism is a bigger family than this. Indeed, it can be a successful strategy not only when it comes to the ontology of ordinary macroscopic material objects, but also in other areas of philosophy: for instance in aesthetics when it comes to the ontology of musical works [Cameron (2008)] or the ontology of photographs [Benovsky (2011)], or – both famously and controversially – in the philosophy of mind when tackling the mind-body problem [Churchland, P. M. (1981), (1988), Churchland P. S. (1986), and Dennett (1978), (1988)]. Thus, eliminativism is a paradise for the Ockham-minded metaphysician. It's a superb tool that can help to solve many apparent problems and puzzles. To come back to the case I will be interested in this article, eliminativism elegantly avoids many possible problems with ordinary objects: problems surrounding composition and the vagueness that can infect it, problems with material constitution and the threat of coincident entities, problems with the arbitrariness of saying which objects 'count' as genuine and which do not, problems with causal overdetermination, or the famous 'problem of the many'. Of course, any such puzzle cases or problems have a variety of solutions, some of them better (or worse) than others, but what characterises eliminativism here, and what makes it be the metaphysician's paradise, is the way in which it has a unified and complete solution to *all* such worries.

II

But this paradise is threatened. Often, a menace comes from incredulous stares and 'intuitions' directed against the eliminativist's central claims, namely that many of the things we think there are do not exist. I will leave the discussion of this type of threat for another day. In this article, I will be interested in a different worry one can raise *à propos* of eliminativism about ordinary objects, namely that it stands on shaky ground. In short, here is the worry: if the eliminativist says that (instead

of there being tables) there are 'atoms arranged tablewise', and if these 'atoms' are meant to be simples, then eliminativism falls prey to the objection that the world could be 'gunky' – no simples, no arrangements of atoms. This objection has been strongly developed and explored by Sider (1993) whose target was Peter Van Inwagen's brand of eliminativism[1] [see, *inter alia*, Van Inwagen (1990), p. 109]. Van Inwagen subscribes to the existence of simples and living things. Tables, to repeat, do not exist, but simples arranged tablewise do, and that's enough for any linguistic, practical, or philosophical purposes. On the linguistic level, for instance, one way to put it is to say that "There are atoms/simples arranged tablewise" is a paraphrase for "There is a table". Sider's line of argument can accept this paraphrase strategy, but questions the existence of the building blocks on which it relies – the existence of simples/atoms. In the history of physics, every time we thought we had discovered a fundamental particle (chemical atoms, protons, neutrons, quarks, …), it emerged sooner or later that, contrary to what we thought, it was *not* a simple, and that it was made of smaller elements. Experience then seems to teach us caution, and it seems to be, at least *prima facie*, a metaphysical possibility that there are no simples – perhaps matter is infinitely divisible, and the world is 'gunky': any part of any object has proper parts.

This is a problem for an eliminativist like Van Inwagen. Leaving the case of living things aside, if there are no simples, his eliminativism, as it stands, cannot be true in a gunky world. Van Inwagen himself claims his 'atomism' to be a metaphysical assumption he does not argue for – after all, every theory has its load of primitives, and this is his. But, Sider (1993), p. 288, objects, "Van Inwagen needs more than the truth of Atomism: he needs its *necessary* truth. And this is what I find implausible". Sider then adds: "Van Inwagen may reply that accepting the necessary truth of Atomism is a cost of his theory, but an acceptable one, given his unappealing rivals. I disagree: I find the *possibility* of gunk so compelling that I am willing to reject any theory that rules it out".

III

There are various ways the eliminativist can react to this worry, some of them available to Van Inwagen himself, and others only available to other versions of eliminativism, as we shall see. The one that I will ultimately find to be the best will then show us something about elimina-

tivism itself, namely that it is an ontology that provides a generic *method* that can be used in various ways.

A first type of reaction could criticise Sider's argument by claiming that it is rather weak [see Korman (2014), pp. 9-10]. Indeed, Sider seems to rely on one kind of metaphysicians' intuitions – namely, the intuition that gunk is possible, and finds it so compelling that he is 'willing to reject any theory that rules it out' (see above). But then, there is the intuition that *tables are possible* which would rule out eliminativism even more directly. Perhaps, *qua* intuition, the latter is even stronger than the gunk intuition, and so if one decides to follow intuitions of this kind one will probably not even consider eliminativism to be a live option at all, and no 'argument from gunk' is needed. But intuitions, for or against eliminativism, are not a good guide for the metaphysician to follow in such a situation. The issue is not about whether gunk, tables, or eliminativism are intuitive. Sider explores a possibility, or at least the possibility of a possibility, and the eliminativist should have an answer to the objection, rather than claiming that his opponent's intuition is not intuitive enough. The eliminativist should take Sider's possibility seriously, even if only to play as fair as possible.

Taking the possibility seriously, the eliminativist could claim to be a contingentist eliminativist, that is, she could say that her view is meant to apply to the actual world only, and leave it open whether in other possible worlds her view is applicable, depending on whether these worlds are gunky or contain suitable simples. Contingentism could seem to be a frustrating retreat for any metaphysician, but it is a live option [see Rosen (2006), Miller (2009), (2010)]. *Stricto sensu*, it would avoid at least one part of Sider's objection. Indeed, it is the *possibility* of gunk that Sider finds so convincingly plausible, not its actual existence in our world. Thus, the contingentist's retreat answers the objection by accepting it: yes, gunk *is* possible, and there are worlds where composition takes place and eliminativism is false. The remaining piece of trouble for the eliminativist is to defend the claim that the *actual* world is ultimately made of simples – which is an empirical claim. Perhaps our world is made of some kind of quanta, or indivisible vibrating strings, or some other 'atoms'. But perhaps not. The truth of contingent eliminativism relies then on future empirical discoveries that may, or may not, be conclusive. Let us see if eliminativism can do better.

A more metaphysically-minded option for the eliminativist is to meet the objection head-on and argue against the possibility of gunk. Williams (2006) takes this line of defence, and claims that Sider's argu-

ment is a tricky one since it argues for the possibility of gunk based on its conceivability – and the route from intuitive conceivability to possibility can be a treacherous one. It's hard to say who has the burden of proof here. But suppose, for the sake of the point I want to make here, that the Williams-like eliminativist succeeds in undermining the possibility of gunk. Well, if this is the path he wants to follow, he'll have to go even further. Indeed, a mirror objection to Sider's could be based on the claim that monism is possible: there is (can be) only one big entity, the universe. Here again, at least *prima facie*, the standard eliminativist who appeals to a paraphrase in terms of 'atoms/simples arranged tablewise' will not work. Thus, in the same spirit as Williams above, he could then argue that monism is not possible, and he may, or may not, succeed. In both cases, and perhaps in other cases as well, this type of eliminativism is vulnerable to arguments supporting the possibility of gunk, monism, or other ontologies which are incompatible with the claim that there are simples arranged tablewise. Success is possible, but difficult to obtain.

IV

Let us come back to the very idea of the paraphrase strategy. Van Inwagen and others claim that instead of saying "There is a table" we can say "There are simples/atoms arranged tablewise in region R". The former is a sentence uttered in ordinary English, and can be said to be true in ordinary English, because the latter is a true sentence uttered in Ontologese, the metaphysician's fundamental language. Now, nobody forces the eliminativist to endorse *this* paraphrase. Instead, she could say "There is gunk shaped tablewise in region R" (or something like this), or she could have a suitable monistic paraphrase, perhaps "The universe is table-like in region R" or in a Spinozian spirit "The universe has a table-like aspect in region R". If gunk is fundamental, the paraphrase will appeal to gunk, if the whole universe is fundamental, the paraphrase will appeal to the universe, and if there are simples, it will mention simples – it can be as straightforward as that. Straightforward, yes, but each of these strategies is open to the same objections. If one has a paraphrase in terms of simples, one has to face the possibility of gunk and the possibility of monism. If one has a paraphrase in terms of gunk, one has to face a similar objection about *the possibility of simples* and the possibility of monism. If one has a monistic paraphrase, one has to face the possibility of gunk and the possibility of simples. In any case, the same type of ob-

jections will arise. It seems that whatever route the eliminativist takes, she ends up in trouble, or will have to retreat to contingentism, or to provide strong arguments to reject the possibilities of gunk/simples/monism, and perhaps more.

To my mind, the pressure put on the eliminativist is misguided and indicates a misconception about what eliminativism *is*. Eliminativism is not a theory about the nature of the fundamental constituents of reality. It does not tell us, and it does not need to tell us, whether quarks, strings, gunk, instantiated properties, or something else is the fundamental stuff of which the world (or the worlds) is made (provided that it does not postulate *composite* entities, since this would deprive eliminativism from its strongest motivation and its problem-solving powers (see end of 1)). These are all additional claims. What it does tell us is that there is nothing more than this fundamental stuff – that's what eliminativism is all about. (With the notable exceptions that some eliminativists make for conscious beings (Merricks) or living entities (Van Inwagen).) Eliminativism is not, in this sense, a *complete* ontology. Rather, it is an incomplete ontology that provides a strategy or a method that allows one to eliminate unnecessary entities from one's ontology, whatever that ontology is. As we have seen in §1, there are all kinds of eliminativisms where this is clearly apparent: eliminativism about musical works or photographs says literally nothing about the fundamental ontology, it only eliminates musical works or photographs, but not, say, tables, and does not appeal at all to any para-phrases using 'gunk', or 'atoms', or 'quarks', etc. Things are similar with respect to eliminativism about ordinary macroscopic objects. Its purpose is to say something about ordinary objects, not about the fundamental ontology. Granted, there needs to be a fundamental ontology and the eliminativist needs to appeal to this ontology in her paraphrases, but as we have seen it is easily compatible with any reasonable ontology one can have, and so it is *neutral* with respect to the choice of fundamental ontology. Eliminativism, *qua* strategy for eliminating tables and shoes, is compatible with virtually any fundamental ontology, and it can be disso-ciated from the additional claim that the fundamental ontology is such-and-such. The eliminativist's job is to eliminate, not to say what the na-ture of what remains is. Of course, eliminativists, like Van Inwagen or Heller, can have in mind their own preferred fundamental ontology, but again, what they do here is to supplement eliminativism with additional claims that they want to defend or embrace. In its simplest and most general form, the eliminativist's paraphrase is simply this: instead of say-ing "There are tables" we can say "There is fundamental stuff arranged

tablewise", where the nature of 'fundamental stuff' and of what 'arranged' exactly means can be left open, without any loss of what eliminativism is there for and of its explanatory power and theoretical virtues.

This does *not* amount to embracing contingentism². Eliminativism is compatible both with contingentism and with the claim that the fundamental ontology is necessary. In the picture of eliminativism I suggest here, eliminativism provides a strategy that can adapt to any (or many) situations and worlds. It is an entirely different issue to claim that all possible worlds are gunky, or that some are gunky and others contain simples, or that some contain only one object (monism) while others are gunky or contain simples. Eliminativism can be true in all these situations, and its claims are orthogonal to these additional issues.

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NOTES

¹ In this article, I use "eliminativism" and "nihilism" as synonyms.
² *Contra* Le Bihan (2013), p. 5.

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