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Arbitrariness and the long road to permissivism

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Abstract

Radically permissive ontologies like *mereological universalism* and *material plenitude* are typically motivated by concerns about arbitrariness or anthropocentrism: it would be objectionably arbitrary, the thought goes, to countenance *only* those objects that we ordinarily take there to be. Despite the prevalence of this idea, it isn't at all clear what it is for a theory to be "objectionably arbitrary", or what follows from a commitment to avoiding arbitrariness in metaphysics. This paper aims to clarify both questions, and examines whether arguments from arbitrariness really *are* the proper foundations for one or both varieties of ontological permissivism. I argue that these considerations (even when made more precise) are far less successful at motivating radical forms of permissivism than we often take them to be. To do better, permissivists must either supply a much more developed metaphysics of material objects, or a controversial (but tempting) conception of what we're doing when we do metaphysics.

Metaphysicians allow themselves many vices: that a theory is revisionary or remarkable rarely counts as a decisive strike against it. Still, for all of our indulgences in the bizarre, metaphysicians mostly seem to agree that there is no place in metaphysics for *arbitrariness*.

It is an aversion to arbitrariness that has compelled many of us to accept extreme conclusions about material object ontology: for example, that any plurality of material objects composes something (*mereological universalism*), or that every material object coincides with an abundance of further material objects, each with different modal or temporal persistence conditions (*material plenitude*). The motivating thought in each case is that once we have admitted some familiar objects – like trees and minivans – there are no principled grounds for excluding those with unfamiliar mereological or modal features – like bizarre fusions of trees and dogs ("trogs") or objects

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that grow and shrink as cars enter and leave garages ("incars"). On pain of arbitrariness, we must admit them all.[1]

This line of reasoning is sometimes called *the argument from arbitrariness*, and reflects what many take to be the most persuasive grounds for rejecting "common sense" views in favor of much more permissive ontologies. But despite the rhetorical effectiveness of these appeals, it is far from clear what it is for a theory to be objectionably arbitrary, or which ontological conclusions follow from our aversion to arbitrariness.[2] This paper aims to make progress on both questions by examining whether considerations of arbitrariness really *are* the proper foundation for the most well-known varieties of permissivism about ontology. I'll argue that arguments in the vicinity (even when made more precise) are far less successful at motivating the target views than we often take them to be.

The core of the challenge I will raise rests on a distinction between what I'll call "moderate permissivism" and "radical permissivism". Theories in the former camp say that there are a lot more things than our everyday practices might have led you to expect – like all permissivists, moderate permissivists are willing to countenance some truly extraordinary objects! But only the radical permissivists take it to the limit: they purport to 'max out' ontology, insisting that the world contains *all* of the extraordinary things in question. The problem with appealing to arbitrariness to motivate varieties of *radical* permissivism is that it isn't clear whether arguments from arbitrariness can take us all the way. Considerations that aim only to undermine particular versions of conservatism, or to motivate adopting an ontology that is more permissive only in certain local respects (eg. by recognizing incars or trogs) won't on their own suffice as foundations for truly radical varieties of permissivism.[3] There is a long road ahead, and we risk stalling out in the neighborhood of the merely moderate.

Section 1 introduces two forms of radical permissivism that we'll be treating as our goal-posts. There, I'll also say a bit more about what is at stake in getting a handle on the argument from arbitrariness. In Section 2, I explore several tempting ways we might understand the relationship between arbitrariness and radical permissivism, and argue that none suffices to motivate the target views. I propose in Section 3 that arbitrariness arguments rest on a pair of commitments: that the domains in question obey parity constraints (roughly, that like cases behave alike) and – more contentiously – that the domains in question are homogeneous (roughly, that all of the cases in question *are* alike). Finally, in Section 4, I try to demystify latter commitment by briefly exploring two attempts to motivate it, and raise worries for each approach.

1 | RADICAL PERMISSIVISM

The terrain of contemporary ontology is sometimes mapped out in terms of different attitudes about "common sense" metaphysics. Borrowing labels from Korman (2015): Conservatives say that there are roughly the objects we ordinarily take there to be; there are electrons, tigers, minivans, and mountains, but not trogs or incars." Conservatives are opposed on one front by Eliminativists (who say that there are hardly any of the objects we ordinarily take there to be) and on the other by Permissivists (who say that there are hosts of extraordinary objects in addition to the ordinary ones).[4]

The danger of this style of cartography is that it makes it easy to elide an important difference between the varieties of eliminiativism and permissivism that are properly extremal, and those that aren't. To keep that difference in focus, I'll use a map that more closely mirrors van Inwagen's taxonomy of answers to the Special Composition Question ("When do some things compose something?"). There are exactly two extremal answers to the SCQ: that pluralities *never*

compose and that pluralities *always* compose. Any other answer – however outlandish – van Inwagen calls "moderate".[5] So, importantly, there might be moderates about composition who acknowledge plenty of unfamiliar objects, but who nonetheless deny that every plurality composes something. In what follows, we'll want labels that help generalize this point. I'll use the label 'radical' for limit-case varieties of permissivism, and so distinguish radical permissivism from merely moderate permissivism. I'll reserve the label 'conservative' for the special case of moderate views that more or less approximate the ontology of common sense.

I've already mentioned two of the most well-known forms of permissivism: universalism and plenitude. Mereological universalism is, of course, van Inwagen's "always" answer: given any collection of material things, there is something composed of them. Material plenitude is a bit less familiar. While universalism is a claim about the mereological complexity of the world, plenitude is a claim about its modal complexity. Plenitude guarantees that every material object coincides with an abundance of further objects with different "modal profiles" – objects that differ with respect to which properties they have essentially and accidentally. Proponents of plenitude will say, for example, that in addition to the cup on the table –which can't survive being smashed – there's also something coincident with the cup that can't survive being picked up and moved to another place in the room, or filled with milk, or painted neon-green.

Put a bit more carefully, plenitude is the thesis that coincident with any material object is a distinct object for *every* consistent modal profile. We wind up with apparently quite different versions of plenitude depending on how we understand 'consistent modal profiles'.[6] What matters for our purposes here is that according to *any* version of material plenitude, there are coincident objects witnessing the full range of modal variation. In this way universalism and plenitude are deeply analogous: not only do they each apparently guarantee the existence of extraordinary objects in addition to the familiar stock of ordinary ones, they also purport to "max out" ontology along some dimension. That is: they are both varieties of radical permissivism.

So it isn't surprising that their motivational foundations are so very similar. In support of universalism, we often hear speeches like the following:

> "Of course there are composite objects: that table, for example, is made up of some suitably arranged atoms. But why should that collection of atoms compose something, but not the collection of chairs in this room? Even though the chair-fusion isn't the sort of object we usually talk about, it seems objectionably arbitrary to recognize only the fusions that correspond to familiar objects. On pain of arbitrariness, we should recognize them all."

And in favor of plenitude:

> "Of course there are coincident objects: statues, for example, are distinct from the lumps of clay that make them up. But why should there be something (like a statue) which has its shape essentially, and not also something (like a "desk-statue") which is essentially sitting on a desk, and so can't survive being carried away? Even though the desk-statue isn't the sort of object we usually talk about, it seems objectionably arbitrary to recognize only the objects corresponding to familiar modal profiles. On pain of arbitrariness, we should recognize them all."

Given these similarities, it may seem that arbitrariness arguments for universalism and plenitude stand or fall together. Why should we think that moderate views of composition are

objectionably arbitrary, but resist plenitude? Granted – there's one obvious point of departure right out of the gate. Each speech begins with a broadly anti-eliminativist premise: that there are *some* composite objects, in the former case, and that there are *some* non-trivially coinciding objects, in the latter. As long as these are separable commitments, universalists who deny non-trivial coincidence are under no direct pressure from arguments like the above to accept plenitude.[7]

Matters are quite different for the very many of us who accept both anti-eliminativist premises. With *that* as our starting point it becomes especially hard to ignore the strength of the analogy between the two speeches. (And, in fact, some better-known versions of these speeches aim to motivate radical abundance along many dimensions at once. See for example (Hawthorne, 2006, p. 105) and (Sidelle, 2002, p. 119-120).) Taking the analogy seriously reveals an underappreciated risk of over-extension lurking in the ways that we usually talk about arbitrariness.[8] If arbitrariness arguments have such exceptionally general force – general enough to threaten *any* form of moderatism about ontology – then we risk being led all the way to something like *maximalism*.

Maximalism, very roughly put, is the thesis that *anything that can exist, does exist*.[9] At least on the face of it, the view amounts to "maxing out" ontology not just with respect to composition or coincidence, but *wherever* we can. Maximalism thus glossed purports to guarantee not just an abundance of bizarre fusions and coincidents, but also (depending on the details) an abundance of mathematical objects, events, propositions, fictional characters, and so on; the sort of ontological horde even the most eager universalist might balk at.[10]

Insofar as we base our commitments to universalism and plenitude on a wholly general commitment to avoiding arbitrariness, we seem to have reason to take maximalism quite seriously. Sider (2007) makes this connection explicit:

> Maximalism is tempting (to the degree that it is) because it minimizes arbitrariness. If maximalism is false, and some consistent objects are present while others are missing, there's a why-question without an answer: why do these objects, but not those, exist? Whereas if maximalism is true, we have a nicely rounded picture of the world, and fewer why-questions go unanswered. Maximalism is attractive for the same reason that plenitudinous views about material ontology are attractive. The more general the maximalism, the more it minimizes arbitrariness. (p. 223)

If this is right, maximalism might be more than an option on the menu for metaphysicians who are especially skittish about arbitrariness. Rather, it might follow from a very natural generalization of the arguments we use to motivate much more mainstream varieties of radical permissivism. After all, maximalism is like the other views we've considered so far in at least one crucial respect: they all mean to capture the thought that ontology is (in the relevant respects) "full to the brim".

But even those of us inclined to ontological decadence should be cautious here. Maximalism is not for the faint of heart! Notoriously, it is *wickedly* difficult to formulate maximalist theses consistently. Consider just one representative gloss:

> What maximalism says is that for any type of object such that there can be objects of that type given that the empirical facts are exactly what they are, there are such objects. (Eklund, 2008, p. 391)

Eklund acknowledges upfront that the gestural notion of empirical consistency he appeals to here "at best fudges things". Worse, plausible precisifications still face the challenge of

incompossible objects: groups of objects such that each is compatible with the empirical facts as they are, but which cannot co-exist.[11] In its slogan form, then, maximalism seems to commit us to objects that even the most radically permissive ontology shouldn't countenance. This corresponds to a much more general problem for maximalism: any maximalist will need to find a way to impose suitable constraints on her ontological picture without surrendering her maximalist credentials.

I won't be arguing that taking arbitrariness seriously requires us to accept maximalism – or even that it requires us to accept *both* universalism and plenitude. However, the specter of maximalism raises two important questions. First: to what extent do the motivations for universalism and plenitude hang together? (And what must the appeal to arbitrariness look like for it to be principled to, as many do, endorse universalism and not plenitude?) Second: if they do hang together, what exactly are the limits of this line of argument? Do the very same appeals to arbitrariness that lead us to universalism motivate something as extreme as maximalism? Though an interest in these questions will guide much of what follows, I won't be able to answer either fully here. Instead, my goal is to clear enough ground for radical permissivists to identify the commitments that *by their own lights* suffice to motivate the target views.

To put my cards on the table: I quite *like* universalism, plenitude, *and* maximalism. But even for those of us attracted to unlimited ontology, the prospect of being *driven* to maximalism by the rhetoric of arbitrariness hasn't been sufficiently investigated. Pinning down how permissivists think about arbitrariness is pressing not only because it helps us better understand the credentials of our own views, but because arbitrariness arguments are often the best resource for making sense of the contours of the views themselves. There is clearly an important connection between radical permissivism and arbitrariness, but we should take care with how we exploit that connection.

2 | ARBITRARINESS

In ordinary usage, we often call decisions, distinctions, selections, beliefs, and edicts 'arbitrary' when they have as their foundation someone's personal whim. In other cases, we call agent's choices 'arbitrary' if they seem to be either foundationless or unsystematic: an arbitrarily chosen mealtime, or an arbitrary collection of objects packed into a moving box. And, sometimes, appeals to arbitrariness – as we've seen above – are connected to an aversion to leaving (some or certain) "why-questions" unanswered.

Discussions of arbitrariness in defense of universalism and plenitude typically invoke one or more of these threads, and are most often presented informally as complaints *against* conservative positions. But, as we'll see, powerful arguments against conservatism often turn out to provide only very weak support *for* varieties of radical permissivism. If an aversion to arbitrariness is meant to serve as our foundation, we'll need to do better.

2.1 | Anthropocentrism

One thought in the neighborhood of our ordinary concept of arbitrariness has to do with the epistemic standing of conservatism or conservative beliefs: that it is a matter of mere epistemic whim that the conservative believes that there are cars and not incars, or that certain collections of atoms compose something but that others do not. But what might this epistemic whimsy consist

in? It is not as if a commitment to conservative metaphysics characteristically involves a kind of ontological wishful thinking: we *do* have reason to believe there are ordinary objects! (And perhaps even some reasons to believe there aren't extraordinary ones.)

A particularly salient way of filling out the idea of "epistemic whim" has to do with the charge of anthropocentrism.[12] This charge is sometimes framed as an epistemic complaint against conservatism; either by targeting the credentials of ordinary ontological beliefs, or by targeting the epistemic habits of the conservative metaphysician. Consider, for example, Yablo's warning about parochialism in metaphysics:

> Even if we do not ourselves recognize essentially juvenile or mature entities, it is not hard to imagine others who would (...) Conversely, we recognize things, say, essentially suitable for playing cribbage, or cutting grass, which others do not, or might not have. To insist on the credentials of the things we recognize against those which others do, or might, seems indefensibly parochial. In metaphysics, unusual hypothetical coloring can be no ground for exclusion. (Yablo, 1987, p. 307)

He goes on to endorse a form of plenitude:

> Since this is metaphysics, everything up for recognition must actually be recognized; and, when this is done, there are coincidents enough to witness the hypotheticality of every hypothetical property.

The suggestion here is that the would-be-moderate ontologist's grounds for excluding something "up for recognition" are bound to be parochial – or at least, too parochial for metaphysics – as evidenced by the observation that others might have recognized the things we fail to.[13]

This is a close cousin of a complaint that is more closely analogous to *debunking arguments* in ethics. The rough idea behind the debunking line is that having reflected on the ways that our ontological beliefs seem to be contingent on our social, cultural, or biological circumstances, we find that we might easily have believed radically different things about what there is. Supposing that the conservative is right and that our ordinary beliefs *are* true, then this is so only by accident, "miracle", or luck – a kind of luck that it is tempting to think is incompatible with knowledge. Thus, the thought goes, the ordinary beliefs that some conservatives aim to validate are rendered epistemically illegitimate when we reflect on their origins – and so conservatism is epistemically suspect even if true.[14]

Korman (2015) discusses this latter line extensively, and argues that there is no stable argument for permissivism in the vicinity. In part, this is because shoring up already suspect ontological beliefs by positing a plenitude of objects does nothing to improve the epistemic standing of the beliefs. In Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018), we reply at length on behalf of permissivism. The upshot of our discussion is that, like Korman, we are not optimistic about this line of argument (though for somewhat different reasons). Here, however, I only want to make the very brief observation that even the best anthropic arguments *against* conservatism – or any hypotheses that rely on the coordination of ontology with ordinary belief – do very little to motivate radical permissivism. Such arguments will do little more than move us off of the center (as it were) without the auxiliary commitment that every form of moderate permissivism will be similarly undermined. But this doesn't seem terribly plausible: whatever fault of anthropocentrism conservatives might be guilty of, there's nothing anthropocentric about the moderate thesis that every plurality has a fusion except for the ones in the coat closet at my parent's house.

It might be tempting to try a line broadly inspired by the Yablo passage, and insist that we're guilty of a kind of objectionable anthropocentrism as long as we've excluded something that a possible community might recognize. (And, moreover, that only ontologists endorsing radical varieties of permissivism can escape that charge by putatively recognizing *everything* "up for recognition".) This strikes me as a very different sort of argument; one which depends on a certain conception of ontology, rather than on an epistemic fault of moderatism. It also seems *much* too quick in the case of plenitude. Depending on what exactly it means for a community to 'recognize' an object, there is no guarantee that every modal profile describes an object that is possibly recognized by some community. (For example, a version of plenitude that is sufficiently permissive about the properties that can be had essentially may yield an object with a stealthy essence – eg. something that is *essentially unrecognized*. More generally, it is at least *prima facie* plausible that there are modal profiles such that nothing like them could be recognized by creatures like us, perhaps because they involve sufficiently complex or heterogeneous modal properties.)

Even if we are licensed to levy some family of epistemic complaints against particularly anthropocentric-seeming proposals, we don't yet have a reason to think that belief in *every* moderate position would be in the same sort of bad standing.[15] So, complaints of anthropocentrism won't get us all the way to radical permissivism.[16]

2.2 | Epistemic parity

A better model for an epistemic complaint against moderate metaphysics comes from the way we usually talk about "arbitrary choices". When I offer you a chance to select one of two identical candy boxes – assuming you know nothing else about them – your selection is bound to be arbitrary. (Notice that we say this sort of thing regardless of whether one in fact contains better candy.) Similarly, when you have equally good reason to believe that p as to believe some incompatible alternative q, your belief that p is in this sense "arbitrary"[17].

I'll try to leave to one side the question of whether an "arbitrary belief" in p necessarily involves some kind of epistemic failing. Whatever we think of the general case, it at least seems that there's something misguided about similarly settling our theoretical beliefs. Epistemic Parity is especially plausible:

> **Epistemic Parity**. For theories T and T', if we have no reasons to favor T over T', and T and T' are incompatible, we should not believe T and we should not believe T'.

The Epistemic Parity principle is adapted from McSweeney (2019), where she argues that when we have equally good reason to believe incompatible theories – when they "score equally well with respect to each theoretical virtue, and any argument we could make in favor of one would generate an exactly parallel argument for the others" – we're not justified in believing either one.[18]

One tempting thought is that this is *exactly* the situation we're in with respect to certain theories about composition and coincidence. Any moderate position will involve "drawing a line" somewhere on the ontological ruler, and we might worry that for a great many candidate ticks on the ruler, we've got no more reason to draw the line at tick A as at tick B. So, the thought goes, committed moderates violate Epistemic Parity, and the only way to avoid such violations is to go fully radical.

On the face of it, this complaint has a much more promising structure for living up to the challenge we've set for ourselves. Even really bizarre forms of moderate permissivism – those that no one has ever endorsed, and which bear no nearby resemblance to any anthropic conceptual systems – may nevertheless be epistemically on a par in the present sense. Of course, the two complaints are closely related. According to many conservatives we *do* have more reason to believe that there aren't trogs or incars than that there are – reasons that stem from our ordinary judgments about the world. The permissivist who would pursue the present strategy by arguing that we are in a place where settling belief will violate Epistemic Parity will have to do something to diffuse this. An argument based on Epistemic Parity thus inherits some of my pessimism about the arguments in the vicinity of the argument from anthropocentrism, but I think there are worse (or, at least, additionally illuminating) worries nearby.

Even granting the controversial premise that *every* form of moderate metaphysics violates Epistemic Parity, it is wholly consistent for the moderate to nonetheless hold that some moderate picture must be right *even if they can't justifiably settle which*. Here is a toy example: for lots of cardinalities m, there may be no n such that we could have better reason to believe that there are exactly n things in the universe than that there are exactly m things. But it would be wrong-headed to conclude on this basis that there is no k such that there are exactly k things in the universe.[19] Lewis makes a similar observation in his discussion of the need for a "natural break" to serve as an upper boundary for the possible sizes of spacetime:

> My hope, notice, is just that some such break exists. I do not claim to make the worlds, and I do not claim to have some way of finding out all about them, therefore I will not be at all troubled if I cannot say just what break is right. My thesis is existential: there is some break, and the correct break is sufficiently salient within the mathematical universe not to be ad hoc. (...) If study revealed more than one suitable break, I would be content to profess ignorance – incurable ignorance, most likely. (Lewis, 1986, p. 103)

In many domains, we have very general reasons to be confident in ruling out extreme options while simultaneously acknowledging that we are in dire epistemic straits with respect to particular middle-ground theses. Even granting that matters are this dire when it comes to debates about composition and coincidence, the moderate who is willing to accept "incurable ignorance" with respect to the details of her moderatism can still enjoy some security.[20] So, while Epistemic Parity might support a complaint against particular moderate positions, it won't be enough to support an argument *for* radical permissivism.

2.3 | Interlude: Scorecards and other methodological complaints

One final issue in the vicinity concerns a methodological complaint sometimes levied against moderate metaphysics. This often takes the form of a concern about "unexplained distinctions" or "leaving why-questions unanswered". A theory is said to be 'arbitrary' in this sense insofar as it commits us to distinctions for which we can offer no explanations, and 'arbitrariness' is understood as a theoretical vice to be minimized or avoided.

For the moment, lets grant the contentious assumption that moderatism in all of its forms really does commit us to leaving why-questions unanswered: to unexplained distinctions between the pluralities that compose and those that don't, or between the modal profiles that correspond to

something and those that don't.[21] If we understand arbitrariness as a comparative vice to be minimized relative to competing theories as much as possible, we'll need some assurance that the scorecard will ultimately tell in favor of the radical permissivist. But it is *far* from obvious that the tally will turn out this way when we make a holistic accounting. The consequences of this or that radically permissive thesis are extraordinarily sensitive to the rest of our metaphysics. Whether, for example, a radical permissivist must posit unexplained distinctions between the pluralities or the profiles that correspond to persons and those that do not may turn on distant commitments about the nature of vagueness, supervenience, personhood, and so on.[22]

Perhaps instead we want to say that not all unexplained distinctions are equally costly for a theory. At the heart of the aversion to "brute facts" in metaphysics is a sense that there are some facts that urgently call out for explanation: we find bruteness where we find facts that demand explanations (in this sense) but have none.[23] The other route for the permissivist here, then, is to insist that the particular why-questions left unanswered by the moderate are too costly to let stand.[24]

An especially significant application of this latter thought is in the version of the *argument from vagueness* found in Lewis (1986, p. 212) and later developed in Sider (2001). That argument turns on the idea that if only *some* pluralities have mereological fusions, then there must either be some "sharp cut-off" for when composition occurs, or there must be borderline cases of composition (i.e., there must be pluralities such that its indeterminate whether they compose something). There can't be any borderline cases of composition and (crucially) any such cut-off would be objectionably arbitrary, so (the argument goes) either every plurality has a fusion or none does. The justification Sider offers for the latter conjunct appeals to the unacceptability of a particular sort of bruteness:

> (...) there would seem to be something 'metaphysically arbitrary' about a sharp cut-off in a continuous series of cases of composition. Why is the cut-off here, rather than there? Granted, everyone must admit some metaphysically 'brute' facts (...) Nevertheless, this brute fact seems particularly hard to stomach. (Sider, 2001, p. 124)

The problem with rallying this kind of thought in service of a standalone methodological complaint against moderates is that – contrary to our temporary assumption – most moderate theories *don't* posit unexplained distinctions. That the radical isn't compelled by any of the explanations offered isn't a scorekeeping worry, but rather a substantive dispute about the content of moderate theories and whether the distinctions they draw can be justified.

3 | PARITY

The most promising foundation for radical permissivism in the vicinity of worries about arbitrariness does crucially appeal to violations of parity, but is not a complaint that concerns how metaphysicians settle their beliefs or choose their theories. Instead, it concerns what reality is like according to the moderate ontologist: roughly, that any version of moderatism requires there to be some parity-violating distinction in the world.

As believers and as choosers, when we make an arbitrary decision we draw a distinction between options where there is no difference relevant to the choice at hand; no difference with the right sort of significance to account for our decision. Similarly, for there to be an "arbitrary" line in the world is for there to be a distinction in the absence of a relevantly significant difference. To

say that a domain doesn't admit of arbitrariness in this sense is to say that it obeys a kind of parity constraint: that there are no distinctions (of a certain kind) without (the right sort of) differences.

Korman (2010, 2015) places parity at the center of his critical discussions of arbitrariness arguments:

> The argument from arbitrariness turns on the claim that there is no difference between certain of the familiar kinds that we intuitively judge to exist and certain of the strange kinds that we intuitively judge not to exist that could account for the former's but not the latter's having instances. In short, there is no ontologically significant difference between the relevant strange and familiar kinds. (Korman, 2010, p. 123)

While I ultimately agree with Korman's diagnosis, I don't think that the characterization of arbitrariness arguments he offers is the most fruitful for our present purposes. Briefly, my concern is that focus on *kinds* threatens to elide the difference between arguments for universalism and plenitude. Kinds carry both compositional and modal constraints – so arguing from familiar to strange kinds seems to push us in a permissive direction along both dimensions at once. Since part of the project of this paper is to explore whether that is inevitable, it will help to find a way of thinking about the role of parity in arbitrariness arguments that separates them.

We can sharpen things somewhat by attending to the questions that radical theories are meant to be "always" answers to – eg. "when do pluralities compose?", "when do modal profiles describe an object?". That is, we should focus on parity principles governing the correspondences that each radically permissive picture purports to max out. The principles of interest to the universalist and plenitude-theorist are *Compositional Parity* and *Profile Parity*, respectively:

> **Compositional Parity**. For any pluralities the *x*s and the *y*s, if there is no relevant ("significant") difference between the *x*s and the *y*s, then if the *x*s compose something, then the *y*s do.

It could only be that the collection of atoms in the vicinity of this cup compose something while the collection of chairs in this room fail to compose something if there were some relevant difference between the collections.[25] Similarly, *Profile Parity*:

> **Profile Parity**. For any modal profiles *m* and *n*, if there is no relevant ("significant") difference between *m* and *n*, then if *m* corresponds to an object, *n* does.

I am still hoping to remain mostly neutral about how we should understand 'modal profiles', which makes Profile Parity somewhat more difficult to illustrate. But the thought is still familiar: it could only be that there is something coincident with the lump of clay that has its shape essentially (and so would be destroyed by squashing) but that there isn't something that has its location essentially (and so would be destroyed by being moved elsewhere) if there were some relevant difference between the modal profiles.

A note on the placeholder phrase 'relevant' or 'significant differences': there is clearly a way to understand it that renders the parity principles trivial. Suppose, for example, that the collection of atoms in the vicinity of the cup composes something and the collection of chairs does not. Here is one difference between these collections: the atoms compose something, and the chairs don't! If that counts as a "significant difference", then moderate metaphysics will trivially avoid

any complaint about parity violations. The best resolution here will be to invoke some notion of explanation or "accounting for", as Korman does in the passage above. But exactly how to do so is going to be delicate, for reasons that will be made more vivid in Section 4. For now, I want to avoid packing any heavy-duty commitments about explanation into our preliminary formulation, and simply stipulate that these considerations won't count as answering a challenge from parity.[26]

There is another worry nearby. How useful could it really be to focus on these parity principles without filling in the placeholder notion? It might seem that we've just highlighted the sense in which we are in serious danger of a dialectical standstill. After all, most moderates and radicals agree that these domains obey parity. They disagree about precisely what the placeholder suppresses: which differences are relevant.

I won't be able to fully answer this worry here, but I do want to sharply distinguish two tasks. The first is to find an argument for radical permissivism that can or should move committed metaphysical moderates. This is an extraordinarily difficult – and important – task, but it isn't the one I've taken up here. (In large part because I suspect that such an argument won't go via concerns about arbitrariness.) Instead, my aim here is to pursue a second task: that of clarifying the motivational foundations of radical permissivism, as they should be understood by radical permissivists themselves. Although we may not gain much ground against the moderate by focusing on these schematic principles, we can nonetheless make progress understanding the foundations for and credentials of radical permissivism. Even generously spotting ourselves this placeholder, it is *also* an extraordinarily hard task to find a road all the way to radical permissivism that looks good *even* by our own lights.

3.1 | Parity at work

I want to look first at two familiar argumentative strategies for varieties of permissivism that rely on parity principles.

Case-based arbitrariness arguments involve identifying some case from our stock of recognized existents (cars, trees, statues) and pairing it with some relevantly similar but contested case (incars, trogs, desk-statues). The plenitude-lover points out that there are things that have their rough shape essentially, but that there isn't any metaphysically significant difference between having a certain shape essentially and having a certain location essentially. And so, by *Profile Parity*, given that there are statues that sometimes sit on desks, there must be desk-statues, as well.[27] Unfortunately, although it may be especially rhetorically effective for motivating some weird and surprising versions of permissivism, this strategy only extends our ontology by fits and starts. While we might get the sense from case-based exercise that we can "keep going", they don't on their own provide any guarantee that adding to our ontology bit-by-bit will take us all the way.

A more promising invocation of parity principles focuses not just on local considerations about specific *pairs* of cases, but instead on a continuous series of cases. In *Chain-Based* arbitrariness arguments, the permissivist argues from a recognized case of existence to more contested ones by constructing a series where each adjacent pair of cases is such that there is no metaphysically significant difference between them. (And, thus, any "stopping point" in such a series would be parity violating.)

Consider an example adapted from Sosa (1987 and 1999). A snowball, let's suppose, is a ball made of snow that is essentially perfectly round – it cannot survive *any* degree of squashing. There doesn't seem to be any metaphysically interesting difference between that modal profile and the

modal profile describing an object that can survive just a little bit of squashing.[28] So, by parity, if there are snowballs, there are these marginally more resilient things as well. As Sosa points out, for any of the infinitely many degrees of squashing between being round and being flattened, we can argue in the same way that there is something which can survive exactly that degree of squashing (but no more). Series like these lead us to recognize infinitely many things just by following small jumps between very similar cases. Thus, we can motivate extraordinarily liberal ontologies this way – certainly some liberal enough to make conservatives uncomfortable!

But once again, we still have only the rhetorical sense that we'll make it all the way to radical permissivism. For a chain-based strategy to motivate universalism or plenitude, we require a further assumption: that any form of moderatism will involve drawing a distinction between adjacent pairs in some such chain. But this assumption seems illegitimate in many of the cases we care about.

Recall the argument from vagueness, which turns on the premise that *in no continuous series is there a sharp cut-off in whether composition occurs*. A very natural way to a continuous series of this kind (from putative cases of composition to putative cases of non-composition) is to take a series of pluralities where each subsequent plurality has all the same members as the one preceding plus one additional member. But there are very compelling moderate positions about composition which don't involve "drawing a line" between adjacent pairs in any series like this. Consider, for example, Finitary Composition, according to which all and only pluralities of *finitely* many things compose, but pluralities of infinitely many things are "too many" to compose. This is a moderately permissive thesis, but no adjacent pair in a series like the one I've described will differ in what matters for composition according to Finitary Composition.

In his discussion of the vagueness argument, Sider (2001) suggests that we can set Finitary Composition aside, on the grounds that "no one will want to claim that the jump from finitude to infinity is what makes the difference between composition and its absence." (p. 123) But our aims here are somewhat more demanding: the present question is whether chain-based parity arguments can get us all the way to radical permissivism. Although Finitary Composition is permissive, it is nonenetheless a form of moderatism that we'll have to rule out to meet that challenge. While I agree with Sider that we ultimately have grounds to do so, the thing to note here is just that Finitary Composition *won't* be ruled out by this application of parity.

Matters are just as delicate when it comes to Profile Parity. A version of the same infinitary puzzle arises most clearly when modal profiles are understood as functions from worlds to objects. We can take Hawthorne (2006)'s formulation of plenitude as a paradigm example: we'll say that a *modal occupation profile* is a function from worlds to matter-filled regions of space time. An object is described by a modal occupation profile iff for each world *w* at which it exists, it occupies exactly the regions *f(w)* there (p. 53). The resulting formulation of plenitude is:

> **Occupational Plenitude**. There's an object described by every modal occupation profile.

The most natural way to construct a chain-based argument for Occupational Plenitude is to take a series of profiles such that each subsequent profile is just like the one preceding, except that it has one additional world in the range of the function. But, once again, no finite chain will ever get us from an object whose modal profile spans only finitely many worlds to one whose profile spans infinitely many worlds. So, the chain-based strategy similarly fails to rule out (say) a version of moderate permissivism according to which all and only the profiles that span finitely many worlds describe objects.

For other ways of thinking about modal profiles, it isn't even clear that there is a non-tendentious way to construct such a chain. If, for example, we understand profiles in a broadly hylomorphic or property-theoretic way – as specifying the properties an individual has essentially, but without the assumption that this is captured by functions from worlds – it is much more difficult to see how we should think about chains of "relevantly similar" pairs of modal profiles. Sosa's snowballs are especially vivid, because we are able to focus on incremental 'degrees' of squashing, but it is much harder to see what sort of suitably continuous chain of property-theoretic modal profiles could get us to (for example) an object that is coincident with me, but might have been coincident with an oak tree.[29] So, ultimately, although both the case- and chain-based applications of parity are powerful argumentative strategies for permissivists, and may leave us with the strong impression that we can go all the way to radical permissivism, neither yet supports the conclusion that we will succeed.

4 | HOMOGENEITY

This suggests that parity isn't the whole story. To make better sense of the motivational foundations of radical permissivism we need to make a *further* commitment explicit. The version of the arbitrariness argument that I think underwrites many permissivist convictions relies not just on our commitment to parity, but also on our judgment that the generative domains in question (pluralities, modal profiles) are *homogenous* with respect to all of the features that could constitute relevant differences. That is, radical permissivists are committed something like the following:

> **Compositional Homogeneity**. For any pluralities the *x*s and the *y*s, there is no relevant ("significant") difference between the *x*s and the *y*s.

> **Profile Homogeneity**. For any modal profiles *m* and *n*, there is no relevant ("significant") difference between *m* and *n*.

Homogeneity principles reflect the sense that any form of moderatism will involve some violation of parity. Taken together, then, Parity and Homogeneity chart the path from an aversion to arbitrariness to a commitment to radical permissivism. (Of course, given the 'relevant differences' placeholder, this is still quite an incomplete map. Even if our only goal is to excavate the sensibilities that underlie our own commitments to radical permissivism, much more will have to be said about the constraints on filling that out.)

Despite the gaps, we learn something about the road ahead by focusing on homogeneity principles. They are clearly incredibly strong, and invite those who would defend them into *very* thorny territory. It isn't even entirely clear what sort of motivations we could offer for either that might be independently illuminating. It doesn't, for example, seem especially satisfying to rely only on a kind of "pessimistic induction" on existing moderate proposals. We should hope to do better when it comes to something as heavy-duty as homogeneity! This is, I think, where the hard work really begins.

My aim in the final sections of this paper is to provide a preliminary agenda for that project by describing two kinds of approaches to motivating one or both homogeneity principles. On what I'll call the *generalist approach*, our verdicts about which differences are "relevant" for questions about composition or coincidence are driven by reflection on very general features of

metaphysical inquiry, and so the tendency among generalists is to treat the various homogeneity principles as a package deal. Generalists found in the wild lean on slogans about "what matters for existence" or "what considerations are relevant to ontology" while, in contrast, those who take a more *nitty-gritty approach* to homogeneity look instead to more local considerations from first-order metaphysics. Nitty-gritty radicals arrive at Compositional Homogeneity by inquiry into composition, at Profile Homogeneity by reflection on essence, accident, and coincidence.

Since the remarks to follow will be fairly brief, I won't defend either approach here. However, I want to emphasize at least that by turning the microscope on this feature of permissivist appeals to arbitrariness, we set ourselves up for a much better understanding of radical permissivism itself. It is sometimes tempting to regard our appeals to arbitrariness as somehow prior to (or quarantined from) more ambitious projects in metaontology or first-order metaphysics – certainly that is the rhetorical role they often play! But, as I hope to demonstrate, understanding arbitrariness arguments in the way I've suggested will help us see how misplaced that temptation is.

4.1 | The nitty-gritty approach

On the nitty-gritty approach, the project of understanding and motivating the homogeneity principles that underwrite arbitrariness arguments is a project in paradigmatically first-order metaphysics. We answer whether pluralties are on a par with respect to what matters for composition by developing theories of composition; whether modal profiles are on a par by investigating essence, accident, and coincidence. In each case, we roll up our shirtsleeves and do the nitty-gritty work required to understand which features are significant for this or that question about ontology.

Radical permissivists about composition motivated in this way will, *just like moderates*, begin by saying something about "what is required for composition". It simply turns out that, by their lights, the required features are shared by every plurality! (Perhaps because, as some universalists say, "nothing is required" for composition.)[30] Crucially, those who would take this approach allow that such investigation might well reveal that what matters for composition, persistence, coincidence, and so on may differ. There is no guarantee from the outset that firm ground for Compositional Homogeneity will provide a similarly firm foundation for Profile Homogeneity. The arbitrariness arguments for each are, in this sense, independent.

Looking a bit further afield, we find an illustration of the nitty-gritty approach to homogeneity in defenses of radically permissive theories of sets. The question "when do some things form a set?" *also* has two radical answers and a range of moderate ones. Here again "always" looks especially attractive. Unfortunately, in the case of sets, this attractiveness is marred by the threat of paradox. Russell's Paradox appears to reveal that some plurality fails to be a set, and so puts pressure on us to seek some relevant difference between those pluralities that do and do not form sets. Radical permissivists about sets resist this pressure in part on the strength of the credentials of something like Set Homogeneity.

> **Set Homogeneity**. For any pluralities the xs and the ys, there is no (set-)relevant difference between the xs and the ys.

It seems especially clear in this case that the relevant homogeneity principle is motivated by commitments about *what sets* are. Linnebo (2010) makes this explicit, arguing that to answer the set formation question "we must go beyond [the claims of ordinary singular set theory] and

analyze the concepts of plurality and set." Reflection on sets, he suggests, leads to the conclusion that pluralities are on a par with respect to everything that matters for set formation:

> Since a set is completely characterized by its elements, any plurality xx seems to provide a complete and precise characterization of a set…what more could be needed for such a set to exist? (p. 147)

The same theme reappears when he argues that the most salient moderate answer – that some pluralities are "too many" to form a set – is committed to an "arbitrary boundary". "Why should this particular cardinality mark the threshold? (…) One answer is that it is somehow "written into" the concept of a set that every set must have fewer elements than this threshold cardinality." His nitty-gritty reply: no such threshold is written into what it is to be a set. (ibid, p. 152-153)

The striking thing about this for our present purposes is that we tend to regard the burden of nitty-gritty metaphysics as one that rests on the moderate alone. It is moderates, not radicals, who must provide some positive account of sets and set formation (such that only *these* things form a set), of composition (such that only *these* things compose), or of coincidence (such that coincidents can only vary modally with respect to *these* properties). But those who take the nitty-gritty approach to motivating homogeneity take on a very similar project: *both* the radical and the moderate must defend the "non-arbitrariness" of their positions by looking to the nature of sets, composite objects, and the like.

Much of the rhetoric around arbitrariness suggests that only the moderate owes us an account of which differences are and are not (for example) compositionally relevant. On the proposed approach to motivating homogeneity, we find that radical permissivists must take on much the same burden. The nitty-gritty approach sets a task for the permissivist that is therefore quite far from what we might have expected from our first encounters with the arbitrariness arguments. Initially it seemed that arbitrariness arguments have force on very general grounds ("if only we recognize the virtues of non-arbitrary theories, we'll be driven immediately to radicalism!"). If, instead, our most solid grounds for endorsing (say) Compositional Homogeneity ultimately rest on substantive commitments about the nature of composition or composite objects, then these appeals to the virtues of anti-arbitrariness were misleadingly cavalier.

Can something from those global appeals to non-arbitrariness be recovered? The *Generalist* hopes so, but as we'll see, that approach comes with its own ambitious program.

4.2 | The generalist approach

The basic thought behind the generalist approach is that inquiries into composition, persistence, coincidence, and so on, will all ultimately yield the same lesson: metaphysically important differences are hard to come by. In general, ontological significance is quite a high bar.

When we're doing physics we have a sense of the sorts of differences that are physically significant – features that might make a difference to whether two objects will fall at the same speed, or to whether two systems are physically equivalent. We're similarly familiar with the idea (even if we disagree on the details) that certain things might be moral difference-makers between cases (like consciousness) and others might not (like height). And, though it is a less familiar way of talking, we also have a sense of the sorts of things that can be difference-makers in the domains of logic or mathematics. In the latter cases we tend to think of the relevant inquiry as operating at a high level of generality – one consequence of which is that many things that are significant in other domains won't make a difference to logical or mathematical equivalence. (Quite roughly: it

doesn't matter whether we have a collection of fundamental particles or a group of groundhogs for whether those things form a set.) For the generalist, ontology is similar in ambition. Features that matter when we "zoom in" to other inquiries – being a groundhog, being finite, being deserving, being intentionally created – won't be relevant for answering questions about what there is. According to the generalist, homogeneity theses fall out of a particularly lofty conception of what it is to do ontology, and a correspondingly lofty conception of what sorts of considerations bear on questions about existence.

There is another familiar family of metaontological pictures that leaves us friendly to the thought that ontologically significant differences are hard to come by, but which leans less on talk of 'generality'. I have in mind here contemporary varieties of ontological deflationism – views characterized by slogans like "existence is cheap", "existence is easy", or "nothing much is required for existence". We should be a bit careful here, though: *one* way of understanding these slogans is as gesturing towards an account of what might "matter for" existence (ie. not much).[31] This does strike me as a version of generalism. However, other views in the neighborhood seem to involve eschewing questions about "what matters for existence" entirely. So, for example, Amie Thomasson's *easy approach to ontology* is sometimes associated with mthese slogans, and she does go in for a certain kind of permissivism. However, talk of homogeneity wouldn't be especially amenable in her framework – see, for example, her rejection of any "substantive criteria of existence" in Thomasson (2015, p. 115-121).[32] The thought common to both the metaontological deflationist and my paradigmatic generalist is that none of the features that distinguish pluralities, profiles, etc. are features that could account for a difference in whether they correspond to an object.[33]

The primary contrast between proponents of the generalist approach to homogeneity and proponents of the nitty-gritty approach is that for generalists there is *much* more pressure to expect that varieties of radical permissivism will stand or fall together. Even those of us attracted to both universalism and plenitude should regard this as a potential risk, since the generalist approach leads us quickly towards the kind of maximalism described in Section 1. Consider, for example, a generalist who concludes that only *being consistently describable* is ontologically relevant. Exactly how coherent we can make this thought isn't entirely clear, but on the face of it this kind of generalism yields a version of maximalism that inherits many of the problems we saw above. Nor is the thorny extravagance of maximalism the not only cost associated with generalist approaches to homogeneity. Most worryingly, generalism threatens to deprive us of resources for getting out of trouble in the face of paradox. This is especially pressing when the generalist faced with pairs of radically permissive principles that are jointly incompatible. Typically, she must either respond by conceding that one of the domains in question isn't homogeneous – which is a *quite* serious revision, for the generalist – or make adjustments elsewhere in her metaphysics.[34]

The lesson here is that tidy generalist positions are very difficult to pin down, and come with a host of challenges that easily outpace the challenges we incur from each of the varieties of radical permissivism taken on their own. But, to have any hope of motivating radical permissivism on fully general grounds, these are the sorts of questions we *must* take up. If we want to avoid the weeds of the nitty-gritty approach by rooting our permissivist commitments in generalism, we'll have to make sense of its limits.

5 | CONCLUSION

We have found that otherwise promising attempts to make something out of appeals to arbitrariness won't cut it as foundations for varieties of radical permissivism, even when they make for effective arguments against particular moderate views. Although the foregoing is by no means

an exhaustive map of the ways that we might think about arbitrariness, the proposals considered here point to a very general problem for motivating radical ontologies by appealing to arbitrariness. When we look at what I've suggested is the most promising structure for understanding how anti-arbitrariness considerations motivate radical permissivism – via a commitment to *parity* and *homogeneity* – we find that these motivations depend on much more substantive commitments than we might have expected from the speeches we started with.

In the final section, I've tried to give a sense of what those commitments might be, though there is clearly more work to be done. If we think that considerations of arbitrariness can have force on fully general grounds, we'll need to come to terms with something like maximalism and its attendant troubles. The nitty-gritty approach, on the other hand, paves the way for a much more cautious defense of one or more varieties of permissivism, but requires us to do more substantive metaphysics than we might have expected. There is a route from an aversion to arbitrariness to radical permissivism, but the road may be much longer than we expected.[35]

ENDNOTES

[1] See for example Cartwright (1975, p. 158), Van Cleve (1986, p. 145), Yablo (1987, p. 307), van Inwagen (1990, p. 66-69 and p. 126), Sosa (1987, p. 178), Sosa (1999, p. 178), Bennett (2004), Hawthorne (2006, p. vii and p. 105), Van Cleve (2008, p. 323-333), Leslie (2011,p. 281), Thomasson (2015, p. 214-215), and Fairchild (2017, p. 34). For recent criticism, see eg. Korman (2010) and Korman (2015).

[2] Some are even less impressed: Hirsch (2002) accuses proponents of these arguments of being "perilously close to carrying out a burlesque battle with the English language."

[3] Of course, even an argument that lives up to this challenge won't thereby weigh decisively in favor of radical permissivism, since radically eliminativist ontologies are also touted by their proponents as gold-star routes to avoiding arbitrariness. My focus in this paper is on better understanding the permissivist's reasons for going radical, but much of what I say will apply to attempts to motivate varieties of radical eliminativism as well.

[4] Note that Korman's use of the label 'conservative' includes views that are extensionally like common sense ontology, but may be less directly beholden to ordinary judgments than my gloss here could suggest. See especially (Korman, 2020, p. 562-563).

[5] van Inwagen (1990, p. 61) and (1993, p. 684).

[6] Different versions of plenitude have been defended or discussed in Fine (1994, 1999), Yablo (1987), Bennett (2004), Hawthorne (2006), Leslie (2011), Jago (2016), and Fairchild (2019). See Fairchild (2020) for an overview.

[7] We can also imagine plenitude-lovers who insist that there are no non-trivial cases of composition, but it is less easy to see the motivations for that sort of picture.

[8] Kurtsal (2021) capitalizes on this point, arguing that the very same aversion to arbitrariness that motivate universalism and plenitude should motivate us to accept *persistence egalitarianism* – a hybrid ontology of perduring and enduring entities.

[9] Although maximalism has its roots in discussions of the ontology of mathematics, maximalism can be – and has been – extended to the case of concrete objects. See Eklund (2006, 2008), Sider (2007), Hawley (2007), and Linnebo (2012) for related discussion. The simple realism developed in Thomasson (2015) has many affinities with Eklund-style maximalism; see especially the discussion in §6.1-6.3.

[10] Does maximalism entail any material objects that go beyond what the universalist and plenitude-lover would together accept? This does depend quite a bit on the details of the maximalism, but just two examples: first, plenitude and universalism are apparently silent on things like social entities (like groups), and maximalism may not be. Second; plenitude is silent on whether there might be multiple objects with the same modal profiles (necessarily coinciding objects). If, for example, objects can differ not just with respect to which properties they have essentially, but also with respect to which properties they have *determinately*, maximalism could yield an abundance of coincidents that goes beyond the commitments of plenitude. I explore the last of these issues in Fairchild (ms).

[11] So, for example: 'xhearts' are things much like hearts but which exist only if 'xlivers' do not, while xlivers are much like livers but exist only if xhearts do not (Eklund, 2008, p. 112). See also Thomasson (2015)'s Ch 8 on the relevant generalization of the "bad-company problem" for Neo-Fregeanism.

[12] Korman (2015) helpfully distinguishes worries about anthropocentrism from arbitrariness, but I include the former here because it is especially instructive to see how the two lines of thought interact in the present context. Moreover, worries about anthropocentrism are often the first port of call in discussions of the apparent arbitrariness of conservativism, so are worth examining more carefully.

[13] See also Cartwright (1975 p. 175).

[14] Hawthorne (2006, p. 105) and Sider (2007, p. 156-157) are mentioned in Korman (2015, p. 95) as examples of debunking arguments against conservatives, advanced in defense of permissivism. However, see Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018) for a disclaimer.

[15] Though see Thomasson (2015) for helpful discussion of a related argument from Bricker (2020) that does crucially appeal to *parochialism* in defense of certain radically permissive pictures. Bricker's complaint, roughly, is not that particular theories are objectionably anthropocentric, but that the virtues we appeal to in metaphysical theory choice provide only parochial grounds for believing in any given theory. So, we do better epistemically to accept more radically permissive pictures.

[16] There is also a nearby complaint that is less purely epistemic: that there is something distinctively objectionable about the metaphysical hypothesis that what there is corresponds roughly to what we ordinarily take there to be. See eg. the discussion of the *How Bizarre!* complaint in Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018). But the same limitation applies there: this challenge only straightforwardly targets particular conservative varieties of moderate metaphysics.

[17] Relatedly, compare Schoenfield (2017)'s characterization of "arbitrary" beliefs: "Here's how I'll think of things: To regard a belief as formed arbitrarily is to regard which belief one ends up adopting with respect to P as independent of whether P."

[18] McSweeney (2019, p. 123).

[19] Thanks to Jeff Russell and Gabriel Uzquiano for discussion of this example.

[20] After all, the permissivist may have to declare widespread ignorance on similar grounds. Even if exactly one collection in of atoms in the vicinity of my friend's cat Pepita makes up Pepita, there may not be any collection such that I have more reason to believe of that collection that it makes up Pepita than any of many others. It happens that I am more comfortable with ignorance about Pepita's exact whereabouts than I am with widespread ignorance about what there is, but that preference has little to do with an aversion to arbitrariness.

[21] Some forms of moderatism certainly have this feature: moderates who accept Markosian (1998)'s "brutal composition" will hold that it is a 'brute fact' – a fact that doesn't obtain in virtue of any others – that a given plurality composes something.

[22] I am thinking here of versions of the "too many thinkers" problem and, more generally, permissivist responses to the problem of the many. Similar concerns may crop up elsewhere, as well- see, for example, Effingham (2011). In a very different setting, Fairchild (2017) discusses an attempt to avoid paradox by allowing occasional violations of a certain uniqueness condition on matter/form compounds, where it is far from clear whether we'll be able to pin down a satisfying explanation distinguishing those that obey it and those that do not. See also Kleinschmidt (2013) for a related case against arguments that the principle of sufficient reason (rather than a weaker explanatory demand) is required to guide good theory choice.

[23] Distinctions – the significant contrasts drawn by a theory – are an especially good place to find facts that seem to call out for explanations. But we should be careful with this as a heuristic: we can often find ways to quite artificially frame posits of a theory as a 'distinction' for which even very good theories will have no explanation. (Eg. a theory that identifies H2O with water needn't provide an explanation of the 'distinction' between *water* and *twin water*, such that H2O is one but not the other.)

[24] So, for example, Horgan (1993, p. 695): "Even though explanation presumably must bottom out somewhere, it is just not credible – or even intelligible – that it should bottom out with specific compositional facts which themselves are utterly unexplainable and do not conform to any systematic general principles." See also Dasgupta (2016) on the distinction between *substantive* facts (which call out for explanation) and *autonomous* facts (which don't).

[25] So, a brutalist in the style of Markosian (1998) rejects Compositional Parity.

[26] This kind of placeholder plays a starring role elsewhere in the literature on composition, especially. See, for example, Merricks (2005, p. 29): "After all, lest restricted composition seem arbitrary, there should be something special about the product of atoms that compose an object. That is, there should be something about that product

that differs relevant from the ersatz "product" of atoms that compose nothing at all." See also the reply in Barnes (2007) for discussion that draws out some of the constraints on "relevant" differences.

[27] Of course, the plenitude-lover shouldn't be quite so blasé here. As an anonymous referee points out, there's at least one important difference between the two profiles: shape properties are widely regarded as intrinsic properties of objects, while location properties are understood to be extrinsic. The plenitude-lover can accept that much and still be moved by this kind of argument, so long as by their lights whether or not a property is intrinsic or extrinsic *isn't* relevant to whether that property can be had essentially.

[28] See also the discussion of *Alteration Parity* in Fairchild and Hawthorne (2018).

[29] See Fairchild (2020).

[30] A note of caution here: not every sort of answer to the general composition question ("What is composition?") will settle Compositional Homogeneity. Consider, for example, debates about the relationship between universalism and "composition as identity" (CAI): the thesis that the relation between a whole and its parts is (in some more or less controversial sense) the relation of identity. The thrust of Cameron (2012)'s argument that CAI *doesn't* entail universalism is that there's a gap in this case between claims about what the relation of composition is (whenever it occurs) and claims about how ubiquitous composition is. In our current vocabulary: that any mereologically complex whole is identical to the plurality of its parts tells us nothing about the compositionally significant features of pluralities more generally. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address the connection between these questions.

[31] See especially Linnebo (2012) on the connection between this kind of metaontological minimalism and ontological maximalism.

[32] For more on Thomasson's permissivism, see Schaffer (2009)'s discussion of Thomasson (2007) and again Thomasson (2015, p. 212-215)

[33] These issues are *really* delicate, and there is much more to be said here. One apparent added benefit of attention to the role that homogeneity plays in motivating permissivism is that we have the opportunity to sharpen the otherwise hazy connection between "generality" slogans and "easiness" slogans.

[34] For examples of problems of this shape explicitly concerning varieties of plenitude, see Fairchild (2017) and Hawthorne and Russell (2018).

[35] This paper has *also* had a long road. Thanks to Andrew Bacon, Mark Balaguer, Jade Fletcher, John Hawthorne, Shieva Kleinschmidt, Irem Kurtsal, Dan Korman, David Manley, Rebecca Mason, Michaela McSweeney, Kate Ritchie, Jeff Russell, Mark Schroeder, Ted Sider, Elanor Taylor, Gabriel Uzquiano, and an anonymous referee for feedback on earlier versions. I have also benefited hugely from discussions with audiences at the University of Rochester, the University of Michigan, Cornell University, UNC Wilimington, the Vancouver Summer Philosophy Workshop, Notre Dame, The University of Virginia, the University of Vermont, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Finally, I am grateful to Sara Bernstein and the participants in the metaphysics group at the Pre-Tenure Women in Philosophy Workshop for extensive discussion of a previous version of this paper.

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