

# Debunking Perceptual Beliefs About Ordinary Objects

Dan Korman

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## 1. Introduction

Debunking arguments are arguments that purport to undermine a certain range of beliefs by showing that there is no explanatory connection between those beliefs and the facts that the beliefs purport to be about. If there is no explanatory connection between one's beliefs about some domain of inquiry and the facts about that domain, then it could only be a coincidence if the beliefs are correct; and having no reason to believe that such a coincidence occurred, it would be irrational to retain those beliefs. Such arguments have been wielded against beliefs about morality, mathematics, logic, colors, and the existence of God. There is, however, one domain of beliefs that is widely thought to be invulnerable to such arguments, namely, our perceptual beliefs about the existence of various kinds of ordinary objects. I will show that this is a mistake.

Debunking arguments arise in material-object metaphysics as well, and they play a pivotal role in motivating the dominant, revisionary conceptions of objects.<sup>1</sup> Mark Heller (1990: 44), for instance, maintains that:

[I]f we conceptually divide up the world into objects one way rather than another because doing so will serve our purposes better [which we do], then there is little chance that the resulting ontology will be the true ontology. ... In principle, we could by sheer coincidence arrive at the true ontology by the use of conventions ... I will discount the possibility of such a coincidence.

Theodore Sider (2001: 156-157) makes similar remarks:

On [a conservative] view, the entities that exist correspond exactly with the categories for continuants in *our* conceptual scheme: trees, aggregates, statues, lumps, persons, bodies, and so on. How convenient! It would be nothing short of a miracle if reality just happened to match our conceptual scheme in this way.

John Hawthorne (2006: 109) concurs:

Barring a kind of anti-realism that none of us should tolerate, wouldn't it be remarkable if the lines of reality matched the lines that we have words for? The simplest exercises of sociological imagination ought to convince us that the assumption of such a harmony is

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<sup>1</sup> These arguments can be found, in one form or another, in Hirsch (1978: 485, 2004: §1), van Inwagen (1981: §3), Yablo (1987: 307), Shoemaker (1988: 209), Sidelle (1989), Heller (1990: 39-42), Hawley (2001: 6-7), Hudson (2001: 111), Merricks (2001: 72-76), Rea (2002: Chs. 4 and 8), Nolan (2005: 35), Hawthorne (2006: 109), Moyer (2006: 408), Thomasson (2007: §10.3), Sider (2001: 156-157, 2008: 252-253), and Elder (2011: 66).

altogether untoward, since such exercises convince us that it is something of a biological and/or cultural accident that we draw the lines that we do.

More often than not, such arguments are wielded specifically against *conservative* views about objects, according to which there are objects belonging to paradigmatic familiar kinds and there are no objects belonging to paradigmatic strange kinds. As an illustration, consider a situation, S, in which there are some atoms arranged palmtree-wise and, a few feet away, some atoms arranged dog-wise. Conservatives maintain that there is a tree and a dog in S. Conservatives deny that there is a trog in S, where a trog is an object composed of a trunk and a dog. Conservatives likewise deny that there is an uptree in S, where an uptree is an object composed of atoms arranged tree-wise but which is upright as a matter of necessity. (If the uptree were to topple over, it would cease to exist, and a downtree, composed of those same atoms, would come into existence.)

Those advancing the arguments typically accept some form of *permissivism*, according to which there are not only ordinary objects but also trogs and uptrees and a plethora of other such extraordinary objects that escape our notice despite being right before our eyes. Permissivists intend for their debunking arguments to show only that our disbelief in extraordinary objects is unjustified.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, however, structurally identical arguments purport to show that our belief in ordinary objects is unjustified as well. Thus, the debunking arguments would seem to be just as much a problem for the permissivist as they are for the conservative.

Though I do not myself believe that these more radical debunking arguments are sound, the bulk of the paper will be devoted to showing that they are not as easy to resist as one might think. We shall see that there is no straightforward causal explanation for why we have beliefs and experiences that accurately represent which kinds of objects there are. We shall also see that embracing permissivism does not itself give one the resources to resist the debunking arguments against ordinary perceptual beliefs.

I ultimately defend a rationalist response, according to which an intellectual apprehension of abstract facts plays a key role in accounting for the accuracy of these beliefs. While it is fairly obvious that this sort of appeal to rational insight, if defensible, is poised to answer the debunking arguments that arise for evaluative and mathematical beliefs, it is somewhat surprising that it would need to play a role—or that it even could play a role—in securing the rationality of *perceptual* beliefs. I hope to show, however, that it is an effective and perhaps indispensable means of avoiding skepticism about ordinary objects. If I am right about this, then the resources

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<sup>2</sup> See Yablo (1987: 307), Shoemaker (1988: 209), Hawley (2001: 6-7), Hudson (2001: 111), Sider (2001: 156-157, 2008: 260), Nolan (2005: 35), Hawthorne (2006: 109), Moyer (2006: 408), and Thomasson (2007: §10.3).

needed to block the debunking arguments in other domains may already be needed to block the debunking arguments that purport to undermine the belief that *here is a hand*.

## 2. Debunking Arguments

The general sentiment in the above-quoted passages seems to go something like this: once we appreciate *why* we have the beliefs we do about which objects there are (or aren't), we can see that it would be a coincidence if these beliefs turned out to be correct, which should in turn lead us to abandon these beliefs. This is precisely the structure of the debunking arguments that arise in a number of other literatures.

Probably the best-known debunking arguments are found in meta-ethics:

(A1) There is no explanatory connection between our evaluative beliefs and evaluative facts.

(A2) If so, then it would be a coincidence if our evaluative beliefs are correct.

(A3) If so, then we should not believe that setting fire to cats is wrong.

(A4) So, we should not believe that setting fire to cats is wrong.<sup>3</sup>

The idea behind A1 is that the factors that lead us hold the evaluative beliefs that we do are independent from the factors that are relevant to settling the truth of those beliefs. The idea behind A2 is that if there truly is this sort of disconnect between our evaluative beliefs and the evaluative facts, then it could only be a matter of luck if the beliefs turned out to be accurate. The idea behind A3 is that, since we have no rational grounds for believing that we got lucky, we should not believe that we did, in which case we should suspend our beliefs about the evaluative facts. This sort of argument may be put forward either with the intent of establishing A4 or, alternatively, with the intent of convincing some specific range of theorists (e.g., moral realists) that they lack the resources to resist A4.

Reliability challenges for mathematical Platonism have the same structure: the mathematical facts, as conceived by the Platonist, aren't the sorts of things that can cause or otherwise explain our mathematical beliefs, in which case it would simply be a coincidence if our beliefs lined up with those facts (so conceived).<sup>4</sup> So do familiar arguments against our beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> See Harman (1977: Ch. 1), Joyce (2006: Ch. 6), and Street (2006). Proponents of such arguments may wish to understand 'we' and 'our' as ranging only over those of us who are alert to these explanatory challenges. The philosophically innocent may be "off the hook" because, not realizing that it would only be a coincidence if their beliefs are true, they do not possess a defeater for their beliefs. Cf. White (2010: §2) on undermining vs. blocking debunkers.

<sup>4</sup> See Benacerraf (1973) and Field (1989: 25-30); cf. Schechter (2010) on logical truths.

about the colors of objects: we shouldn't believe that external objects have the colors that they appear to have because the factors that determine which colors we seem to see are entirely independent of the facts about which colors (if any) objects actually have.<sup>5</sup> So do Freudian arguments against religious belief: once theists recognize the true source of such beliefs ("wish fulfillment"), they ought to abandon them.<sup>6</sup> So does Berkeley's argument against materialism in the *Principles*: even supposing that there are external bodies, they cannot play any role in explaining why we have the experiences that we do, in which case we have no reason to postulate them.<sup>7</sup>

The most straightforward way to resist such arguments is to insist that the facts in the relevant domain do explain our beliefs about the domain. I believe that the children are doing something wrong because they are setting fire to a cat and it is wrong to set fire to cats. Or: I believe that  $1+1=2$  because  $1+1$  does equal 2. Or: theists believe that a deity exists because there exists a deity who arranged for them to have the sort of susceptibility to wish fulfillment that would lead them to believe in a deity. Whether it is rational to accept such claims is of course precisely what is at issue in the debunking arguments. But if they are correct, then there would be an explanatory connection of the relevant sort—one that makes the accuracy of these beliefs non-accidental and non-coincidental. What these explanations (the explanantia) have in common is that they logically imply the truth of the beliefs in question. In other words, the explanations are *alethic*:

E is an alethic explanation for why A believes that p iff (i) E explains why A believes that p and (ii) E implies that p.

The notion of alethicality can be generalized to other contentful states:

E is an alethic explanation for why S  $\phi$ s that p iff (i) E explains why S  $\phi$ s that p and (ii) E implies that p.

Thus we can also characterize experiences, intuitions, or even wishes as having or lacking alethic explanations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Pautz (2011: §3).

<sup>6</sup> Freud (1927). Cf. Marx (1843) and Nietzsche (1881: §95).

<sup>7</sup> *Principles* 19: "...though we give the materialists their external bodies, they by their own confession are never the nearer knowing how our ideas are produced; since they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind. Hence it is evident the production of ideas or sensations in our minds can be no reason why we should suppose Matter or corporeal substances, since that is acknowledged to remain equally inexplicable with or without this supposition."

<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that only alethic explanations can underwrite the needed explanatory connections. Certain forms of anti-realism are also poised to underwrite such a connection: if believing that something is wrong suffices to make it wrong, then that would explain the accuracy

Unsurprisingly, the defense of A1 and the associated premise in other debunking arguments typically takes the form of showing there to be no alethic explanation for the relevant beliefs. This, in turn, can take either of two forms. The first involves showing that there *cannot* be such an explanation. For instance, one might argue that moral facts, if they exist, are causally inert and therefore cannot influence our beliefs. The second involves showing that the best explanation for these beliefs is non-alethic. For instance, one might supply an evolutionary explanation for our evaluative beliefs and observe that evaluative facts at no point enter into the explanation for those beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Debunking Conservatism

#### 3.1 *Debunking Disbelief in Extraordinary Objects*

As indicated above, the debunking arguments against conservatives are most often wielded by permissivists, targeting beliefs about which objects *there aren't*.<sup>10</sup> In the case at hand, such an argument might run as follows:

(B1) There is no explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are and aren't and the facts about which objects there are and aren't.

(B2) If so, then it would be a coincidence if our beliefs about which objects there are and aren't are correct.

(B3) If so, then we should not believe that there is no trog in S.

(B4) So, we should not believe that there is no trog in S.

As with A1 above, there would seem to be two avenues for defending B1. One is to maintain that the relevant facts about which objects there are and aren't *cannot* explain why we have the beliefs that we do. Even if there indeed is no trog in S, the reasoning goes, the fact that there is no trog is not the sort of thing that could influence our beliefs or intuitions about whether there are trogs. Nor can any facts that together imply that there are no trogs—for instance, (i) that the sole trunk and dog in S are so arranged, (ii) that there is a trog in S only if the trunk and dog in S compose something, and (iii) that a trunk and dog so arranged do not compose anything—explain why we believe that there is no trog in S. For even if (iii) is in fact true, there would seem to be no way for this sort of general, abstract fact to influence our beliefs.

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of our evaluative beliefs. Additionally, there is no alethic explanation for our beliefs about the future (the fact that the sun will rise tomorrow does not explain my belief that it will), but there plausibly is some explanatory connection between these beliefs and the associated facts—perhaps that the facts and beliefs about the future have a common cause.

<sup>9</sup> See Harman (1977: Ch. 1) for the first sort of the strategy, and see Joyce (2006: Ch. 6) and Street (2006) for the second.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2 for references.

The other avenue is to champion some specific non-alethic explanation for why we are inclined to believe that there are no trops in S. This is the strategy that one actually finds in the literature, albeit typically in sparse detail. Our disinclination to believe that there are trops or other such extraordinary objects in S is to be explained in terms of arbitrary conventions or other cultural or biological contingencies.<sup>11</sup> It may, for instance, be suggested that we take there to be no trop in S because we were born into a community whose conventions for dividing up the world into objects generally prohibit treating some things as the parts of a single object unless they are spatially continuous (or otherwise unified). This, in turn, may trace back to an arbitrary decision or it may trace back to some adaptive advantage of so conceiving of the world.

Such debunking explanations are entirely compatible with the observation that intuition plays a key role in accounting for such beliefs—that the reason that we are inclined to believe that there are no trops in S is that we have the intuition that a trunk and dog so arranged do not compose anything. For the debunker can maintain that these intuitions are explained in a similar matter. We have the intuition that trunks and nearby dogs do not compose anything because there is a conventional prejudice against such objects.

### *3.2 Debunking Belief in Ordinary Objects*

Debunking arguments can also be wielded against our beliefs about which objects *do* exist, though these arguments have been far less prominent in the literature.

(C1) There is no explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are and the facts about which objects there are.

(C2) If so, then it would be a coincidence if our beliefs about which objects there are are correct.

(C3) If so, then we should not believe that there is a tree in S.

(C4) So, we should not believe that there is a tree in S.

Such arguments are a powerful asset to *eliminativists*, who wish to eliminate wide swathes of ordinary objects. For instance, they play a central (and often overlooked) role in Trenton Merricks's defense of the overdetermination argument against baseballs.<sup>12</sup> The motivation for the various premises of this argument are much the same as those for the argument for B1 above.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. James (1890: 285), Hirsch (1978: §5), Heller (1990: 39-42), Hudson (2001: 110), Hawthorne (2006: 109), and Johnston (2006: §17) on the role of these sorts of factors in explaining why we believe in the objects that we do.

<sup>12</sup> See Merricks (2001: 72-76). Heller (1990: 39-42) also deploys such arguments in his defense of eliminativism.

Accordingly, the debunking reasoning threatens to establish far more than permissivists may have realized.

As with B1, there are two avenues for defending C1. The first is to maintain that the facts about which objects there are simply cannot explain why we have the beliefs that we do about which objects there are. Even if there indeed is a tree in S, the fact that there is a tree there cannot play any role in explaining why we believe there to be a tree there. (One might think that this line of defense is a non-starter, for there would seem to be a causal explanation of the belief in terms of the presence of the tree. But one would be mistaken; as we shall see in the next section, there is more to this line of defense than meets the eye.) The other avenue is to put forward a specific non-alethic explanation for these beliefs. Our inclination to take there to be a tree (rather than a frog) upon encountering S may be explained in terms of biological and cultural contingencies, for instance, which sortal expressions we happen to use, which distributions of qualities happen to be of interest to us, and our innate tendencies to perceive certain arrays of qualities as the qualities of a single object.

These debunking explanations of why we are inclined to form the beliefs that we do are also poised to undermine the perceptual basis of these beliefs. How exactly the story goes depends upon one's conception of the contents of perceptual experiences. On one conception, all that the experience itself presents as being the case is that certain sensible qualities are distributed in such and such a way, and, upon having an experience, we spontaneously form beliefs about which of those qualities are coinstantiated by a single object and about the kinds to which those objects belong. A debunker who adopts this first conception will think that the aforementioned biological and cultural contingencies explain why we are disposed to form the beliefs that we do on the basis of this sparse perceptual information.<sup>13</sup>

On a second conception, experiences have a richer representational content, carrying information (or misinformation) not only about distributions of sensible qualities but also about which qualities are borne by a single object and about the kinds to which those objects belong. When we encounter a situation like S, experience represents a single object as instantiating the green shades of the leaves and the brown shades of the trunk, and *that there is a tree* is itself part of the content of the experience. A debunker who opts for this second conception may maintain that our experiences represent the kinds that they do as a result of "theory-ladenness" or

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<sup>13</sup> Debunkers may maintain that biological and cultural contingencies are likewise responsible for our *intuition* that if qualities are distributed thusly then there is a tree (which together with the perceptual belief that qualities are distributed thusly in S would be poised to justify the belief that there is a tree in S). Since the perceptual and intuitive justifications for belief in trees stand or fall together, I will largely ignore the latter in what follows.

“cognitive penetration”: we experience the qualities distributed treeishly in S as borne by a single object, and we experience that object as a tree, entirely as a result of the aforementioned biological and cultural contingencies. For ease of exposition, I will assume this second conception for the remainder of the paper.

In what follows, I focus primarily on the argument for C4, which I refer to hereafter simply as ‘the debunking argument’. I begin by considering the prospects for challenging C1 by supplying a causal explanation for the accuracy of the relevant beliefs and associated experiences. I then turn to a permissivist strategy, according to which, because there are trogs, uptrees, and all manner of other extraordinary objects, it is no accident that our perceptual beliefs are accurate. Finally, I turn to the account that I ultimately want to defend, according to which the accuracy of these beliefs is the result of rational insight.

#### **4. A Causal Explanation**

One does not need to look far to find what would seem to be a perfectly straightforward alethic explanation for our perceptual beliefs about which objects there are. There is a tree before me in S and it causes me to have an experience as of a tree. It would seem to follow that the presence of the tree explains why I have an experience as of a tree and, in turn, why I believe there to be a tree in S. Thus, C1 is false: there is an alethic explanation for these sorts of beliefs. Indeed, the availability of this sort of causal explanation is precisely why perceptual beliefs about ordinary objects are typically cited as the *paradigm* of beliefs that are not susceptible to debunking arguments.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with this line of reasoning is that the mere fact that experiences representing various kinds of objects are caused by objects of just those kinds does not suffice to show that there is a causal explanation for the accuracy of these experiences.

To see why, first notice that demands for explanations, often implicitly, involve a contrastive element.<sup>15</sup> When asked why he robs banks, Willie Sutton replied that that’s where the money is. This is a perfectly good explanation of why he robs banks rather than other sorts of establishments. But it fails to explain what he was surely being asked to explain, namely, why he robs banks rather than walking the straight and narrow.

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Joyce (2006: 182), Enoch (2010: 436), Schechter (2010: 438), and Clarke-Doane (forthcoming: §2).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Dretske (1970: 1021-1022) and van Fraassen (1980).



Another (more pertinent) example: There is a children's toy called a See-n-Say, which randomly produces one of ten animal sounds when its cord is pulled. A duck happens upon the See-n-Say and, mistaking the cord for a worm, gives it a yank. Curiously, the toy then makes the sound of a duck. Someone sees this happen and wonders: why did it make the sound of a duck just then? What she wants to know is why it made the sound of a duck rather than the sound of a cow or chicken or some other animal. The explanation of this contrastive fact is going to be entirely in terms of such factors as how far out the cord was pulled before being released, and it won't make any reference to the extraneous information that it was a duck that pulled the cord. It is simply a coincidence that the toy produced the sound of a duck (rather than a cow) when the duck pulled the cord, and the fact that the duck sound was caused by the duck does not make it any less of a coincidence. Indeed, this is precisely what *makes* it a coincidence!

Now let us return to the question of why we believe there to be a tree in S. If what we want explained is why we believe that there is a tree in S rather than believing that there is nothing at all growing from the ground in S, or why we believe there to be a tree in S rather than wishing there were a tree in S, then the fact that there is a tree in S could serve as an explanation. But, given our interest in the accuracy of our beliefs with regard to the kinds of objects represented, what we want explained is why we believe there to be a tree in S rather than believing there to be a trog or uptree in S and, in turn, why we experience perceived qualities as borne by a tree, rather than as borne by a trog or an uptree. For if it is a matter of chance that trees and dogs cause us to have experiences as of trees and dogs rather than experiences as of uptrees or trogs, then it is a matter of chance that our experiences are accurate in the relevant respects.

Even supposing, then, that the tree causes our experience as of a tree, does the fact that there is a tree there explain why we have an experience as of a tree rather than an experience as of a trog or an uptree? It does not. The putative fact that ordinary objects cause our experiences falls short of explaining why our experiences represent the *kinds* of objects that they do and, accordingly, why we form the beliefs that we do about which kinds of objects there are. This will instead be explained entirely in terms of the perceptual and cognitive processes that operate on the raw sensory input of *qualities distributed thusly* to yield an experience with the content *that there is a tree*, and a proper explanation won't make any reference to the extraneous information that it is a tree that's causing the experience. Just as the fact that the duck caused the toy to produce a representation of a duck does not explain why it represents a duck rather than a cow, the fact that a tree caused the experience does not explain why it represents a tree rather than a trog.

(One might at this point be tempted to invoke a tracking account of content: just as our experiences represent water rather than twater because we encounter water and not twater, our experiences represent trees rather than trogs because we encounter trees and not trogs. But this would require an extraordinary sort of externalism. Suppose that Oscar and Toscar are intrinsic duplicates up to *t*, and that at *t* both encounter *S*. Suppose further, perhaps *per impossibile*, that in Oscar's world the atoms in *S* compose a tree but no trog while in Toscar's world they compose a trog but no tree. On the envisaged view, Oscar and Toscar would then cease to be intrinsic duplicates at *t*, since they would then differ with respect to their narrow contents and associated counting behavior: Toscar but not Oscar takes there to be a single object in the region jointly occupied by the trunk and dog. The idea that external phenomena could have this sort of influence on narrow content is unprecedented in the literature and draws no support from the usual arguments for externalism.)

We can now see the flaw in the reasoning behind the causal response:

(D1) The tree causes my experience.

(D2) If so, then the fact that there is a tree explains why I have an experience as of a tree.

(D3) If so, then there is an alethic explanation for my belief that there is a tree.

(D4) So there is an alethic explanation for my belief that there is a tree.

In certain contexts, D2 may express a true proposition (e.g., that the fact that there is a tree present explains why I have an experience as of a tree rather than an experience as of perfectly flat terrain), and D1 through D4 may express a sound argument. But in the present context, D2 is false, because D2 says that the fact that there is a tree explains why I have an experience as of a tree rather than as of a trog or an uptree. At least, that is what it must say if this is to be a cogent argument to the desired conclusion: that there is an alethic explanation for the fact that I believe that there is a tree in *S* rather than that there is a trog or an uptree.

## 5. Permissivism and Other Incoherent Responses

### 5.1 The Permissivist Strategy

Permissivists take there to be ordinary objects like trees as well as extraordinary objects like trogs and uptrees. Because they believe that there are trees, they must find a way to resist the debunking argument for C4.

Permissivists *appear* to be well positioned to resist the argument by denying C2:

(C2) If there is no explanatory connection between our beliefs about which objects there are and the facts about which objects there are, then it would be a coincidence if our beliefs about which objects there are are correct.

After all, permissivists take there to be objects answering to virtually all of the alternative ways that we might have perceptually and conceptually divided S up into objects. Accordingly, having experiences that accurately represent the presence of a given kind of object is a trivial accomplishment. As Hawthorne puts the point:

[I]t is something of a biological and/or cultural accident that we draw the lines that we do. If we are to be charitable towards ourselves without being unduly chauvinistic, it seems that we should posit ever so many more objects than we habitually talk about, in order not to credit ourselves with too much luck or sophistication in successfully hitting ontological targets most of the time.<sup>16</sup>

There are various ways that one might challenge this response. One is to emphasize that, although it does an excellent job of securing the accuracy of beliefs about which objects there *are*, it does a terrible job when it comes to beliefs about which objects there *aren't*, for instance, the belief that there are no trogs or uptrees in S. Permissivists will likely be unfazed by this complaint, for their own debunking arguments from §3.1 purport to show that we shouldn't believe such things anyway. Moreover, since permissivists typically maintain that we ordinarily restrict our quantifiers to exclude extraordinary objects like trogs when we say such things as 'there is nothing made of both flesh and wood', they will likely deny that anyone (with the exception of a few philosophers) actually believes that there is no trog in S.<sup>17</sup> In any case, I will not pursue that line of response here. My preferred strategy for challenging the permissivist response to the debunking argument is by showing it to be epistemically incoherent.

### 5.2 The Incoherence Objection

Imagine that Bill is in the gift shop at the World Bird Sanctuary, flipping through a picture book of American birds. Alice, who works in the gift shop, is looking over his shoulder. Each time he flips the page, she points to the bird depicted there and names a state in which it can be found. Presuming her to be an expert such matters, Bill believes her. Bill later overhears Alice confess to a co-worker that she was naming states at random and has no idea where the birds can be found.

The rational thing for Bill to do would be to suspend belief about where the birds can be found. But suppose that, rather than abandoning these beliefs, he attempts to assure himself of their accuracy by means of the following, patently absurd line of reasoning:

[1] Alice's testimony and my testimonial beliefs are accurate: those birds can be found in the indicated states. [2] Yet it is a matter of chance that she named the states that she did.

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<sup>16</sup> Hawthorne (2006: 109). Cf. Shoemaker (1988: 209), Hawley (2001: 6-7), Hudson (2001: 107f), Witmer (2003: 606), Nolan (2005: 35), and Thomasson (2007: §10.3).

<sup>17</sup> See Korman (2008) for discussion.

[3] Presumably, I am not just lucky to have ended up with accurate beliefs about where these birds can be found, as I would be if each could be found in only one or two states.  
[4] So the best explanation for the accuracy of her testimony and of my beliefs is that each bird can be found in all fifty states.

Even if it were true that each bird can be found in every state, one obviously cannot come to be justified in believing that on the basis of this silly line of reasoning. Why not? Bill plausibly was rationally entitled to accept [1], at least before overhearing Alice's confession. The problem is that step [2] in the reasoning undercuts the authority of his testimonial source. Once his source is discredited in this way (by his own admission), it would be irrational for him to then seek an explanation for how she managed to deliver accurate information nonetheless. Once he recognizes that Alice was naming states at random, he is no longer entitled to take for granted the accuracy of her testimony. A fortiori, he cannot take the accuracy of her testimony for granted in an abductive inference to how he managed to end up with true testimonial beliefs.

The permissivist's reasoning looks to be structurally identical to Bill's:

[1'] My experiences and perceptual beliefs are accurate: there are trees and other ordinary objects. [2'] Yet it is a biological and/or cultural accident that my experiences represent the objects that they do. [3'] Presumably, I am not just lucky to have ended up with accurate beliefs about which objects there are, as I would be if there were only ordinary objects. [4'] So the best explanation for the accuracy of my experiences and beliefs is that there are both ordinary and extraordinary objects.

Or, revisiting the quote from Hawthorne:

[2'] It is something of a biological and/or cultural accident that we draw the lines that we do. If [1'] we are to be charitable towards ourselves without being unduly chauvinistic, it seems that [4'] we should posit ever so many more objects than we habitually talk about, [3'] in order not to credit ourselves with too much luck or sophistication in successfully hitting ontological targets most of the time.

With [1'], the permissivist simply takes for granted that her experiences are veridical, without further argument. That, in itself, is not problematic; as we will see in §7.1, we plausibly are defeasibly entitled to accept that our basic sources of information are reliable even in the absence of independent evidence of their reliability. The problem is that [2'], like [2], is an authority-undercutting concession. The permissivist discredits the experiential source of her beliefs, but continues to take their accuracy for granted in an inference to the best explanation of their accuracy.

### *5.3 Is There Independent Evidence for Permissivism?*

Permissivists are likely to respond as follows: There are other arguments for permissivism. Accordingly, one does not have to establish permissivism on the basis of this illicit line of reasoning. Rather, one can establish it on independent grounds and then already have it in hand as a reason to accept [1']. Accordingly, even though permissivists undercut the authority of their experiences by embracing [2'], they can persist in taking their experiences to be accurate on the strength of their independent, philosophical reasons for accepting the full permissivist ontology. This would then be a crucial disanalogy with Bill's reasoning, since Bill has no independent evidence (i.e., independent of Alice's discredited testimony) that each bird can be found in every state. A more apt analogy would be one on which, after hearing Alice's testimony, Bill reads on the dust jacket that the book depicts only birds that can be found in all fifty states; in that case, it would be perfectly rational for him to retain his testimonial beliefs even after hearing Alice's confession.

In assessing this response, I will examine the two most influential arguments for permissivism: the argument from arbitrariness and the argument from vagueness. I will not criticize these arguments. Rather, I will show that both rely crucially upon perceptual beliefs about ordinary objects, in which case permissivists cannot coherently maintain that they are good arguments while at the same time discrediting such experiences by accepting [2'].

Arguments from arbitrariness purport to establish the existence of some variety of extraordinary objects by way of showing that there is no ontologically significant difference between those objects and certain ordinary objects. And, having countenanced some of these extraordinary objects, there would seem to be no "reasonable stopping point short of positing a plenitude of temporal parts in combination with universal composition" (Hawthorne 2006: 109). Here is one such argument:

(E1) There is no ontologically significant difference between uptrees and islands.

(E2) If so, then islands exist iff uptrees exist.

(E3) Islands exist.

(E4) So uptrees exist.

(E5) By parity, all of the permissivist's ordinary and extraordinary objects exist.

E1 derives its plausibility from the fact that both uptrees and islands would seem to be objects that cease to exist without their constitutive matter undergoing any intrinsic change,<sup>18</sup> and E2 may be defended by appeal to a prima facie plausible prohibition on certain varieties of brute facts.

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<sup>18</sup> Uptrees cease to exist when they change their orientation relative to the earth, and islands (allegedly) cease to exist when they change their orientation relative to the water level. Cf. Hawthorne (2006: vii) and Korman (2010: §5) on islands and incars.

Focus though on what seems to be the most innocuous premise: E3. Presumably, any justification we have for believing that islands exist ultimately derives from experience—for instance, from looking out across the water and seeming to see island. So this argument does not yield justification for permissivism that is independent of experiences whose authority is undercut by [2'].

Matters are much the same for the argument from vagueness, which purports to show that composition cannot occur restrictedly: either every plurality of objects has a fusion or no plurality of objects has a fusion.<sup>19</sup> Those moved by the argument (whose details needn't concern us here) might reason as follows:

(F1) Either every plurality of objects has a fusion or none do.

(F2) Some pluralities of objects have a fusion.

(F3) So, every plurality of objects has a fusion.

(F4) If every plurality of objects has a fusion, then there are trees.

(F5) So, there are trees.

Focus again on the most innocuous premises. Is there reason to accept F2 and F4 that is independent of our (discredited) experiences?

The most obvious reason for accepting F2 is one that is not available to the permissivist in this context, namely, that we have experiences as of trees and other composites. There are, however, independent theoretical reasons for accepting F2, which turn on the existence or possibility of “atomless gunk”, that is, composites all of whose parts have proper parts.<sup>20</sup> For instance, one might argue against the nihilist thesis that there are no composites as follows: it is possible for there to be gunk; if so, then it is possible that nihilism is false; nihilism is necessary if true; so nihilism is false. Those persuaded by such arguments would have an independent basis for accepting F2.<sup>21</sup>

How about F4? There are atoms arranged treewise, so it follows from F3 that there is a single object composed of those atoms. But it does not follow that they compose a tree.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>19</sup> See Sider (2001: §4.9) for a detailed presentation of the argument.

<sup>20</sup> See Sider (1993, 2003: 724-725). Cf. Van Cleve (2008: 325).

<sup>21</sup> It is somewhat puzzling, though, how anyone could find this argument persuasive. One who is sufficiently suspicious of the intuition that composite tables are possible to regard nihilism as a live option surely would not (or at least should not) be moved by the intuition that composite gunk is possible. As Dorr puts it (2002: 68n19): “I’m not sure I understand why this [argument from gunk] should be considered better than the simpler argument from the premise ‘It is obvious that composite things are possible’.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Unger (1979: 150) on eliminativism: “There is nothing in these arguments [for eliminativism] to deny the idea, common enough, that there are physical objects with a diameter greater than four feet and less than five. ... It is simply that no such objects will be ordinary

they compose only an uptree or, alternatively, only a mereological sum which exists when and only when those very atoms exist. Apart from discredited experiences as of trees, there would seem to be no reason to believe that the tree-shaped, tree-sized composites are trees. Accordingly, it would be epistemically unstable to think that this argument for F5 is a good argument while at the same time maintaining that there is no explanatory connection between the kinds that there are and the kinds that our experiences present there as being.

For all I have said, the arguments from vagueness and arbitrariness may be perfectly good arguments for permissivism, and I certainly have done nothing to spare conservatives the burden of having to respond to these arguments. What we have seen, though, is that the arguments are not available to one who undercuts the authority of experience by accepting [2']. Thus, absent a compelling argument for permissivism that does not rest on perceptual beliefs about ordinary objects, the present strategy for resisting the objection from §5.2 fails.

#### 5.4 *Relativists and Bootstrappers*

The problem for the permissivist strategy generalizes to any strategy for resisting the debunking argument that does not involve denying C1. I illustrate this point by considering two further strategies for resisting the debunking argument.

*Relativism.* Relativists maintain that existence claims are context-sensitive. On one straightforward way of developing the view, an utterance of ‘trees exist’ expresses a proposition of the form *that trees exist relative to C*, where C is the speaker’s conceptual scheme. Thus, ‘trees exist’ expresses a true proposition in my mouth and would express a different, false proposition in the mouths of speakers whose conceptual scheme includes trogs but not trees.<sup>23</sup> Relativists, like permissivists, will reject C2.<sup>24</sup> Although the facts about which objects there are neither explain nor are explained by our beliefs about which objects there are, there is no luck involved in having

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things; none are stones or planets or pieces of furniture.” Cf. Heller (1990), Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997), and Van Cleve (2008).

<sup>23</sup> This evidently is Rorty’s view; see Boghossian (2006: Ch. 4). Sosa (1999) defends, but does not ultimately endorse, this view, and Hirsch (2002) defends a structurally identical view according to which ‘exists’ has a different “existence-like meaning” in the mouths of speakers with different conceptual schemes. In the terminology of recent debates in the philosophy of language, these sorts of relativist views would be classified as *contextualist*, though similar points apply to “true” relativists who take existence claims to be assessment-sensitive (see Horgan and Potrč 2008: Ch. 3).

<sup>24</sup> Why not C1? Relativists do not claim that there are trees *because* we have the conceptual scheme that we do. Compare: My utterance of ‘Barbara is short’ expresses the true proposition that Barbara is short for a basketball player because I am in a context in which the operative standards for assessing height are fairly stringent. It does not follow that Barbara is short because I am in a context in which the operative standards are stringent.

accurate beliefs. For having accurate beliefs about which objects there are is a simple matter of believing in objects that exist relative to one's own conceptual scheme.

As with the permissivist response, it would be epistemically incoherent to embrace this relativist response on the grounds that it best explains why we are not simply lucky to have accurate beliefs, while at the same time granting that it is a biological or cultural accident that we have the beliefs that we do. So one must find some other reason for accepting relativism. But, as with permissivism, the best reasons for accepting relativism ultimately rest upon ordinary perceptual beliefs. For instance, one might turn the argument from arbitrariness on its head as follows:

There are islands and no uptrees, and yet there is no ontologically significant difference between islands and uptrees. So, on pain of arbitrariness, one must embrace a view that does not privilege islands over uptrees by virtue of taking the former but not the latter to exist. Relativism is just such a view, since it takes islands and not uptrees to exist *relative to our conceptual scheme*, but allows that uptrees but not islands exist relative to alternative conceptual schemes that are in no way inferior to our own.

This reasoning takes as its starting point that there are islands, and the justification (if any) for this premise comes from experience. By conceding that C1 is true, one undercuts the authority of one's experiences, which in turn renders this line of reasoning unavailable.

*Bootstrapping.* Another strategy for resisting the debunking argument involves denying C3:

(C3) If it would be a coincidence if our beliefs about which objects there are are correct, then we should not believe that there is a tree in S.

The idea behind C3 is that, unless we have reason to believe that we *did* get lucky, we should not believe that we did, and so should not believe that our experiences are accurate. One could therefore reject C3 if it can be shown that there is good reason to believe that we got lucky and that a coincidence occurred.

Of course, we sometimes do have good reason to believe that a coincidence occurred. Having set sail for Bermuda, I fall asleep at the wheel. In the morning, I find that I have hit land, and my first sight is a banner reading "Welcome to Bermuda". I recognize that it would have taken a tremendous stroke of luck for me to wind up in Bermuda. Surely, though, it would not be irrational for me to believe that I am in Bermuda.<sup>25</sup>

What reason could you have, then, for believing that you luckily have accurate experiences? One might suggest the following. You can check (using your eyes) whether there is a table before you, and indeed there is. You can then check (using introspection) whether you are

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<sup>25</sup> The example is from White (2010: 589).



having an experience as of a table, and indeed you are. You can then make the straightforward inference that the experience is accurate. You can perform similar checks for the chair, computer, and coffee mug that you seem to see. And, recognizing that it is a matter of chance that you have the experiences that you do, you conclude that you are extremely lucky to have coincidentally ended up with experiences that accurately represent which objects there are.

This line of reasoning is blatantly circular: one assures oneself that one's experiences are accurate by checking the deliverances of one's experiences against those very experiences. That said, this style of reasoning would seem to be licensed by widely-endorsed foundationalist theses,<sup>26</sup> and some (surely begrudgingly) may be willing to concede that one can in this way come to be justified in believing one's experiences to be accurate. Yet even supposing that this sort of "bootstrapping" is sometimes legitimate, it cannot confer justification once one concedes that it would be a matter of luck if one's experiences are reliable. This was the lesson of the Bill and Alice case: one cannot rationally rely on a source of information once one has discredited it, or undercut its authority, by accepting that there is no explanatory connection between that source and the range of facts that it purports to be delivering information about. If bootstrapping is ever rational, it cannot be accompanied by a conviction that one's beliefs bear no explanatory connection to the domain of facts that they are about.

## **6. A Rationalist Strategy**

The moral of the preceding section is that once one grants that there is no explanatory connection between our perceptual beliefs about which kinds of objects there are and the facts about which kinds of objects there are, it is irrational for one to retain those beliefs. So if one is to resist the debunking arguments, one must deny C1.

My aim in the remainder of the paper is to show that rationalists, according to whom we have a capacity of rational insight enabling us to apprehend abstract facts (concerning, e.g., which distributions of qualities are borne by a single object), are in a position to rationally reject C1 as well as B1.<sup>27</sup> Before articulating the rationalist strategy, let me very clear about what I do and do not aim to accomplish in what follows. I do not even attempt to answer the (burning) question of how this capacity for intellectual apprehension of abstract facts is meant to work; indeed,

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<sup>26</sup> See Cohen (2002).

<sup>27</sup> There are alternative strategies for denying C1 that I will not pursue here, but which I suspect can be defended along similar lines. One is to embrace anti-realism: the fact that there are trees and no trogs doesn't explain why we have the experiences that we do, but the latter does explain the former (see Sidelle 1989). Another is to maintain that we have accurate experiences as a result of intelligent design (see Rea 2002: Ch. 9).

‘apprehension’ here is serving as something of a dummy term for that, whatever it is, by which abstract facts influence our mental states. I am not *putting forward* any explanation of the accuracy of our perceptual beliefs. What I will do is explain how one can be justified in taking oneself to have such a capacity, even in the face of the debunking arguments, and even in the absence of an explanation of how such a capacity is meant to work.

I also do not attempt to convince debunkers that their arguments are unsound, nor do I attempt to convince permissivists that permissivism is false. Rather, my aim is to convince debunkers, permissivists, and prospective conservatives alike that there is an epistemological perspective from within which one can rationally retain the perceptual and intuitive beliefs targeted by the debunking arguments.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, I assume without argument that leaves and a trunk arranged palmtree-wise compose a tree and that a dog and a trunk arranged trog-wise do not compose anything. But I beg no questions against debunkers and permissivists in doing so, for (again) I am not attempting to persuade them that they themselves should not be convinced by their arguments.<sup>29</sup> (You will recall that we did not fault the causal strategy in §4 or the permissivist strategy in §5 for taking as their starting points the very thing that the debunker refuses to accept, namely, that our experiences are accurate.)

What reason, then, can the conservative have for believing that we have this capacity for rational insight? The justification for believing that we have such a capacity derives from an inference to the best explanation of the accuracy of our experiences. Our experiences do accurately represent which kinds of things there are, and we presumably are not simply lucky to have accurate experiences. The supposition that our experiences are influenced by an apprehension of abstract facts is poised to account for their accuracy (more on this below), and no superior explanation appears to be forthcoming. So, by abductive inference, we may accept this account. This line of reasoning shares much in common with the permissivist reasoning rejected in §5. What is absent, though, is the main defect of that reasoning, namely, the authority-undercutting concession that there is no appropriate explanatory connection between our experiences and the facts about which objects there are.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Pryor (2004: §7), who emphasizes that the success of a philosophical response to a skeptical argument should not be measured by its ability to persuade the skeptic herself, but rather by its ability to provide a diagnosis of the flaw in the skeptic’s reasoning that can be rationally accepted, if only by those advancing the response (even if it cannot be rationally accepted by those seized by skeptical doubts). See also Nozick (1981: 197-198), Plantinga (2000), and Williamson (2007: §7.3).

<sup>29</sup> Nor does assuming these things guarantee success in answering the debunker. For the accuracy of these beliefs would still cry out for explanation, and if one can find no satisfactory explanation, then that exposes an incoherence among the conservative’s beliefs—one which perhaps can be rationally resolved only by dropping the supposition of accuracy.

I address some natural objections to this line of reasoning in the following section. First, though, let us see how intellectual apprehension—which is typically invoked in connection with *intuitive* judgments—is meant to have any bearing on ordinary perceptual judgments. Here is how. Our experiences represent the kinds of objects that they do largely as a result of cognitive penetration, the phenomenon by which background cognitive states influence how information is presented to us in perception.<sup>30</sup> Cognitive penetration sometimes has a pernicious influence on perceptual content, as when paranoia leads one to experience an unexceptional facial expression as menacing. But it also sometimes enhances perceptual content, as when a radiologist viewing an x-ray has an experience as of a stress fracture, where a novice has an experience only as of a faint grey streak. On the present account, our experiences are the beneficiaries of cognitive penetration, representing the kinds of objects that they do partly as a result of our apprehension of facts about composition, coinstantiation, and kind membership.

To illustrate, here is why we have an experience as of a tree when we encounter S. We are perceptually aware of a distribution of sensible qualities in S. Furthermore, we have a great deal of knowledge, from prior experience, of the likely distribution of sensible qualities that are currently occluded from view (e.g., those of the backsides and insides of perceived objects). Finally, we apprehend the fact that when qualities are distributed treewise they are borne by a single object and that an object with that qualitative profile counts as a tree. Our apprehension of these facts, together with our perceptual awareness of the qualities in S and background suppositions about the qualities occluded from view, accounts for our having an experience as of a tree when we encounter S. We likewise apprehend the fact that a trunk and a dog so arranged do not compose anything, and our apprehension of this fact accounts for why we do not have an experience as of a trog when we encounter S.<sup>31</sup>

If this is correct, then there is an alethic explanation for why we have experiences as of trees rather than experiences as of trogs. The facts which explain why we have the experiences that we do—that qualities are distributed thusly in S and that there are trees and no trogs when qualities are distributed thusly—together imply that there are trees and no trogs in S. Of course, this is all compatible with the possibility of misperception. One could have an experience as of a tree as a result of hallucinating qualities distributed treewise, or as a result of mistaken background suppositions (e.g., while driving through “tree façade county”), or even as a result of

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<sup>30</sup> See Siegel (2012).

<sup>31</sup> To say that we apprehend such facts is not to say that they feature in our occurrent thoughts or beliefs. Rather, we are responsive to the relevant facts without consciously attending to them, much as a hiker is responsive to suitable and unsuitable places to step without pausing to reflect on the matter. The idea is that, like the hiker’s steps, our experiences are intelligently guided.

Burgesque conceptual errors (e.g., one may mistakenly believe that sufficiently tall shrubs count as trees). My claim is only that, when experience *does* accurately represent the presence of a certain kind of object, the explanation is often alethic.

This rationalist account of the accuracy of our experiences is poised to account for the accuracy of our intuitions about S as well. We apprehend the fact that when qualities are so distributed, there is a tree, and, because we apprehend this fact, it seems to us that there is a tree in a situation like S when we consult our intuitions. We have the intuition that there is no trog in S because we apprehend the fact that a dog and trunk so arranged do not compose anything. Thus, rationalists can deny B1. It is also poised to account for the allegedly arbitrary conventions that guide our talk and thought about objects. We naturally come to have a word for trees and not trogs, and a convention of treating situations like S as containing trees but not trogs, because we have experiences as of trees and we do not have experiences as of trogs, which in turn is a result of our apprehending the fact that the distributions of qualities that we encounter are ones which suffice for there to be trees but not for there to be trogs.

## 7. Objections

I now turn to some objections to the rationalist strategy. The first is that we have no independent evidence for the accuracy of our experiences. The second is that the postulated capacity is objectionably mysterious. The third is that there is no explanation for how we could have come to have such a capacity in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

### 7.1 *No Independent Evidence*

The abductive justification offered above for accepting the rationalist strategy takes as its starting point that our experiences accurately represent the kinds to which encountered objects belong. One might object that we have no independent evidence that our experiences are accurate with regard to the kinds that they represent. We cannot, as it were, get outside of our skins and check the way our experiences represent the world as being against the way the world in fact is. But once we recognize that we have no such independent evidence, how can it be rational to persist in supposing our experiences to be accurate in this regard?

This concern is a manifestation of a far more general concern: what evidence can we ever have for believing that any of our basic sources of information (experience, introspection, memory, intuition) are reliable? In fact, the demand for independent confirmation gives rise to

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<sup>32</sup> These are counterparts of three objections that Schechter (2010: 448-449) raises against rationalist responses to reliability challenges in the epistemology of logic.

powerful and perfectly general skeptical arguments, like the following (where any proposition whatsoever may be substituted for p):

- (G1) Suppose for reductio that you are justified in believing that p.
- (G2) You are justified in believing that p only if you are justified in believing that you have a reliable source of information concerning whether p.
- (G3) So you are justified in believing an infinite sequence of propositions of the form: that your belief *that p* has a reliable source, that your belief *that your belief that p has a reliable source* has a reliable source, ....
- (G4) If so, then some sources of information are self-justifying.<sup>33</sup>
- (G5) No sources of information are self-justifying.
- (G6) So you are not justified in believing that p.<sup>34</sup>

‘Justified’ should be understood here as *ex ante* justification, where S is *ex ante* justified in believing that p so long as it would be doxastically appropriate for S to believe that p (regardless of whether S actually has formed the belief that p). Understood in this way, G2 is a prima facie plausible constraint on justification (and is not open to the usual “overintellectualization” objections). The idea behind G4 is that we only have so many sources of information, and yet (by G3) there is an infinite sequence of beliefs standing in need of justification, in which case there must be some point in the sequence at which some source of information recurs. But given the nature of the sequence, this amounts to there being nothing to attest to the reliability of these sources but those sources themselves. G5 then makes the plausible claim that one cannot be justified in believing that various sources are reliable solely on the basis of information obtained by those very sources.

Here are the three options that I am aware of for resisting the argument.<sup>35</sup>

- (i) *Coherentism*. I am justified in believing that experience and other basic sources of information are reliable by virtue of the fact that my belief that they are reliable belongs to a “web” of beliefs which together exemplify certain epistemic virtues

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<sup>33</sup> Sources of information  $J_1 \dots J_n$  are *self-justifying* if one can be justified in believing that  $J_1 \dots J_n$  are reliable sources of information entirely on the basis of the deliverances of  $J_1 \dots J_n$ .

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Chisholm on the problem of the criterion (1977: Ch. 7).

<sup>35</sup> I deliberately omit reliabilism from the list of options. Reliabilists will contend that, to be justified in believing the deliverances of a source of information, it is sufficient (absent defeaters) that it be a reliable source of information. But on pain of epistemic incoherence—and Moore-paradoxical beliefs—reliabilists cannot deny G2. For, given the second-personal character of the argument, this would be tantamount to conceding that *they themselves* are not rationally entitled to accept that their experiences are a reliable source of information, while at the same time affirming the deliverances of their experiences (cf. Bergmann 2005: 426-427). So even reliabilists must go in for one of these three options, in order to escape the skeptical threat.

(e.g., coherence). Thus, the justification does not derive from a source of information. G4 is false.

(ii) *Default Entitlement*. I am simply entitled, by default, to accept that experience and other basic sources of information are reliable, and (absent defeaters) this is all that is needed for justifiably believing their deliverances. Thus, the justification does not derive from a source of information.<sup>36</sup>

(iii) *Bootstrapping*. I am justified in believing experience and other basic sources of information are reliable on the grounds that they have had an excellent track record, established as follows: here is a hand and, sure enough, I am experiencing a hand; here is a desk and, sure enough, I am experiencing a desk; and so on ad nauseum. Thus, some sources of information are self-justifying. G5 is false.

Admittedly, none of these options has a great deal of initial plausibility, and perhaps some will be willing to embrace global skepticism on the basis of such arguments. But those of us who would reject global skepticism must accept that we are (somehow or other) entitled to take for granted that our experiences are reliable, even in the absence of independent evidence for their reliability. Such entitlement is still susceptible to defeat, and the debunking arguments purport to provide defeaters by supplying positive reason to doubt that our experiences are accurate. But merely discovering that we lack independent evidence for taking our experiences to be reliable—that we have no way of checking the testimony of our senses against the way the world in fact is—is not itself a defeater.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, I will assume that we are rationally entitled to take our experiences and other basic sources of information to be reliable, even in the absence of independent evidence of their

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<sup>36</sup> See Wright (2004), White (2006: §9), and Schafer (2010: 475-6). Proponents of this line of response may or may not equate *entitlement to accept* with *justification to believe*. Those who do will deny G4; those who do not will deny G2.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Baker (2007: 46-7).

reliability.<sup>38</sup> This is a controversial assumption, but only the most radical skeptic is in a position to object.<sup>39</sup>

## 7.2 *Mysteriousness*

One might object that the postulated capacity of intellectual apprehension is utterly mysterious. I could not agree more. But it is far from clear that this shows the conservative to be irrational in taking herself to have such a capacity. For there is countervailing reason to take ourselves to have it. The reason derives from the inference to the best explanation of the accuracy of our experiences given in §6.

It may be illuminating to compare the question of whether we have this capacity to the question of whether there are Platonic universals and propositions. These would be abstract, nonlocated entities, and as such are themselves fairly mysterious. Nevertheless, we have what many take to be sufficient reason to believe in them: they play an indispensable role in accounting for certain facts, for instance, the fact that ‘red is more similar to orange than to blue’ is true. (The proposition is the meaning of the sentence; the universals are the constituents of the proposition and referents of the abstract singular terms.) It may well be that the mysteriousness of these entities gives us some reason not to postulate them. But if indeed they are an indispensable part of our best account of something that we justifiably believe to be the case, then that can serve as countervailing reason for postulating them nonetheless. Likewise, although it is mysterious how the envisaged sort of apprehension could work, for lack of a better account of the accuracy of our experiences we are entitled to accept that we have just such a capacity.

One might object that it is not simply our failure to understand how it works that makes it irrational for us to believe that we have such a capacity, but rather that we have no idea how one

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<sup>38</sup> Here is one point at which the supposition in §3.3 that perceptual content is rich makes a difference. For suppose instead that the content of experience is sparse. In that case, perceptual content is silent on the question of whether there are trees, and entitlement to take our experiences to have accurate contents would not by itself entitle us to take there to be trees. Nevertheless, a minor variant on the response is available to proponents of sparse content. We have the intuition that there is a tree and no trog when qualities are distributed thusly. Since intuition is a basic source of information, we are entitled to accept that its deliverances are accurate (absent defeaters). The best explanation for their accuracy arguably involves apprehension of abstract facts. It would then be reasonable to conjecture that apprehension of these facts accounts for our inclination to form tree-beliefs rather than trog-beliefs on the basis of our sparse experiences.

<sup>39</sup> Epistemologists are widely in agreement that we do not need such independent evidence. Feldman (2005: 95): “It is widely thought that people do not in general need evidence about the reliability or evidential value of perception, memory, or other basic faculties in order to have knowledge or reasonable belief on their basis.”

might even go about investigating, or making progress on, the question of how it works. But this is surely an overstatement. Perhaps (as many rationalists think) apprehension of abstract facts can somehow be accounted for in terms of what it is to possess and understand concepts; or perhaps the capacity can be assimilated to a more general capacity to evaluate counterfactuals; or perhaps it can be understood in terms of other relations that concreta can bear to abstracta (e.g., instantiation or constitution).<sup>40</sup> Whether any of these avenues holds any promise remains to be seen. But it's just not true that we have no idea where to look for an account of this sort of capacity. Thus, we would seem to be in a relevantly similar position to that of our ancient ancestors, who lacked an account of how we perceive the sensible qualities of distant objects, who may have speculated that this somehow involves a medium between our sense organs and those objects, who may even have harbored some concerns about the very possibility of such an explanation (like those voiced by Berkeley in footnote 7), but who surely were nevertheless justified in believing in external objects of various colors and shapes.

### *7.3 Etiological Worries*

A third objection arises from reflection on the question of why it is that we have a belief-forming mechanism that delivers accurate verdicts about which objects there are, rather than one that delivers inaccurate verdicts.<sup>41</sup> For there would seem to be no adaptive advantage to having accurate beliefs regarding which objects compose something or about the kinds to which various composites belong. This is not to deny that it is adaptive for creatures like us to have tree-beliefs rather than trog-beliefs, perhaps because it would be too cognitively taxing to track objects under the sortal *trog*. Rather, the idea is that if in fact there are trogs and no trees in situations like S, we are not thereby at any disadvantage by virtue of taking there to be trees and no trogs; creatures who conceived of S as containing trogs and no trees would not thereby have greater fitness.

Yet if there is no adaptive advantage to having accurate beliefs about the kinds to which perceived objects belong, then there would seem to be no adaptive advantage to having the envisaged capacity for intellectual apprehension. In that case, even supposing that such a capacity at some point arose in our evolutionary history, we would have to regard ourselves as incredibly lucky that it was passed down (since there would be no evolutionary explanation for the retention of this useless trait). But since we have no rational grounds for believing that we got lucky, we

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<sup>40</sup> See Peacocke (1982), Bealer (1999), and Huemer (2005: §5.7) on concept possession, Williamson (2007: Ch. 5) on counterfactuals, Bonjour (1998: §6.7) on instantiation, and Bengson (manuscript) on constitution.

<sup>41</sup> For structurally similar objections, see Rea (2002: Ch. 8) on modal beliefs and Schechter (2010: 449) on logical beliefs.



shouldn't believe that we have such a capacity, in which case we shouldn't accept the proffered account of the accuracy of our beliefs and experiences.

I grant that there is no adaptive advantage to having accurate beliefs about whether it is trees or frogs or uprees in S. What I deny is that this shows there to be no adaptive advantage to having the envisaged capacity for intellectual apprehension. As I see it—and as rationalists have traditionally seen it—the capacity for intellectual apprehension is topic-neutral, and it underwrites a wide range of abilities. Some of these abilities are adaptive, and others aren't. Very plausibly, though not uncontroversially, there is an adaptive advantage to forming accurate mathematical and logical beliefs, insofar as this enables one to reason effectively about matters pertaining to survival and reproduction.<sup>42</sup> Such a capacity would also underwrite abilities that are pointless from an evolutionary perspective, for instance, the ability to prove theorems, to discern whether it is permissible to pull the level in trolley cases, or to theorize about evolution and debunking arguments. Additionally, our apprehensions of various facts—for instance, facts about composition and kind-membership—are poised to penetrate the contents of our experiences in ways that have no adaptive advantage. These are all byproducts (“spandrels”) of a general capacity for intellectual apprehension of a priori matters, just as the ability to perceive things far too distant to threaten or be eaten by us (e.g., the moon) is a byproduct of a general capacity for detecting wavelengths in the visible spectrum.

I have said that it is traditional for rationalists to take us to have a topic-neutral capacity for intellectual apprehension, but is there any good reason to believe that there is a single such capacity? It is reasonable if one thinks that the relevant beliefs have a unified subject matter. Mathematical beliefs and beliefs about what follows logically from what, like the relevant beliefs about composition and kind-membership, plausibly have abstract facts as their truthmakers. One can assure oneself that one's mathematical and logical beliefs are the products of a capacity for intellectual apprehension of such facts by means of the same sort of abductive reasoning sketched above in §6. And while it is possible that the capacity for apprehension of mathematical and logical facts is entirely disjoint from the capacity for apprehension of facts about composition, the simpler hypothesis is that there is a unified capacity for apprehending abstract facts.

The foregoing was not intended as an argument that we *do* have a capacity for intellectual apprehension, and I certainly was not arguing from the premise that such a capacity would be adaptive to the conclusion that we have the capacity. Rather, I have been combating the objection

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<sup>42</sup> See Field (1989: 28-29) and Clarke-Doane (forthcoming) for skepticism about the adaptivity of accurate mathematical beliefs, and see Schechter (forthcoming) for a defense of the adaptivity of accurate logical beliefs.

that we would have to have gotten lucky to inherit such a capacity, and to block this objection it is sufficient to show that such a capacity would be adaptive.

## **8. Conclusion**

We have been examining debunking arguments for the conclusion that we should not believe that there are trees or other such ordinary objects. I have exposed the shortcomings of various natural responses to these arguments, and I have defended a response according to which we have a capacity for intellectual apprehension of facts about composition, coinstantiation, and kind-membership which underwrites the accuracy of our experiences and perceptual beliefs.

Two morals can be drawn from the foregoing. The first is that advocates of debunking arguments in other domains—for instance, ethics and mathematics—are playing the fire. For precisely the same line of reasoning threatens to generalize beyond these limited domains to our most basic perceptual beliefs (here is hand). Debunkers may have thought that their arguments couldn't threaten realism about ordinary objects since a causal explanation for the accuracy of these beliefs is readily available. However, as we saw in §4, there is no mundane causal explanation for why we have experiences as of objects belonging to ordinary kinds rather than various extraordinary kinds and, thus, no mundane causal explanation for the accuracy of the associated beliefs. It is open to those debunking evaluative and mathematical beliefs to embrace the rationalist response defended here as a means of blocking the arguments against perceptual beliefs. But doing so would undermine the key premises of their own arguments (e.g., A1 above), for the envisaged capacity for intellectual apprehension underwrites an alethic explanation for our mathematical and evaluative beliefs as well.

The second is that those permissivists who wield debunking arguments against conservatives (e.g., the argument for B4 above) are likewise playing with fire. For (again) precisely the same line of reasoning threatens to undermine our justification for believing in ordinary material objects. Permissivists may have thought that their proliferation of objects would save them from these more radical debunking arguments, by rendering it a trivial accomplishment that we have accurate beliefs about the existence of various kinds of objects. However, as we saw in §5, this line of response is epistemically incoherent. It is open to permissivists to instead embrace the rationalist response defended here. But doing so would undermine B1 of their argument against the conservative, for the envisaged capacity for intellectual apprehension also underwrites an alethic explanation of our beliefs about which objects there aren't.

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