Of Baseballs and Epiphenomenalism: 
A Critique of Merricks’ Eliminativism

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One of the central concerns in metaphysics is the nature of objects which populate the universe. What constitutes a composite object and how its supposed existence relates to its (alleged) causal powers occupies much of contemporary literature. In the chapter “Epiphenomenalism and Eliminativism,” from Objects and Persons, Trenton Merricks presents an argument for not believing in the existence of baseballs. He attempts this by drawing a distinction between baseballs and their constituent atoms, and attributing the causal powers to the atoms composing the baseball. Using a restricted version of Alexander’s Dictum: “to be real is to have causal powers,” Merricks argues that since the baseball has no causal powers, we have no reason to believe it exists. When challenged with the contention that we have reason to believe in baseballs because we can see them, Merricks tries to prove that claims of the form ‘I believe x because I can see it’ are arbitrary.

The intent of this paper is to challenge Merricks’ objection to our belief in objects by virtue of being able to see them. To accomplish this, I will draw from Korman’s treatment of strange linguistic communities in his paper “Strange Kinds, Familiar Kinds and the Charge of Arbitrariness.” Rather than completely undo the argument Merricks outlines, the rest of the paper will defend his remaining premises, to arrive at the conclusion that baseballs, and other ordinary objects, are epiphenomenal.

I. The Argument for Elimination

In the chapter, Merricks considers the case of a baseball shattering a window. His argument can be sketched as follows:
(1) In the above case, only atoms arranged baseballwise cause the shattering of the window.
(2) If the atoms are the only cause of the shattering, then a baseball did not cause
the shattering of the window.

(3) If baseballs do not cause the shattering of windows, then they do not cause anything.

(4) We have no reason to believe that objects without causal powers exist.

(C) Baseballs do not exist

Merricks defends (1) through application of bottom-up metaphysics, whereby he attributes the final causes to the atoms. He maintains that to reject this is to hold that the baseball shattering the window is overdetermined (having two distinct causes), in the same way had two rocks shattered the window simultaneously. Accepting this claim leads to systematic overdetermination, which he argues is unpalatable. His opponent is left with the option to say that the baseball has some emergent causal property beyond that of its atoms. However there is nothing a baseball does that cannot be accounted for by the atoms working together.

Premise (2) is straightforward, as the atoms arranged baseballwise shattered the window and the baseball has no causally emergent properties. A clever philosopher may take the position that the baseball and its atoms are identical, however the existence and persistence conditions of a baseball and its atoms differ greatly. A baseball cannot survive having its atoms scattered across the universe, however the atoms composing said baseball are undamaged. Likewise, a baseball is one, while the atoms composing it are many. Leibniz’s Law states that if two objects are identical, then they have the same properties, so baseballs and collections of atoms arranged baseballwise are not identical. Since the baseball and its atoms are not identical, and the window was shattered by the collection of atoms, we have reason to accept, that baseballs have no causal powers (3).

A possible objection to (3) is that while baseballs may not cause the shattering of windows, they cause us to perceive baseballs and subsequently believe in them. One could claim that the ability to generate perception in humans is an emergent property. Human perception is, fundamentally, a matter of physical chemistry. The sight of a baseball arises from the interaction of light emitted from the baseball’s atoms and the corneas. All other human means of approbation rely fundamentally on chemical and physical interaction, whose causes can be reduced to the collection of atoms. Collections of atoms arranged baseballwise, not the baseballs, are what cause windows to shatter, people to see baseballs, baseball games to function, as well as a host of other baseball-involving activities.

With the baseball separate from the atoms that compose it, Merricks puts forward his eliminativist argument by using Alexander’s Dictum (to be real is to have causal powers) in a restricted sense to argue that objects can cause things. Anticipating his critic’s response that we have reason to believe in baseballs because we can see them, he claims that being able to see an object does not give any substantial reason to accept its existence. He considers the case of a child reared on an island of philosophers who accept unrestricted composition, the view that arbitrary sums, such as an object composed of a dog and the top half of a tree, exist. The child would have been taught at
an early age to accept arbitrary sums, and when challenged, would argue that an object composed of a dog and the top half of a tree exist, because she could just see it. With this example, Merricks contends that there is no serious epistemic difference between the child from the island of unrestricted composition and the critic who claims that baseballs exist because he can see them. As such, Merricks contends that if the critic wants to accept baseballs being seeable as a valid reason to accept their existence, then he has to accept the child’s reason for the existence of things such as objects composed dog and treetop wise. To accept one and reject the other would be arbitrary, and invalidate the argument.

II. ARBITRARINESS

The argument against our belief in baseballs by being able to see them is similar to what Korman classifies as the charge of arbitrariness in “Strange Kinds, Familiar Kinds and the Charge of Arbitrariness.” Korman’s “Charge of Arbitrariness” applies to a type of argument commonly applied by defenders of unrestricted composition, who seek to undercut opposing claims by making them seem arbitrary. While Korman’s classification of the Charge of Arbitrariness applied to ontological statements about kinds, it can be repurposed for Merricks’ argument:

(P1) There is no significant epistemic difference between the child from the island inhabited by unrestricted composition enthusiasts and me.

(P2) If so, it is objectionably arbitrary to accept my seeing baseballs as reason for existence, and not her seeing arbitrary sums as reason for their existence.

(C) If we are going to believe in baseballs because we can see them, then we have to accept arbitrary sums, such as objects composed of dogs and treetops.

Korman’s treatment of strange linguistic communities enables a response to this type of claim. Korman’s criticisms were limited to defending particularism, (the rejection of arbitrary sums) although his arguments can be extended to this case as well. Korman claims that the mere imaginability of communities with intuitive judgments different than ours need not challenge our own intuitive judgments. Additionally, the nature of the belief held by the child can be brought into question. Would the child in this case actually believe in arbitrary or would the child merely indicate them because of conditioning? Be this the case, we have ample reasoning to reject (P1).

For Merricks’ sake, let’s assume that there was an island discovered and it was indeed populated by adherents of universal composition, and the child hailing from this island does believe in arbitrary sums, and justifies their existence by their being seeable to her. This still does not give us enough reason to doubt our own beliefs about the existence of baseballs. Drawing again from Korman’s argument, were the child hailing from this strange community to challenge our ethical norms or modes of scientific inquiry, we wouldn’t discard our standing institutions. If the child were to claim, by rational inquiry, she came to the conclusion that it is morally permissible to boil and eat all green-eyed babies at birth, we would not discard our non-baby eating
norms for fear of arbitrariness. Likewise, if someone challenged the heliocentric nature of the solar system, we wouldn’t cease our inquiry for fear of arbitrariness, but rather “we would investigate, looking for possible sources of error on both sides.”

The fact that we can imagine people who have different experiences, but similar perceptual and reasoning faculty does not give us sufficient reason to doubt our belief in things we see. The claim that we should believe in baseballs because we see them can be challenged, but it is not objectionably arbitrary, so (P2) fails. As such, Merricks has not undone our reasons to believe in baseballs, and has not given us reason to accept (4).

III. EPIPHENOMENALISM

Without (4), Merricks cannot endorse eliminativism through an appeal to arbitrariness, although to discard the remnants of his argument would be hasty. The claim that the baseball is not identical to its constituent atoms holds water, and the demonstration that the baseball has no role in the shattering of the window (or any other activity involving baseballs) cannot be dismissed offhand. As Merricks presents in his chapter and demonstrated above, the baseball can be completely separated from all of the entities with causal powers. Merricks extends this distinction from baseballs to all non-living macrophysical objects, and from this he claims that all non-living macrophysical objects are epiphenomenal. While Merricks intended to demonstrate that we had sound reasoning to follow epiphenomenalism with outright elimination, the previous section demonstrates that Merricks has not entirely excised our reasons for believing in baseballs, or any other macrophysical object. The remaining premises insist that baseballs are epiphenomenal.

To salvage his argument, Merricks could resort to a spirited defense of Alexander’s Dictum and insist that we only countenance existence as it is tied to causation. This would allow Merricks to bypass challenging the epistemological qualms raised by the example of the child hailing from the island of unrestricted composition, as there would be no need to raise a charge of arbitrariness. Unfortunately, this move would require Merricks enter into the present debate on Alexander’s Dictum, and take relevant positions on perception and the status of abstract objects—something Merricks claims that he does not intend to do. If Merricks opts to defend Alexander’s Dictum, he exposes the claim ‘objects cause events’ to challenge, as well as his claims on the status of biological entities. Alexander’s Dictum presents a challenge to the argument this paper, although it presents a host of problems for Merricks’ agenda.

Another challenge to be considered is that Merricks’ failure to demonstrate the arbitrariness in our belief in baseballs means that we should privilege the overdetermined view of baseballs—that the baseball and the atoms arranged baseballwise cause the shattering of the window. The motivation behind such a challenge would be that given we still have reason to believe in baseballs, we should be able to recover our belief in their causal role in interacting with the world. To achieve this, the critic would need to challenge (1) and (2).
The obvious challenge to these claims is that the baseball is what causes the shattering of the window. To merely state that the baseball was the sole cause of the shattering of the window would suggest that baseballs are simples, which no philosopher would accept. Likewise, as shown previously, claiming the baseball to be identical to its atoms results in a violation of Leibniz’s Law. The only remaining objection is a form of the trumping argument. Take, for example, the case of Wile E. Coyote attempting to assemble a trap for the Roadrunner. Naturally, the trap backfires horribly, and Wile E. is crushed by an anvil and the RMS Titanic. In any ordinary circumstance, the anvil by itself would have been sufficient to crush Wile E. Coyote, but as the Titanic is much heavier than the anvil, it seems the Titanic would be more causally relevant to his crushing.

This example is more nuanced than overdetermination, as overdetermination involves two separate causes working together to achieve an effect. (i.e. two anvils falling on Wile E. Coyote, simultaneously) The involvement of the Titanic renders the anvil’s squashing of Wile E. Coyote causally non-essential (if not downright irrelevant), as he would not have been in a better position were the anvil to miss him. On the other hand, to claim that the anvil either doesn’t exist or doesn’t play a role in the squashing is wrong, because the anvil hits Wile E. Coyote before the Titanic. If the critic could successfully claim that the baseball is akin to the anvil and the collection of atoms akin to the Titanic, the cause of the window shattering can be called into question, collapsing (1).

If we assume that this is the case the arrangement of the atoms baseballwise, it could be argued, are what play the critical role in the window smashing, but it could be imagined that the baseball was sufficient enough. For this to be possible, either the critic would have to claim that the baseball is identical with the atoms arranged baseballwise, or he would have to claim that the baseball has some property separate from the atoms. Identity claims render the trumping argument meaningless. What remains for the critic is to either morph this into an overdetermination claim, or claim that we have some reason to believe that the baseball trumps the effects of the atoms. If the critic were willing to accept that the baseball is separate from the atoms, then he would have to admit the possibility that, somehow, there could be a case where the baseball, but not the atoms could smash the window. This strange situation would seem to require more than the identity case, or the case of emergent properties in baseballs, as this would require baseballs to exert causal power independent of their constituent atoms. As with the Roadrunner case, Wile E. Coyote would have still been smashed by the Titanic had the anvil missed, but it seems unlikely that a situation could be imagined where a window was smashed despite the atoms arranged baseballwise smashing it.

IV. Conclusion

In “Epiphenomenalism and Eliminativism” Merricks pursued a form of bottom-up metaphysics, in which causation comes from the smallest possible source—in the
case of macrophysical objects like baseballs, the causal powers come from the atoms arranged baseballwise. Since the events baseballs allegedly cause are actually caused by the collection of atoms arranged baseballwise, and a baseball is not equivalent to the collection of atoms, we can claim that a baseball has no causal powers. Merricks attempted to demonstrate that this gave us cause to question our ordinary reasons for believing in baseball (being able to see them) by trying to show that these ordinary reasons were arbitrary. Korman’s classification of the charge of arbitrariness and observations on strange linguistic communities enables a challenge against Merricks’ claims of arbitrariness. Specifically, the real or imagined possibility of a community with different beliefs does not challenge our beliefs in ethics or science, and therefore should provide no challenge to our reasons for believing in macrophysical objects. Without this challenge, Merricks’ eliminativism fails.

The failure of eliminativism has no bearing on the status of the other premises. Identity claims fail on account of Leibniz’s Law, whereas overdetermination presumes that baseballs have emergent causal powers beyond their atoms. The trumping argument was presented as an alternative, however for it to be coherent, it requires that there be a possible circumstance where a baseball can demonstrate causal powers outside the atoms arranged baseballwise. To refuse such a challenge makes trumping synonymous with identity. With causal work performed by collections of atoms, baseballs and other non-living macrophysical objects are epiphenomenal. By adopting such a position, we need not trouble ourselves with the potential that our conception of ordinary objects like tables and chairs are not mere preferences, and we can accept that organic composites like mollusks and people can interact with their environment.

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ENDNOTES

8: Merricks, 80-81.