Conventionalism and Realism-Imitating Counterfactuals

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Abstract. Historically, opponents of realism have managed to slip under a key objection that realists raise against them. The opponents say that some element of the world is constructed by our cognitive practices; realists retort that the element would have existed, unaltered, had our practices differed; the opponents sometimes agree, contending that we construct in just such a way as to render the counterfactual true. The contemporary installment of this debate starts with conventionalism about modality, which holds that the borders of the world’s kinds and the careers of individuals in those kinds obtain only relative to our conventions of individuation. Realists charge that the kinds and careers in nature would still have obtained, had our conventions been different, but conventionalists claim to be able to agree. This paper argues that the claim is false, and that conventionalism contradicts itself.

Historically, opponents of realism have argued that the world’s objects are constructed by our cognitive activities—or, less colorfully, that they exist and are as they are only relative to our ways of thinking and speaking. To this realists have stoutly replied that even if we had thought or spoken in ways different from our actual ones, the world would still have been populated by the same objects as it actually is, or at least by most of them. (Our thinking differently could cause some differences in which objects exist, or in what some existing objects are like, but that is another matter.) Yet this reply has repeatedly failed to amount to a decisive objection. For opponents of realism have repeatedly argued, in one way or another, that we construct the world’s objects in just such a way as to render such a counterfactual true. We construct them so as to appear not to be our constructs.

Just such a debate is currently underway concerning the properties that are essential to the world’s objects. It is widely agreed, with varying caveats1, that there are such properties—that by virtue of belonging to one or another natural kind, the world’s objects possess certain properties essentially, and have individual careers that last exactly as long as those essential properties are jointly present. But what underlies the status as essential of the properties that are thus essential to objects in the world? The realist answer treats essential status as mind-independent, and assigns it to the way the world works (Elder
The opposing answer is conventionalist. It holds that the membership-conditions that mark out nature’s kinds, and the persistence-conditions that mark out the careers of individual members of those kinds, are functions of our conventions for individuating kinds and members of kinds. Then what if we had attached different conventions of individuation to the sortals by which we pick out nature’s kinds, or had employed different sortals altogether: would it not then have been the case, the realist side is tempted to ask, that the world’s objects would have fallen into the very same kinds—kinds having the same membership-conditions—and that they would have begun and ended their existences in the very same sorts of circumstances as they actually do? But again it can happen that this challenge fails to amount to an objection. For conventionalists commonly reply that our conventions of individuation are precisely such as to render such a counterfactual true (Sidelle 1989, p. 6 ff.; Sidelle 1992, pp. 286-87; Thomasson forthcoming, Ch. 3). The realist intuitions, whatever their weight, do nothing to defeat conventionalism.

The aim of this paper is to show that the appearance here of a stalemate is illusory. The conventionalist side loses, because it contradicts itself.

I

Both in order to gain a sense of the importance of this debate, and in order to canvass the resources that may be available to the conventionalist, it is useful to see this reply to the realist challenge as echoing other moves that have been made by opponents of realism. Some of these parallel moves have been made within the recent literature. Thus Simon Blackburn, who holds that true moral judgements do not report mind-independent properties of actions, but rather express our sentiments towards the actions picked out by these judgements, holds that his “quasi-realist” position can perfectly well agree with the realist’s challenge that

(1) “Even if we had approved of it or enjoyed it or desired to do it, bear-baiting would still have been wrong” (Blackburn 1985, p. 6).
Hilary Putnam holds that the job of scientific theory is not one of reporting the contents and nature of a theory-independent world, but he also holds that the best scientific theories will be expressions of “internal realism”—they will treat the objects and properties with which they deal as being independent of what we say about them and how we experience them (Putnam 1977; Putnam 1981, Ch. 3).

But by far the most interesting and historically influential case of an opponent of realism arguing that we construct the world’s objects so as to make them seem not to be our constructs—that is, so as to render the realist’s counterfactuals true—is Kant. Kant taught that the objects of our sensory experience are merely appearances, not entities which have an existence in and of themselves. But he also taught that we treat these objects, and in fact must treat these objects, as having an order an arrangement of their own, which can diverge from the order and arrangement in which they appear within our experience. On Strawson’s interpretation, this is indeed a central message of the first Critique (Strawson 1966). But on anyone’s interpretation, it is the message of the Second and Third Analogies. In the Second Analogy Kant argues that though the objects and events encountered in sensation can, as appearances, have no order independent of the order in which we experience them, we nevertheless treat them (and must treat them) as having an order on their own, which determines and is reflected in the order of our experiencing them (A 190 / B 235 – A 191 / B 236; cf. A 197 / B 242). In the Third Analogy Kant argues that in some cases we can and must treat appearances experienced in succession as existing simultaneously with one another.

Parallel moves can likewise be found in the philosopher who in many ways made himself the inheritor of Kant’s transcendental project, namely Husserl, and again in a philosopher deeply influenced by Husserl, namely Sartre. It would be controversial to say that Husserl and Sartre are themselves opponents of realism. But it is not controversial, or only barely so, to say that both philosophers subscribed to a theory of meaning which required each to argue that we constitute certain elements of the world as not being constituted by us. But “we” and “us” here must be read distributively, not collectively. That is, on the theory of meaning that Husserl framed, and that Sartre took over, the meaning of each of my terms—and the content of each of my concepts—must be capable of being
illustrated within the realm of my own direct experience, illustrated exhaustively and without remainder (Husserl 1970, § 41; § 43, at p. 91). But then each philosopher must find room to admit that some of my concepts at least appear to have a content that cannot exhaustively be presented in the realm of my direct experience, a content which is (at least partly) independent of that realm. For Husserl, such a concept was the concept of the world-as-it-presents-itself-to-the-Other, of the Other’s “sphere of ownnness” (Husserl 1970, § 55). For Sartre, the key example was myself-as-I-am-for-Others (Sartre 1966, pp. 340-77, especially pp. 351 and 367).

Whether Kant or Husserl or Sartre succeeded in showing that objects constructed or constituted by us can be constructed or constituted in such a way as to render true the counterfactual claims that depict them as independent of our construction or composition is an open question. What one makes of this question will be connected with what one makes of the conventionalist claim that is at issue here. This is the claim—to put it a bit colorfully—that by virtue of our conventions of individuation, we carve out objects that would have been there anyway, complete with their modal profiles, even if we had embraced different conventions of individuation.

II

But why should conventionalists be so accommodating to the counterfactual claims that realists raise in objection? Let us begin with the conventionalists’ central claim, which I will put this way:

(2) The membership-conditions that delimit the world’s kinds, and the persistence-conditions that mark out individual objects falling into these kinds, obtain only in virtue of our exercising our conventions of individuation.

“Kinds” here is to be read broadly, as referring both to the families of individual objects that form the extensions of our sortals, and to the stuffs that form the extension of our mass terms (e.g. “water”, “gold”). The idea is that we wield conventions that shape our judgements as to whether “the same kind again” is present in a given object (“another cat”) or a given sample (“more water”), and conventions that shape our judgements as to whether a given object or sample is “the same object [or sample] still
continuing to exist”. The latter conventions shape also our judgements as to when an individual object or sample belonging to a kind is destroyed, when an individual object or sample comes into existence, and when an individual object or sample is persisting through alterations. The thesis is that there is no phenomenon of sameness-in-kind, nor of numerical sameness across time, apart from the projections of these convention-governed judgements.

Calling the principles that guide our judgements of sameness “conventions” implies that we could have adhered to different principles instead. What then if our conventions of individuation really had been different? The membership-condition for membership in the kind water is possession of whatever underlying nature science identifies in actual samples of the kind, and hence, given what science has discovered, amounts to being composed of molecules with the structure H₂O. The persistence-condition for an individual member of the kind trees is that the individual be a woody thing which retains, across a continuous path through space and time, a broadly-specifiable shape and size (where the size can alter, but generally only gradually and generally only in the direction of growth). But what if we had embraced different conventions for individuating the stuffs of nature—conventions, say, that lumped the stuff in our lakes and ponds together with the stuff in our wine bottles, or conventions which divided the stuff in our lakes and ponds into different kinds, depending on whether the weather were sunny or cloudy? What if we recognized a kind that was present wherever our actual sortal “tree” is satisfied, but embraced conventions of individuation on which individual members of that kind perished when the leaves fell off, or continued to exist even when a given tree were passed through a wood-chipper?

Realists are right to find it hard to believe that there would then be no sameness joining the contents of our lakes and ponds together, be the weather sunny or not, and not joining them with the contents of our wine bottles. True enough, if we wielded neither the sortal “water” nor the chemical term “H₂O”, we would not be able to say that there were just such a sameness. But it seems hard to believe that the sameness would not still be there, unremarked. How could our speaking and thinking in different ways remove the sameness? The very suggestion sounds like an endorsement of magic. Similarly realists seem right to find it incredible that if only we had spoken and thought differently from how we actually
do, none of those tall things now standing in the forest in August could last through the winter, or that the young George Washington would not have been guilty of destroying anything in his father’s orchard. Again one would want to ask about the mechanism by which our mere thought and talk could influence the courses of existence of the tall woody things in the forest or in the orchard.

Conventionalists have motivation, then, to endorse, rather than reject, the realists’ counterfactuals. Moreover, conventionalists have the means to endorse them. Consider, for example, the counterfactual

(3) Even if we had embraced different conventions for individuating kinds of stuff, water would still have been characterized by the molecular composition H₂O.

Alan Sidelle contends—and surely he is right here—that in discussing the possible worlds specified by the antecedent, we are required to adhere to our actual conventions for individuation (1989, p. 7; 1992, p. 286 f.). But our actual conventions for individuating stuff-kinds require us, in addressing the question “is this the same stuff again?”, to look only at the composition of the sample to which “this” points. They do not require us, and in fact do not permit us, to take account of the speech behavior of speakers in the neighborhood of the sample, and to ask what conventions of individuation they are following. So in discussing a possible world in which speakers (we ourselves, perhaps) adhere to outlandish conventions of individuation, the right thing to say is that only the samples having the composition H₂O—and indeed all such samples—are water. A conventionalist is required by his own conventionalism to endorse (3).

Parallel arguments show that conventionalists may, indeed must, embrace many other counterfactuals like (3). I shall call such counterfactuals “realism-imitating counterfactuals”, RICs. Here is another RIC:

(4) Even if we had embraced different conventions of individuation, individual trees would still have gotten destroyed in just the same sorts of circumstances as those in which they actually are destroyed—and would have come into existence in just the same sorts of circumstances as they actually do, and would have persisted across just the same sorts of alterations as they actually do.

Our actual conventions tell us that “the same tree still continuing to exist” depends only on woody composition and a fairly constant broadly-specifiable shape and size, both present across a continuous
path through space and time—not on the cognitive or linguistic behavior of any speakers who may be in the neighborhood. Hence (4) is another RIC which conventionalists will endorse, on Sidelle’s argument. Likewise

(5) Even if we had adopted different conventions of individuation, individual samples of water would still have continued to exist across the same changes in circumstances as they actually do, and would have ceased to exist in the same sorts of circumstances.

III

The conventions that enable conventionalists to endorse RICs such as (3)-(5), I have just said, also require them to assert such RICs. To be sure, some philosophers often regarded as conventionalists appear to have denied some RICs. Thus Nelson Goodman, who held that constellations and even individual stars exist only relative to one or another of the world-versions we adopt, was willing to say that the existence of stars depends on our worldmaking not just counterfactually but even temporally: on one correct version, “call it V,…the star and everything else come into being only via a version,” rather than “much earlier than any version” (Goodman 1996, p. 167). But contemporary conventionalists are right, I submit, to dispute whether such claims faithfully voice our actual conventions (cf. Wright 1984, p. 190). In particular our conventions governing when and where “is a star” is assertible positively forbid us to take into consideration whether, at those times and places, any conscious beings are endorsing any particular world-versions. Moreover, there is a serious question of motivation. Affirmations of dependence on our conventions, such as Goodman’s, invite just such embarrassing questions as we considered at the start of the previous section about how—by what magic—mere alterations in our thought and talk by themselves alter the lifespans, or times of existence, of objects in the world.³

But this raises a serious challenge against the very title of this paper. Why suppose that any imitation of realism is going on when conventionalists endorse claims such as (3)-(5)—why aren’t such claims every bit as much the province of conventionalism as of realism? My answer, to anticipate, is that
conventionalists cannot regard claims such as (3)-(5) as true unless they hold that there really exist in the world such things as trees and pools of water. But their very conventionalism requires them to deny that there really, mind-independently, are any such objects. Voicing our conventions requires conventionalists to utter just the claims that realists do about when and where numerically the same member (or sample) of a kind persists across time. But the conventionalist is not able, I now shall argue, consistently to say that the very subject-matters of those utterances even exist. That is, the conventionalist is required to deny mind-independent reality to the individual objects that apparently fall into natural kinds, and to the individual samples that apparently are composed of familiar stuffs; he is likewise required to deny that there really are in the world kinds and stuffs themselves.

The reasoning here is easiest to grasp if we begin with the case of an individual object belonging to a kind. By virtue of belonging to that kind, we have been supposing, an individual object possesses certain properties essentially. It persists just as long as it retains those properties. Where those properties cease jointly to be present, there does its existence end; and its existence began just where, moving back along a spatio-temporally continuous path from its present existence, those properties came jointly to be instantiated. But an individual member of any kind $K$ typically will at any time have many properties not thus essential to $K$s, many accidental properties. The departure of an accidental property, and its replacement by a contrary property, amounts only to an alteration of an individual $K$. Properties accidental to $K$s are properties which individual $K$s may gain and may lose. It is the properties essential to $K$s that fix the end-points of the course of existence of an individual $K$.

But what conventionalism centrally contends is that this very distinction—the distinction between properties essential to $K$s and properties merely accidental to $K$s—is itself just the projection of our conventions of individuation. For conventionalism, as I have formulated it, is the view that

\begin{enumerate}
\item The membership-conditions that delimit the world’s kinds, and the persistence-conditions that mark out individual objects falling into these kinds, obtain only in virtue of our exercising our conventions of individuation.
\end{enumerate}

But this seems to entail that independently of us, there is no distinction between what it is for a $K$ merely to undergo alteration, and what it is for a $K$ to cease to exist (or to come into existence). Independently of
us, there is no such phenomenon as a $K$’s ceasing to be, or as its coming into existence. (2), in short, appears to entail

(6) If we had not existed, there would not have been in the world kinds having membership-conditions, nor individual members of those kinds having persistence-conditions. There would not have been in the world any such phenomenon as an individual object’s getting created, nor as its undergoing a mere alteration, nor as its getting destroyed.

If the conventionalist is forced to endorse (6)—more on this question in the next section—then it would seem she must indeed deny that there mind-independently exist in the world individual objects belonging to natural kinds, or individual samples of natural stuffs, or that there are in the world kinds and stuffs at all (Elder 2004, Ch. 1; Rea 2002, Ch. 4 and Ch. 7). For, given (6), the conventionalist must at the least concede that the careers of the world’s objects (and samples), their courses of existence, obtain only in virtue of our conventions of individuation. And it seems far too unstable a position to say that though the existences of individual objects in the world obtain only relative to our conventions, their existence is mind-independent. One could try to say this. One could say “where the actual members of the world’s kinds come into existence, where and how long they persist and undergo changes, and where each of them ceases to exist are matters that obtain only relative to us; but that there are those very objects is independent of us”. But it is hard to believe that there could mind-independently be objects so radically incomplete and indeterminate as not to exist somewhere and somewhen.

If the conventionalist does indeed endorse (6), just what picture of the world will he elect? The picture repeatedly offered by Alan Sidelle is that the world is not a plurality of objects at all, but a place or rather a stuff across which a play of properties takes place, one property giving place to another and that other to yet another (Sidelle 1989, p. 55n, p. 57; Sidelle 1992, pp. 284-86; Sidelle 1998, pp. 441-44). There also exist our conventions of individuation. In virtue of these conventions, some of these givings-place amount to alterations, others to destructions or comings-to-be. Where we, who are the owners of these conventions, fit into this picture is a more difficult question. It seems out of the question that we should ourselves be objects, or intimately depend for our existence on the existence of certain objects (Elder 2004, Ch. 1; Rea 2002, p. 163 ff.). For the existence of every object is, according to (6),
metaphysically posterior to the obtaining of our conventions of individuation. Moreover, since the
obtaining of all persistence-conditions is metaphysically posterior to the obtaining of our conventions of
individuation, we as owners or formulat 觀 of these conventions must ourselves, so far, be without
persistence-conditions of our own. There can be, so far, no such phenomenon as our coming into being or
undergoing alterations or persisting or passing out of existence. Perhaps the view really requires thinking
of us as transcendental egos. We independently apply our conventions of individuation to the stuff of the
world, and manage thereby to come up with largely matching pictures of persisting objects that fall into
kinds. The picture here would be deeply reminiscent of Kant’s transcendental psychology. For some
conventionalists—e.g. Putnam in *Language, Truth, and History*—the parallel would evidently be bracing,
a sign that we are onto something profound (Putnam 1981, Ch. 3). For many students of Kant, especially
those who have studied Strawson, the parallel would be a sign that something is deeply amiss (Strawson
1966, e.g. pp. 38-42).

IV

But conventionalists can dispute the claim that they are required to endorse (6). Consider trees,
the conventionalist may say. Our conventions tell us that, in any possible world, where and whether an
individual tree comes into existence, and where and how long that tree persists through changes, is strictly
a function of where woody matter is found, that retains a certain roughly-defined shape and size across a
spatio-temporally continuous path. Our conventions do not require us, and in fact do not permit us, to ask
whether in the neighborhood of the woody matter there are speakers who wield conventions of
individuation. So even in possible worlds in which there are no intelligent speakers at all, our
conventions may require us to recognize individual trees (Sidelle 1992, p. 286; Thomasson forthcoming,
Ch. 3 and Ch. 10). Conventionalists are therefore free to endorse such RICs as

(7) Even if there had never existed in the world any intelligent speakers at all, trees
would still have come into existence in the same sorts of circumstances as they do
in the actual world—and would have persisted through the same sorts of alteration
as they actually do, and would have gotten destroyed in just the same sorts of circumstances as those in which actually they are destroyed.

And

(8) Even if there had been in the world no intelligent speakers, water would still have been characterized by the molecular composition $H_2O$, and a sample of water would still have existed wherever, and as long as, a parcel of $H_2O$ were to be found.

Yet (6), the conventionalist next will say, has as substitution instances

(9) If we had not existed, there would not have been in the world the kind trees, and there would have been no such phenomenon as an individual tree’s coming into existence, its persisting across alterations, and its getting destroyed.

And

(10) If we had not existed, there would not have been the distinct stuff water, and there would not have been parcels of water which traced out determinate courses of existence.

Since he is required by (7) and (8) to deny (9) and (10), the conventionalist will conclude, he is required to deny (6).

The conventionalist may now appear to have shown that he can take objects such as trees, and parcels of stuff such as pools of water, to have mind-independent existence, and hence can regard RICs such as (3)-(5) as being literally true (and likewise the RICs (7) and (8)). I will have us examine this appearance more closely in the next section. Before closing this section, I should sound a caution for conventionalists who do want to argue, on the lines sketched here, for RICs such as (7) and (8). Alan Sidelle at one point argues that the truth expressed by our utterance “water necessarily has composition $H_2O$” is more perspicuously framed as a claim about our semantic conventions (1989, pp. 43-49; see also 1992, p. 288). Roughly, this claim would be that in speaking of the contents of any possible world, our conventions require us to apply “water” only to samples that are the same in their molecular microstructure as the actual-world samples of water—which, given what empirical science has discovered about these samples, amounts to saying that application of “water” requires the presence of the microstructure $H_2O$. But it would be dangerous for conventionalists who wish to advance arguments like those sketched in the present section to take a parallel stance on the consequents of RICs such as (7) and
(8). To take such a stance concerning the consequent of (8), for example, would be to say that it is more perspicuously expressed as “our semantic conventions would still have required us to apply the mass-term ‘water’ only to samples having molecular composition H₂O, and to assert ‘the same sample of water as before’ only of samples that have retained composition H₂O across a spatio-temporally continuous path”. But conjoining this consequent to the antecedent of (8) yields a counterfactual that is distinctly hard to believe. For if there had been in the world no intelligent speakers, there would not have been us, and there would have been no such things as our semantic conventions. Hence it is distinctly hard to believe that if there had been in the world no intelligent speakers, our semantic conventions would have required anything.

Let me put the same point a bit differently. Seated here in the actual world, and discussing a possible world in which we ourselves do not exist, we are required by our actual conventions (let us agree) to say that all such water as occurs in that world has composition H₂O, and any pools of water in that world persist across just such circumstances as pools of water in the actual world persist. But in saying this we cannot be saying, in less-than-perspicuous fashion, what our semantic conventions in such a world would require. In saying this, the conventionalist must rather maintain, we are projecting our semantic conventions, not reporting them. For we are not reporting what our semantic conventions actually are like (since if we are reporting anything, we are reporting how things are in a different possible world) or what they would be like (since they would not be at all, in the possible world we are discussing).

The moral of my cautionary digression is that conventionalists who want to endorse RICs such as (7) and (8) must hold that the consequents in such RICs belong to projective discourse. They must say the consequents are projective in the sense that their very subject-matters have only projected existence, not mind-independent reality. This is why I say that (7) and (8) cannot literally be true, for the conventionalist.
In a subtle way, the response we have just seen conventionalists make to the charge of anti-realism, and my criticism that conventionalists cannot regard claims such as (3)-(5) and (7)-(8) as literally true, both tell the same story about conventionalism. At the heart of that story is a certain duality. On the one hand, conventionalists claim that our conventions of individuation require us to affirm (3)-(5) and (7)-(8). And so far, realists can perfectly well agree. That is, realists can go along with conventionalists not only in affirming (3)-(5) and (7)-(8), but even in saying that we have conventions of individuation that require these affirmations. Realists would need only to add that these conventions are not just conventions—they would have to say that, in the favorable case at least, our conventions of individuation are shaped by mind-independent facts as to the borders of nature’s kinds and as to the persistences of the individual objects that belong to these kinds. Historically it has been reckoned a severe challenge for realism to say just how this shaping could occur, just how we could pick up on such mind-independent matters. But pick up on them we somehow do, realists have always contended. (For a suggestion on how, see Elder 2004, Ch. 2).

On the other hand, conventionalists assign to our conventions of individuation a central place in a reductive theory—and this is where there is mandatory disagreement between them and realists. Conventionalists hold that there is no individuation out there to be picked up on, apart from our exercise of conventions of individuation that we already have. Nature’s kinds have the borders they do, and individuals belonging to those kinds persist across the spans that they do, just in virtue of our employing our conventions. This aspect of conventionalism, at least, entails that absent us and our cognitive activities, there are no spans across which objects of nature persist. I therefore have inferred that—since without mind-independent existences, there can be no mind-independent existence—conventionalists are committed to claiming that had we convention-users never arisen in the world, there would not have existed in the world individual material objects. So under the hypothesis that we had never arisen in the
world, there can be no truths as to how long, and in what circumstances, individual material objects would have persisted. Conventionalists cannot regard RICs as literally true.

But conventionalists can rely on the *other* aspect of their position to argue that they are *wrongly* characterized as anti-realists. This is what we have just seen them do. The very conventions of individuation that they make so central, conventionalists can say, require them to give voice to claims such as (7) and (8)—claims that speak, under the hypothesis that convention-users never arose in the world, about persistence-conditions that objects would then have had. So it is a mischaracterization, they can conclude, to say that under this hypothesis there are, for them, no material objects.

I regard this response as insufficient. For conventionalists to say that their own very position requires them to give voice to claims such as (7) and (8) does not, by itself, even address the reasons for thinking that conventionalists cannot regard (7) and (8) as literally true. But I am also willing to allow, for the sake of argument, that there is an aspect of the conventionalists’ position that requires and allows them to *affirm* (7) and (8)—not just, as in my tendentious phrase, to “give voice” to those claims—and to treat (7) and (8) as literally true. This by itself does not show that conventionalists are not *forbidden*, by their own very conventionalism, from treating (7) and (8) as literally true. It would show that only if we could deploy the additional premise that conventionalism is a consistent position. That is what I deny. I hold that it is a self-contradictory position, at least under the assumption that conventionalists genuinely affirm RICs.

VI

But there are two routes by which it still might seem that the conventionalist could avoid the charge of inconsistency. One is for him to deny that (6) really follows from (2). The other is for him to deny that there is any argument, commencing with premises which he accepts, that yields as conclusions (9) and (10).

To deny that (2) entails (6), I suggest, would be a desperate move indeed. For unless
(2) The membership-conditions that delimit the world’s kinds, and the persistence-conditions that mark out individual objects falling into these kinds, obtain only in virtue of our exercising our conventions of individuation.

entails

(6) If we had not existed, there would not have been in the world kinds having membership-conditions, nor individual members of those kinds having persistence-conditions. There would not have been in the world any such phenomenon as an individual object’s getting created, nor as its undergoing a mere alteration, nor as its getting destroyed.

it is simply not clear what “obtain only in virtue of our exercising our conventions” even means. Now it is true that the precise wording of (2) is mine, not wording offered verbatim by an actual conventionalist. But other locutions would do no better at blocking the inference to (6). To say that membership-conditions and persistence-conditions are “wholly fixed by” our conventions of individuation, or “are strictly a function of” those conventions, is again to invite the inference that if there had not obtained in the world any such things as our conventions of individuation, those membership- and persistence-conditions would likewise not have obtained.

Now true enough, on this matter conventionalists will not go down without a fight. One strategy for resistance that I have heard, in conversation, is to say that we employ our conventions of individuation so much in the manner of an involuntary reflex that we simply cannot bring ourselves to say, of a possible world in which convention-users never arose, that in that world there would not have been kinds having borders and members of kinds having determinate existences. It still is true that sameness in kind, and numerical sameness across time of a member of a kind, are but artifacts of conventions, and not convention-independent phenomena. The fundamental conventionalist message remains true. But we simply cannot bring ourselves to say that, had the artificers of these artifacts never arisen in the world, these phenomena would not have obtained. Conventionalism is true, but cannot be expressed. This strategy seems to me implausible at best, obscurantist at worst. At the least it is disingenuous: conventionalism can be expressed, and is expressed in the sentence, in this very paragraph, that begins “It still is true that...”. It remains unexplained why that sentence does not entail (6).
The more promising strategy for the conventionalist is to argue that when speaking in metaphysical seriousness we should avoid all talk of “objects”, in the plural. For no determinate conventions are fixed, the conventionalist could say, for the sortal “objects”. That is why a question such as “how many objects are there in this room?” simply has no answer: the question is ill-formed (Thomasson forthcoming, Ch. 6; Sidelle 1992, p. 287). Individuation, counting, is possible only in applying specific sortals such as “trees” and “rocks” and “chairs”. So the conventionalist should not, in metaphysical seriousness, endorse either (6) or (2). He is therefore not required to endorse (9) or (10) either.

But this strategy saves conventionalism by removing its force. What is now left of conventionalism? Evidently only specific RICs such as (3)-(5), (7), and (8). But with these counterfactuals the realist is in complete agreement. Why would “conventionalism” now deserve its name? One is reminded of the comment of an American military leader during the Vietnam war: “in order to save the village, it was necessary to destroy it”. What conventionalism should be is a denial of

(11) The membership-conditions which delimit the world’s kinds, and the persistence-conditions which mark out the individual objects falling into those kinds, are fixed by the way the world works, independently of how we talk and think about the world.

But if the conventionalist wants to say that (11) is false, he cannot say that it is ill-formed. And then neither is (6) ill-formed.⁴
Footnotes

1 Alan Sidelle’s caveat is one of the subtlest. Sidelle begins by presenting the conventionalist stance much as I do in this paragraph, but then comments that “the conventions…are in the first instance rules governing the use of terms, and I may have gotten myself in some trouble by proceeding at the object level” (1989, p. 43). The real point, Sidelle then explains, is not that anything which belongs to the kind water has composition \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) essentially or necessarily or in all possible worlds; the real point is that application of the mass-term “water”, in talk about the actual world or any other world, requires that we find present the composition \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \) (1989, pp. 43-49). But see the last three paragraphs of § IV, where I show that conventionalists should take this observation of Sidelle’s not as a claim about what should replace talk about water’s essential properties, but rather as a claim about what the truth-maker is for such talk.

2 The most careful presentations of the conventionalist position, in my opinion, are Sidelle 1989, Sidelle 1998, and Thomasson forthcoming. But the most influential endorsement of conventionalism is probably Hilary Putnam’s attack on “Self-Identifying Objects” (Putnam 1981, Ch. 3), or on “ready-made objects” (Putnam 1982). Another widely-read endorsement of conventionalism is Jubien 1993.

3 Iris Einheuser (forthcoming) argues that while conventionalists should complete counterfactuals beginning “If our conventions had been different,…” in ways that would replicate what realists would say, there are same-sounding counterconventionals, and conventionalists are free to complete these in ways that realists would find bizarre. Her position however would appear to require a frank espousal of the framework of transcendental psychology that I identify at the end of § III, and most contemporary conventionalists are unwilling so to ally themselves.

4 I thank Amie Thomasson for correspondence on the topic of conventionalism, and two anonymous referees for this journal for their comments on an earlier draft.
References


Thomasson, Amie forthcoming: Ordinary Objects.