

How to Be a Relationalist

Shamik Dasgupta

1. Relationalism

In Dasgupta (2013) I argued that mass is fundamentally relational. On this “relationalist” view, the physical state of a system of bodies vis-à-vis mass consists at bottom just in facts about how they are related in mass. This is in contrast to the “absolutist” view that there are further facts about their intrinsic masses.¹ But David Baker (2020) has argued that relationalism implies that classical physics is indeterministic. Baker’s stated aim is just to point out this consequence, but it’s not hard to imagine someone complaining that the consequence is objectionable. A relationalist should, therefore, have something to say in response.

As Baker recognizes, there are complications with some of his examples—particularly the example of escape velocity—so a relationalist might quibble over details. But that would be a distraction, for I believe Baker is right that relationalism leads to indeterminism. I believe it leads to a kind of non-locality too, and indeed I now believe that a host of other relationalist views to which I am sympathetic also lead to indeterminism and non-locality. Consider relationalism about motion, the view that all motion is motion relative to another body, as opposed to the absolutist view that there are extra facts about whether something is “really” moving independently other bodies. This relationalist view also implies that classical physics is indeterministic and non-local—I’ll argue in

¹ In Dasgupta (2013) I called the relational view ‘comparativism’. This is because in the case of other quantities like distance, even the absolutist agrees that the fundamental facts are relational; hence it seemed inappropriate to contrast absolutism with *relationalism*. Still, the multiplication of terms might be confusing in this paper, so here I revert to the terms ‘absolutism’ and ‘relationalism’.

section 2 that this is the lesson of Newton's bucket argument. A third example is relationalism about handedness, the view that the fundamental facts about handedness consist in relations of congruence—that this hand is congruent with that one, incongruent with this other. This is in contrast to the absolutist view that there is a further property that distinguishes the left hands from the right hands. It turns out that relationalism about handedness also leads to a physics that's indeterministic and non-local.²

If these relationalist views lead to indeterminism and non-locality, the question is whether this is objectionable. Here I argue that it is not. This will involve distinguishing two senses in which a theory can be indeterministic and non-local. The relationalist views do lead to indeterminism and non-locality in one sense, but section 3 argues that this is a virtue, not a vice. There is a second sense of the terms in which indeterminism and non-locality would be a vice, but sections 5–10 argue that relationalist views do not lead to indeterminism or non-locality in that sense. With respect to determinism and locality, then, these relationalist views get things exactly right.

Determinism and locality are intimately connected to metaphysical possibility. Thus, to distinguish the two senses of determinism and locality we'll need to distinguish two species of metaphysical possibility (sections 7 and 8). This distinction may be of interest to modal metaphysicians regardless of its bearing on determinism and locality.

In what follows I focus on the case of handedness because it is free of needless complications and so illustrates the main ideas more perspicuously. I'll then apply my approach to the case of mass at the end (section 10). I'll discuss the case of motion at times as we go along, but I leave a complete discussion of that case for another time.

What exactly is the issue of relationalism vs. absolutism about handedness? Consider a pair of gloves: one right-handed, one left-handed. They are known as "incongruent counterparts." They are counterparts because they share the same intrinsic geometry: each contains a thumb

² For an introduction to the issue of absolutism vs. relationalism about motion, see Sklar (1974), Maudlin (2012), and Dasgupta (2015). For an introduction of the issue about handedness, see Earman (1989) and Pooley (2003).

and forefinger standing in the same angular relation, the same distance apart, etc. But they are incongruent insofar as there is no way of translating and rotating one glove through space in such a way that it exactly superimposes over the other. So defined, whether they're congruent depends on the geometry of space: they're incongruent if space is Euclidean but not, for example, if it's a Möbius strip. I'll assume for simplicity that space is Euclidean.

Consider some gloves divided into two equivalence classes under the relation of congruence. Call one class 'left-handed' and the other 'right-handed'. The question is whether there's a further physical property, above and beyond their relations of congruence, that distinguishes members of one class from members of the other. Absolutism is the view that there is, but this view comes in many varieties. One variety states that there's a primitive intrinsic property that all and only the left-handed gloves have. Another variety posits a pervasive oriented field, so that all and only the left-handed gloves are aligned with the field. And a third variety states that the gloves are situated in substantival space. On this third variety, the set of all glove-shaped regions of space can be divided into two equivalence classes under the relation of congruence; call the regions in one class the L-regions. Then, the idea is that all and only the left-handed gloves are located in L-regions.³

By contrast, relationalism is the view that there is no physical property that distinguishes hands in one class from those in the other. The hands in one class are congruent with each other, and incongruent with hands in the other class, and that is all there is to it. The clearest version of this view is the anti-substantialist view that physical reality consists just in material bodies standing in spatiotemporal relations to one another. Suppose, as the anti-substantialist must, that the geometry of space is then fixed by (actual or possible) spatiotemporal relations between bodies. Then, whether two gloves are congruent is ultimately fixed by the spatial relations between their parts together with the geometry of

³ To be clear, this third variety of absolutism assumes that there is trans-world identification of regions of space. So-called "sophisticated substantialism" denies this, but that view does not yield an absolutist view of handedness as I understand the term.

space. For the relationalist, these relational facts of congruence are all the facts of handedness there are.⁴

2. Indeterminism and non-locality

I said that a relationalist physics of handedness is indeterministic and non-local. It's worth seeing why before asking whether this is a problem. Earman (1989) thought that the situation for the relationalist is in fact more dire—he claimed that she can offer no physics of handedness *at all*. But I'll argue that Earman overstated his case: the relationalist has a well-defined physics; it's just indeterministic and non-local.

Earman's argument starts from the observed fact that some things behave differently depending on whether they're left- or right-handed. Examples include neutral hyperons and the cobalt atoms, but to keep things simple I'll work with a fictional example drawn from Pooley (2003). Imagine we discover that the fundamental components of matter are not point particles or strings, but *little hand-shaped things*. Call them handrons, and imagine they move around and collide in accordance with deterministic laws of motion. Suppose, further, that they come in two colors, red and green, and suppose we see that they sometimes change color when they collide. Looking closer, we see that it's all and only the *left-handrons* that change color. These observations confirm the following "First Law" of handrons:

(F) Whenever a handron collides with another, it changes color iff it is left-handed.

Earman's idea is that this would refute relationalism: since left- and right-handed handrons behave differently, there must be some real

⁴ See Brighouse (1999) and Pooley (2003) for discussion of how an anti-substantialist is to understand relations of congruence. I will assume for the sake of argument that the relationalist recognizes facts of cross-temporal congruence. This entails admitting *some* kind of cross-temporal spatial relation, contrary to what is sometimes known as "Leibnizian relationalism", but I bracket exactly how this is best understood.

difference between them. As he put it, the relationalist ‘does not have the analytic resources for expressing’ a law like (F) (1989, 148).

It will help to compare this with Newton’s analogous bucket argument against relationalism about motion. Newton observed that bodies behave differently depending on their state of rotational motion: water in a bucket sloshes up the side when spinning but stays flat when not. He argued that the difference is not whether the water is spinning relative to the bucket, or relative to the laboratory, but whether it is spinning *absolutely*; that is, independently of its motion relative to other bodies. Thus, observations of water in buckets confirm a theory that appeals to absolute acceleration—a theory that relationalists “lack the analytical resources to express”, as Earman might put it.⁵

But both objections are too quick, for in each case the relationalist does have the analytic resources to express an alternative theory of the phenomena. In the case of motion, Mach took this approach when he proposed that water sloshes up the side of a bucket when it spins *relative to the fixed stars*.⁶ The general approach here is to choose some body (or bodies) and say that water sloshes up the bucket when it spins relative to *it* (or *them*). One could take the same approach in the case of handedness. Suppose that a particular handron was observed to change color upon collision; call it ‘Changy’. Then a relationalist could offer the following “Machian” alternative to (F):

(F-Machian) Whenever a handron collides with another, it changes color iff it is congruent with Changy.

Still, these Machian theories are unattractive. Some object to Mach’s theory of motion on the grounds that he never developed it with a precision to rival Newton’s. Others might object that fundamental physics should not make reference to particular entities like Changy or the fixed stars. But let me emphasize a third objection, which is that these

⁵ Newton’s text can be read in a number of ways; my summary is just one reading. For more on the bucket argument, see Sklar (1974, ch. 3), Maudlin (2012), and Dasgupta (2015).

⁶ At least, this is the view typically attributed to Mach; I won’t comment on whether this interpretation is accurate.

Machian theories fly in the face of scientific practice. If our basic theory of motion were Mach's, we could never use it to model hypothetical physical systems in which the fixed stars do not exist; yet we appear to do this all the time. Just remember high-school physics problems in which you predict the behavior of a harmonic oscillator: *on the face of it*, you're reasoning about a hypothetical physical system containing just an oscillator. More seriously, cosmologists routinely model counterfactual scenarios in which heavy elements, and hence the fixed stars, never form. The same goes for any Machian theory formulated with reference to some special entity like Changy: the theory can't be used to model counterfactual systems in which the special entity doesn't exist.

Is this so bad? Being a positivist, Mach may not have cared whether his theory can model far-out counterfactual scenarios. Still, it would be nice to avoid the problem if we can. In the case of handedness this is straightforward. Perhaps the relationalist can't say that the handrons that change color are all *left*-handed. But she *can* say that they're all congruent with one another, and incongruent with those that don't change color. Thus, as Pooley (2003) points out, she can offer the following "minimalist" theory of handrons:

- (F-Minimalist) (i) If x and y are congruent handrons, then x changes color on collision iff y does too.
 (ii) If x and y are incongruent handrons, then x changes color on collision iff y does not.

Unlike (F-Machian), (F-Minimalist) is not tied to any particular body and so can be used to model counterfactual systems that don't contain Changy.

Sklar (1974) proposed an analogous minimalist theory of motion in response to Newton's bucket argument. True, the relationalist cannot say that flat bodies of water are *absolutely* unaccelerated. But she can say that they're all unaccelerated relative to one another and accelerated relative to water that goes concave. Sklar's idea was that the relationalist should simply offer *that* as her "minimalist" law of motion. As he put it, the law would state '(1) that objects in relative motion vary in the inertial forces they suffer and that (2) objects in uniform motion with respect to one

another suffer similar inertial forces' (1974, 230).⁷ On this view, the water in Newton's bucket goes concave because it's unaccelerated relative to other concave bodies of water. This minimalist theory stands to Newton's theory just as (F-Minimalist) stands to (F). Unlike Mach's theory, it is not tied to any particular body and so can model counterfactual systems in which the fixed stars don't exist.⁸

If there's an objection to these relationalist views, then, it's not that they can offer *no* physical theory of the phenomena—they can offer the minimalist theories just described. Still, it turns out that these theories are indeterministic and non-local in a way that the original theories were not.

To see why (F-Minimalist) is indeterministic, consider a world containing just two left-handrons about to collide. Will they change color? (F) implies that they will. But (F-minimalist) does not, it just implies that either *both* or *neither* will change color. Hence there are two possible futures consistent with (F-minimalist)—the mark of indeterminism.

I said that the world contains two *left*-handrons, but can a relationalist legitimately describe counterfactual worlds in terms of 'left'? Perhaps not; we will discuss this later. But for now it doesn't matter, for we may instead describe it as a world containing two *congruent* handrons about to collide. For the relationalist this is a complete description of the world vis-à-vis handedness. And (F-Minimalist) is still consistent with two possible futures, one in which both change color and one in which neither does. The absolutist avoids the problem because he distinguishes *two* worlds that fit this description: one in which the handrons have that physical property that (on his view) distinguishes the left-handrons, and another in which they don't. And the absolutist reads (F) as stating that handrons change color if and only if they have that property. (F) then

⁷ Note that by 'relative motion' he means relative *acceleration*. Obviously this is just a rough gloss of what should ultimately be expressed with mathematical precision, but the kind of theory Sklar has in mind is clear enough.

⁸ Sklar (1974) is often said to have responded to the bucket argument with an *absolutist* theory that posits a primitive property of absolute acceleration. This is some truth to this; see his discussion on pp. 230–1. But strangely, his discussion slurs that absolutist theory together with the minimalist theory described in the text, and the subsequent literature latched onto to the former at the expense of the latter. I find that unfortunate, for his minimalist proposal is far more intriguing.

implies that the handrons will change color in the first world but not the second, so in each world there is only one possible future.

I've been assuming the following standard definition of determinism:

A theory is *deterministic* iff any two metaphysically possible worlds in which it obtains, and which agree at one time, agree at all times.⁹

The point is that the absolutist's physics satisfies this definition while the relationalist's physics does not.¹⁰ Note that the indeterminism here is unusual: (F-minimalist) does not assign probabilities to possible futures; it just stays silent on the matter. Say that a theory is *complete* iff it is deterministic or assigns a probability to each possible future given the state of the world at a time. Then, the point here is that (F-minimalist) is incomplete.¹¹

What about the claim that (F-Minimalist) is non-local? Well, suppose that a handron is about to collide. Will it change color? According to (F-Minimalist), this depends on the results of other collision events which may occur thousands of miles away. So, as Pooley (2003) noted, whether it changes color is a function not of its local environment but of its relation to potentially far-off events—the mark of non-locality. By contrast, the absolutist's physics is local in this respect. For according to (F), whether a handron changes color depends on whether it's left-handed, and for the absolutist this depends on whether it possesses the physical property that distinguishes the left-handrons. And on all the

⁹ See Earman (1986) for definitions along these lines. His definitions quantify over *physically* possible worlds; I assume for now that these are metaphysically possible worlds in which the actual physical laws obtain. Earman and others have argued that this definition must be refined, but the issues they raise are not relevant for our purposes.

¹⁰ I'm sacrificing precision for the sake of brevity. Even as the absolutist interprets it, (F) isn't deterministic because on its own it doesn't determine anything about how the handrons move. More accurately, then, the claim is that the conjunction of (F) *and the laws of motion that we're assuming to be deterministic vis-à-vis motion* is a deterministic theory, while the result of replacing (F) with (F-minimalist) is not. But I'll bracket this complication for brevity in the text.

¹¹ Compare the "Hole" argument, which purports to show that substantivalism renders General Relativity indeterministic. In that case too the indeterminism is incompleteness, not stochasticity. See Brighouse (1994) for some of the issues involved there. Of course, (F-Minimalist) yields implications about all collision events when conjoined with information about a single collision event, for example that Changy changed color. But that conjunction is just (F-Machian).

absolutist views surveyed earlier, this is a function of its local environment such as whether it's aligned with the oriented field—at any rate, it doesn't depend on its relation to far-off collision events. Later I'll be more precise about what non-locality amounts to, but this gloss will do for now.

The upshot is that the relationalist's minimalist physics of handrons is indeterministic and non-local in a way that the absolutist's physics is not. The same goes in the case of motion. Given a world with just two buckets of water at rest relative to one another, Sklar's minimalist theory does not determine whether the water in either bucket will slosh up the side. All it says is that either both will remain flat or both will go concave, but it does not determine which (indeterminism). And whether a body of water goes concave depends on its motion relative to potentially far-off bodies of water (non-locality).

This, I suggest, is the real moral of Newton's bucket argument and Earman's analogous argument about handedness. Properly understood, the argument in each case is *not* that the relationalist can provide no physical theory of the phenomena whatsoever. Rather, it's that her best theory is indeterministic (in the sense of being incomplete) and non-local in a manner that the absolutist's theory is not.¹²

3. Turning the tables

The question now is whether this is objectionable. The consensus seems to be that it is; that completeness and locality are weighty, perhaps nonnegotiable constraints on an adequate physical theory.¹³ For example, having noted that (F-Minimalist) is non-local, Pooley (2003) immediately concludes that this is a serious strike against relationalism.

¹² The dialectic is a little different in the case of the physics of cobalt atoms that Earman discussed. In that case, the absolutist theory he starts with is a quantum theory and hence is indeterministic anyway (at least, on some interpretations). But then the current point is that its minimalist correlate would introduce a further degree of indeterminism, in the manner of incompleteness.

¹³ Skow (2007) is explicit about these constraints, and notes that they are shared by theorists of many different kinds, including relationalists such as Barbour (1999).

But I think this consensus gets things exactly back to front: incompleteness and non-locality are *virtues* of the relationalist's physics, not vices.

After all, why should we think that completeness or locality is a constraint on an adequate physics? Here we must distinguish a priori from empirical reasons. In the first case, the idea is that these constraints are justified independently of observation. For example, one might argue on a priori grounds for an anti-Humean view of laws on which they "govern" events, and then argue that they can't govern if they're incomplete or non-local. Or one might claim that a preference for complete and local laws is a primitive epistemic norm governing theory choice. Whatever the details, the result would be an objection to relationalism based on a priori constraints.

But this kind of objection should not convince. The history of physics—in particular the history of geometry—shows that we shouldn't put much weight on a priori principles to the effect that the world has this or that spatiotemporal or causal structure. Conflicting with such "principles" is not such a big deal.

It would be a much bigger deal, in my view, if completeness and locality were empirical findings, principles that constrain an adequate physics *because of how things look*. For example, if handrons were observed to behave deterministically and relationalism implies that they do not, then relationalism would be disconfirmed by observation. This objection has more teeth, for on the face of it handrons were indeed observed to behave deterministically. When our fictional scientists observed handrons colliding, they didn't just see 80 percent of the left-handrons change color. No, fully 100 percent of the observed left-handrons changed color upon collision, and 100 percent of the observed right-handrons did not. It was on the basis of these observations that they proposed the deterministic theory (F), rather than a stochastic theory like

(F*) When a left-handron collides with another, there is an 80 percent chance that it changes color.

This is not an a priori requirement that the process is deterministic, but an observation that it looks to be that way.

Similarly in the case of motion. Why is it objectionable that Sklar's minimalist theory of motion is indeterministic? Not because we know a priori that the laws of motion are deterministic, for we know no such thing. Rather, it's because, when we observe water spinning in buckets, it goes concave 100 percent of the time. Thus, it's an observed fact that water behaves in the deterministic fashion described by Newton's theory. Sklar's minimalist theory, on which water does not behave deterministically, therefore, flies against an empirical finding.

Seen like this, what we have is an empirical objection to relationalism: it's an observed fact that handrons and water behave deterministically; yet relationalism implies that they do not.

But what exactly is the observed fact? Here we must take care. To be sure, the absolutist's theory of handrons is deterministic and local; but did we observe handrons behaving in accordance with *that theory*? We did not. For let us be clear about its content. The absolutist interprets 'left' as referring to that physical property L that distinguishes left from right-handrons, and for concreteness let's suppose that L is the property of being aligned with some oriented field. So interpreted, (F) states that the handrons that change color are those that are aligned with the field. This theory is indeed deterministic and local, *but our observations did not confirm this theory*. We never observed that the handrons that changed color were all aligned with some field. After all, everything would look (and smell, and taste) exactly the same in a mirror world that differs only in that every handron is flipped from left to right and vice versa; that is, a world in which the handrons that change color are all *anti-aligned* with the field and the ones that *don't* change color are all aligned. What we observed is no reason to think that we live in one world over its flipped cousin. All we really observed is the relational facts common to both worlds, namely that the handrons that changed color were all congruent with one another. This confirms (F-Minimalist) but does nothing to confirm the absolutist's interpretation of (F).¹⁴

¹⁴ One might suggest that observation at least provides reason to believe that *there exists* a field, such that the handrons that change color are either all aligned or anti-aligned with it. The idea might be that this theory better explains the observations than (F-Minimalist), and so is justified on the basis of inference to the best explanation. But even if so, this theory is

Sklar made this point when discussing his minimalist theory of motion. He emphasized that we never directly observe whether a body of water is spinning *absolutely*; we just observe (i) whether it goes concave, and (ii) its state of motion relative to other bodies (Sklar 1974, 230). Everything would look (and smell, and taste) exactly the same in a world in which water stays flat when spinning at some absolute rate and goes concave when spinning relative to that absolute rate. Thus, Sklar claimed, his minimalist theory, not the absolutist's theory, is exactly what gets confirmed by what we actually observe. I'm making the same point in the case of handedness.

With regard to this empirical objection, then, the tables are turned: it is the relationalist's physics, not the absolutist's, that gets things right with regard to observations of determinism and locality. The relationalist's theory is indeed indeterministic and non-local, *but such a theory is precisely what observation confirms*. If anything, it's the absolutist who has the problem here, proposing a theory that's not confirmed by the evidence.

If this is surprising, it might be because we always observe subsystems of the universe, not the entire universe itself. If I see a handron h about to collide and I know it's congruent with another handron that changed color, then (F-Minimalism) *plus my background knowledge* implies that h will change color. Likewise, if I observe a single bucket of water and I know that it's at rest relative to another bucket of water that remained flat, then Sklar's minimalist law *plus my background knowledge* implies that the water will remain flat. This gives the appearance of determinism: the behavior of these subsystems can indeed be deduced from minimalist laws plus information about how the subsystem relates to the outside world. What has *not* been observed, however, is that the universe as a whole evolves in the deterministic and local manner described by the absolutist.

So far, then, it is the relationalist who has the upper hand.

indeterministic and non-local in just the same way that (F-Minimalist) is. Thus, the point remains that *the theory justified by observation*, whatever it is, is indeterministic and non-local.

4. Determinism in practice

Still, there remains something to the empirical objection. When observing handrons our fictional scientists did, after all, find that 100 percent of the left handrons and 0 percent of the right-handrons changed color upon collision. So, I'll argue, they would write down (F) as their physics of handrons and reason with it in a deterministic and local manner. At least, they would if our fiction is to reflect actual physics. For when investigating chiral objects like cobalt atoms, physicists use *seemingly* absolutist language like 'left' and 'right' to formulate theories and reason with them in *seemingly* absolutist ways. We must, therefore, imagine that our fictional scientists do the same, which in this case means reasoning with (F) in a deterministic and local manner. The question is whether we can make any sense of this practice if, as the relationalist thinks, the world is fundamentally indeterministic and non-local. As we will see, this is surprisingly difficult to do. To my mind this is the real challenge facing relationalism; the rest of the paper is an attempt to address it.

Let us start by describing the practice at issue. First, it involves using 'left' and 'right' to record observations of handrons. After all, physicists investigating cobalt atoms don't limit themselves to talk of congruence; they routinely use 'left-handed' and 'right-handed' (or mathematical cognates) to sort the atoms. Thus, we must imagine that our fictional physicists do the same and record their observations by writing statements like

This *left*-handron changed color.

This *right*-handron did not.

Already there's a question of what 'left' and 'right' could *mean* on the relationalist's view, but put that aside until later; here I'm just describing the practice.

Second, the practice involves taking these statements to confirm a theory they write down as:

(F) Whenever a handron collides with another, it changes color iff it is *left-handed*.

Again, practicing physicists don't hesitate to use such language (or cognates) to express theories of cobalt atoms, so we must imagine that our fictional physicists do the same.

Finally, the practice includes reasoning with (F) as if it were deterministic and local. I'll focus on determinism for now. To illustrate, consider how (F) would be used to predict actual events. Imagine a fictional physicist teaching a student about (F), and suppose they come across a left-handron about to collide. Sensing a teachable moment, the professor sets a pop quiz:

Question 1: According to (F), will this left-handron change color?

The right answer, of course, is that it will; that given (F) it *must* change color; that (F) *rules out* any other possible outcome. The professor should give this answer full marks. But this is to reason *deterministically* with (F). To emphasize the point, just imagine the professor had asked what will happen according to (F*). In that case the correct answer is that the handron will *probably* change color but *might not*; that (F*) leaves open *both possibilities*. Thus, our physicists reason differently with (F) and (F*); only with the former do they reason deterministically.

The same goes when reasoning about hypothetical events. Imagine that our fictional professor sets another pop quiz:

Question 2: Consider a possible world in which there are just two *left*-handrons about to collide. According to (F), what will happen?

Again, the right answer is that both will change color; that (F) does not leave open any other possibility. Once again, this is to reason with (F) *deterministically*. The professor may then set a third pop quiz:

Question 3: Consider a possible world in which there are just two *right*-handrons about to collide. According to (F), what will happen?

This time, the students can easily calculate that neither will change color; that according to (F) this is the *only* possible outcome. Yet again, this is paradigmatic deterministic reasoning.

Questions 1–3 are known as “initial value problems”: one is given the initial state of a hypothetical physical system and must solve for what happens. Note that in these problems the initial states are characterized in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Note also that the left–right distinction is treated as an independent variable, something whose initial value can be set independently of other quantities so that the effects of each value can be investigated—witness how Questions 2 and 3 differ only in a uniform switch of this value. The point is that initial value problems like these are standard in actual physics: the initial state of some cobalt atoms will be characterized in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ (or cognates), and a theory expressed in such terms is used to solve for what happens.

The question is whether the relationalist can make sense of this practice. Of course, she’ll regard this talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’ as non-fundamental in some sense—fundamentally speaking the only truths about handedness concern relations of congruence. But to account for scientific practice she must make sense of the talk nonetheless. What could ‘left’ and ‘right’ *mean* such that we can reason about initial value problems in the deterministic manner just described? And how is this deterministic reasoning consistent with her view that *fundamentally speaking*—under the hood as it were—handrons behave indeterministically as described by (F-Minimalist)?

It’s not clear what the relationalist can say. There are two worries here. The first is whether she can legitimately *characterize* problems like Questions 2 and 3 in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Suppose that the only meaning the relationalist could attach to ‘x is left-handed’ is to treat it as synonymous with ‘x is congruent with S’, where S is some standard object like Changy, or a set of objects like hands on our heart side or physical particles of some kind; and conversely for ‘right’. On this semantics she can meaningfully describe *actual* handrons like the one in Question 1 as left- or right-handed: they are being described as congruent or incongruent with S. But this semantics is unable to account for the practice of characterizing the *counterfactual* handrons in Questions 2 and 3 in terms of left and right. For the standard object(s)

S do not exist in the worlds described by Questions 2 and 3, and so on this semantics it cannot be true that those worlds contain *left* or *right*-handrons.¹⁵ More generally, the worry is that relationalism implies

Incommensurability: There is a class C of metaphysically possible worlds such that, for any possible world W in C, and any handron *x* in W, there is no fact of the matter whether *x* is left- or right-handed in W.¹⁶

Different specific semantics of ‘left’ will differ on what the class C is, but the worry is that *any* relationalist semantics will entail that it is nonempty and includes worlds like those of Questions 2 and 3. And if the handrons in Question 2 can’t be said to be *left*-handed—if all we can say is that they are congruent—then (F) won’t entail that they’ll change color and our deterministic reasoning falls apart.

But put this aside—suppose the relationalist can legitimately characterize the world in Question 2 as containing two *left*-handrons. The second worry is whether she could then characterize the world in Question 3 differently, as containing two hands. For the two worlds agree on all facts about congruence, and surely—the worry goes—relationalism implies that any two worlds agreeing on all facts about congruence cannot disagree on any further facts about handedness precisely because on her view there are no further facts. Specifically, the worry is that relationalism implies

Relational Supervenience: Metaphysically possible worlds agreeing on all relational matters of congruence agree on all matters of handedness.

Thus, *if* we grant that the world in Question 2 contains two left-handrons, Relational Supervenience implies that the world in Question 3

¹⁵ This is, in effect, our objection to the Machian theory from section 2. For if the relationalist defines ‘left’ as ‘congruent with Changy’, then in her mouth the theory (F) becomes synonymous with (F-Machian). And as we saw, this theory makes no predictions about worlds in which Changy does not exist.

¹⁶ This idea that there is “no fact of the matter” can be understood in a number of ways. One way is to admit of truth value gaps at W, and say that instances of “*x* is left-handed” and “*x* is right-handed” are neither true nor false at W. But those who dislike truth value gaps can understand the idea differently and say all such instances are false at W. It will not matter for our purposes which version we pick, though I will sometimes talk as if there are truth value gaps for simplicity.

also contains two left-handrons; hence the relationalist cannot distinguish Questions 2 and 3 or say that they have different answers. She cannot, that is, make sense of the practice of treating left–right as an *independent variable* in these problems.

If this is right, the relationalist can't make sense of the use of 'left' and 'right' we see in physical practice. In effect, there's a kind of modal breakdown: thanks to Incommensurability she can't *characterize* initial value problems like Questions 2 and 3 in those terms, and thanks to Relational Supervenience she can't *distinguish* them. By contrast, the absolutist faces no such breakdown. He interprets 'left' as denoting the special physical property L that all and only the left-handrons have. There is, then, no problem with characterizing worlds like Questions 2 and 3 in terms of 'left' and 'right': he is characterizing the distribution of L in those worlds. Nor is there any problem in distinguishing the worlds: they differ in their distribution of L. And we know that (F), so interpreted, is deterministic. But the relationalist can't interpret 'left' like this—and in any case she doesn't want to, since (as we saw) on that interpretation (F) expresses a theory for which there is no evidence. So the question is whether she can understand this talk of 'left' and 'right' in some other way.

If not, she must bite the bullet and say that scientific practice must be revised. But I find this unacceptable—who would seriously tell their colleagues in the physics department to revise their physics of cobalt atoms? The point here is particularly perspicuous in the case of mass, where the analogue of 'left' and 'right' is talk of mass in kilograms (or some other unit), and the analogue of Questions 2 and 3 is initial value problems that differ only in a uniform doubling of mass in kilograms. As I'll discuss in section 10, what Baker (2020) shows is that standard scientific practice distinguishes these problems and predicts a different evolution for each problem. It would be outrageous to tell the physics department that talk of kilograms must be banished. So I think the relationalist must make sense of this practice or go home.¹⁷

¹⁷ It might be thought that initial value problems like these can be interpreted as descriptions of possible *subsystems* that exist alongside various reference points such as standard objects in Paris, laboratory equipment, and so forth, so that Incommensurability will never be a problem. But even if this is an option with *some* initial value problems, the solution clearly does not

This then is the challenge. The relationalist must interpret talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in such a way that makes sense of the deterministic just described, yet does not collapse into the absolutist’s interpretation on which (F) expresses a theory for which there is no evidence.

5. Devices of coherence

In what follows I will show how the relationalist can do this. I will not argue that it is the only way, or even the best way, just that it works. I proceed in two stages. First, I’ll describe how a relationalist might use the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’. On the basis of that usage, I’ll then develop a theory of metaphysical possibility that avoids the modal breakdown and makes sense of the deterministic reasoning with (F) just described.

So, how might a relationalist use ‘left’ and ‘right’? The obvious way is to define ‘left’ as ‘congruent with Changy’ or some other standard, but we know that this leads straight to Incommensurability. Thankfully, there is another way to use the terms. Let me illustrate with a fictional community of relationalists who lack the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’. They have only a two-place relational predicate ‘*x* is congruent with *y*’ with which to talk about handedness, and they wish to introduce one-place predicates to help them store and communicate information about congruence more efficiently. To this end, they introduce two new marks, # and *. Their idea is to use these marks in such a way that if two hands are given the same mark, this means they are congruent, while marking them differently means that they are incongruent. More precisely, they stipulate that the marks are monadic predicates governed by the following three rules of inference:

(R1)	(R2)	(R3)
x is #, y is # x and y are congruent.	x is *, y is * x and y are congruent.	x is #, y is * x and y are incongruent.

generalize. As I mentioned in section 2, cosmologists think about initial value problems in which heavy elements, and hence our planet and all the reference points it contains, never exist.

But they stipulate nothing else. Note that these are all exit rules; there are no introduction rules that specify sufficient conditions for concluding (say) that x is #. Thus, they have not given explicit definitions of the predicates in terms of standard reference bodies.

Still, this is enough to ground a practice that encodes information about congruence. When they first encounter a handron h_1 , they can call it # or *, since either is consistent with the rules. Suppose they call it #. And suppose they then encounter a handron h_2 that is incongruent to h_1 . If they call it #, then by (R1) they could infer a falsehood. So, insofar as they aim to utter things that imply truths, their hand is forced: they must call it *. Thus, when a speaker uses the marks, her aim is to “cohere” with other accepted uses in the community, in the sense that their combined uses yield truths about congruence via (R1)–(R3). Once their usage becomes entrenched—imagine them using these marks for a few decades—there will be a clear distinction between correct uses that cohere and incorrect uses that do not. In this way, they can use # and * to communicate information about congruence.

Cohering with one’s community is not easy, especially if the community is large and dispersed. To aid coherence it may help to use a standard glove displayed in a public place: if each speaker ensures that she coheres with the sentence ‘The standard glove is #’, they will all cohere with one another. But—and this is important—they need not *define* the predicate ‘ x is #’ to be synonymous with ‘ x is congruent to the standard glove’. The standard glove is functioning just as a practical aid to help them cohere, not as a definition (or as a reference fixer). If they discover by surprise that all their interactions with the standard glove were subject to some massive and systematic illusion, so that the standard glove is in fact *incongruent* with the gloves they call #, they would report this discovery by saying that the standard glove is in fact *. So long as their other applications of # and * still cohere with one another, there is no need for further revision.

I think that that our words ‘left’ and ‘right’ are in all important respects like # and *. They are devices of coherence: our aim in uttering ‘ x is left-handed’ is to cohere with other utterances in our linguistic community in the above sense. On this view, reference objects like the hand on our heart side, or certain kinds of molecules, or standard gloves in Paris, do

not serve to define 'left' and 'right' but are practical aids to help us cohere with one another. But the claim that *we* use 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence is an empirical claim that I won't defend. Here I just make the uncontroversial claim that a community of relationalists *could* use 'left' and 'right' this way. What I'll argue is that *if* they use the terms like this, that would explain the practice described in section 4.

It is easy to see that it would account for the practice of using 'left' and 'right' to record their observations and advance theories like (F). Imagine that a community has used 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence for generations, so that there is a clear distinction between correct uses that cohere and incorrect uses that do not. They will then recognize left hands from right hands in much the same way that we do, say, by making an "L" shape with the hand on their heart side. For them, these methods are not an attempt to determine whether a given hand satisfies a definition of 'left', but an attempt to ensure that their use of the terms cohere. So, when observing handrons, they'll fill their notebooks with inscriptions like

This *left*-handron changed color.

This *right*-handron did not.

And they would take these to confirm a theory they'd write down as (F). Since their use of 'left' is not tied to any particular standard object, (F) in their mouths is not equivalent to a Machian theory.

To be clear, this is not to settle all semantic questions about this practice. What propositions are expressed by the inscriptions in their notebooks, or by (F)? What are their truth conditions? I haven't said, though I'll discuss this further in section 8. For now, the claim is just that a relationalist using 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence can record her observations of handrons in these terms and will take those observations to confirm a theory she'd write down as (F).

6. Modal correspondence

That much is straightforward. The more difficult question is whether the relationalist can make sense of the deterministic reasoning in Questions 2

and 3. Here she faced the “modal breakdown”: thanks to Incommensurability she couldn’t *characterize* the worlds in Questions 2 and 3 in terms of left and right, and thanks to Relational Supervenience she couldn’t *distinguish* them.

Perhaps we’ve already made some progress here. For if ‘left’ and ‘right’ are devices of coherence, why *can’t* they be used to characterize those worlds? By labeling the handrons in Question 2 ‘left’ one can’t derive anything false with (R1)–(R3); all one can derive is that they’re congruent.¹⁸ Thus, nothing about the rules governing the terms prohibits their application in Question 2. This is in stark contrast to the semantics on which ‘left’ is defined as ‘congruent with Changy’, which entails that ‘left’ has no application to worlds in which Changy doesn’t exist. It’s tempting to wonder, then, whether we have a solution to the problem of Incommensurability.

The same goes for Question 3: nothing in the rules (R1)–(R3) prohibits us from labelling those handrons as ‘right’. But if we label the handrons in Question 2 as ‘left’ and those in Question 3 as ‘right’, we appear to be *distinguishing* the initial value problems after all. It’s tempting to wonder, then, whether we have a solution to the problem of Relational Supervenience too.

The idea can be modeled by representing the initial value problems with pairs of the form $\langle W, f \rangle$, where W is a possible world and f is a function assigning the word ‘left’ to one congruence class of handrons in W and the word ‘right’ to the other. Even if a relationalist can’t distinguish two *possible worlds* that differ only in a uniform flip of left to right and vice versa, she can easily distinguish $\langle W, f_1 \rangle$ and $\langle W, f_2 \rangle$, where f_1 and f_2 differ only in flipping which congruence class is mapped to the word ‘left’. Thus, while Relational Supervenience might be true of the possible worlds, it certainly isn’t true of the pairs.

More generally, it’s clear that the space of pairs $\langle W, f \rangle$ recognized by the relationalist corresponds one-to-one with the space of metaphysically

¹⁸ I’m assuming that, like any set of exit rules, they are only applicable within a world. After all, suppose it’s an exit rule governing ‘bachelor’ that from ‘ x is bachelor’ one can infer ‘ x is unmarried’. If an individual a is a bachelor in W , one can infer by this rule that a is unmarried in W but not that a is unmarried in a distinct world W^* .

possible worlds recognized by the absolutist. The tempting idea, then, is that anything the absolutist does with possible worlds, the relationalist can mimic with the pairs instead. Thus, while the absolutist interprets an initial value problem as characterizing a *possible world*, the relationalist might interpret it as characterizing a *pair* and solve it in exactly the same way. *Et voilà*: she's made sense of the reasoning involved in Questions 2 and 3. Similarly, recall our definition of determinism from section 2, which quantified over indices we called "possible worlds". The absolutist will take the definition at face value, and we saw that (F)—as he reads it—satisfies it. But the relationalist might now interpret the indices as pairs, not possible worlds, and so understand a theory to be deterministic iff any two *pairs* in which it obtains and which agree at one time, agree at all times. *Et voilà* again: (F), even in her mouth, is deterministic in this sense.

But is this legitimate? The worry is that it's just trickery; that the pairs are cheap, formal objects with no bearing on the philosophical issues at hand. For the pairs are not themselves metaphysically possible worlds, so what they represent isn't *metaphysical possibility* in the standard sense. Given what philosophers typically mean by "metaphysical possible world", there is I think no question that relationalism implies Relational Supervenience. The pairs are formal objects that make that problem go away, but the cost is that we're no longer talking about metaphysical possibility in the standard sense.

Is it a significant cost? Perhaps not, for it's an open question whether initial value problems must be understood in terms of the possible worlds of the philosopher. When a high-school physics teacher assigns her students initial value problems, it's far from clear that she's asking them to think about "possible worlds" in the contemporary metaphysician's sense of the term. Indeed, physicists rarely use the term themselves, talking rather of "models" or "hypothetical physical systems" or "fictional situations". The same goes for the indices quantified over in the definition of determinism: physicists typically call them "models", or "closed systems", or something of that ilk, and it's not at all obvious that these are alternative labels for what philosophers call "metaphysically possible worlds". So, there must be some leeway to diverge from the philosopher's preferred notions.

But not unlimited leeway. For the pre-theoretic idea behind determinism is that a system *must* evolve in a certain way, given the laws. And it's widely agreed that this is not the logical 'must': it's not that the present state of the system and the laws *logically imply* its future state. Nor is it an epistemic 'must': it's not that *an ideal agent could infer* how the system will evolve, given complete knowledge of its initial state and the laws—this notion of “Laplacian determinism” is not of interest to contemporary philosophers of physics. Rather, the consensus is that the relevant sense of determinism involves a *metaphysical* 'must'. It's hard to say exactly what this means, but the rough idea is that metaphysical possibility is constrained not by the logical constants (logical possibility), or by states of knowledge (epistemic possibility), or by the meanings of words (conceptual possibility), but by “the world”; by the things it contains and what they're like. Thus, when a deterministic system *must* evolve in a certain way, this is due not to states of knowledge or the logical properties of a formal language or the meanings of our words, but to *the nature of the system itself*. Our definition of determinism attempts to capture this by quantifying over a set of indices, the “possible worlds”. But this will succeed only if each index is a distinct possible world *in some recognizably metaphysical sense of the term*. So it's not enough to just produce formal objects like the pairs $\langle W, f \rangle$ and use them to define determinism; it must also be shown that they represent a genuinely metaphysical sense of possibility.

I will argue that they do. Now, obviously the kind of possibility they represent isn't what philosophers ordinarily mean by “metaphysical possibility”, for this creates the very problems that the former is meant to solve. So what I'll argue is that we must distinguish two varieties of metaphysical possibility. One variety is what philosophers typically mean by the term—the familiar variety on which it's uncontroversial that relationalism implies Relational Supervenience. Call this “strict possibility”. But I'll argue that there's another notion of metaphysical possibility, “loose possibility”, on which relationalism does *not* imply Relational Supervenience or Incommensurability. This is the notion of possibility represented by the pairs. If that's right, our hope is vindicated after all: the relationalist can legitimately use the pairs—or, more accurately, the

loosely possible worlds they represent—to mimic the absolutist and account for deterministic reasoning involving (F).¹⁹

For this to work we must establish two things about loose possibility. First, we must show that the relationalist's conception of loose possibility accurately mimics the absolutist's conception of strict possibility. Thus, where the absolutist distinguishes two strictly possible worlds that differ only in a uniform flip of left and right, the relationalist must distinguish two *loosely* possible worlds that differ in the same way. More precisely:

Modal Correspondence Thesis: There is a one-to-one correspondence between the space of *strictly* possible worlds recognized by the absolutist and the space of *loosely* possible worlds recognized by the relationalist that preserves all relational facts of congruence *and* facts about left and right.

Second, we must show that loose possibility really is a species of metaphysical possibility. But what exactly is meant by “metaphysical” possibility? I glossed it as possibility that's constrained by “the world”, rather than our concepts or states of knowledge or the logical properties of a formal language, but that's hardly precise. Still, we can sidestep the question by taking strict possibility as our fixed point. For there's no doubting that *it* is a species of metaphysical possibility—it's the paradigm case. I'll sketch a theory of strict possibility on which strict possibility is understood in terms of *fundamentality*, which in turn is understood in terms of *metaphysical explanation* (section 7). I'll then distinguish a slightly different notion of metaphysical explanation and show that it yields a slightly different notion of possibility; this will be loose possibility (section 8). Since strict and loose possibility are both understood in terms of two closely related senses of explanation, that

¹⁹ To be clear, my claim is not that physicists use ‘possibility’ to mean loose possibility, not strict possibility (these are fine distinctions of modal metaphysics, so there may be no fact of the matter what they mean). My claim is rather that a relationalist can explain why the practice of reasoning deterministically with (F) makes sense by interpreting it as reasoning over a domain of loosely possible worlds. This is more along the lines of “rational reconstruction”, not psychological description.

will suffice to show that each is as “metaphysical” as the other, whatever that means.²⁰

7. Possibility and explanation

So, let me sketch a theory of strict possibility, the notion of metaphysical possibility familiar to philosophers. There won't be space to defend it fully here; my aim is just to outline the basic idea and lend it some plausibility. The theory consists in two claims. The first is that *a strictly possible world is a way of reorganizing fundamental matters*. For example, consider a relationalist view on which, fundamentally speaking, there are just handrons spatially related to one another—ignore any non-spatiotemporal properties and relations. A strictly possible world, then, is a way of reorganizing the spatial relations between handrons. This explains why relationalism implies Relational Supervenience when it comes to strictly possibility. For, if a strictly possible world *just is* a way of spatially relating handrons, then strictly possible worlds agreeing on those relational respects are one and the same.

This conception of a possible world is, I think, ubiquitous throughout philosophy, albeit implicitly. Consider the physicalist view that the world is, fundamentally, just physical. It is widely presumed that this has the consequence that worlds that are physically identical, and which contain no “alien” fundamentalia, agree in all other respects concerning consciousness, normativity, and so on. This is, indeed, a consequence of physicalism

²⁰ In Dasgupta (2013) I tried to distinguish strict from loose possibility somewhat differently. The idea was to mimic Lewis's (1986) “cheap haecceitism”, where he uses counterpart theory to distinguish between two modal indices: possible worlds and possibilities. I showed that this approach can be extended to the case of mass, and one could apply it to the case of handedness too. But counterpart theory (of any form) now strikes me as an inadequate way of understanding metaphysical possibility, so here I explore a different strategy that understands possibility in terms of explanation instead. This strategy is structurally analogous to Bhogal (2020). There he distinguishes metaphysical explanation from *scientific* explanation, and he then argues that each notion yields a corresponding notion of possibility, metaphysical and scientific possibility respectively. But his notion of scientific explanation is different from the notion I'll distinguish, and hence the notions of possibility we end up with are different too. As he emphasizes, his notion of scientific explanation is explicitly *non-metaphysical* and hence his notion of scientific possibility is non-metaphysical too. Here I employ the same strategy but my aim is to distinguish two notions of possibility that I suspect would both count as metaphysical even by Bhogal's lights.

if, as the first claim states, a world just is a way of recombining fundamental matters.

This first claim does not imply “combinatorialism”, the view that *every* reorganization of fundamental matters is a strictly possible world. Suppose distance-in-feet is fundamental. Then one reorganization of fundamental matters puts x 1 foot from y , y 1 foot from z , and x 50 feet from z —a violation of triangle inequality. If you think that’s impossible, you might propose that principles like triangle inequality restrict which ways of reorganizing fundamental matters are genuinely possible. I’ll call these “metaphysical principles”, though I leave open whether there are any and what they might be. Thus, the intended content of the first claim is that a strictly possible world is a reorganization of fundamental matters that’s consistent with the metaphysical principles (whatever they are).

This first claim connects strict possibility with fundamentality, but what is fundamentality? The second claim is that something is fundamental iff it is *unexplained* in a “metaphysical” or “constitutive” sense of the term. To illustrate, suppose that the fundamental matters just concern atoms arranged in space. Still, there are chairs; it’s just that chairs are things that exist when *and because* atoms are arranged in a certain way. The fact that there are chairs *holds in virtue of* the arrangement of the atoms; that arrangement *makes it the case that* there is a chair. This mode of explanation is not causal but “constitutive”. We can be ecumenical in how we understand this notion. Perhaps it is (or tracks) a primitive relation of “grounding” between facts (Rosen 2010), or perhaps it is better analyzed in terms of dependency relations (Schaffer 2016, 2017), metaphysical laws (Wilsch 2015), or unifying patterns (Kovacs 2020). Or we might understand the explanation semantically, as reporting that “There are chairs” is made true by the arrangement of atoms.²¹ Indeed, for our purposes we could understand it in a deflationary manner congenial even

²¹ This is close to Sider’s “metaphysical semantics” (2011, ch. 5). While Sider himself doesn’t endorse this, one could in principle say that P explains Q iff the correct metaphysical semantics implies that ‘ Q ’ is true if P . But this bears considerable refinement, and, of course, if one wants to join me in defining fundamentality in terms of explanation, one had better not join Sider in defining metaphysical semantics in terms of fundamentality. But I will not elaborate on these issues here.

to a logical positivist. For even a positivist can accept that John is a bachelor in virtue of being an unmarried male; she just understands this as meaning that “John is a bachelor” follows logically from “John is an unmarried male” together with the analytic definition of “bachelor”.²² All I require is that we do not understand this notion of explanation in terms of possibility. Quite the opposite: I want to understand possibility in terms of this notion of explanation.

According to the second claim, then, the fundamental matters are those that are unexplained in this constitutive sense: if they obtain, there’s nothing in virtue of which they obtain. This conception of fundamentality is controversial (see Wilson 2016 for objections) but I won’t defend it here. If you like, you can read this second claim as *stipulating* the sense of “fundamentality” meant in the first claim. Either way, putting the two claims together yields a theory of strict possibility in terms of explanation: a strictly possible world is a way of reorganizing unexplained matters.

One nice feature of this theory is that it explains why the space of possibilities is as broad as it is. Handrons could have been arranged differently in space, let’s agree, but why? Our theory offers an answer. For there is, I think, a constitutive connection between explanation and possibility: roughly, that *if something has no explanation, then it could have been otherwise*. The idea is that if there’s *no reason* why something is the way it is—if there is nothing *making* it be that way—then it *needn’t* have been that way. This is why (ignoring the metaphysical principles for a moment) if you reorganize those matters for which there is no explanation, such as how handrons are arranged in space, you get a way things *could* have been; a possible world. Of course, as stated, this constitutive connection between explanation and possibility is no more than an aphorism and needs considerable refinement. Still, like all good aphorisms it contains a germ of truth—enough to shed some light on why it makes sense to think of a strict possibility as a reorganization of unexplained matters.²³

²² See Dasgupta (2017) for various “deflationary” ways of understanding this notion of constitutive explanation.

²³ What about the metaphysical principles themselves? Why can’t *they* be otherwise? As stated, our aphorism implies that, being necessary truths, they must have an explanation. But

Indeed, the connection between possibility and explanation goes deeper. Suppose the fundamental matters concern atoms arranged in space, and suppose that *W* is a world in which atoms are arranged chair-wise. Arguably, *W* is also a world in which there is a chair. But why? Why isn't it a world in which there's a penguin? The question is what constrains what's the case at *W* above and beyond the fundamental matters. One natural answer is that whatever's the case at *W* must *hold in virtue of* the fundamental matters at *W*. The existence of a chair would hold in virtue of the arrangement of atoms in *W* but the existence of a penguin would not; that is why *W* is a world in which there is a chair.

The general idea, then, is that the space of possibility is limned by explanation. If something is constitutively explained by other matters, it is thereby constrained: it cannot be otherwise so long as those other matters remain unchanged. But if it has no constitutive explanation, then it lacks this constraint and can therefore vary freely.²⁴ To implement this more precisely we need a nonfactive notion of constitutive explanation on which one state of affairs, which may or may not obtain, is explicable by others, which may or may not obtain. This could be regimented with an operator

T, U, . . . settle that S

glossed as “if T, U, . . . , that would make it the case that S”, where this doesn't imply that T, that U, . . . or that S.²⁵ For convenience I will

the explanans must presumably be necessary too, so do we have an infinite regress? Here is one place the aphorism needs refinement. One solution is to restrict it to matters that I have elsewhere called “substantive”; that is, matters that are “apt for being explained” in the constitutive sense. If so, then “autonomous” matters—matters that are not apt for being explained—fall outside the scope of the aphorism and can then be necessary and true for no reason. See Dasgupta (2014b, 2016) for more on the distinction between ‘substantive’ and ‘autonomous’ truths. We can then say that the metaphysical principles, if any, are autonomous and hence also outside the scope of the aphorism. But it would detract from the main thread to refine the aphorism in detail here.

²⁴ Ignoring the metaphysical principles, of course. They are, in effect, a second source of modal constraint alongside explanation.

²⁵ Since statements of this form help generate the space of worlds, they don't vary in truth value from world to world; they are just true or false *simpliciter*. Does this mean that they're necessary? We could say that, but it would be misleading, since their truth or falsity is prior to

sometimes abbreviate this with quantification over states of affairs, or facts, or “matters”, saying that some matters (facts, states) settle others.

Our theory, then, is that a strictly possible world is a way of reorganizing those matters that aren’t settled by anything. If those matters just concern handrons spinning in a void, then a strictly possible world *W* is a way of reorganizing how the handrons spin in the void. And *W* is a world in which there is a chair just in case the handrons in *W* spin in such a way that constitutes (that is, settles that there is) a chair.

8. Strict and loose possibility

We’ve just understood strict possibility in terms of being unexplained. But I’ll now argue that there are two related notions of being unexplained. If ‘left’ and ‘right’ are devices of coherence, then there is one sense in which matters of left and right have an explanation and another sense in which they don’t. The former sense yields the notion of strict possibility; the latter yields the notion of loose possibility we’re looking for.

The key is to recognize that if ‘left’ and ‘right’ are devices of coherence, then they’re not fully factual. Lee and Yalcin (n.d.) also argue for a non-factualist view about left and right; here I’ll argue that non-factualism follows from the claim that they’re devices of coherence.

By calling an expression factual I mean, roughly speaking, that its function is descriptive. The word ‘green’ is factual insofar as it is (typically) used to describe what something is like, i.e., as being green. By contrast, ‘Hooray!’ is non-factual insofar as its function is not descriptive but emotive—one uses it to express joy. Likewise, on a simple expressivist view of moral discourse, ‘good’ is non-factual insofar as it is used not to describe something but to express a pro-attitude toward it.²⁶

the worlds they generate. I prefer to think of them as “aworldly” in something akin to Fine’s (2005) sense.

²⁶ I just explained the factual vs. non-factual distinction in terms of a word’s *function*, but some philosophers express puzzlement about the idea that words have functions. I confess that I’m puzzled about their puzzlement. Like cups and saucers, words are things we use for certain purposes; their function can be thought of as whatever we use them to do. This is not the only

An utterance can be evaluated as to whether it fulfills its function. For example, since an utterance of

- (1) Grass is green.

functions to describe what grass is like, it fulfills its function iff, and because, grass is as (1) describes it to be; that is, iff, and because, grass is green. We therefore evaluate (1) positively by calling it ‘right’ or ‘correct’. More generally, a factual utterance fulfills its function iff, and because, it is *true*. Hence the primary standard of evaluation for a factual utterance is truth: it is correct iff, and because, it is true. By contrast, since non-factual utterances have different functions, they may have different standards of evaluation.²⁷

Is ‘left’ factual? It would be if defined as synonymous with ‘congruent with Changy’, for its function would then be to describe things as being congruent with Changy. Thus, given a particular glove Gary, an utterance of

- (2) Gary is left-handed.

would be correct if, and because, Gary is congruent with Changy. The same goes for an absolutist who interprets ‘left’ as expressing that physical property L that distinguishes the left from right hands. For then the function of ‘left’ would be to describe things as having that property L, and an utterance of (2) would be correct iff, and because, Gary has L.

sense in which words have functions, but it’s a particularly unproblematic sense and is all I need here.

²⁷ In saying that truth *explains* the correctness of factual utterances, am I assuming an inflationary theory of truth? Strictly speaking, yes. But this is just a convenience, and the main point can be put in deflationary terms. For a deflationist can agree that (1) is correct because snow is white, and so can mimic our account of factual utterances with the following scheme: if ‘S’ is factual, then ‘S’ is correct if, and because, S. There is, of course, more to say about the factual vs. non-factual distinction, but the rough idea just glossed is clear enough for our purposes. For more, see Gibbard (2003) and Yalcin (2012), though I stress that the distinction I’m drawing here may not coincide exactly with theirs.

But if 'left' is a device of coherence, then it is not factual in this sense. For one's aim in uttering (2) is then not to describe Gary but to cohere with one's linguistic community—to utter something which, along with other accepted applications of 'left' and 'right', would yield truths about congruence via the rules (R1)–(R3). So, what makes the utterance correct is not that it is *true* but that it *coheres*: coherence, not truth, is the primary standard of evaluation. Remember, the rules (R1)–(R3) are just exit rules; they do not define a property of being left-handed, like L, possession of which by Gary would make (2) true. Rather, the correctness of (2) is fully explained by the fact that it coheres.

To be clear, to say that this talk is non-factual is not to deny that it is constrained by the world. For its correctness consists in coherence, and utterances cohere iff they imply *truths about congruence* via the rules (R1)–(R3). Thus, to say that (2) is non-factual is not to say that its correctness depends solely on one's subjective mental state or such like, for it depends largely on the worldly facts about congruence. So this is a non-factualism of a somewhat mild stripe, but it's non-factualism nonetheless.²⁸

Now, suppose (2) is correct: Gary is left-handed. What constitutively explains *why* Gary is left-handed? I suggest that, on this non-factualist view, there is no answer: there is nothing about the underlying facts of congruence in virtue of which it is left-handed. Again, things would be different if 'left' were defined to be synonymous with 'congruent with Changy'. For in that case it would be natural to say that Gary is left-handed *in virtue of* being congruent with Changy. Here there is a kind of semantic transparency: that which explains why (2) is correct—namely, Gary's being congruent with Changy—also explains why Gary is left-handed. But on the non-factualist view this transparency appears to break down. There is a constitutive explanation of why my utterance of (2) is correct: it is correct because it coheres with my neighbor's utterances. But this is *not* an explanation of why Gary is left-handed. To think so would be to mistake (2) with the factual assertion *that Lefty is*

²⁸ Moreover, note that the non-factualist need not deny that there are truths or facts of left and right in a deflated sense. If (3) is correct, then it's assertable that Gary is left-handed; hence it's assertable that (3) is true in a disquotational sense of 'true' (see Field 2001). But its truth in this sense is explanatorily derivative; it doesn't enter into the explanation of why (3) is correct.

congruent with hands my neighbors call 'left'. And that mischaracterizes the phenomena: when 'left' is used as a device of coherence, the aim is not to describe Gary as having that property, but to cohere with other utterances.²⁹

This breakdown in transparency is familiar from other cases of non-factual discourse. Consider again a simple expressivist view on which in uttering 'Charity is good', I express my pro-attitude toward charity. On this view, the content or meaning of the utterance will involve that pro-attitude—that is what's expressed, after all. But it is *not* part of this expressivist view that charity is good in virtue of my pro-attitude toward charity—even in my mouth this explanation would not be right. To think otherwise would be to confuse expressivism with a subjectivist view on which my saying 'Charity is good' means *that I have a pro-attitude toward charity*.³⁰

What we see here is a distinction between a (non-homophonic) explanation of *what makes an utterance of 'S' correct*, and an explanation of *what makes it the case that S*. With factual utterances they coincide precisely because correctness amounts to truth. But with non-factual utterances they can differ: that which makes (2) correct—that it coheres—does *not* make it the case that Gary is left-handed.

The upshot is that if a relationalist uses 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence, then there is a sense in which matters of left and right have a constitutive explanation and another sense in which they do not. On the one hand, the *correctness* of all talk of 'left' and 'right' is explained in terms of congruence: my utterance of (2) is correct in virtue of the fact that Gary is congruent with gloves my neighbors call 'left'. In this sense, matters of left and right *do* have a constitutive explanation in relational terms. On the other hand, there is nothing in virtue of which Gary is left-handed—in *that* sense it's a brute, unexplained matter whether Gary is left-handed. If it sounds odd to hear a relationalist saying this, remember that being left-handed is, on her view, a non-factual matter. Thus, it

²⁹ To be clear, it is not impossible to speak a language in which 'left' is defined as 'congruent to what members of my community call "left"'. My claim is just that a community using 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence do not speak this language.

³⁰ What does explain why charity is good, on a simple expressivist view? I won't try to answer; see Berker (2020) for more discussion.

remains the case on her view that all the *factual* matters that are unexplained (in the constitutive sense) are relational; that is what makes her view count as *relationalist*.

We can characterize the two senses of being unexplained as follows:

It is *loosely fundamental* whether S iff nothing settles whether S.

It is *strictly fundamental* whether S iff (i) nothing settles whether S and (ii) it is factual whether S.

Put in these terms, the question of absolutism vs. relationalism concerns the *strictly* fundamental matters of handedness: Which *factual* matters of handedness are explanatorily basic? The absolutist thinks they consist in the distribution of the physical property L that distinguishes the left from right hands, while the relationalist thinks they consist just in relational matters of congruence. The relationalist I envisage then adds that matters of left and right are *loosely* fundamental, but that does not contradict her relationalism.³¹

We therefore have two senses in which something can be fundamental (unexplained). Insofar as a possible world is a way of reorganizing fundamental (unexplained) matters, we have two corresponding notions of a possible world. The *strictly possible worlds* from section 7, we now see, are ways of reorganizing *strictly fundamental* matters. For the relationalist, the strictly fundamental matters concerning handedness just concern relational matters of congruence; hence a strictly possible world just is a way of reorganizing relational matters of congruence (and other strictly fundamental matters concerning mass, etc.); hence strictly possible worlds agreeing on relational matters of congruence agree on all matters of handedness *per* Relational Supervenience. But for the absolutist,

³¹ In Dasgupta (2014a) I tried to get at this distinction between two senses of being “unexplained” in terms of plural grounding. Suppose a plurality of facts including X have an explanation when taken together, but X has no explanation on its own. Then there’s one sense in which X has an explanation—it is explained as part of a plurality—and another sense in which it does not—it has no explanation on its own. But I’ve come to think that the framework of plural grounding doesn’t helpfully illuminate the phenomena. The phenomena were the use of ‘kilogram’ predicates described in §9 of that (2014a) paper, which in essence is the idea that such talk is a device of coherence like ‘left’ and ‘right’. I still believe we use ‘kilogram’ talk that way (see section 10 of this chapter), but I now think this usage is better understood in terms of non-factualism than plural grounding.

the strictly fundamental matters include the distribution of the physical property L that distinguishes left from right; hence a strictly possible world on his view is a way of reorganizing L (as well as other strictly fundamental matters); hence the absolutist can distinguish strictly possible worlds that differ only in a uniform flip of left to right and vice versa, *contra* Relational Supervenience. This is all as expected, for strict possibility is the normal sense of metaphysical possibility already familiar to philosophers.

By contrast, say that a *loosely possible world* is a way of reorganizing loosely fundamental matters. On the relationalist view under discussion, the loosely fundamental matters include relational matters of congruence *and* matters of left and right, so a loosely possible world is a way of reorganizing those relations *and, in addition, reorganizing what's left-and right-handed*. Even for a relationalist, then, matters of left and right can be freely stipulated of a loosely possible world; there is no need to require that they be fixed or settled by the relational facts at that world, so there is no danger of Incommensurability when it comes to loosely possible worlds. For the same reason, there can be loosely possible worlds that agree on all relational facts, yet disagree only in a flip of left to right and vice versa. Thus, when it comes to *loosely possible worlds*, relationalism does *not* imply Relational Supervenience. Again, if this sounds odd, just remember what loosely possible worlds are. Whereas strictly possible worlds represent how *factual* matters could have differed, loosely possible worlds represent how *all* matters could have differed—including non-factual matters. Thus, for the relationalist, the loosely possible worlds that differ only in a flip of left to right agree in all *factual* respects; they disagree only in the non-factual respect of left and right.³²

In this way the relationalist can recognize a distinct loosely possible world for each strictly possible world recognized by the absolutist. But is the converse also true? One might think not. After all, the absolutist (as

³² This distinction between loose and strict possibility is closely related to Russell's (2015) distinction between possibility and factual possibility: in both cases the former represents how all matters, including non-factual matters, could have differed. However, he explicitly rejects the idea that there are two distinct notions of possibility in play; his aim instead is to understand Lewis's idea that distinct possibilities can "correspond" to the same possible world. I'm not exactly sure what this Lewisian idea amounts to and so am unsure to what extent our views really differ.

we are imagining him) thinks that the *only* strictly fundamental matters of handedness are matters of left and right, and matters of congruence are settled by them. By contrast, the relationalist thinks that matters of left and right *and* matters of congruence are loosely fundamental. Does that mean there are weird loosely possible worlds that the absolutist makes no sense of, for example one in which there are two incongruent left-handrons? In principle, yes. But more likely, the relationalist will think that the conditionals encoded in the exit rules (R1)–(R3)—for example, that if two handrons are both left-handed, then they are congruent—are metaphysical principles. This is not ad hoc: on her view those exit rules are constitutive of meaning, and hence the encoded conditional is plausibly a conceptual or analytic truth. If that is right, the relationalist does not in the end recognize these weird worlds that the absolutist cannot make sense of. Hence, we have

Modal Correspondence Thesis: There is a one-to-one correspondence between the space of *strictly* possible worlds recognized by the absolutist and the space of *loosely* possible worlds recognized by the relationalist that preserves all relational facts and facts about what is left and right.

Which is precisely what we were after.

9. How to be a relationalist

We are finally in a position to see how the relationalist can account for the use of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in scientific practice, as described in section 4. That practice included expressing observations of handrons in those terms and writing down their theory of handrons as

(F) Whenever a handron collides with another, it changes color iff it is *left*-handed.

We saw in section 5 that if ‘left’ and ‘right’ are devices of coherence, this practice makes perfect sense to a relationalist. The residual question was how to make sense of the deterministic reasoning in which (F) is used to

solve initial value problems like Questions 2 and 3. That reasoning involved *characterizing* the possible worlds in terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ and *distinguishing* worlds that are mirror images of one another, and the worry was that the relationalist can’t make sense of that. The solution is now clear: the relationalist can interpret initial value problems as involving *loosely* possible worlds. After all, we know that the absolutist can interpret Question 2 as involving a *strictly possible world* containing two left-handrons, and Question 3 as involving a *distinct* strictly possible world containing two right-handrons. By the Modal Correspondence Thesis, the relationalist can do exactly the same with *loosely* possible worlds instead.

More generally, the relationalist can now say that (F) is deterministic. Recall from section 2 that we defined determinism in terms of possible worlds thus:

A theory is *deterministic* iff any two possible worlds in which it obtains, and which agree at one time, agree at all times.

So we must now distinguish two notions of determinism, strict and loose, depending on whether “possible world” is understood in the strict or loose sense. We said in section 2 that (F), as the absolutist understands it, is deterministic, and in retrospect what we meant was that it is *strictly* deterministic—we were working with the standard sense of possibility, which we now call “strict possibility”. By the Modal Correspondence Thesis it follows that (F), as the *relationalist* understands it, is *loosely* deterministic.³³

But if the relationalist mimics the absolutist so closely, what, then, is her advantage? The answer is that she avoids the epistemic problem plaguing absolutism from section 3. Remember, the absolutist interprets

³³ Or more cautiously, (F) is loosely deterministic on the relationalist’s interpretation if and only if it is strictly deterministic on the absolutist’s. The more cautious statement is more accurate because, of course, (F) itself isn’t really deterministic *at all*. One has a deterministic theory only by combining (F) with a determinist theory of motion; see section 2. But the point remains that, on the absolutist’s view, any two strictly possible worlds that agree on (F) and agree on all facts of left and right at a time, agree on which handrons will change color upon collision. The point is that the same is true on the relationalist’s view vis-à-vis loosely possible worlds.

(F) as stating that the handrons that change color are those with some physical property L, such as being aligned with some oriented field. But we never observed that handrons with *that* property change color. Everything would look exactly the same in a strictly possible world in which all handrons are flipped, so that the ones changing color are *anti*-aligned with the field. For the absolutist, the difference between these worlds is factual: there is a genuine fact about whether the handrons changing color are aligned with the field, a fact that can't be known. But on the relationalist view there is no such fact. True, she can distinguish *loosely* possible worlds that differ only in a uniform flip of left to right, but the difference is merely non-factual, a difference in labels (as it were) but not in fact.

As emphasized in section 6, this approach is adequate only if loose possibility is a genuine species of metaphysical possibility. Otherwise we've not shown how the relationalist can say that (F) is deterministic *in the right sense*. The argument of sections 7 and 8 is that it is indeed a genuine kind of metaphysical possibility. The key lies in the connection between metaphysical possibility and constitutive explanation: that if something is constitutively unexplained—if there is nothing *making* it be that way—it could have been otherwise. What I then argued is that there are two related notions of being constitutively unexplained: strict and loose fundamentality. Each notion then gives rise to a corresponding notion of possibility: strict and loose possibility, respectively. Thus, loose possibility is as much a genuine notion of metaphysical possibility as strict possibility is, and for the same reason.

This approach will be rejected by those seduced by the idea that there is a clear, univocal notion of “metaphysical possibility” that we grasp independently of its connection to fundamentality and explanation. On this view, metaphysical possibility may (as it happens) correspond to ways of reorganizing strictly fundamental matters, but no notion of metaphysical possibility corresponds to ways of reorganizing loosely fundamental matters. This view is antithetical to the approach I take here, on which there is no content to talk of metaphysical possibility apart from its connection to explanation. There is no space to settle this deep issue of modal metaphysics in this paper; I can only be explicit about what my approach is.

Still, even granting that loose possibility is an appropriately metaphysical modality, one may still object that it is not the right *kind* of metaphysical modality to use when defining notions like determinism. The worry would be that there is no reason why the relationalist should use *it*, rather than strict possibility, other than the ad hoc reason that things work out nicely for her if she does. But this objection gets things exactly back to front. After all, the difference between strictly and loosely possible worlds is that the former represent how the *factual* matters could have differed, while the latter represent how *all* matters could have differed. Since the relationalist thinks that matters of left and right are non-factual, it follows that questions of how such matters could have differed are intelligible for her *only* as questions about loose possibility. It would, therefore, be perverse to expect her to model counterfactual reasoning about left and right with strictly possible worlds. To the contrary, loosely possible worlds are precisely what it makes sense for her to use when thinking counterfactually about left and right, independent of the fact that things work out nicely for her if she does.

Even granting this, one might still worry whether loose determinism counts as *determinism* in any serious sense of the term. The worry is that in the definition of determinism it is important that worlds agree at a time if they agree in all respects *intrinsic* to that time. Otherwise, one could say that agreement at a time requires agreement in what *will* happen from that time onward, in which case determinism becomes trivial. And the worry would be that matters of left and right are not intrinsic to a time, on the relationalist's view, since they serve to summarize relational matters of congruence that may hold between times. In response, I won't quibble over whether right and left count as intrinsic for the relationalist (I suppose we could distinguish loose and strict senses of 'intrinsic' . . .) The important point is that allowing agreement at a time to include agreement in matters of left and right does not render determinism trivial. For the theory

(F*) When a left-handron collides with another, there is an 80 percent chance that it changes color.

is not deterministic in either the loose or strict sense, so there is no danger that the notion of loose determinism is trivial.

Of course, 'left' and 'right' is just loose talk on the relationalist's view; it doesn't get at how things are at the (strictly) fundamental level. When doing physics in *strictly fundamental* terms, she will just talk in terms of congruence. Thus, the strictly fundamental First Law of handrons will be:

- (F-Minimalist) (i) If x and y are congruent handrons, then x changes color on collision iff y does too.
 (ii) If x and y are incongruent handrons, then x changes color on collision iff y does not.

I argued in section 2 that this is indeterministic, and that is true in both the strict and loose senses. But as we saw in section 3, this is a *virtue* of relationalism since, fundamentally speaking, the indeterministic behavior described by (F-Minimalist) is all that we observe.

Here, then, is the relationalist picture. At the strictly fundamental level, the world is an indeterministic system governed by (F-Minimalist). But we rarely represent matters of handedness in strictly fundamental terms; we typically use 'left' and 'right' as devices of coherence to characterize the world more efficiently. And characterized like *that*, handrons behave in the *loosely* deterministic manner expressed by (F). Thus, once the relationalist has introduced talk of 'left' and 'right', she'll reason about handrons in the same deterministic manner that the absolutist will; the only difference will be their interpretation of the reasoning.

Much the same goes for locality. We saw in section 2 that the absolutist's physics of handrons is local. For (F) says that whether a given handron will change color depends on whether it is left-handed, and for the absolutist this depends on whether it has that property L that distinguishes left from right-handrons, not on its relation to far-off handrons. This was in contrast to (F-Minimalist), which says that whether a handron will change color depends on the results of other collision events that may occur thousands of miles away. But our mistake was to conclude that the relationalist's physics *in toto* is non-local. For once she introduces talk of 'left' and 'right', her physics will include (F) and she can agree that (F) is local. After all, she agrees that whether a handron is

left-handed doesn't depend on its relation to far-off handrons—on her view being left-handed is loosely fundamental and so doesn't depend on *anything*. True, the *correctness* of calling a handron 'left' may depend on congruence relations to far-off handrons, but *that it is left-handed* does not. In *that* sense she can agree that, according to (F), whether a handron changes color does not depend on the results of far-off collision events.

If one defines locality in terms of possible worlds, this point can be put in terms of strict and loose possibility just as it was with determinism. How might such a definition work? As Baker explains, the idea behind locality is that “approximately isolated systems can generally be treated as if they were entirely isolated” (2020, n. 21). This is what allows us to model our solar system to a high degree of accuracy while ignoring the gravitational effects of Alpha Centauri. The idea is that if you ignore everything outside the system and pretend that it's its own possible world, this should have negligible effect on what the theory predicts about the system. Thus, if *S* is an approximately isolated subsystem of a world *W*, locality amounts to the following idea: that the result of *first* taking a world that's an intrinsic duplicate of *S* at a time *t*₀ *and then* evolving the duplicate forward to *t*₁ according to the theory is approximately the same as *first* evolving the entire world *W* from *t*₀ to *t*₁ according to the theory *and then* taking a world that's an intrinsic duplicate of *S* at *t*₁. Thus, locality amounts to a kind of commutativity between the operation of taking a world that's an intrinsic duplicate of a subsystem at a time and the operation of evolving a world over time according to the theory. Admittedly, precisifying this idea is somewhat complex and there is room to quibble over the details, but those details don't matter to the general point. Take *whatever* possible worlds definition of locality you like; we can then distinguish strict vs. loose locality depending on whether the worlds are read as strict or loosely possible worlds. By the Modal Correspondence Thesis, (F) is loosely local on the relationalist's interpretation if and only if it is strictly local on the absolutist's.³⁴

³⁴ Here is one way to precisify a possible worlds definition of locality. Given a theory *T* and a subsystem *S* of a world *W*, call the worlds in which *T* is true and whose complete state at *t* duplicates the intrinsic state of *S* at *t* the *isolated* *S*_{*t*,*t*} worlds. These worlds represent how *S* can evolve from *t*, according to *T*, if we ignore the rest of the world *W*. Then take the worlds that

And the same goes for other modal reasoning about left and right concerning counterfactuals, causation, explanation, and so on: the relationalist will exactly mimic the absolutist's reasoning, differing only in her interpretation of what it means. Thus, suppose an absolutist asserts a counterfactual such as 'Had two left-handrons collided, they would have changed color'. And suppose he interprets this as having a possible-worlds truth condition à la Lewis-Stalnaker. Then the relationalist can agree, adding just that she interprets the truth condition as involving loose rather than strict possible worlds.

This might sound odd. If being left-handed is non-factual, how could there be scientifically respectable counterfactuals regarding how left-handrons would behave? How could being left-handed play a role in scientific explanation or causation? The worry would be that only factual matters can be "real" pushes and pulls. But remember, the relationalist is not trying to say that being left-handed does any work *at the strictly fundamental level*. She is rather earning the right to speak like an absolutist, with no pretense that this is getting at how things are most fundamentally in the strict sense. Thus, she will happily say that a handron changes color because it is left-handed, so long as it is noted that this is not getting at the strictly fundamental pushes and pulls.

10. Mass

That is how to be a relationalist about handedness. Let me now explain how this approach carries over to the case of mass and discuss Baker's arguments I mentioned at the beginning.

As with handedness, the issue of absolutism vs. relationalism concerns the *strictly fundamental* facts about mass. The relationalist thinks they

agree with W at t and in which T is true, and call the subsystem S in each world an *embedded $S_{T,t}$ system*. These represent how S can evolve from t , according to T , if we take into account the rest of the world W . Finally, say that the embedded $S_{T,t}$ systems *match* the isolated $S_{T,t}$ worlds iff there's a one-to-one correspondence between them that maps each system to a world that's an approximate intrinsic duplicate. Then we can define a theory T to be *local* iff, for any world W , any approximately isolated subsystem S of W , and any time t , the embedded $S_{T,t}$ systems match the isolated $S_{T,t}$ worlds. This can then be interpreted over strictly or loosely possible worlds as indicated in the text.

just concern how bodies are related in mass, for example that x is less massive than y , or twice as massive as z . Relationalists may disagree on which relations are strictly fundamental—orderings, ratios, or something else—but for our purposes nothing hangs on this and I'll assume they're ratios for simplicity. By contrast, the absolutist thinks that the strictly fundamental facts concern which intrinsic mass each body has, and these then settle their mass relationships: if x is more massive than y , this is because of their intrinsic masses.

In the case of handedness a central question was the interpretation of 'left' and 'right'. Here the corresponding question is the interpretation of units such as 'kilogram'. For the absolutist, a natural interpretation is that terms like '1 kg' and '2 kg' directly refer to intrinsic masses. She might add that their referent is fixed by a description involving a standard object—perhaps '1 kg' is to refer to that intrinsic mass possessed by the standard kilogram in Paris. But however reference is fixed, the view is that kilogram terms make direct reference to strictly fundamental, intrinsic properties.³⁵

How might the relationalist interpret kilogram talk? One option is to define '1 kg' to be synonymous with 'equal in mass to the standard kilogram in Paris'—this is like defining 'left' as 'congruent with Changy'. But the better option is to understand 'kilogram' as a device of coherence, just as we did with 'left' and 'right'. On this view, predicates of the form ' x is r kilograms' are stipulated to be governed by the following exit rule:

(K)

x is r kilograms, y is s kilograms

x is r/s times as massive as y

But one stipulates nothing else: there are no introduction rules that specify sufficient conditions for concluding (say) that a given body is 2 kg, so the predicates have no explicit definition. Nonetheless, this is sufficient

³⁵ While the term '1 kg' contains a numeral, on this view it makes direct reference to a particular intrinsic mass and not the number. Thus, this is not the "Pythagorean" view on which numbers are fundamentally enmeshed in matter.

to ground a meaningful practice in which the predicates are used to record information about mass-ratio. When first applying the predicates to a body one has free reign—one can call it 1 kg, 2 kg, or whatever. But if one calls it 2 kg then subsequent usage is constrained: given another body twice as massive as the first one must call it 4 kg else one could infer a falsehood via (K). Thus, one's aim in applying these predicates of mass-in-kilograms is to *cohere* with one's neighbors in the sense that the combined uses imply truths about mass-ratio via the rule (K). On this view, the standard kilogram in Paris plays no semantic role in defining or fixing the referent of 'kilogram'. Its role is rather to help billions of language users worldwide cohere: if we all cohere with the statement 'The standard kilogram is 1 kg', then we'll all cohere with each other.

I believe that this is, in all important respects, how *our* talk of mass in kilograms actually functions.³⁶ But that is an empirical hypothesis that I will not defend here. All I need is the uncontroversial claim that it is *possible* for a community of relationalists to use 'kilogram' like this. If they do, their kilogram talk will be non-factual for the same reason as with 'left' and 'right'. For in uttering 'x is 2 kg' their aim is not to describe but to cohere; hence the utterance is correct not because it is true but because it coheres. Thus, matters of mass in kilograms are *loosely* fundamental, again for the same reason: there's no constitutive explanation of why x is 2 kg, just an explanation of why 'x is 2 kg' is correct.

When it comes to counterfactual reasoning, then, the relationalist will distinguish strict from loose possibility just as before. The strictly fundamental matters about mass just concern mass relationships; and so a strictly possible world is just a reorganization of mass relationships (along with other strictly fundamental matters unrelated to mass); hence *strictly* possible worlds agreeing on all mass-relational matters must agree on all matters of mass. This is the analogue of Relational Supervenience in the case of mass. But the *loosely* fundamental matters include matters of mass in kilograms; hence a loosely possible world includes a reorganization of the mass in kilograms of each thing; hence there can be loosely possible worlds that agree on all relations of mass and disagree only in a uniform doubling of mass in kilograms. Indeed,

³⁶ See Dasgupta (2013, §4) and (2014, §9) for arguments to this effect.

this space of *loosely* possible worlds will correspond one-to-one with the space of *strictly* possible worlds recognized by the absolutist, for the same reasons as before. Thus, we have:

Modal Correspondence Thesis for Mass: There is a one-to-one correspondence between the space of *strictly* possible worlds recognized by the absolutist and the space of *loosely* possible worlds recognized by the relationalist that preserves all mass-relational matters and matters of mass in kilograms.

We can now see how a relationalist can interpret a physics of mass. Imagine that some fictional physicist observes the behavior of massive bodies and records their measurements in units like mass in kilograms and acceleration in m/s^2 . And imagine their observations confirm a classical theory consisting of $f = ma$ and various force laws, where $f = ma$ is to be understood as

(N) The total force in Newtons acting on a body = its mass in kilograms times its acceleration in m/s^2

and the equations describing force laws are understood similarly. Imagine further that they use this theory to solve initial value problems like Baker's cases of escape velocity. One initial value problem involves a planet with a rocket on its surface, each with a specified mass in kilograms, and the rocket is fired upward at a specified velocity. The question is whether the rocket will escape the planet's gravitational field, and the answer is that it does. A second problem is just like the first except the planet and rocket are double in mass what they were in the first, and Baker shows that in this case the rocket does not escape. Note that the initial states are *characterized* in terms of kilograms and they're *distinguished* only by a uniform doubling thereof. These are, therefore, analogous to Questions 2 and 3 concerning handedness, which were characterized in terms of left and right and distinguished only by a uniform flip (indeed, I designed Questions 2 and 3 to be analogous to Baker's cases). Baker shows that the theory behaves *deterministically* insofar as it entails a unique solution for each problem. Indeed, let's

imagine that the theory satisfies the standard possible worlds definition of determinism from section 2.³⁷

To the absolutist this all makes perfect sense. Measurements of mass in kilograms are measurements of a strictly fundamental quantity, namely intrinsic mass, and equations like (N) describe how this quantity relates to others. Initial value problems characterize the initial state of a *strictly* possible world with respect to this quantity, and since on his view strictly possible worlds can differ in a uniform doubling of mass, there is no problem distinguishing the two problems. And the theory is strictly deterministic insofar as any two *strictly* possible worlds in which it holds, and which agree at one time, agree at all other other times—that's why the theory yields a unique solution in each case.

The relationalist can make good sense of this too, but her interpretation is different. On her view measurements of mass in kilograms aren't descriptions of a strictly fundamental quantity; they're statements in a derivative and non-factual vocabulary designed to conveniently store information about the underlying mass relationships. Thus, an equation like (N) isn't a *strictly fundamental* physics of mass; it's what physics looks like when presented in this derivative and non-factual vocabulary of mass in kilograms. Since talk of kilograms is non-factual, reasoning about how things could have differed in kilograms must involve loose, not strict possibility—after all, strictly possible worlds don't represent how non-factual matters could have differed. Thus, the relationalist will naturally interpret Baker's initial value problems as characterizing the initial state of two *loosely* possible worlds. By the Modal Correspondence Thesis for Mass, the relationalist can distinguish two such problems differing only in a uniform doubling of mass, just as the absolutist can. Indeed, the correspondence shows that the relationalist's theory must be loosely deterministic if and only if the absolutist's theory is strictly deterministic.

Why, then, did Baker think that relationalism about mass leads to indeterminism? He noted that the initial states of the two problems agree on all mass relationships (and in all respects other than mass); hence on the relationalist's view their initial states agree in *all* respects *simpliciter*.

³⁷ To be clear, classical mechanics is arguably not deterministic; see Norton (2008). But these kinds of failures of determinism are not germane to our discussion so I'll bracket them here.

Since they diverge thereafter, this is indeterminism. Moreover, he argued ingeniously that the relationalist must agree that there are indeed *two* ways for that initial state to evolve.³⁸ But the mistake was to think that since they agree on all mass relationships, they must agree in *all* respects of mass. That would be right, on the relationalist's view, *if* they are strictly possible worlds. But on her view they're not: they're loosely possible worlds, and, as we know, she can distinguish two such worlds that differ only in a uniform doubling of mass in kilograms. Thus, there's no failure of determinism: there are, indeed, two ways for the initial state *characterized relationally* to evolve, but each way corresponds to a different initial state vis-à-vis mass in kilograms.

Nonetheless, Baker is right that indeterminism lurks in the vicinity. For what would the relationalist's physics look like if expressed in *strictly fundamental* terms? She would restrict herself to talk of mass relationships and so couldn't propose (N). In its place, one option would be a Machian alternative that contains reference to a particular body, such as:

(N-Machian) The total force in Newtons acting on a body = its mass ratio with the standard kilogram in Paris times its acceleration in m/s^2 .

But this inherits the same problems with Machian laws discussed in section 2: it doesn't apply to worlds in which the standard object in Paris doesn't exist. Better is a minimalist theory that stands to (N) just as (F-Minimalist) stands to (F). Such a theory is complex to write down in full generality, but the idea is that it would imply statements like

(N-Minimalist) If one body is r times as massive as another and they are both subject to the same force, the first will accelerate at $1/r$ the rate as the second.³⁹

³⁸ The argument is this. Consider a third initial value problem containing *two* planet-rocket systems with one system double the mass of the other, and let the systems be sufficiently far apart that they're more or less isolated. And suppose the rocket in the less massive system escapes, while the other rocket does not. The relationalist must agree that this is possible. But by locality, the behavior of each system doesn't depend on its relation to the other, so each would behave similarly were it its own possible world. Thus, we have two worlds that agree initially in all mass relationships (and all respects other than mass), yet diverge thereafter.

³⁹ See Field (1980) for a proper articulation of what a set of minimalist laws like this might look like.

And (N-Minimalist) is indeterministic and non-local in both the strict and loose sense, just as (F-Minimalist) was. After all, it implies *nothing* about how a world containing just one body will evolve over time (indeterminism), and it implies that a body's rate of acceleration depends on how other bodies many thousands of miles away are accelerating (non-locality).

But as with handedness, this is a virtue: the indeterministic and non-local behavior described by (N-minimalism) is all we really observe. In particular, we did not observe the deterministic behavior described by the absolutist's interpretation of (N). Recall that on that interpretation (N) states how a body with a particular intrinsic mass M would accelerate under a given force. But we never observed that *that particular mass M* affects acceleration in that way, since everything would look (and smell, and taste) exactly the same in a uniformly mass-doubled world. In that world, the mass that's *half M* would affect acceleration in the same way that M actually does, and the behavior of all the other intrinsic masses would be similarly transformed.⁴⁰ What we actually see gives no reason to think we live in the one world over its doubled cousin. All we really observe are the relational facts common to both worlds, namely that bodies accelerate at a rate inversely proportional to their mass. But that just confirms (N-Minimalist), not the absolutist's interpretation of (N).

The upshot is this. When it comes to *strictly fundamental* physics, the relationalist proposes (N-Minimalist), while the absolutist proposes (N) interpreted as stating how particular intrinsic masses affect acceleration. The absolutist's theory goes beyond what's confirmed by observation; the relationalist's does not; that's a point in favor of relationalism. True, the relationalist's theory is indeterministic and non-local, but that's a virtue, since that's all that observation confirms. Still, when reasoning about mass, the relationalist will find great utility in using kilograms as a device of coherence, and when she does physics in these terms, she'll propose (N) and reason counterfactually in terms of loose possibility. Her physics

⁴⁰ In the doubled world, would (N) be true? Yes and no. What (N) actually states, in our mouths, is false at that world: the intrinsic masses line up with rates of acceleration differently than (N) states. But our counterparts in the doubled world, using the terms as we do, would express a truth with (N). For their term '1 kg' would pick out a different intrinsic mass than ours and therefore what (N) means in their mouth would be true.

will then behave on the surface just like the absolutist's: it is deterministic and local (in the loose senses), and initial value problems are solved in just the same way as the absolutist thought. The only difference lies in the interpretation of this practice. For the absolutist it gets at how things are at the strictly fundamental level, while for the relationalist it is, ultimately, just a convenient shorthand.

11. Conclusion

In both handedness and mass, then, the success of relationalism hangs centrally on the interpretation of the vocabulary of 'left' and 'right', and 'kilograms', respectively. This issue has received insufficient attention. It is sometimes presumed that the relationalist has no right to such vocabulary—witness Earman saying that the relationalist cannot so much as *express* the law (F) since it contains the term 'left'. Other times the relationalist is allowed the vocabulary but it's presumed to behave modally much like other vocabulary—witness Baker's assumption that if two initial value problems agree in all mass-relational respects, then the relationalist must count them as agreeing in all respects of mass. But both presumptions are wrong. The relationalist can interpret the contested talk as a device of coherence, and if she does, its modal behavior will mimic how the absolutist always thought it behaved.

Indeed, this may explain why absolutism initially strikes many as the more plausible view. For being left- or right-handed and having a particular mass in kilograms certainly *appear* to be independent variables, states that hold independently of relations of congruence and mass ratio respectively. Relationalism has always been *thought* to deny this appearance; hence the plausibility of absolutism. But we now know that a relationalist needn't deny the appearance. They *are* independent variables, she can say, insofar as something's being left-handed and being 2 kg doesn't hold in virtue of anything. But the idea that a relationalist (of all people) can say this is only apparent once we reflect on her interpretation of the relevant vocabulary and recognize it as a device of coherence.

I've applied this approach to the cases of handedness and mass; could it also apply to other domains in which there is an analogous dispute

between absolutist and relationalist views? These include the case of motion discussed at the beginning, and also disputes about the interpretation of ‘gauge’ theories. The question is whether the language used by the absolutist to describe his extra feature of reality can be interpreted by the relationalist as a device of coherence, in which case the relationalist could largely mimic the absolutist in the way I’ve described in this chapter. But I leave a discussion of these other cases for another time.

Acknowledgments

This paper has been in the making far too long, and I’ve received feedback from more people than I recall. I do remember that Daniel Berntson, Neil Dewar, Niels Martens, Michaela McSweeney, John Morrison, Brad Skow, Jack Spencer, and Nat Tabris all suffered through early drafts and responded with undue politeness; I thank them all for their helpful feedback. I also thank audiences at the University of Oslo, Rochester University, Columbia University, Princeton University, Brown University, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Philosophy of Science Association 2018 meeting, and North Carolina State University for engaging with this material at various stages of its development. Most of all, I thank David Baker for raising these issues of determinism and locality and for discussing this material with me over the years, during which time he has invariably been a model philosophical interlocutor.

References

- Baker, David. (2020). “Some Consequences of Physics for the Comparative Metaphysics of Quantity.” In Karen Bennett and Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics: Volume 12*, 75–112. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barbour, Julian (1999). *The End of Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berker, Selim. (2020). “Quasi-Dependence.” In Russ Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics: Volume 15*, 192–218. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bhagal, Harjit. (2020). “Nomothetic Explanation and Humeanism about Laws of Nature.” In Karen Bennett and Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics: Volume 12*, 164–202. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Brighouse, Carolyn. (1994). "Spacetime and Holes." *PSA: The Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 1: 117–25.
- Brighouse, Carolyn. (1999). "Incongruent Counterparts and Modal Relationalism." *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 13(1): 53–68.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2013). "Absolutism vs Comparativism about Quantity." *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics: Volume 8*: 105–48.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2014a). "On the Plurality of Grounds." *Philosophers' Imprint* 14(14): 1–28.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2014b). "The Possibility of Physicalism." *The Journal of Philosophy* 111(9): 557–92.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2015). "Substantivalism vs Relationalism about Space in Classical Physics." *Philosophy Compass* 10(9): 601–24.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2016). "Metaphysical Rationalism." *Noûs* 50(2): 379–418.
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2017). "Constitutive Explanation." *Philosophical Issues* 27(1): 74–97.
- Earman, John. (1986). *A Primer on Determinism*. D. Reidel.
- Earman, John. (1989). *World Enough and Space-Time: Absolute versus Relational Theories of Space and Time*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Field, Hartry. (1980). *Science without Numbers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Field, Hartry. (2001). "Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content." In *Truth and the Absence of Fact*, 104–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit. (2005). "Necessity and Non-Existence." In *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*, pp. 321–54. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gibbard, Alan. (2003). *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kovacs, David. (2020). "Metaphysically Explanatory Unification." *Philosophical Studies* 177: 1659–83.
- Lee, Geoffrey and Seth Yalcin. (n.d.). "Finding Meaning in a Disoriented World." MS.
- Lewis, David. (1986). *On The Plurality of Worlds*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Maudlin, Tim. (2012). *Philosophy of Physics: Space and Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Norton, John D. (2008). "The Dome: An Unexpectedly Simple Failure of Determinism" *Philosophy of Science* 75(5): 786–98.
- Pooley, Oliver. (2003). "Handedness, Parity Violation, and the Reality of Space." In K. Brading and E. Castellani (eds.), *Symmetries in Physics: Philosophical Reflections*, 250–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Rosen, Gideon. (2010). "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction." In B. Hale and A. Hoffman (eds.), *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, 109–36. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, Jeff. (2015). "Possible Worlds and the Objective World." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90(2): 389–422.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. (2016). "Grounding in the Image of Causation." *Philosophical Studies* 173(1): 49–100.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. (2017). "The Ground between the Gaps." *Philosophers' Imprint* 17: 1–26.
- Sider, Ted. (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sklar, Larry. (1974). *Space, Time, and Spacetime*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Skow, Brad (2007). "Sklar's Maneuver." *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 58(4): 777–86.
- Wilsch, Tobias. (2015). "The Nomological Account of Ground." *Philosophical Studies* 172(12): 3293–312.
- Wilson, Jessica. (2016). "Grounding-Based Formulations of Physicalism." *Topoi* 37 (2): 1–18.
- Yalcin, Seth. (2012). "Bayesian Expressivism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 62: 124–60.