

---

# Alexander's Dictum and the Reality of Familiar Objects

Crawford L. Elder

---

Alexander's Dictum at first appears to be entirely reasonable, and almost too bland to be of interest. Who could possibly want to claim reality for entities which cannot, even in principle, produce any manifestation of their existence? It seems hard to deny that there might *be* some such entities, lurking somewhere in the world. So perhaps Alexander's Dictum should not be regarded as a constitutive principle of ontology. But its status as a regulative principle seems unassailable.

How surprising, then, that Alexander's Dictum can readily appear to require breathtaking revisions in the ontology of common sense. For when combined with familiar worries about causal exclusion (see, e.g., Heil and Mele, 1993; Sturgeon, 1998), it can readily appear to entail that there are in the world no familiar medium-sized objects at all, but only the microparticles which – as common sense would put it – jointly compose those familiar objects. When combined with less familiar worries about the causal inefficacy of historical properties (Antony, 1996; Enç and Adams, 1992), Alexander's Dictum can appear to entail the non-existence of a specific sub-group of familiar objects, namely those which if real are essentially characterized by historical properties – a group which arguably includes all organs and all artifacts (Millikan, 1984; Elder, 1996; Elder, forthcoming).

In this paper I examine mainly the more general, but also the more specific, challenge to the ontology of common sense. I argue that both challenges rest on confusions. Alexander's Dictum is as bland and as true as it appears to be, and is no reason for us to lose our Moorings in ontology (to borrow a phrase from David Lewis).

## 1.

The idea that familiar medium-sized objects have causal powers must lose all plausibility unless we can maintain that from time to time such objects actually *do* cause things to happen. But widely discussed worries about causal exclusion suggest that whenever familiar objects appear to cause things, the real causing is being done by microparticles. In this section I set forth these worries.

The current discussions of causal exclusion generally<sup>1</sup> focus on apparent examples of *mental* causation – on the case in which *A*'s wanting *x*, and believing *p*, bring about an appropriate action on *A*'s part (Heil and Mele, 1993; Macdonald and Macdonald, 1995). But the worries I have in mind apply equally to any case in which *any* familiar object appears to bring about some result. Thus suppose that over some centuries a glacier carves a cleft in a range of mountains. Or suppose that a deciduous tree, as it grows, weakens and eventually wipes out a colony of sun-loving ground plants which had occupied the place where the seedling sprouted. In all such cases there is a very close connection between the gradually-produced macro-result – the cleft that appears in the mountain range, the weakening of the colony of plants – and a vast array of movements and state-changes successively undergone by a vast number of microparticles, exactly where that macro-result emerges. Some hold this close connection to be simply a matter of identity (Davidson, 1967, 1969). But others (e.g. Kim, 1969; Kim, 1980) argue that such a ruling individuates events too coarsely; the connection is rather that the vast array of microparticle events *composes into* the establishment of the cleft, or that the establishment of the cleft (at least weakly) *supervenes on* that vast array. Such relatively fine-grained individuation of events is presupposed by the current worries about causal exclusion. But it independently is the more

