

Objects and Persons

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I

EXPLAINING ELIMINATIVISM

IN this book I shall show that there are no books. Nor are there statues, rocks, tables, stars, or chairs. Indeed I shall argue that there are no inanimate macrophysical objects at all. Thus I shall argue against the existence of most of the objects alleged to exist by what we might call, to be trendy, ‘folk ontology’. I shall, however, defend the existence of the folk themselves, and shall do so on the assumption that they are human organisms. As we shall see (Chapter 4, §VI), it will remain somewhat of an open question which other alleged organisms really exist.

I cannot fully explain why I deny the existence of, say, statues, but not human organisms, without arguing for the truth of my ontology. But the aim of this chapter is not to present those arguments; it is not to defend that ontology. That is the work of later chapters, starting with Chapter 2. For I cannot even begin to defend my ontology until I make clear what exactly that ontology *is*.

The claim that we human organisms exist is not likely to be misunderstood or assailed by objections that simply miss the mark. And so I won’t dwell on that claim in this chapter. I will instead focus on my ‘eliminativism’ about non-living macrophysical objects. This sort of eliminativism is often, at least

initially, grossly misunderstood. This chapter aims to rectify the gross misunderstandings that underlie knee-jerk responses to eliminativism—Can't you *see* that statue? Do you think we are *dreaming* that statues exist?—and to counter two different versions of the charge that eliminativism is contradictory.

I. Eliminativism: The Basic Idea

Let us start by contrasting the eliminativist's claim that there are no statues with the claim that there is no Bigfoot. (I'll focus on eliminativism about statues in this chapter; the points made apply to eliminativism about non-living macrophysical objects generally.) The claim that there is no Bigfoot, as it is typically understood, dictates a certain array of responses to a terrified camper who honestly claims to have seen a Sasquatch. We might suspect that she has hallucinated, been the victim of a prank, or perhaps mistaken something for Bigfoot, such as a bear, that, upon further inspection, the camper herself would agree is not Bigfoot.

But when someone claims to have seen a statue, I am *not* likely to suspect that he has hallucinated, been the victim of a prank, or mistaken something for a statue that, upon further inspection, he would agree was not really a statue after all. Such occurrences are genuine possibilities. For example, my mother once mistook a very still alligator for a statue (oops). But they are exceptions, not the rule. The rule is that one's 'seemingly seeing a statue' is caused—in a non-hallucinatory, non-prankish way—by things *arranged statuewise*.¹ And further inspection of those things would not lead one to deny one has really seen a statue (cf. §II).

¹ The locution 'arranged statuewise' is inspired by van Inwagen (1990: 109), though my explication of such expressions differs from his.

In much of what follows, I'll make claims about *atoms* arranged statuewise. I have in mind here the atoms of physics, not Democritus. For there is no need to build a commitment to (or, for that matter, against) simples into eliminativism (cf. Chapter 4, §VI). Then again, there is no need to build in a commitment to the atoms of physics either. So consider my claims about the atoms of physics to be useful but expendable. Such claims are really placeholders for claims about whatever microscopic entities are actually down there.

Obviously, that there are atoms arranged statuewise does not mean that there are atoms arranged so as to compose a statue. For if it did, eliminativism about statues would entail that there are no atoms arranged statuewise. To get a rough-and-ready understanding of what it does mean, imagine the eliminativist and the folk ontologist standing in front of an alleged statue, allegedly composed of atoms. Imagine further that the eliminativist wants to explain her position to the folk ontologist. She can do so by saying that those atoms—the ones in front of her—do not really compose a statue. But to do that, she must be able to refer to them. And she can refer to them with 'the atoms arranged statuewise'.

Let us go beyond this rough-and-ready understanding of 'arranged statuewise'. The first step is to consider the following thesis: atoms often compose statues; but whether atoms compose a statue does not supervene on *anything* about those atoms except, trivially, that they compose a statue. This thesis has the following result. There is a possible situation in which atoms compose a statue. There is a second possible situation in which atoms have all the same properties and stand in all the same relations (both to each other—save the superadded relation of *composing a statue*—and also to everything else in the world) as in the first situation but fail to compose a statue.

The above thesis is unattractive. So I think non-eliminativist philosophers should assume that, if atoms compose a statue, then they do so because of something *else* about

them, something on which statue-composition non-trivially supervenes. To be a bit more precise, the sort of supervenience I have in mind here is both *global* and *microphysical*.² My claim, then, is that philosophers who believe in statues should assume that worlds that are exactly alike at the microphysical level are exactly alike with respect to the existence (and qualities) of statues.

Of course, one could also add that worlds alike in other ways are alike with respect to statues. For example, one could add that worlds alike with respect to statue-shaped lumps are alike with respect to statues. Such additions are not of concern in this section. All that matters here is that, if statues existed, then whether certain atoms compose a statue would non-trivially supervene on their features and the relations they stand in to each other and to all the other microscopica in the world.

Now consider the following:

Atoms are *arranged statuewise* if and only if they both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if statues existed, those atoms' *composing a statue* would non-trivially supervene.³

From the perspective of the folk ontologist, there should be no complaints about this account of 'arranged statuewise'. It is unexceptionable.

² Or mostly microphysical. I'll argue in Chs. 4 and 6 that the existence of humans with conscious mental properties does not supervene on the microphysical. So if the global supervenience base for statue-composition includes conscious human (e.g. artistic) intentions, then that base includes the microphysical *and* whatever is required for the mental. I'll ignore this qualification in what follows.

³ This account of 'atoms arranged statuewise' indicates how to understand similar expressions used throughout the book. For example, to define 'atoms arranged *baseballwise*', start with this account and make these substitutions: 'baseballwise' for 'statuewise', 'if baseballs existed' for 'if statues existed', and 'composing a baseball' for 'composing a statue'. To define '*things* arranged statuewise', substitute 'things' for 'atoms' in this account. And so on.

From the perspective of the eliminativist, however, the account is not quite perfect. Its imperfection is *not* that it implies that statue-composition follows from statuewise arrangement. The account does not imply this. (It implies only that if statues existed, then atoms arranged statuewise would compose a statue.) Rather, its blemish is that, from the perspective of the eliminativist, this account includes a counterpossible conditional whose antecedent is ‘if statues existed’.

Only the most dogmatic metaphysician refuses to entertain seriously what she takes to be counterpossibles (cf. Chapter 2, §V). For so to refuse is to refuse even to consider the strengths (or weaknesses) of theories one believes to be necessarily false. Enemies of temporal parts, for example, should recognize that—*per impossibile!*—were four-dimensionalism true, there would be otherwise unavailable solutions to the Ship of Theseus. And enemies of temporal parts, in recognizing this, should do more than attribute vacuous truth to a counterpossible. In a similar spirit, the eliminativist should affirm the conditional embedded in the above account. And the eliminativist can then accept that account of ‘arranged statuewise’.⁴ (See Sider’s 1999*a*: 339–40 defence of using counterpossibles in a similar way.)

Nevertheless, I concede that my opponents have in hand an account of ‘arranged statuewise’ that is, by their lights, better than the one I have. Such are the burdens of hospitality: giving the best to one’s guests, reserving the least for oneself. Moreover, in the current dialectical context, what is most important is that eliminativism’s opponents have a crystal-clear account of ‘arranged statuewise’. For presumably eliminativism’s defenders will not be tempted to quibble pedantically over this issue, freely admitting (what is surely

⁴ The folk ontologist who *denies* that whether atoms compose a statue non-trivially supervenes should accept the account in a similar way, interpreting it to include a counterpossible with the antecedent ‘if statues exist and statue-composition is non-trivially supervenient’.

true) that they get the idea behind ‘arranged statuewise’ well enough.

Some might want to exchange my account of ‘arranged statuewise’ for a ‘fictionalist’ account. The fictionalist account says that atoms are arranged statuewise just in case, according to the ‘folk-ontological fiction’, they have properties and stand in microscopic relations upon which their composing a statue supervenes. This no more requires counterpossibles, so the suggestion goes, than does the claim that, according to Leibniz’s monadology, the table is really a colony of souls (see Rosen 1990: 331).

I can see why some who are uneasy with counterpossibles might find the fictionalist account attractive. But note that uneasiness with counterpossibles, and so the motivation for ‘going fictionalist’, will afflict only those who reject folk ontology. From the perspective of the folk ontologist, my account of ‘arranged statuewise’ does *not* invoke a counterpossible. And, as noted above, it is the folk ontologist I most want that account to please.

And I suspect that the folk-ontological fiction—or, to make this alternative account of ‘arranged statuewise’ an option for folk ontologists, the folk-ontological *story*—says little or nothing about the features of the microscopic entities upon which, if statues existed, their composing a statue would non-trivially supervene. In support of this, note that the relevant microscopica might turn out not to be atoms or indeed anything for which we currently have a name. On the other hand, the question of what is ‘true according to a fiction (or story)’ is a difficult one (see e.g. Lewis 1978). And so perhaps an account of ‘arranged statuewise’ in terms of the folk fiction (or story) can do the job. If so, I commend it as an option worth taking seriously.

Indeed, in filling out my own account of ‘arranged statuewise’, I am inclined to borrow a page from fictionalism. For I think that—given eliminativism—the folk concept of *statue*

(and so the folk fiction about statues) plays a crucial role in grounding the non-vacuous truth of the relevant counterpossible and so in fixing which atoms are arranged statuewise. That is, what the folk mean by 'statue' is part of what makes it the case that certain atomic features are those upon which, if there were statues, statue composition would supervene.⁵ More about this later.

One might accept my account of being arranged statuewise, yet claim that that account could be understood only by one who already knew what statues were supposed to be. This claim, even if true, is no objection to my ontology. For comparison, imagine the philosopher who says that 'smiles' are not entities on people's faces, who says that there is no object such that it is a smile. But this philosopher is quick to add that people smile. Smiling is something they do. Jay Rosenberg puts this sort of idea in the following way:

For a person to wear a warm, welcoming smile is not for him to stand in a quasi-sartorial relation to an independent entity, distinct from and somehow supervenient on his curved lips, but simply for him to smile, warmly and welcomingly. (1993: 701)

These claims seem quite sensible. But all that matters for our purposes is that the following, even if true, would be a bad reason to reject these sensible claims: to understand what it is to smile, one must first know what smiles are supposed to be. Likewise, no one should reject eliminativism on the grounds that, to understand what it is to be arranged statuewise, one must first know what statues are supposed to be.

In fact, the concept of *statue's* being epistemically prior to the concept of *being arranged statuewise* fits nicely with my

⁵ My account of 'arranged statuewise' does not, all by itself, entail that the folk concept of *statue* plays a role in fixing whether atoms are arranged statuewise. Folk ontologists could deny that the folk concept plays such a role, insisting instead that the conditional in my account is made true by the existence of statues and the appropriate facts about supervenience, all of which are independent of folk concepts.

overall account. After all, I say that the folk concept of *statue* plays a role in determining which atomic arrangements are statuewise. I would even go so far as to say that if *being arranged statuewise* were not derivative upon folk-ontological concepts in the ways noted here, something would be amiss. For the whole point of introducing statuewise arrangements is to show that eliminativism shares important common ground—the existence of atoms arranged statuewise—with folk ontology.

This common ground implies that those who think they see statues are, although mistaken, neither hallucinating nor the victims of a prankster. This common ground, as we shall see, implies that eliminativism is not a straightforwardly empirical thesis of the sort that could be settled simply by pointing out a statue. And I shall argue that these and other fruits of this common ground make eliminativism less radical than it might initially seem.

II. Eliminativism: Not as Bad as you might Think

Let us depart from both folk ontology and eliminativism for just a moment. Let us consider, instead, the claim that the atoms arranged my-neighbour's-dogwise and the-top-half-of-the-tree-in-my-backyardwise compose an object. There are legitimate ways to try to defend this claim. The most obvious involve philosophical arguments for unrestricted (universal) composition, the thesis that any two things compose something.⁶ But it won't do to defend this claim with nothing more than 'I can *just see* the object composed of the atoms arranged dog-and-treetopwise'. Part of why this won't do, presumably,

⁶ Defenders of unrestricted composition include Cartwright (1975), Leonard and Goodman (1940), Lewis (1986a, 212–13), and Sider (1997).

is that one's visual evidence would be the same *whether or not* those atoms composed something. Because this sort of defence won't do, I'll say debates over whether the dog-cum-treetop exists are not 'straightforwardly empirical'.

Whether atoms arranged my-neighbour's-dogwise and the-top-half-of-the-tree-in-my-backyardwise compose something is not a straightforwardly empirical question. By the same token, whether atoms arranged statuewise compose something (a statue) is not straightforwardly empirical. In part this is because, as with the dog&treetop, my visual evidence would be the same whether or not the atoms arranged statuewise composed something.

The analogy with the atoms arranged treetopwise and my-neighbour's-dogwise supports the claim that whether atoms arranged statuewise compose a statue is not straightforwardly empirical. Here is more support for that claim. The fundamental question is not so much whether some particular alleged statue exists. That question might—sceptical scenarios aside—seem to be a matter of just looking and seeing. The issue is rather whether, in general, atoms arranged statuewise compose a statue. And whether or not they do so will be a matter of necessity. But it seems that this question of metaphysical necessity cannot be decided, one way or the other, simply by a trip to the museum or a ride down Monument Avenue. It must be decided on philosophical grounds.

Atoms arranged statuewise cause the visual and other sensations the folk ontologist thinks are caused by statues. Indeed, atoms arranged statuewise can do just about anything normally attributed to statues. They can, for example, be purchased at auction and serve as landmarks. As a result, eliminativism need force no revision of our everyday practices like buying 'statues' or relying on 'statues' in giving directions. (In fact, I shall argue in Chapter Seven (§III) that eliminativism better accommodates some of our practices than does folk ontology.)

Moreover, eliminativism can even allow everyday statue-talk to remain largely unchanged. To begin to see this, consider whether ‘the Crew of the USS *Enterprise*’ is a plural referring expression—akin to ‘Locke, Berkeley, and Hume’—or, instead, the name of a single large object with each crew member as a proper part. Note, in fact, that there are two questions here. First, there is the semantic question of what ‘the Crew of the USS *Enterprise*’ is supposed to mean. Second, there is the metaphysical question of whether there really is a big physical object that has all and only the crew members as its parts (at one level of decomposition⁷), a scattered object that weighs as much as the sum of the weights of those people taken individually.

I am not sure how to answer the first question. But, I say, the answer to the second question is ‘no’. Some philosophers would disagree. No matter. The point here—in this section of this chapter—is not to settle either the metaphysical or the semantic dispute surrounding ‘the Crew of the USS *Enterprise*’. It is, rather, that such disputes are neither here nor there with respect to everyday uses of ‘the Crew of the USS *Enterprise*’. ‘The Crew of the USS *Enterprise*’ will continue to perform its ordinary duties regardless of how or whether the semantic and metaphysical disputes get settled.

Similarly, everyday sorts of claims like ‘there is a statue aboard ship’ can be useful and appropriate whether or not there are, in addition to atoms arranged statuewise, statues. Thus for practical purposes, the bulk of everyday uses of ‘statue’—as well as, for example, ‘Michelangelo’s *David*’ and ‘*the Statue of Liberty*’—can remain unchanged, even if the claims such uses express are false because eliminativism is true.

⁷ Intuitively, an object’s ‘parts at one level of decomposition’ are parts of that object that do not overlap and that, collectively, fill the whole region the object fills. For example, an object’s parts at one level of decomposition might be its atoms and, at another, its elementary particles.

The fact that the eliminativist insists that there are atoms arranged statuewise suggests another way—besides highlighting eliminativism’s non-straightforwardly-empirical and non-practical nature—that eliminativism is not as radical as it might first seem. Some (presumably non-eliminativist) philosophers say that there is nothing more to the material world than microscopic entities arranged in certain ways. They even think of this position as part of our ordinary, or at least of our ‘scientific’, outlook on the world. Thus Richard Swinburne simply asserts, as if it were obvious, that:

there is nothing more to large-scale material objects except the fundamental particles and the relations they have to each other. (1995, 395)

And John Searle tells us:

the basic intuition that underlies the concept of reductionism seems to be the idea that certain things might be shown to be nothing but certain other sorts of things. The most important form of reduction is ontological reduction. It is the form in which objects of certain types can be shown to consist in nothing but objects of other types . . . This form is clearly important in the history of science. For example, material objects in general can be shown to be nothing but collections of molecules . . . (1992: 112–113)

And consider reductionism as characterized (but not endorsed) by Hilary Kornblith:

the inventory of microphysics is in some important sense complete: once we are done specifying all of the microphysical things there are, we have specified all of the things there are. (1993: 53)

It is hard to know how exactly to interpret ‘nothing more to’ or ‘nothing but’. But eliminativism provides one ready interpretation. Saying there is *nothing more to* a statue than—or saying that a statue is *nothing but*—atoms interrelated in certain ways can readily be interpreted as meaning that, when it comes to alleged statues, there are really only atoms in statuesque

arrangement and nothing else at all. On this interpretation, an interpretation buttressed by Kornblith's comments, 'scientific reductionism' implies eliminativism. (But scientific reductionists, thus interpreted, go further than I do, eliminating all 'large-scale' material objects, including human organisms.)

The familiar sentiments noted by Kornblith, and endorsed by Swinburne and Searle and of course many others, do not amount unequivocally to eliminativism. And I am sure Swinburne and Searle would disavow eliminativist interpretations of their positions. (In § IV I shall quote Searle's distinctly non-eliminativist gloss on reductionism.) Nevertheless, it is worth noting that familiar reductionist sentiments resonate with eliminativism, making eliminativism somewhat more plausible and somewhat less foreign than it might otherwise be.

III. The Linguistic Charge of Contradiction

If eliminativism is to get a hearing, it is important to establish that it is not empirically falsified simply by presenting, à la G. E. Moore, one (alleged!) statue and then another. In establishing this, I relied on the fact that, although there are no statues, there are atoms arranged statuewise. I also emphasized that such atoms do most or even all of the everyday work allegedly done by statues. Moreover, I said that eliminativism coheres with familiar reductionist claims, claims like a statue is 'nothing but' atoms arranged statuewise, there is 'nothing more to' a statue than its constituent atoms, and the inventory of microphysics is 'complete'.

All of these considerations are intended to support eliminativism. But they might make atoms arranged statuewise sound suspiciously like statues. And this is bad news for the eliminativist. For if atoms arranged statuewise are statues, then there

is—to say the least—a tension between the claim that there are no statues and the claim that there are atoms arranged statue-wise. There are, in fact, two distinct ways to argue that these claims actually *contradict* each other. I shall develop, and respond to, one such argument in this section and another in the next.

‘There are married bachelors’ is not explicitly formally contradictory, but it is contradictory in some quite straightforward sense. And one might object that ‘there are atoms arranged statuewise but no statues’ is contradictory in the same way. For as ‘bachelor’ means someone who is, among other things, unmarried, so—the objector insists—‘there are [composite] statues’ *just means* that there are some things arranged statuewise. Because of its contradictory nature, we should not take seriously an ontology according to which there are married bachelors. Likewise, this objection concludes, we should not take seriously the eliminativist’s ontology with its atoms arranged statuewise but no statues (see Hirsch 1993). This—the ‘linguistic’ charge of contradiction—is the first of the two arguments for the claim that eliminativism is contradictory.

The linguistic charge has a faulty foundation. ‘There are statues’ does *not* mean only that there are some things arranged statuewise, in the sense of ‘arranged statuewise’ at issue in this book. Again, ‘there are statues’ does not mean that there are things that both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, if there were statues, their composing a statue would non-trivially supervene. This is simply not a plausible claim about ordinary meaning.

Some might cry ‘Paradox of Analysis!’ They might say that the above claim about ordinary meaning—although it does not reflect what most people would initially *say* is meant by ‘there are statues’—nonetheless provides an analysis of what is meant by ‘there are statues’. And, they might conclude, this makes eliminativism contradictory. In reply, I recognize that genuine

analyses can be surprising. But they cannot be circular. Thus ‘there are statues’ cannot be analyzed in terms of how things would be if, among other things, there were statues. But this is just the sort of ‘analysis’ our objectors are here proposing.

One could reply that the proposed analysis equivocates on ‘there are statues’: in the analysans it means there are *really* statues, whereas in the analysandum it means merely that there are only things arranged statuewise. This cures the analysis of circularity. But, obviously, the linguistic charger cannot take this medicine; it requires the very distinction she finds contradictory, a distinction between there really being statues and there being only things arranged statuewise. (On the other hand, the *eliminativist* who (rejects the linguistic charge and) endorses the above analysis of the ordinary meaning of ‘there are statues’ could take it to be non-circular in the way just suggested.)

At any rate, I say the linguistic charge rests on false claims about the ordinary meaning of ‘there are statues’. Now perhaps there is a more subtle objection in the area, an objection not predicated on false or unacceptably circular claims about what is ordinarily meant by ‘there are statues’. But note that the ‘more subtle’ objection cannot merely be, for example, that there being atoms arranged statuewise is *sufficient* for the truth of—or provides one set of truth conditions for—what is ordinarily meant by ‘there are statues’. This is merely to deny eliminativism, which is not at all the same thing as showing it to be contradictory.

It is difficult to see how the linguistic charge can avoid false claims about meaning and synonymy while also preserving its lofty status as a charge of contradiction. For it seems that once it abandons the false claims about meaning, it must be downgraded to the bald assertion that, because statues exist, atoms arranged statuewise always compose a statue. Nevertheless, there may be some accounts of meaning that allow the linguistic charge to avoid these pitfalls. So I want to respond to

the linguistic charge supposing, for the sake of argument, that 'there are statues' ordinarily means only that there are atoms arranged statuewise.

Given this supposition, the eliminativist should insist that sometimes—such as when it is denied by eliminativists—the sentence 'there are statues' means something else. Sometimes, according to the eliminativist, 'there are statues' means that atoms arranged statuewise stand in the relation of *composing something* one to another. Sometimes 'there are statues' means that there is, in addition to various atoms in statuesque arrangement, some much bigger object—with a mass, centre of gravity, and so on—that has each of those atoms as a part. And when this is the meaning of 'there are statues', says the eliminativist, 'there are statues' is false (cf. van Inwagen 1993).

To better understand this response, compare it with the following claims. 'There is a crew aboard ship' is true of any fully manned ship (pretend there are ships), if it means only that there are many people aboard, performing certain assigned tasks. But 'there is a crew aboard ship' is false if it means that those people stand in the relation of *composing something* one to another. It is false, that is, if it means that on the ship there is a big scattered object composed of those people, an object with a mass many times that of any person and a constantly shifting and hard-to-locate centre of gravity.

This explanation of eliminativism in terms of *composing something* should be helpful to some, especially when compared to parallel claims about crews. But it will do little to placate many originally inclined to endorse the linguistic charge. For many moved by the linguistic charge in the first place will think that 'there are atoms that compose something' means only that there are atoms arranged in one or another of a variety of ways, including statuewise. And so they are likely to charge that one contradiction has been exchanged for another.

So let us try again. Suppose there are n atoms arranged statuewise in a room. 'There is a statue in the room' in its

allegedly ordinary sense implies only that there are n things in the room—the atoms themselves—as big as, or bigger than, an atom. ‘There is a statue in the room’, in the sense in which it is denied by the eliminativist, implies that there are at least $n + 1$ things in that room as big as, or bigger than, an atom.

For comparison, note that one reading of ‘there is a forty-member crew aboard ship’ implies only that there are forty physical objects on the ship that have a heart among their proper parts. A second reading implies that there are at least forty-one physical objects on the ship that have a heart (i.e. have at least one heart) among their proper parts: the members and the crew. The first reading parallels the allegedly ordinary meaning of ‘there are statues’. The second parallels the ‘other’ meaning of that sentence, the one the eliminativist says is false.

These comments should be enough to explain how the eliminativist’s denial of ‘there are statues’ does not contradict the claim that there are atoms arranged statuewise. One could, however, object that these comments are themselves contradictory. One might claim that ‘there are $n + 1$ things in the room as big as, or bigger than, an atom’ means that there are n at-least-atom-sized things in the room arranged in one or another of various ways, including statuewise. On the one hand, I think this shows we have successfully responded to the linguistic charge. For this is not a plausible claim about ordinary meaning. On the other hand, it shows how difficult it is to respond to that charge. For it shows that there will always be a (dubious) claim about meaning the linguistic charger can make that, if true, would render any direct explanation of eliminativism contradictory.

Let us try an indirect explanation, by way of an analogy. Suppose that I exist and person P exists. And suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is nothing composed of all and only the atoms arranged my-left-earwise and P’s-nosewise. In asking us to make this second supposition, I am asking us to suppose that unrestricted composition is false. Making this

supposition does not require that unrestricted composition actually *be* false, or even possibly false. All it requires, given the aims of the analogy I'm developing, is that the denial of unrestricted composition is not contradictory *in the sense at issue in the linguistic charge*. This requirement can be met. For we should all agree that our ordinary ways of speaking do not render the denial of unrestricted composition contradictory. (Note: Defenders of unrestricted composition *defend* it. They do not think that 'any two objects compose an object' is akin to 'there are no married bachelors', which needs no defence.⁸)

Again, suppose that there is nothing composed of all and only the atoms arranged my-left-earwise and P's-nosewise. Now imagine a world just like ours with respect to which things exist. So P and I exist there. And given what we are supposing about our world, there is nothing in that world composed of the atoms of my left ear and P's nose. In the world we are imagining, moreover, everyone speaks English. But in the dictionaries of that world there is an entry for 'slithy tove' which reads: 'an object composed of the atoms of Merricks's left ear and the atoms of P's nose'. Let us add that this definition of 'slithy tove' is widely known in that world and the expression itself widely used.

I assume that a philosopher in this imagined world could grant, for the sake of argument, that 'there is a slithy tove' ordinarily means only that there are atoms arranged my-earwise and P's-nosewise. He could therefore grant that 'there is a slithy tove' is ordinarily true. Yet it also seems—this is a crucial assumption—that this philosopher should be able to state *the truth*. He should be able say that *there is nothing in existence* that is the referent of 'slithy tove'. He should be able to say truly that the atoms of my left ear and of P's nose do not, in concert, compose any object at all. (None of this is to deny that our

⁸ Those who think a whole is identical with its parts might say that unrestricted composition is 'ontologically innocent' (Lewis 1991: 81) and so not in need of defence. Below (§IV) I argue that a whole is not identical with its parts.

philosopher might have a difficult time explaining the truth. It might take him a whole chapter to get the idea across.)

I say that, as it is with our imagined philosopher and ‘there is a slithy tove’, so it is with eliminativists and ‘there is a statue’. One might deny the situations are analogous. That is to deny eliminativism. But all that matters here is that to say that the situations are analogous—and so to affirm eliminativism—is not like saying ‘there are married bachelors’. Thus eliminativism has been explained in a way not open to the linguistic charge of contradiction.

There is a second point. The linguistic charge could be levelled, *mutatis mutandis*, by our philosopher’s worldmates against him when he says ‘there is no slithy tove, although there are atoms arranged Merricks’s-left-earwise-and-P’s-nosewise’. But in the imagined world the linguistic charge is mistaken. For rightly understood, what the imagined philosopher is saying is true. I think this shows that the linguistic charge in our own world, applied to eliminativism about statues, is mistaken as well.

Let me focus on what I think is the fundamental point at issue. I assume that there is an objective fact of the matter about what exists. And I think we use the apparatus of existential quantification—expressions like ‘there is’, ‘there are’, and ‘exists’—to say what (we believe) objectively exists. But there is nothing magical about ‘there is’, ‘there are’, or ‘exists’. We control them; they do not control us. So we can use these bits of language however we choose. Thus we could use them ‘deviantly’, to do something other than describe what (we believe) exists. For example, we could use ‘there is an F’ to mean we wish there were an F.

With this in mind, let’s return to the linguistic charge. If the linguistic charge’s assumption about the ordinary meaning of ‘there is a statue’ is correct, ‘there is a statue’ does *not* ordinarily mean that there is some x , such that x is a statue. It means, instead, that there are some things, none of which is a statue,

in certain arrangements. Thus if the linguistic charge's claim about ordinary meaning is correct, then 'there is' is used deviantly in ordinary occurrences of 'there is a statue'. Eliminativism has nothing to say about such deviancy. Eliminativism claims only that 'there is a statue' is false when 'there is' is being used as a legitimate and straightforward existential quantifier.

I think that reflecting upon deviant versus straightforward uses of 'there are', 'there is', and 'exists' supports my original response to the linguistic charge. That response was that 'there are statues' does *not* ordinarily mean that there are atoms arranged statuewise. For I think—although I don't really care—that most ordinary speakers do not use 'there are' deviantly when they say 'there are statues'. Contrary to the allegations of the linguistic charge, it seems clear that the most literal and straightforward meaning of 'there are statues' is also the ordinary meaning. So in what follows I shall assume that—if eliminativism is true—when the folk say 'there are statues', they say something false. (I shall return to this issue in Chapter 7, §I.)⁹

I have responded to the linguistic charge. I have explained why believing in atoms arranged statuewise while disbelieving in statues is not akin to believing in married bachelors. But I don't harbour any illusions. I know there are some who are still swayed, as a result of their philosophy of language, by the linguistic charge. They will find themselves unable even to understand the ontology I defend. Those same philosophers do not understand, or at least should not understand, ontologists who deny the existence of numbers, properties, or holes. This illustrates that the eliminativist is, with respect to

⁹ Some might object that there is no single straightforward and literal meaning of 'exist'. I say more about this in Ch. Seven (§I). Here I note only that this objection does not, all by itself, imply that one of the allegedly many ordinary, literal, and straightforward meanings of 'statues exist' is that there are things, none of which is a statue, arranged in certain ways.

the linguistic charge, no worse off than any (other) nominalist. I don't know what more to say in defence of the discipline of ontology, other than to note that the two chapters that follow may help. For those chapters will highlight some of the substantive issues at stake in the debate over whether, in addition to atoms arranged statuewise, there really are any statues.

IV. The Metaphysical Charge of Contradiction

Recall that, in a passage quoted above (§II), Searle says that a material object is *nothing but* certain other sorts of things. Searle then—and here we go beyond previously quoted material—calls the 'nothing but' relation 'a peculiar form of the *identity* relation' (1992: 113; emphasis added). Similarly, David Armstrong says 'mereological wholes are *identical* with all their parts taken together' (1997: 12). Donald Baxter states 'the whole is many parts counted as one thing . . . there is no one thing distinct from each of the parts which is the whole' (1988: 578). David Lewis agrees that the parts of a thing are *identical* with the whole they compose.¹⁰ Lewis glosses this view—he calls it 'composition as identity'—as the claim that a physical object is 'nothing over and above its parts' (1991: 80). This gloss brings to mind the familiar reductionist sentiments noted earlier in the chapter.

Suppose, if you can, that composition as identity is true.¹¹ Suppose also that statues exist composed of atoms. Then each

¹⁰ But Lewis disagrees with the details of Baxter's position and makes distinctions Baxter does not. For Lewis says that there is a difference between the sort of identity that holds between a whole and its parts—he calls this the 'broadened' sense of identity—and the more familiar version of identity—what he calls the 'ordinary one-one' sense of identity. Lewis thinks these two senses of identity are analogous in significant ways (1991: 84–7).

¹¹ *Composition* as identity is not the view that *constitution* is identity. The former claims that a single object (e.g. a statue) is identical with the many parts (e.g. atoms) it comprises. The latter claims that a single object (e.g. a statue) is identical with a single object (e.g. a statue-shaped lump of clay) that 'constitutes' it.

statue is *identical with* some atoms (or others) arranged statue-wise. And so one could charge that my ontology, with its atoms arranged statuewise but no statues, is in some way contradictory. In what way? In just the same way that an ontology that includes a certain object, but not something identical with that object, is contradictory. This—the ‘metaphysical’ charge of contradiction—is the second argument for the claim that eliminativism is contradictory.

Do not worry about this charge. Just reject composition as identity. One good reason to reject composition as identity is that it implies, obviously enough, that one thing (e.g. a whole) can be identical with many things (e.g. the whole’s parts). But I think one of the most obvious facts about *identity* is that while it holds both one-one (John is identical with Mr Smith) and perhaps even many-many (John and Mary are identical with Mr Smith and Ms Jones), it never holds one-many.¹² (I follow Lewis 1991 in using ‘one-one’ to describe an ordinary binary relation, ‘one-many’ to describe a multigrade relation holding between one thing and many things, and ‘many-many’ to describe a multigrade relation holding between many things and many things.)

Identity cannot hold one-many. So composition as identity is false. Moreover, consider the following argument. Suppose that composition as identity is true. Suppose, then, that I really am identical with my constituent atoms $A_1 \dots A_n$. And $A_1 \dots A_n$ are identical with me. Identity is not temporary.¹³ And so it follows that I am always identical with $A_1 \dots A_n$ and they are always identical with me. Thus if composition as identity is true, the atoms that compose me have always composed me

¹² Let us grant, for the sake of argument and as a concession to my opponent, that identity can hold many-many. For if identity cannot hold many-many, then it cannot hold one-many—to see this, think about the transitivity of identity.

¹³ Perhaps one could make sense of ‘temporary identity’ by way of temporal parts. (Some say that objects that share a temporal part are thereby temporarily identical.) Below I concede that temporal parts undermine the above argument.

and will always compose me. (I assume that if composition as identity is true, any atoms that are identical with me are thereby atoms that compose me.)

Composition as identity implies that I have not undergone, and will not undergo, change of atomic parts. More generally, it implies that no persisting object ever changes parts. This implication is false. So composition as identity is false.

Some will object that objects do not ‘change parts’ in the sense presupposed by my argument. But they will hasten to add—lest their position be incredible—that objects do change parts in another sense. To understand their objection, we must understand the thesis that objects perdure, that they are four-dimensional, that they have temporal parts. If I perdure, I am not ‘wholly present’ at any one moment in time. Rather, I am spread out over time much as a spatially extended object is spread out over space. And the perdurantist who believes in composition as identity will say that I am identical with all my parts, including my *temporal* parts. And, she will add, the four-dimensional Merricks never changes with respect to the parts he has. Thus, she will conclude, the above argument against composition as identity is unsound. (For more on perdurance and its rival, endurance, see Merricks 1994, 1995*a*, 1999*a*, *c*, and Chapter 2, §III.)

As just noted, the perdurantist denies that I change parts in the way required by my argument against composition as identity. Yet she will say that a temporal part of mine existing at one time has parts that a temporal part of mine existing at another lacks. Thus, she concludes, there is a straightforward sense in which I have different parts at different times. And this, she maintains, implies that there is a straightforward sense in which I experience change of parts, keeping her position on change from being incredible.

(The perdurantist blocks my argument against composition as identity by defending—and rendering credible—the claim that, in some important sense, objects do not change parts.

The charge that perdurance does not allow for real change is both shopworn and controversial. But the above shows that the perdurantist—at least if she believes in composition as identity—should positively insist that there is a sense in which objects do not change parts. Thus she should concede that there is some truth to the old charge. I think this tells against perdurance.)

At any rate, if objects do not perdure (but instead endure), then some objects do change parts in the sense presupposed by my argument against composition as identity. So if objects endure, then we must—in light of that argument—conclude that composition as identity is false.

There is a second argument against composition as identity, an argument that does not presuppose that objects endure. This second argument is a ‘modal’ version of the first. It starts by noting that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. There is no possible world in which Locke, Berkeley, and Hume exist and even one of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume does not exist. And Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in every possible world.¹⁴ Similarly, there is no possible world in which $O_1 \dots O_n$ exist and even one of $O_1 \dots O_n$ does not exist. And $O_1 \dots O_n$ are identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$ in every possible world.

Now suppose that O , the object composed of $O_1 \dots O_n$, is identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$. This, the fact that $O_1 \dots O_n$ are identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$ in every possible world, and the indiscernibility of identicals imply that O is identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$ in every possible world.¹⁵ Therefore, if composition as identity is

¹⁴ That is, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in every possible world *in which they exist*. In what follows, claims about an object’s identity ‘in all possible worlds’ are to be understood as implicitly restricted to worlds in which the object exists.

¹⁵ Lewis hedges on whether ‘broadened’ identity implies indiscernibility: ‘even though the many and the one are the same portion of Reality, and the character of that portion is given once and for all whether we take it as many or take

true, there is no world in which *O* exists but is not composed of $O_1 \dots O_n$. So composition as identity implies that *O*—and, of course, every other composite object—must, in every world in which it exists, be composed of the parts that actually compose it. In other words, composition as identity entails mereological essentialism. But—here I make a fairly uncontroversial assumption—mereological essentialism is false. Therefore composition as identity is false. QED.

I feel entitled to the commonsense denial of mereological essentialism. And in presenting my ‘temporal’ argument, I helped myself to the bit of common sense that says objects change parts over time. But I reject the bit that says there are statues. Problem? No. I start off with all the common sense I can get, unloading it only when prompted to do so by the overall burden of argument. (More on this topic in the introduction to Chapter 4.) By the end of the book it should be clear why I abandon the bit of common sense that says there are statues. In my opinion, there are not equally compelling reasons to jettison the bit that rejects mereological essentialism (or the bit that says objects can change parts over time). I may disagree with most readers about which composite objects exist. But we can still agree that there is some composite object or other—such as, I say, a human organism—that does not have all its parts essentially.

Given the necessity of identity, the modal argument against composition as identity goes through. And I accept the necessity of identity. So I conclude that we have a sound argument for the falsity of composition as identity. Yet there are fans of contingent identity. For the sake of argument, I want to explore their options. For, surprisingly, contingent identity alone is not enough to undermine the argument. I’ll explain

it as one, still we do not really have a generalized principle of indiscernibility of identicals. It does matter how you slice it—not to the character of what’s described, of course, but to the form of the description’ (1991: 87). My arguments require only the indiscernibility of the ‘character’ of the one and the many.

why by making use of a version of counterpart theory according to which the counterpart relation is *not* sortal-relative. No one defends this kind of counterpart theory. (At least not any more; it was defended in Lewis 1968.) But considering it is the best way to show that contingent identity alone cannot undermine the above argument.

The counterpart theorist says that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume can share a single counterpart in another world—a world in which there is, say, just one British Empiricist. Thus the counterpart theorist can insist that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume all exist in a world in which, so to speak, there is only one of them. In that world, by the counterpart theorist's lights, Locke is identical with Berkeley is identical with Hume. Yet that identity is contingent. In the actual world they are distinct.

Similarly, the counterpart theorist says that $O_1 \dots O_n$ can exist in a world in which there are fewer than n of them. For in some world several of $O_1 \dots O_n$ have the same counterpart and are therefore contingently identical. In this way, the defender of counterpart theory and composition as identity can maintain that O , the object composed of (and identical with) $O_1 \dots O_n$, can exist in a world in which it has fewer parts than it actually has.

Now according to the counterpart theorist-cum-devotee of composition as identity, the world in which O has fewer than n parts, fewer than it actually has, is *ex hypothesi* one in which it nevertheless has $O_1 \dots O_n$ as parts. (In that world, however, some of $O_1 \dots O_n$ are contingently identical with each other.) It is by saying this—by insisting that O 's counterpart (or counterparts) in every world has (or have) counterparts of $O_1 \dots O_n$ as parts—that she maintains that her view is consistent with composition as identity. But it is by saying this that she also commits herself to mereological essentialism. This shows that *mere* contingent identity is not enough to undermine the simple argument above for composition as identity's entailing mereological essentialism.

Contingent identity alone does not undermine that simple argument. But a species of counterpart theory—the species some philosophers actually defend—does. That species insists that objects do not have counterparts *simpliciter*, but rather only *qua* their being certain kinds of things.¹⁶ Thus Locke *qua* influential Enlightenment figure might have a counterpart C in W, a figure that exemplifies a Lockean influence on the (counterpart of) the Enlightenment in W. But Locke *qua* descendant of ancestors $A_1 \dots A_n$ might have a counterpart in W distinct from C, one whose ancestors are (counterparts of) $A_1 \dots A_n$. So, although Locke *qua* Enlightenment figure is actually identical with Locke *qua* descendant, possibly—for example, in W—this identity does not hold.

Similarly, this species of counterpart theory says that O (that is, $O_1 \dots O_n$) *qua* the many objects $O_1 \dots O_n$ exists in other worlds only if counterparts of $O_1 \dots O_n$ exist in those worlds. But O *qua*—for example—the single object named ‘the Eiffel Tower’, standing in Paris, and having shape S and mass M, exists in other worlds if those worlds contain the right sort of tower in (the counterpart of) Paris—even if they fail to contain counterparts of $O_1 \dots O_n$. Thus, the counterpart theorist could grant that O is identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$, yet note that O, *qua* something-other-than- $O_1 \dots O_n$, is possibly not identical with $O_1 \dots O_n$. As a result, O (*qua* something-other-than- $O_1 \dots O_n$) could fail to have $O_1 \dots O_n$ as parts.

So the species of counterpart theory according to which objects do not have counterparts *simpliciter* undermines my second argument against composition as identity. It does so by way of a *relativized* version of contingent identity (but not any-

¹⁶ David Lewis (1971; 1986a: 248 ff.) and Allan Gibbard (1975) defend views along these lines. The rejection of counterparts *simpliciter* is more understandable given that, according to Lewis (but not Gibbard; see Gibbard 1975, n. 3), the counterpart relation is a similarity relation. It could be, for example, that A and B are more similar *qua* profession to each other than either is to C; B and C more similar *qua* gender to each other than either is to A; and questions of who is more similar *simpliciter* to whom ill formed.

thing like the ‘relative identity’ of Geach 1980). Indeed, the only way to undermine that argument is to endorse ‘relativized’ contingent identity. And I believe that sortal-relative counterpart theory provides the only way to make good sense of this sort of identity. So, I conclude, only those who endorse (sortal-relative) counterpart theory can sensibly resist the argument linking mereological essentialism to composition as identity.

But we should not endorse sortal-relative counterpart theory. This is because it implies that identity is, in the ways noted above, contingent and ‘relativized’. Although sortal-relative counterpart theory makes the claim that identity has these features coherent, that claim still seems false. Moreover, many deny that counterpart theory can even satisfy the demand placed upon it by its very *raison d’être*, that of providing a compelling account of *de re* modality. Here is an example of the most familiar sort of objection along these lines: the existence of someone in another world who is a lot like me, but happier, is irrelevant to whether *I*—this very person—could have been happier; and it is irrelevant even if we call that other-worldly someone ‘my counterpart’ (see Kripke 1980: 45–9; Plantinga 1974: 108–20).

If, for whatever reason, we reject sortal-relative counterpart theory (as I do), we must accept that composition as identity implies mereological essentialism. And if we also reject mereological essentialism (as I do), we must conclude that composition as identity is false.¹⁷ Similarly, if we believe (as I do) that objects endure and that at least some objects change parts over time, then we should reject composition as identity. Henceforth, I shall proceed on the assumption that composition as

¹⁷ In the next chapter I say that even if there were objects (like masses) that have all their parts essentially, they would not be identical with their parts. It would be a mistake to object that, since my argument against composition as identity relied on the denial of mereological essentialism, composition could be identity in cases involving the mereologically invariant. For the conclusion of my argument is about composition *as such*: composition is not identity.

identity is false. I proceed thus because of the temporal and modal arguments just given and also because the claim that identity holds one-many seems contrary to the logic of identity.

Composition as identity is false. So every composite object is distinct from—i.e. not identical with—its parts. So every such object is something ‘in addition to’ its parts. For if we set out to take an inventory of all the objects in the universe, and included on our list only the parts of a composite object but not the object itself, we would have an *incomplete* inventory. It would be incomplete because there would be an object such that nothing identical to it is inventoried.

I don’t know whether a composite object’s being distinct from and in addition to its parts is consistent with ‘reductionism’ about physical objects. This is in large part because—once reductionism is distinguished both from composition as identity and from eliminativism—I don’t know what it is supposed to be (see Merricks 1999c, §IV). But for our purposes, all that matters is that, no matter how ‘reductionism’ should be understood or what reductionism is consistent with, every object composed of atoms is not identical with, and so is something in addition to, those atoms.

Composition as identity is false. So even if there are statues, they are not identical with their constituent atoms (or, of course, with their proper parts at other levels of decomposition). Thus, even if atoms arranged statuewise do compose statues, ontologies that include atoms arranged statuewise but exclude statues are not contradictory. That is, they are not like ontologies that include an object but exclude something identical with it. The ‘metaphysical’ charge of contradiction cannot be made to stick.

V. Conclusion

Many disputed metaphysical theses are, if true at all, necessarily true. To establish that such a thesis is possibly true just is to establish that it is actually true. Thus establishing that a disputed metaphysical thesis is possibly true cannot be a prerequisite for presenting arguments for that thesis. Nevertheless, we should ask the metaphysician, before she presents her arguments, what thesis she purports to defend. After all, if we don't know what thesis she is defending, we cannot possibly judge whether her arguments adequately support it.

I have not tried to establish that eliminativism is possibly true. But I have tried to explain what eliminativism is. I have explained the eliminativist's thesis that there are atoms arranged statuewise but no statues. And I have countered two versions of the charge that the first half of that thesis contradicts the second. This should be enough to get us started. We should now understand eliminativism well enough to follow and evaluate arguments for its truth.

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