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The Problem of Identity and Mereological Nihilism

Peter Unger's problem of the many discussed in "The Problem of the Many" and Derek Parfit's fission puzzle put forth in "Reasons and Persons" place a great amount of stress on the concept of "personal identity". I put forward that both of these problems can be resolved from the removal of an assumption of unrestricted mereological composition, and from there a suggestion that there are no personal identity facts. I will begin by discussing the two problems put forward by Unger and Parfit, followed by a discussion of the resolution that can come from discounting unrestricted mereological composition and the resolution that can come from concluding that there are no personal identity facts.

Unger's problem of the many can be summarized in the following argument:

Imagine various groups of water molecules in the sky, denoted by c_i .

P1 For each c_i there is a thing (call it t_i) which has all and only members of c_i as parts.

P2 $t_i \neq t_j$ if $i \neq j$

P3 If there are clouds, one of the t_i is a cloud

P4 If one of the t_i 's is a cloud, they all are

C There are either no clouds, or many, many clouds

While this cloud argument may at first seem to have little to do with identity, it does directly relate. Unger suggests that the problem of the many can apply to the individual, stating "either one does not exist, and there are no people, or else in any case of any typical person ... there are, right then and there, millions of people present." Unger is bringing up the problem that

arises when you attempt to describe each of the fusions of various sets of particles within an individual's body a single person. This corollary that states the problem of the many applies to persons is important to keep in mind, as it is a consequence of Unger's argument. This consequence of the argument will also be the focus of discussion later on in the paper. The following portion of the paper will discuss Unger's argument that is outlined above.

I will take the argument premise by premise and break down what each of them entails. Premise 1 begins by suggesting that for each cloud there is a thing that is composed of all and only the members of the things that make up the cloud. This premise itself seems to depend upon a belief in unrestricted mereological composition, or the idea that "any class of things has something composed exactly of the members of that class" (Khoo, 3). This premise will be discussed in more detail later on. Premise 2 is logical, stating that one thing is unequal to another if that which makes up the two things are different. Premise 3 is stating that one collection of these water molecules make up a cloud, if clouds exist. In other words, if we believe unrestricted mereological composition then there is a cloud. This premise could be denied based upon the claim that clouds are essentially vague. Though replacing the cloud with another object, say a person, complicates this denial. Premise 4 states that if one of the t_i 's is a cloud, then they all are. This premise means to describe the main problem that Unger poses. If one of these t_i is a cloud, then all of the other potential compositions of water molecules are also individual clouds. In other words, Unger is saying that many, many clouds inhabit a very small area that we would normally refer to as "one cloud". The conclusion follows from this premise, stating that there are either no clouds at all, or there are a great many number of clouds. This ends the summary of Unger's argument.

In this section, I will describe the problem put forward by Parfit that deals with fission. Parfit brings up a great many important questions that have to do with personal identity, but the scenario that we will focus on is as follows:

Imagine a pair of twins, one of which that has been in a terrible accident and died. Doctors have found that the living twin's brain can be split in two with one half being implanted in the dead twin. After the transplant, both twins continue to live on, each continuing forward with the original twin's mind.

There are four possible outcomes for this scenario with regards to personal identity:

- 1) The original twin does not survive
- 2) The original twin survives only as one of the new twins
- 3) The original twin survives as both new twins
- 4) There are no personal identity facts, and there is no answer to this question.

Parfit is of the belief that there are no personal identity facts. His rationale for denying the first claim is that it is difficult for a double success to be considered a failure. If we succeed in saving the life of both twins, it would be bizarre to think that they both died in the process. The second possibility is ruled out due to the difficulty in deciding which twin survived, as there isn't any reason for believing that one lived over the other, since they both have the same body and the same continued state of mind from before the surgery. Parfit argues that the final option is most believable, and that there is no such thing as personal identity.

It seems as though these two scenarios are quite different and have a deeply troubling outcome. However, the two problems deal with a fundamental issue that comes from multiple objects sharing the same identity. In the case of Unger's problem of the many, the issue comes from many different potential compositions constituting an individual, and no apparent reason

for discounting each one of their existences. In the case of Parfit's fission problem we are dealing with the splitting of one supposed personal identity into two. Both of these problems clearly have different nuances to them, but I believe that there is a unique solution to the two of them. Parfit's proposition that there are no personal identity facts seems to solve the problem of fission, but I believe that it can be strengthened in conjunction with the conclusion that unrestricted mereological composition is false. In place of unrestricted mereological composition, adopting a viewpoint of mereological nihilism keeps both Unger's and Parfit's problems from being actualized. Mereological nihilism entails the denial of classical mereology, in other words, it denies the idea that the union of objects can itself make up a new object. I am proposing that this view is apt and acts as a solution to Unger's problem of the many while laying the groundwork for a denial of personal identity facts.

Here I will begin my discussion of how mereological nihilism can both solve Unger's problem of the many and why that would entail the denial of personal identity facts. I take issue with Premise 1, which states that a group of water molecules constitutes a thing. I propose that only the building blocks of the cloud exist. The composition of the cloud made up of these basic building blocks is simply an illusion of our senses. This suggestion may initially sound quite strange. However, this solution, that mereological nihilism is true and that there is nothing but the basic building blocks of matter, becomes more sensible when we focus on these small building blocks. If mereological nihilism is true, then only basic constructing particles exist, quarks. If there are two quarks together in a box we can ask the question, how many objects are in the box? The mereological nihilist would say two, which seems to make sense at first glance. Those in favor of unrestricted mereological composition would say that there are these two objects, and in addition there is a third object composed of the initial two. This argument appears

to be introducing a sort of axiom, that the union of multiple objects is itself an object. The rationale for this is clear; we treat objects like this all the time in daily life. A hand is made up of bone, skin, and fingernails. However, the treatment of objects like this in daily life is not necessarily a justifiable reason for believing unrestricted mereological composition, the adoption of which leads to a wide variety of metaphysical problems.

Unger's problem of the many can be solved by stating that there are no clouds in the sky, in other words, Unger's conclusion that there are no clouds is valid, though his initial questioning of what the water molecules in the sky compose is not. This solves his problem of the many, and the same problem that applies to multiple human beings being instantiated within what would normally be called one body.

One might be concerned that the conclusion that there are only building blocks in the universe is no better than that which involves a universe that has a seemingly infinite number of objects. I find that we also have epistemic reasons to believe that there are only building blocks themselves, and rather the things that we consider to be individual objects are illusions of our senses. In a universe where the unity of any object composes another, we don't find much usefulness for categorizing things, unless we can distinguish between "normal objects" and "irregular objects". It seems that it may be impossible to create a non-arbitrary classification of objects that is capable of explaining the difference in significance between things that we consider "normal objects", and the "irregular objects" composed of things like the union of the cup on my desk and the moon. A discussion of potential arguments that attempt to explain the discrepancy between "normal objects" and "irregular objects" are outlined in the following, alongside explanations describing their failures. This discussion is critical, as the ability for

unrestricted mereological composition to distinguish between these two types of objects would make it far more useful than mereological nihilism. However, I posit that this is not the case.

In thinking about potential concrete methods of discerning between “normal objects” and “irregular objects” one may consider the possible distinctions that the building blocks can have. I see only four base distinctions that these building blocks can have: their geometry, their composition, their proximity from other particles, and their interactions with outside forces. The geometry and composition of these particles can be lumped into one discussion, as I posit that the intricacies of these building block geometries and compositions are lost when discussing normal objects like tables and chairs. This notion may seem dismissive, but when considering objects the size of quarks, it also seems absurd to take into account their individual shapes and compositions when attempting to classify normal objects. The proximity of these building blocks to other particles seems to be the most appealing as it is most applicable to objects that are on the size we interact with daily. If two sets of particles are spaced a certain distance apart, I can distinguish between the objects that the sets comprise. However, this view runs into issues when we consider objects that are more spaced out, like the solar system. It would be impossible to use this distinction and still say that objects like the solar system exist while tables also exist as objects. This leaves us with the final distinction, that these particle interactions with outside forces can be used to distinguish “normal objects” from “irregular objects”. It seems unnatural to determine what constitutes an object based upon something that can be changed outside of the object. For example, would compressing or expanding a car change it into a different object? It seems as though this view would also raise issues. Overall, we see that the individual functions of these elementary particles cannot be used to distinguish between “normal objects” and “irregular objects”. It is possible that some composition of these properties of the particles could

achieve something that they singularly could not, but it seems as though the conjunction of these properties would only cause more problems.

There is a secondary consideration that I have avoided, that normal objects can be defined vaguely. In other words this is the idea that it is possible to simply say that there is no fact of the matter about what constitutes an object, rather we are free to assign the quality of “normal object” to whatever we want. I agree with Lewis in his paper “Counterparts or Double Lives?” where he states that composition cannot be vague, “Vagueness is semantic indecision” (Lewis, 212). If vagueness is merely semantic indecision, and a concrete distinction between “normal objects” and “irregular objects”, then we are led to believe there is not a way of clearly distinguishing between the two.

So, if the distinction between “normal objects” and “irregular objects” cannot be defined either concretely or vaguely, then we can conclude that there is no clear distinction between regular objects and irregular objects. Unrestricted mereological composition leads to Unger’s problem of the many, and a whole host of other personal identity problems. It simultaneously cannot be used to distinguish between “normal objects” and “irregular objects” making it no more useful for categorizing matter in our world than mereological nihilism. Mereological nihilism appears to avoid Unger’s problem of the many along with other metaphysical issues, making it a more reasonable model than unrestricted mereological composition. I will move from Unger’s problem of the many to a further discussion of personal identity problems to further bolster this argument.

To discuss these personal identity problems, I will use Parfit’s fission case as an example. We have many metaphysical concerns over things that may or may not exist, such as the concept of personal identity. We begin this fission case by looking at an individual that is later comprised

of two seemingly different people. The view of unrestricted mereological composition introduces a wide variety of issues, suggesting that personal identity is a key trait of these individuals. Mereological nihilism suggests that this is an illusion of senses that bind individuals together. These base particles, quarks, are the only objects that exist, and the body or psychology of an individual does not. It follows from this that there are no personal identity facts, because the idea of the “person” is an illusion as well.

One concern that comes with accepting mereological nihilism is that the view does not allow for individuals to easily speak about the world around them. If I deny the existence of tables and chairs it makes it quite difficult to describe them. A potential argument that nihilists have used for getting around this is stating that the way we speak is close enough to the truth, that there are elemental particles arranged in a table-like shape and when we say “table” we are talking about a sort of fiction. However, this way of speaking leads to the same concerns of Unger’s problem of the many. How do we distinguish between sets of these table-like sets of elemental particles? In order to avoid these concerns, hard-lined mereological nihilism is what I am favoring, one in which we do not accept that there are tables, chairs, or other composite objects, and we do not speak as if they exist. Granted, this view is difficult to swallow. There are of course epistemic reasons for speaking the way that we do, such as more easily describing the world around us. However, from a metaphysical point of view, I put forward that mereological nihilism is favorable to unrestricted mereological composition.

This view does seem to be rather hard to swallow and quite depressing. However, it also gives us reason to suggest that there are no personal identity facts, as Parfit does as well. This gives us a solution to Unger’s problem of the many, and problems of personal identity. However, the consequences of believing that an object is solely the unbreakable building blocks seem to be

very heavy. When we say that objects are only comprised of base blocks what does that mean for the human experience? It is uncomfortable to suggest that all we know of existence is an illusion, and it would be desirable to say that it is unnecessary. However, the reasoning for believing an alternative to mereological nihilism does not seem to be convincing. Thus, we are left with the conclusion that mereological nihilism is capable of solving Unger's problem of the many and Parfit's fission case while seeming to be a strong metaphysical alternative to unrestricted mereological composition.

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