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Coinciding objects: in defence of the 'standard account'

E. J. LOWE

1. In a number of recent articles ([2], [3] and especially [4]), Michael B. Burke has argued against what he calls the 'standard account' of relations between objects falling under different sortals, according to which numerically distinct objects can exist in the same place at the same time – for instance, a certain statue and the piece of copper which composes it. According to the standard account, when a piece of copper is fashioned into a statue, a new object is created – the statue – which cannot be identified with the piece of copper composing it, because that piece of copper pre-existed the statue. Burke maintains that this verdict rests upon the false assumption that the piece of copper composing the statue can be identified with the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue (see [4], pp. 595–6). If we drop this assumption, we can say that the statue and the piece of copper composing it are numerically identical, having come into existence at the same time. Being identical, each is both a statue and a piece of copper.

Burke is fully aware that his claim that one and the same object can be both a statue and a piece of copper conflicts with another assumption of the standard account, namely, that the sortal terms 'statue' and 'piece of copper' have associated with them different sets of persistence conditions (or criteria of identity), and that every object to which a given sortal term applies must comply with the persistence conditions associated with that term. Burke does not challenge the first part of this assumption – that the sortal terms in question have associated with them different persistence conditions – but only the second: that an object must comply with the persistence conditions associated with every sortal term which applies to it (see [4], p. 600). He believes that two sortal terms, with which different persistence conditions are associated, may both apply to the same object, and that when this happens there is a principled way of deciding *which* set of persistence conditions the object should be thought to comply with (see [4], pp. 610 ff.). Thus, in the case of the piece of copper composing the statue, Burke holds that this object complies with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'statue', whereas he holds that the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue complies instead with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper' ([4], p. 605). As he puts it, the latter piece of copper is *merely* a piece of copper, whereas the former is also a statue ([4], p. 597).

Elsewhere ([5]), I have defended at length the view that objects falling under sortal concepts which convey different persistence conditions cannot be identified. It is on this basis that, for instance, I refuse to identify persons with their bodies. Clearly, then, Burke presents a challenge to the standard account which promises to have very far-reaching metaphysical implications. It is accordingly a matter of great importance to establish whether or not his alternative account is tenable. On the face of it, it may seem merely surprising rather than outright absurd to claim that the piece of copper pre-existing the statue ceased to exist upon the creation of the statue. It is surprising because one imagines that the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper' – with which, as Burke himself agrees, that piece of copper complies – are such that a mere change in shape should not suffice to terminate the existence of an object complying with those conditions. Burke himself acknowledges the force of our intuition that 'a piece of copper retains its identity while undergoing a continuous change in shape' ([4], p. 596) and, evidently, all that needs to be done to a piece of copper in order to make it into a statue is to change its shape in an appropriate way. Clearly, however, Burke takes the view that a change of shape in a piece of copper which suffices to bring into existence a *statue* does indeed suffice to terminate the existence of that piece of copper. He makes the point that statues are *essentially* statues, and consequently non-statues are essentially non-statues, so that the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue – being itself a non-statue – could not *become* a statue ([4], p. 596).

Of course, adherents of the standard account are in agreement with Burke that the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue could not *become* a statue – that is, could not continue to exist but simply start to fall under the sortal concept *statue* – because they hold that no piece of copper whatever can fall under that concept. Burke, in contrast, holds that *some* pieces of copper can indeed fall under this concept, but only ones which have not previously (or, indeed, subsequently) failed to fall under it. Burke is also in agreement with adherents of the standard account that after the creation of the statue *there is* a piece of copper in the place occupied by the statue – but he, unlike them, regards this piece of copper as being one which complies with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'statue' rather than with those associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper', and accordingly he denies that it is identical with the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue. Burke calls the piece of copper which pre-existed the statue 'Piece 1', the piece of copper which exists in the place of the statue 'Piece 2', and the statue 'Statue'. We shall abbreviate these names to ' P_1 ', ' P_2 ' and ' S ', respectively. By his account, then, P_2 is identical with S and not with P_1 , whereas on the standard

account P_2 is identical with P_1 and not with S . And here let me summarize in Burke's own words his grounds for denying that P_2 is identical with P_1 :

The reason that Piece 2 is not Piece 1 is that Piece 1 was merely a piece of copper, whereas Piece 2 is also a *statue*. Given the assumption that a mere piece of copper cannot *become* a statue ..., Piece 2 cannot be identified with Piece 1. ([4], p. 596)

2. Burke appears, thus, to have produced a coherent alternative to the standard account, and one which has the apparent advantage of not requiring us to countenance the existence of two different objects in the same place at the same time. However, closer inspection reveals, I suggest, that Burke's account is untenable. We can see this more easily if we first disengage an aspect of Burke's account which is really irrelevant to the issue in hand, namely, his contention that a sortal term can be applicable to an object even though that object does not comply with the persistence conditions associated with that sortal term. (By the 'issue in hand', I mean the question of whether or not we should believe that two numerically distinct objects can exist in the same place at the same time.) We can disengage this aspect of his account by inventing two new sortal terms, 'piece of copper*' and 'statue*', which we shall define as follows. (1) x is a piece of copper* iff x is a piece of copper and x complies with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper', and (2) x is a statue* iff x is a statue and x complies with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'statue'. Now it is clear that, whether or not Burke is correct in thinking that the original sortal terms 'piece of copper' and 'statue' are applicable to objects which do not comply with the persistence conditions associated with those terms respectively (or at least that the first of these terms is thus applicable), it is certainly the case that our newly defined sortal terms are indeed only applicable to objects which comply with those persistence conditions respectively. (Of course, an adherent of the standard account, like myself, will maintain that 'piece of copper*' is in fact synonymous with 'piece of copper', and likewise that 'statue*' is synonymous with 'statue', but now that we have to hand the new sortal terms we can deploy them without assuming any such synonymy and hence without begging any question against Burke.)

Armed with this new terminology, we can make the following observations. First, P_1 is a piece of copper* but is not at any time a statue*. Second, S is a statue* but is not at any time a piece of copper*. Both Burke and adherents of the standard account can agree with these judgements. As for P_2 , its status is contentious: Burke holds that it is a statue* but not a piece of copper*, whereas adherents of the standard account hold that it is a piece of copper* but not a statue* (but see further my remarks in the

penultimate paragraph of this section). However, the question we need to focus on does not turn directly on the status of P_2 , so the fact that this is contentious need not at present detain us. The question we need to focus on is just this: is there any reason to suppose that the piece of copper* P_1 must cease to exist upon the creation of the statue* S ? Since all that needs to be done to make S out of P_1 is to change P_1 's shape in an appropriate way, our question reduces to this: is there any reason to suppose that P_1 must cease to exist when its shape is changed to that of statue* S ? Remember, here, that P_1 is a piece of copper*, and accordingly has the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper'. So our question reduces further to this: is there any reason to suppose that the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper' are such as to forbid any object which complies with those conditions from taking on the shape of statue* S (or, indeed, that of any other possible statue*)? Surely, the answer to this question must be 'No'. To suppose that the mere taking on of a certain shape by a piece of copper* could terminate its existence is utterly fantastical. To be a piece of copper*, an object has to consist of copper and be 'all of a piece', that is, be spatially connected – but it doesn't matter what *shape* such an object has. It is not as though we have to suppose that a piece of copper* which took on the shape of a statue* would have to *become* a statue*, that is, undergo a change in its persistence conditions. That is indeed impossible, but is not what is being envisaged.

At this point Burke might retort that there is, after all, a very good reason why piece of copper* P_1 must cease to exist upon the creation of statue* S , and this is that if P_1 were not to cease to exist then we would have two numerically distinct objects existing in the same place at the same time. However, whether or not this can happen is precisely the question at issue, an answer to which should not be presumed to be correct without argument (but see further the discussion in section 3 below). And here it should be observed that an adherent of the standard account is not simply presuming the correctness of the contrary answer to this question – that is, such an adherent is not simply presuming that two numerically distinct objects *can* exist in the same place at the same time. Rather, an adherent of the standard account is offering an *argument* in support of this answer, based on a highly plausible view of the persistence conditions of pieces of copper*. The argument is just this. Those persistence conditions are such that a piece of copper* can take on the shape of a statue* without thereby ceasing to exist – though in doing so it will not *become* a statue*, for this is indeed impossible, given the difference in persistence conditions between pieces of copper* and statues*. But when a piece of copper* does take on the shape of a statue*, a statue* is thereby created. Since the piece of

copper* continues to exist (at least as long as none of the copper of which it consists is replaced) and exists in the same place as the statue*, with which it cannot be identical, we are compelled to conclude that two numerically distinct objects can indeed exist in the same place at the same time. This is not something we presumed to be possible from the outset, but rather something that we have shown must be possible, given certain highly plausible premises.

Having reached this conclusion, we may return to the question of the status of P_2 , the piece of copper which, both Burke and adherents of the standard account agree, exists in the place occupied by S . Now, if Burke is right in supposing that something can be a piece of copper (*unstarred*) while complying with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'statue', we may grant there *is* such a piece of copper existing in the place occupied by S and that that piece of copper is indeed identical with S . But granting this in no way undermines our previous conclusion that there is a piece of copper* (*starred*) existing in the place occupied by S and that this piece of copper* is *not* identical with S . That will mean, of course, that two different *pieces of copper* can exist in the same place at the same time, but this need be no embarrassment for an adherent of the standard account, given that one of these pieces of copper is a piece of copper* whereas the other is a statue*. This suggests that Burke was subtly begging the question against adherents of the standard account in speaking of 'the' piece of copper existing in the place of the statue, given his own account of the semantics of sortal terms: he was not entitled to assume from the outset that there was just *one* 'piece of copper' there. Consequently, even if Burke is right in claiming that there is a piece of copper there – call it ' P_2 ', if you like – which is *not* identical with P_1 , this by no means implies what he thinks it does, namely, that P_1 no longer exists in the place occupied by S . One could perfectly well accept in full the passage from [4] quoted at the end of section 1, without having the slightest reason to abandon the verdict of the standard account that a statue is numerically distinct from the piece of copper composing it.

We see, thus, just how irrelevant to the real issue in hand is Burke's contention that the sortal term 'piece of copper' may apply to an object even though that object does not comply with the persistence conditions associated with the sortal term 'piece of copper'. However, given that the real issue has been resolved in favour of the standard account, there seems little to be gained by holding out against the plausible view that 'piece of copper*' and 'piece of copper' are in fact synonymous. For, after all, the standard account has a perfectly good way of acknowledging that there *is* a sense in which it is true to say that the statue S 'is a piece of copper' – namely, by regarding the 'is' in such a predication as being the 'is' of

constitution: *S* 'is a piece of copper' just in the sense that *S* is *constituted* by a piece of copper.

3. How might Burke react to my criticisms of his position? I suspect that he might protest that it was never his aim to *refute* the standard account, but only to present an alternative account which is more in keeping with common sense – and that he succeeded in this aim by showing that one *can* consistently deny that a statue is numerically distinct from the piece of copper composing it, thereby preserving what he calls 'the commonsense principle of one material object to a place' ([4], p. 591). Maybe, then, Burke would freely admit that he was just *taking it for granted* that the standard account is mistaken in rejecting this principle and complain that it was unfair of me to describe him as 'begging the question' against adherents of the standard account, because he never intended to treat the question as an open one. My response is as follows. First, the principle which Burke cites can in fact hardly be claimed to be a 'commonsense' one, because 'material object' is a philosophical term of art rather than an expression to be found in common use. As such, it is a principle which *needs* to be argued for if it is to be accepted – and, likewise, arguments *against* it (such as the one that I have just offered on behalf of the standard account) need to be defeated if it is to be accepted. Secondly, it most certainly *is*, by contrast, contrary to common sense to claim that a piece of copper must cease to exist merely upon assuming a certain shape – as any seven-year old child will confirm, if the question is put to him in terms of the fate of a piece of plasticene which is fashioned into the figure of a man. So, while I cannot pretend to have shown that Burke's position is *internally* inconsistent, I would most strenuously deny that his position is more in keeping with common sense than the standard account can claim to be.

Burke does, it is true, attempt to mitigate the counterintuitiveness of his proposal that a piece of copper can go out of existence merely upon assuming a certain shape by distinguishing between the *piece* of copper and the copper of which that piece consists ([4], p. 597). He acknowledges that *the copper* doesn't cease to exist, and thinks that one reason why we are tempted to suppose that the *piece* of copper doesn't cease to exist is that we are inclined to 'overlook the distinction between [them]' ([4], p. 597). It might be thought that this still leaves Burke with a case of coinciding objects, namely, the piece of copper and the copper of which it consists – and, indeed, the *statue* and the copper of which *it* consists. (Burke himself quite frankly admits that 'Of course, the copper and the piece of copper occupy just the same place' ([4], p. 597).) But Burke has a reply to this objection, as follows. On one view – with which he himself sympathizes – the copper of which the statue consists is not a *single* object, but rather a

plurality of copper atoms, and if so, then 'the congruence of the statue and the copper is not a case of coincidence because it is not a case of the congruence of one object with any one other' ([4], p. 616). This response somewhat puzzles me. If it is admitted that *many* objects can collectively occupy the same place as one other object, in what way is this supposed to be preferable to admitting that *one* object can occupy the same place as one other object?¹ In any case, though, it is hard to see why the copper of which the statue consists should *not* qualify as a 'single' object, since it seems clear that we can indeed single it out in thought as a subject of predication.

However, Burke also considers an alternative view, according to which the copper of which the statue consists *is* a single object, but one which 'is identical with the *aggregate* of the copper atoms ... of which the statue is composed' ([4], pp. 616–7). With regard to such an object, Burke apparently takes the view that

An aggregate of [atoms] is to be distinguished from the [atoms] of which it is the aggregate: The [atoms] are *many* objects; their aggregate is *one* object. ([4], p. 618)

And he would further maintain that although the piece of copper P_1 and the statue S are each to be identified with a certain aggregate of atoms, they are nonetheless to be identified with *different* aggregates of atoms, albeit aggregates of the *same* atoms. Thus, on his view, just as there is no *piece* of copper which survives the creation of the statue, so there is no *aggregate* of copper atoms which survives this event, even though all of the individual copper atoms do. This still leaves Burke having to concede that *many* objects can collectively occupy the same place as one other object, and I repeat my observation that I don't see how this is preferable to admitting that *one* object can occupy the same place as one other object. But there is, I think, also a deeper problem for Burke here, and this is that he has already conceded that 'the *copper* here now [where the statue is] is the *copper* we had to begin with' ([4], p. 597) and, thus, given his latest suggestion that the copper here now 'is identical with the *aggregate* of the copper atoms ... of which the statue is composed' ([4], pp. 616–7), it is hard to see how he can nonetheless *deny* that the aggregate of copper atoms of which the statue is composed is identical with the aggregate of copper atoms of which the piece of copper P_1 is composed. It looks as

¹ Is *each* of the many a *part* of the one? If not, then we shall still have a case of one object coinciding with another, namely, one of the many and that part of the one which exists in the same place as that one of the many. If so, on the other hand, then it may be questioned whether, after all, the one may not be *identified* with the many (cf. Baxter [1], p. 193: 'in cases of a whole of parts, I argue, the many parts together are identical with the single whole').

though, in order to sustain the latter denial – which he needs to do if he is not to admit that some *one* object survives the event of the statue's creation and thereafter occupies the same place as it – Burke must either abandon the suggestion that the copper of which the statue consists is identical with an aggregate of copper atoms, or else abandon his earlier judgement that the piece of copper P_1 and the statue consist of *the same copper*. Neither option seems very palatable, though it is clear that the former is the one that Burke must favour, given his already stated predilection for denying that the copper of which the statue consists is a 'single' object at all. Seen in this light, any claim on Burke's part to have common sense on his side looks decidedly threadbare.

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