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# Composite Persons

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The universe of discourse of this paper comprises (in addition to various abstracta) material objects and any physical things that are parts of material objects[1], whether they are themselves material objects themselves or not. (There are things of many kinds—protein molecules, for example, and electrons—that, at least according to common opinion on such matters, are parts of material objects but which at least some philosophers would hesitate to classify as, or would balk at classifying as, "material objects.")

We begin with a definition of 'correct answer to the Special Composition question'. This definition will incorporate five preliminary definitions. Our primitive notion is "part" (we so understand 'part' that everything is a part of itself). We employ both singular and plural variables.

> *x* and *y overlap* $=_{df}$ *x* and *y* have a part in common
>
> The *x*s are *disjoint* $=_{df}$ no two of the *x*s overlap
>
> The *x*s *compose y* $=_{df}$ the *x*s are all parts of *y* and every part of *y* overlaps at least one of the *x*s and the *x*s are disjoint[2].
>
> *Mereological term*. One might say that that a mereological term was any word or phrase that could be defined or analyzed entirely in terms of 'part' and the vocabulary of first-order logic with identity. (According to that definition, 'part' itself and 'overlap', 'disjoint', and 'compose' are mereological terms.) But suppose someone were to define an "ecomposite" as any object that essentially had proper parts. By the strict terms of the proposed defintion, 'ecomposite' would not be a mereological term. Perhaps is safest to say that a mereological term is a word or phrase whose meaning in some way "essentially involves" the concept of parthood. Then all terms that are mereological terms by the previous

[1] For the benefit of nihilists: physical things that *would* be parts of composite material objects if there were any composite material objects.

[2] We shall once or twice need the concept of a sum of fusion: *y* is a sum or fusion of the *x*s just in the case that the *x*s are all parts of *y* and every part of *y* overlaps at least one of the *x*s (thus, summation is composition without the requirement that the *x*s be disjoint).

definition are mereological terms, but terms whose definition or philosophical analysis contains 'part' and modal or mathematical terms ('necessarily', 'function') or terms of any other kind are also mereological terms.

An *answer to the Special Composition Question* (we shall frequently abbreviate this phrase as 'an answer') is any sentence that satisfies these two conditions:

> —a single plural variable is free in that sentence; no other variable is free in that sentence
> —it contains no mereological terms.[3]

$\phi$ is a *correct* answer to the Special Composition Question $=_{df}$

> (*i*) $\phi$ is an answer to the Special Composition Question
>
> (*ii*) If $\alpha$s is the plural variable that occurs free in $\phi$, and if $\beta$ is a singular variable, then
>
> ⌜For any $\alpha$s, ($\exists\beta$ the $\alpha$s compose $\beta$. $\leftrightarrow$. the $\alpha$s are disjoint & $\phi$)⌝
>
> is a metaphysically necessary truth (or expresses a proposition that is a metaphysically necessary truth)[4].

We now turn to some representative answers to the Special Composition Question.

In *Material Beings*, I defended the following answer: 'the activity of the *x*s constitutes a life'. We may call this answer *organicism*, since, if it is correct, the only composite objects are living organisms. And organicism is correct just in the case that it is a metaphysically necessary truth that

> For any *x*s, ($\exists y$ the *x*s compose $y$ $\leftrightarrow$ . the *x*s are disjoint & the activity of the *x*s constitutes a life[5]).

Organicism is a *moderate* answer, since, if it is correct, there are *x*s that compose nothing and there are *x*s that compose something.[6]

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[3] If two sentences that are answers to the Special Composition Question differ only in the free plural variable they contain, we count them as the "same" answer. Thus 'the *y*s are 10 or more in number' and 'the *z*s are 10 or more in number' are the same answer to the Special Composition Question. We also count answers that are "alphabetic variants" of each other as the same answer. For example, '$\exists y$ *y* is one of the *x*s' and '$\exists z$ *z* is one of the *x*s' are the same answer—as are '$\exists y$ *y* is one of the *z*s' and '$\exists x$ *x* is one of the *y*s.

[4] Oddly enough, we have defined 'correct answer to the Special Composition Question' without saying what the Special Composition Question is. I have given a very careful formal definition of 'answer to the Special Composition'. I am content to give an informal statement of the Question itself: it is the question, 'In what circumstances do a plurality of disjoint objects compose something?'.

[5] The clause 'the *x*s are disjoint' is probably redundant: it is hard to see how the activity of certain objects could constitute a life if any of those objects overlapped any of the others.

There are two immoderate or *extreme* answers. There is, first, *universalism*:

$\exists y$ *y* is one of the *x*s.[7]

If universalism is correct, then, for any *x*s, if those *x*s are disjoint, they compose something. (It is a plausible thesis that composition is unique—that is, for any *x*s, those *x*s compose *at most* one thing. Note that this plausible thesis and universalism together imply that any disjoint *x*s have a unique fusion.[8])

There is, secondly, *nihilism*:

$\forall x\ \forall y$ (*x* is one of the *z*s & *y* is one of the *z*s $\mathbf{.} \rightarrow x = y$)

Nihilism is a correct answer to the Special Composition Question just in the case that

For any *z*s, ($\exists y$ the *z*s compose *y* $\mathbf{.} \leftrightarrow \forall x\ \forall y$ (*x* is one of the *z*s & *y* is one of the *z*s $\mathbf{.} \rightarrow x = y$)).

If nihilism is the correct answer to the special composition question, then, for any things, those things compose an object if and only if there is only one of them. That is to say: everything is a simple; nothing has any proper parts; parthood is coextensive with identity; there are no composite objects.

Universalism has long been a popular answer. Its illustrious adherents have included Goodman, Quine, and David Lewis. But nihilism has been gaining adherents: Gideon Rosen, Cian Dorr, and Theodore Sider have recently endorsed and defended it.[9]

Every answer to the Special Composition Question faces serious philosophical difficulties. Organicism, for example, implies that there are no tables or chairs or moderate-sized specimens of dry goods—and for good measure, no protons, no atoms (in the modern, chemical sense), no molecules, no seas, no mountains, no planets, no stars . .

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[6] More exactly: there are *x*s that are disjoint and compose nothing (if two of the *x*s overlap, then, by the definition of composition, the *x*s compose nothing), and there are *x*s that are two or more in number and compose something (if there is exactly one thing that is one of the *x*s, then, by the definition of composition, the *x*s compose that thing).

[7] Universalism is a logical truth. (Which is not, of course, to say that 'Universalism is a correct answer to the Special Composition Question' is a logical truth.) Any logical truth in which one plural variable occurs free and contains no other free variables would be an essentially equivalent answer to the Special Composition Question.

[8] Let *superuniversalism* be the thesis that for any *x*s, those *x*s have a fusion if and only if $\exists y$ *y* is one of the *x*s—or more simply: for any *x*s, those *x*s have a fusion. (Let *unique superuniversalism* be the thesis that any *x*s have a unique fusion. Unique superuniversalism and the transitivity of parthood are the two axioms of Leśniewski's "Mereology.") Superuniversalism logically implies universalism, but the converse does not hold—for superuniversalism implies that Tarski and Leśniewski have a fusion $F_1$, that Tarski and Łukasiewicz have a fusion $F_2$, and that $F_1$ and $F_2$ have a fusion, while universalism implies only the first two of these theses. I expect, however, that anyone who accepted universalism would also accept superuniversalism.

[9] Gideon Rosen and Cian Dorr, "Composition as a Fiction," in Richard M. Gale (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 151-174; Theodore Sider, "Against Parthood" in Karen Bennett and Dean W. Zimmerman (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, Vol. 8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 237–93.

. . Many philosophers regard this consequence of organicism as a *reductio ad absurdum* of organicism.

The difficulties that face universalism are well known. They may be summarized as a dilemma: either endurantism or perdurantism is the correct theory of persistence. If, on the one hand, endurantism is the correct theory of persistence, it is very difficult indeed to reconcile universalism with the thesis that human persons are composite material things that persist through time. If, on the other, perdurantism is the correct theory of persistence and universalism is the correct answer to the special composition question, then the analogue of universalism ought to hold for "cross-temporal composition": '∃*y y* is one of the *x*s' where the range of the plural variable is perduring or temporally extended things. And anyone who accepts "cross-temporal universalism" must abandon realism concerning modal properties *de re* and embrace a counterpart-theoretical replacement for modal properties *de re*. Universalism is thus inconsistent with the following attractive combination of positions: (a) human persons are composite material things that strictly endure through time, and (b) things have modal properties (such as the property expressed by '*x* could have had a longer life')[10].

Nihilism confronts all the "missing object" difficulties that confront organicism—and, of course, the further difficulty that it implies that even more objects are "missing": not only are there no chairs and no stars, but there are no dogs or cats or jellyfish, either. And nihilism faces a difficulty that, while it is intimately related to the "missing organisms" difficulty, has seemed to many philosophers, myself included, to be far more profound: it is inconsistent with materialism, or at any rate with any form of materialism but eliminative materialism (that is, nihilism is inconsistent with the thesis that there are human persons and that these human persons are material things). This difficulty could be put in the form of an argument:

> Human persons exist
> If human persons exist, they are composite material things[11]
> If nihilism is the correct answer, there are no composite material things

*hence,*

> Nihilism is not the correct answer.

But why should we suppose that there are human persons? That is to say, why should we suppose that there are human persons "in the strict and philosophical sense" of 'there are human persons'—for the nihilist does not mean to deny the obvious truth that the earth is a very different place from what it would have been if, say, a gamma-ray burst had

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[10] A counterpart-theoretic treatment of modal statements *de re* can allow the existence of such properties if it affirms the existence of exactly one "all encompassing" counterpart relation. But the more plausible versions of counterpart theory affirm the existence of a multitude of possible counterpart relations, among which the users of counterpart theory must make a choice each time they apply counterpart theory, a choice that depends on pragmatic considerations. It is that feature of counterpart theory that is inconsistent with the reality of modal properties.

[11] Alvin Plantinga, who is a substance dualist and who therefore rejects this premise, once told me that he found nihilism a very tempting position. I am conditionally subject to the same temptation. If I were somehow to be converted to substance dualism, I'd probably embrace nihilism.

destroyed all terrestrial life five million years ago. The nihilist grants that at any given instant *t* in the last couple of centuries there were billions of non-overlapping sets of elementary particles (each with something like $10^{30}$ members) such that the members of each of those sets were at *t* "arranged human-person-wise." The nihilist maintains, however, that for any *x*s, if those *x*s are the members of one of these sets, the *x*s composed nothing at *t*. The nihilist maintains that "in the strict and philosophical sense" of 'the things that there are or ever have been', the only (non-abstract) things that there are or ever have been are elementary particles (or at any rate mereological simples of some sort). And since, obviously, no human person is an elementary particle, there are (in the strict etc.) no human persons.

So: why should we suppose that "in the strict and philosophical sense" of 'there are human persons' there are human persons?

Well, the argument really requires the "strict existence" of only one human person. The argument, could, therefore, be replaced with a first-person argument (an argument each philosopher is invited "go through" for himself or herself):

> I exist
> If I exist, I am a composite material thing
> If nihilism is the correct answer, there are no composite material things

*hence,*

> Nihilism is not the correct answer.[12]

Each of us may therefore replace the question 'Why should we suppose that human persons exist?' with the question, 'Why should I suppose that I exist?' (Or, 'Why should I suppose that, in the strict and philosophical sense of "there is such a thing as myself," there is such a thing as myself?')

In *Material Beings*, I offered the following answer to this question[13]. (I paraphrase.)

> Suppose there is a shelf that is supporting a number of disjoint material things the sum of whose weights is 1 kilogram. (Those things may or may not compose a material thing with a weight of 1 kilogram.) If this is so, the shelf exemplifies the property "supports things with a collective weight of 1 kilogram." If nihilism is the correct answer, however, then there is no such thing as the shelf. (In the sequel, I will leave it to the reader to supply the necessary "strict and philosophical sense" qualifications.) And, therefore, if nihilism is the correct answer, the property "supports things with a collective weight of 1 kilogram" is unexemplifed—since, obviously, no elementary particle supports things with a collective weight of 1 kilogram. (Much less does any abstract thing.) Still, as one might put it, the supporting *gets done*. And if nihilism is the correct answer, it gets done this way: certain things that together enter into the variably polyadic relation expressed by 'the *x*s are arranged shelfwise' also enter into the variably polyadic

[12] *Cf.* Rosen and Dorr *loc. cit.*
[13] Citation

> relation expressed by 'the *x*s collectively support things with a collective weight of 1 kilogram'.
>
> I am going to assume, simply to avoid needless complication in the argument, that there are no immaterial thinkers. Now suppose that I—a human person, a living human organism—am at a certain moment *t* entertaining the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October. (The thought passes through my mind, as the idiom has it.) If so, I have at *t* the property "is entertaining the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October." If nihilism is the correct answer, however, there is at *t* no such thing as I, no such thing as myself. (Nor is there at *t* any other human person.) And, therefore, if nihilism is the correct answer, the property "is entertaining the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October" is unexemplifed—for, obviously, no elementary particle (and no abstract thing) entertains the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October at *t* or any other moment.
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> But might it be that the thinking somehow *gets done*—despite the absence from the world of anything with mental properties of any sort? Might it be that, even if nothing has any mental *properties*, certain things, as one might say, sometimes stand in mental *relations*? Might one of these mental relations be the variably polyadic relation expressed by (or at least suggested by) the open sentence 'the *x*s are collectively entertaining the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October'? Might it be that the things that stand in this relation at a certain moment also, at that same moment, stand in the relation 'the *x*s are arranged human-person-wise'?
>
> The answer to this rhetorical question has to be No. It makes no sense to speak of a plurality of non-thinking things (or, for that matter, a plurality of thinking things) collectively entertaining a thought.

Here ends my recapitulation of the argument I presented in *Material Beings*. If I understand him, Ted Sider thinks that the answer to the rhetorical question with which the argument concludes is Yes. He has written

> A familiar Cartesian idea is that one can be certain of one's own existence. Given the further (and much less Cartesian!) premise that one is not mereologically a simple entity, one can infer that nihilism is false.
>
> Nihilism allows sentences about our own existence to be correct even if they are untrue, just as it allows sentences about hydrogen atoms to be correct even if untrue. So the alleged certainty cannot be of the mere correctness of the claim that we exist. The Cartesian objector must claim to be certain that, in addition to there being particles arranged thinking-cogito-wise, she herself exists. It's hard to see why she should be so certain—or even justified. The preceding sections [of this paper] establish, I take it, that we are not entitled to conclude on Moorean, perceptual, or Williamsonian grounds that ordinary things like tables and chairs exist. What further grounds are there for concluding that we ourselves exist, as opposed to there merely existing appropriately arranged particles?
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> Van Inwagen [*Material Beings*, chapter 12] seems to suggest that further grounds lie in the nature of mentality. He concedes that the correctness (or truth,

> given a liberal metasemantics) of 'there is a table', 'there is a hydrogen atom', and so on, demand nothing more than appropriately arranged particles; but, he says, the correctness (or truth) of 'I am thinking' demands more. It demands that there be a thinker that is me. Mentality is metaphysically singular.
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> But why think this? What is wrong with saying that the correctness (or truth) of 'I think' is a matter of arrangements of particles? It's not enough to emphasize how justified or certain 'I think' is, or the immediacy of our awareness of it. The arrangement of particles constituting its correctness (or truth) might be one that is especially immediate, both epistemically and psychologically.
>
> Rejecting materialism about the mind would not on its own support metaphysical singularity. Irreducible or nonsupervenient mentality could consist of irreducible or nonsupervenient mental relations which relate many subatomic particles, rather than irreducible or nonsupervenient mental properties that are instantiated by single entities.
>
> Perhaps van Inwagen's belief in metaphysical singularity has something to do with the character of conscious experience? A subject's simultaneous experiences are experienced by that subject as being in some sense part of one conscious episode, and as experienced by a single subject. But it is unclear why these aspects of phenomenology could not be due, metaphysically, to states of particles.[14]

I do not think we can make much progress with the question I have asked or with the further questions that Sider's arguments raise without asking and attempting to answer some preliminary questions. To wit: What is a thought? And what is it to entertain one of them—what it for one thing to entertain a certain thought, and what is it (or what would it be) for a plurality of things collectively to entertain a certain thought? What is a sensation? And what is it to have one of them—what it for one thing to have a certain sensation, and what is it (or what would it be) for a plurality of things collectively to have a certain sensation? (I take it that thought and sensation are primary subdivisions of what Sider has called 'mentality'. There are, of course, others: belief, for example. We might ask, What is a belief? And what is it to have one of them. But perhaps a consideration of thought—episodic thought—and sensation will suffice for the purposes of the present discussion.)

A thought, in my view, is a proposition. If the thought that that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October[15] passed through my mind earlier today, and if the thought that that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October passed through Peter Mayle's mind in October 1989, the thought that passed through my mind and the thought that passed through Mayle's mind are the same thought. That is, the two thoughts are literally identical. (Mayle and I are a case of the proverbial two minds with but a single thought.) Or consider George Orwell's comment on these lines of Kipling:

> Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne,
> He travels the fastest who travels alone.

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[14] Sider *op. cit.*, pp. xx-xx. Rosen and Dorr *op. cit.* make very similar remarks.

[15] The thought in question should be understood to be impersonal, not first-personal: a general observation, not something akin to, "Here I am in Provence in October—what a fine thing!"

Orwell writes,

> There is a vulgar thought vigorously expressed. It may not be true, but at any rate it is a thought that everyone thinks. Sooner or later you will have occasion to feel that he travels the fastest who travels alone, and there the thought is, ready made and, as it were, waiting for you.[16]

*The Thoughts of Chairman Mao*, or anyone else's thoughts, as I conceive them, are "Fregean" thoughts, *Gedanken*, abstract objects, things that are neither agents nor patients, things each of which exists at all times and in all possible worlds. And if this thought, the thought that passed through both our minds, Mayle's and mine, is a proposition, it is of course the proposition that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October, the proposition expressed by the English sentence 'It is a fine thing to be in Provence in October'. (But this thought does not depend for its existence on the existence of that English sentence. For all I know, it, that same thought, may once have been entertained by someone who spoke only Coptic or Basque: the only connections between that thought, that proposition, and the English language are, first, that that proposition—which would have existed if William of Normandy had never conquered England and indeed if there had never been any human beings—happens to be expressible in English, and, secondly, it is not expressible in various other languages. As to its inexpressibility in certain languages, it suffices to point out that there was no word for Provence in Homeric Greek. Perhaps, moreover, the *exact* shade of meaning carried by the English idiom 'it's a fine thing + infinitive' cannot be expressed in some languages.)

I am acutely sensible of the fact that many philosophers will tell me that I am guilty of an elementary confusion: a confusion of type and token. What passed through my mind earlier today, I shall be told, what I entertained, was not a *proposition*, not the proposition that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October. It was rather a *thought-token* whose *content* was that proposition. And what passed through Mayle's mind in 1989 was an earlier token of the same type. I am, in fact, likely to be told that even the thought-*type* "It is a fine thing to be in Provence in October" is not the proposition that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October. After all, my imaginary critic will observe, thoughts are *mental representations*, not *abstract* things like propositions. Propositions are the content of these mental representations: if a thought has the proposition *p* as its content, it represents the world as a world in which *p* is true. And, whatever the relation between thought-types and propositions may be, thought-tokens can *certainly* not be propositions, for how could a proposition "pass through one's mind"? A thought-token, is an *episode*, an *event*, and propositions are, as I have explicitly conceded, timeless things.

I would say, however, that "what happens"—*all* that happens—when the thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October passes through one's mind is that one momentarily stands in a certain relation ("entertaining" is as good a name for it as any) to the proposition that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October. When the elementary particles that compose one stand in certain relations to one another, that is sufficient for one's standing in the "entertaining" relation to the proposition that it is a fine thing to be

[16] Citation.

in Provence in October.[17] There is, I say, nothing "there," there is no concrete thing involved in this episode, but a human being and the particles that compose that human being. The case is strictly parallel to this one: a one-meter metal bar is placed in a hot oven; in due course, having reached thermal equilibrium in its new environment, the length of the bar "settles down to" 1.01 meters; at some intermediate moment *t* its length was 1.005 meters. That is to say, at *t* it bore the relation "having" or "being of" to the length "1.005 meters." This length is a platonic universal, an abstract object (it is no doubt the length of many things). When the elementary particles that compose the bar stand in certain relations to one another, that is sufficient for its standing in the "being of" relation to the length "1.005 meters."[18] There is nothing "there," there is no concrete thing involved in this episode, but the bar and the particles that compose it. (If someone were to say that if two bars are 1.005 meters in length, then each of them has a *token* of the length "1.005 meters" that is peculiar to itself, I should have no reply to make—other than an incredulous stare.)

Now let us turn to sensation. You have a momentary pain in your left elbow. There, now it's gone. What was this momentary pain—metaphysically speaking? To what ontological category does it belong? The answer is that it was nothing—that is (in the strict and philosophical sense) there is, and was, no such thing. What there was was a certain fusion of elementary particles (you) and the property (an abstract object) expressed by the open sentence '*x* has a pain in *x*'s left elbow'. When the particles that compose you stand in a certain variably polyadic relation (or no doubt when they stand in any of a vast number of such relations; but let us ignore this refinement), their fusion has that property. They momentarily stood in that relation and you momentarily had that property. (Or more exactly, during that interval, you were successively the fusion of the *x*s, the *y*s, which largely overlapped the *x*s, the *z*s, which largely overlapped the *y*s . . . and the *x*s, the *y*s, the *z*s . . . successively stood in that relation, and, in consequence, you had that property throughout that interval.) I should note that it's quite possible that the set of variably polyadic relations that "underwrite" your possession of the property "having a pain in one's left" elbow may be unique to you. It may well be that, say, Ted Sider's anatomical and physiological structure is such that it would not even be possible for any particles both to compose him and to stand in any of *your* "underwriting" relations. (Except, of course, in your case, Ted.)

All right, then. Here are two mental properties:

—entertaining the passing thought that it is a fine thing to be in Provence in October

[17] Well, environment plays a role as well. One's perfect duplicate on Twin Earth at the corresponding moment comes to stand in the "entertaining" relation to the proposition that it is a fine thing to be in Twin Provence in Twin October.

[18] Its existence is independent of the historically contingent existence of the metric system of linear measure. If there had been no French Revolution, no one would *call* that length '1.005 meters', but there would still be such a length. (And that length would exist if nothing were 1.005 meters long—if nothing were *of* that length.) Perhaps I should note that I am assuming for the sake of the example that there really is such an intrinsic property as "being 1.005 meters long." As every schoolchild knows, Einstein has shown that this assumption is inconsistent with the empirically verifiable fact that the speed of light *in vacuo* is the same in every reference frame. A more complicated assumption consistent with Special Relativity could have been used to the same purpose.

—having a pain in one's left elbow.

One can have either of these properties at *t* only if (a simplified version of what was said above) the particles that compose one at *t* are then arranged in a certain way.

Logically speaking, things stand with these two mental properties exactly as they stand with the two following physical properties:

—being an iron ball with a mass of 1 kilogram

—being a right cylinder that is 10 centimeters in diameter and 1 meter in length.

In each case an object has the property in question only if the elementary particles whose fusion it is are arranged in a certain way (or in any of a vast number ways—but ways that, for all the vastness of their number, constitute a vanishingly small proportion of the ways in which particles of the requisite types and numbers could be arranged).

Nihilism implies that nothing has any of these four properties. In the case of the physical properties, it is consistent with nihilism to maintain that there have been occasions on which someone (someone caught up in what I like to call "the ordinary business of life") uttered the sentences

> In today's physics lecture, the demonstrator simultaneously dropped two iron balls, one with a mass of 1 kilogram and the other with a mass of 2 kilograms, from a height of 10 meters, and we all saw that they struck the floor simultaneously

> In the materials lab, there is a platinum-iridium right cylinder that is 10 centimeters in diameter and 1 meter in length—and these dimensions are accurate to within ± 2 nm

and spoke the strict and literal truth. But, I maintain, if someone spoke these sentences "in the ontology room," any nihilist should contend that *in that context*, these sentences expressed false propositions.[19] (Despite its self-evident truth, this is a hard position to defend. Few philosophers believe me when I propound self-evident truths of this sort.) And, if I were a nihilist I would say that the sentences 'I was just reflecting on what a fine thing it is to be in Provence in October' and 'I have a pain in my left elbow' could not express truths if uttered in the context "the ontology room," although they could express truths if uttered in the context "the ordinary business of life." By way of analogy, a metaphysician who is an "elminativist about shadows"[20] and who accepts my metasemantics (in Sider's sense of the word) should say that the sentence 'The black cat was almost invisible because it was lying in the shadow of the armchair' could not

[19] In Sider's terms, my metasemantics dictates a liberal semantics for sentences uttered in the ordinary business of life and a reactionary "Tarskian" semantics for sentences uttered in the ontology room. For more on this topic, see my "Inside and Outside the Ontology Room" citation.

[20] See Roy Sorenson citation

express a truth if uttered in the ontology room and could express a truth if it were uttered in the ordinary business of life.

'I have a pain in my left elbow' cannot express a truth in the ontology room (given nihilism) because the proposition it expresses (on a given occasion of utterance) in the ontology room is true if and only if the object denoted by 'I' has the property expressed by '*x* has a pain in *x*'s left elbow'—and nihilism implies that no utterance of 'I' denotes anything and that nothing has the property expressed by '*x* has a pain in *x*'s left elbow'. (And similarly for our other illustrative sentence.) To say what proposition it expresses *outside* the ontology room and to say why that proposition is true even if nihilism is true requires a little stage-setting.

Say that a variably polyadic relation *R underwrites* a property *F* just in the case that

> For any disjoint *x*s, if those *x*s stand in *R* at *t*, then, necessarily, the *x*s compose something and the thing they compose has *F* at *t*.

For example, anyone who believes that, necessarily, if the *x*s are arranged ballwise they compose something will (and should) believe that the relation expressed by 'the *x*s are arranged ballwise' underwrites the properties "being a ball" and "having a surface of constant curvature."

There will obviously be few if any occasions on which a nihilist will wish to apply the concept of "underwriting" in any straightforward way. But nihilists may want to refer to various "composite object fictions" and perhaps to make use of an "open" operator along the lines of 'According to the fiction *x*'. Using this operator, they can say things of the form 'According to some composite-object fictions, *p*' and 'According to the universalist fiction, *p*' and 'According to the organicist fiction, *p*'. A nihilist might, for example, say

> According to the universalist fiction, any disjoint things necessarily compose something, and therefore, according to the universalist fiction, the relation expressed by 'the *xs* are disjoint and arranged ballwise' underwrites the property "having a surface of constant curvature" and does not underwrite "being cubical."[21]

Now consider Sider's first-person sentence 'I am thinking'. A nihilist who accepted my metasemantics (in the Siderian sense) might therefore say something like this:

> It is obvious that there are fictions according to which there are human beings and all human beings are composite material thinkers. Call these *human thinker fictions*. It is obvious that there exist variably polyadic relations such that it is true according to all human thinker fictions that those relations underwrite the property "is thinking." Call these *fictional-thought-underwriting* relations. Then, if I utter the sentence 'I am thinking' at *t*, the proposition I thereby affirm is true

[21] Note that—assuming that no elementary particle could be a ball—nihilism implies that the relation expressed by 'the *x*s are arranged ballwise' underwrites "being cubical" and all other properties.

> just in the case that the I-at-*t* particles[22] now stand in at least one fictional thought-underwriting relation.

Note, by the way, that "fiction" operators do not imply that a sentence to which they are appended is false: it is, for example, true in the *War and Peace* fiction that Napoleon invaded Russia. And let us suppose that, although calling a philosophical position a fiction certainly carries the conversational implicature that many of the propositions true in that fiction are false in actual fact, so calling it does not *logically imply* that any of them is false. Thus, one could say, without conceding that one accepted any falsehoods, "As one who accepts the organicst fiction, I think . . .'. (Of course, one would probably be more likely to say, "As one who accepts the *so-called* organicist fiction . . . .")

I can agree that if I now say 'I am thinking' in the ordinary business of life (perhaps my wife has just asked me what I'm doing, and that is my answer), the proposition I thereby express is "metaphysically equivalent" to the proposition that the I-now particles stand in at least one fictional thought-underwriting relation. That is, while no doubt the latter proposition is not the same proposition as the proposition expressed by 'I am thinking' in the ordinary business of life, the two propositions are true in the same possible worlds. But when the sentence 'I am thinking' is uttered in the ontology room, it expresses a proposition that is true only if 'I' denotes something and what it denotes has the property expressed by the predicate "am thinking." For, in the ontology room, all sentences have a Tarskian semantics. (This is no more than a consequence of my definition of 'the ontology room'.) In the ontology room—or, if you like, 'in those dialectical situations van Inwagen tendentiously describes as occurring "in the ontology room"' —, therefore, nihilists should not use the sentence 'I am thinking'; they should replace that sentence with something along the lines of 'The I-now particles stand in at least one fictional thought-underwriting relation'.

In sum: the proposition one expresses by uttering 'I am thinking' inside the ontology room (where the sentence, by the definition of 'in the ontology room', has a Tarskian semantics) is inconsistent with Nihilism, and the proposition one expresses by uttering 'I am thinking' outside the ontology room—in the ordinary business of life—is consistent with Nihilism. Call these, respectively, 'the inside proposition' and 'the outside proposition'.

Now suppose that a Nihilist asks me the following question: Why do you insist on the truth of the inside proposition; why are you not content with the truth of the outside proposition?

I have no knock-down argument for the conclusion that one should insist on the truth of the inside proposition—that one should not be content with the truth of the outside proposition. There are, after all, no knock-down arguments for any substantive, positive thesis in metaphysics (in particular) or in philosophy (in general). In lieu of a knock-down argument, I will present a sort of intuition pump.

I begin with the position of a typical atheist and materialist concerning death. Or perhaps it is not typical. On the chance that it is not, I'll ascribe it to a fictional atheist (and materialist) I'll call Athena. Let her speak:

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[22] I assume that the nihilist will not object to the open plural-referring phrase 'the I-at-*t* particles' and will know what particles are being referred to (plurally) when a given person uses a phrase like 'the I-now particles'.

> Catullus, referring to death, has written, *nox est perpetua una dormienda*—that is, death is "one unending night to be slept through." That is misleading. It suggests that when you are dead you will still exist, although you will not be having any experiences. It suggests that your existence is like a film that goes on forever: an initial segment of the film is full of color and motion, and then the screen "fades to black," and, for all eternity, the theater sits there displaying a black screen. But death is not like that. If your existence is to be compared with a film, it must be to a film that *stops*. And when it has stopped, blackness is not being displayed on the screen; rather, things have stopped being displayed on the screen. Either the projector has been turned off or the screen no longer exists, depending on how you want to develop the metaphor. "To die, to sleep, To sleep, perchance to dream"? No—, there is no "perchance" about it, for after one's death there will be nothing *there* to have dreams. Death is not a deep coma, not even the deepest possible coma. One can be *in* a deep coma: that's a possible condition for a human being. But death is non-existence, and 'non-existence' is not the name of a condition that a human being or anything else can be in.

No suppose someone reliable—God, perhaps—were to tell me that, although I am at present, always have been, and for some period shall continue to be, at each moment the fusion of certain elementary particles, particles whose activity constitutes a continuous organic life, this is soon going to cease to be the case. (It will cease to be the case at noon, next Thursday.) And this will not happen because that activity, that "continuous organic life" is to be brought to an end by the explosion of a bomb or by a coronary thrombosis or something of that sort. Rather, the *life* will continue; it will be *going on* on Friday and on Saturday and for quite a long while thereafter. What *will* happen at noon on Thursday is this: the particles caught up in that continuing life, the particles whose activity constitutes that life, will cease to have a fusion.

What would I expect—I mean subjectively speaking? What would the transition from "fusion" to "no fusion" be *like*? And here is my answer: it would not be like anything. That is, my answer is precisely the same as Athena's answer to the question: "Suppose that you were suddenly—instantly—to die without warning at noon next Thursday. What do you expect would happen—I mean subjectively speaking? What would dying instantly and unexpectedly be *like*?" She, too, will say, "It wouldn't be like anything." And she will justify her answer by pointing out that after her instant and unexpected death *there won't be anyone there*. It will cease to be the case that she has any mental properties—and not because she will exist and have no mental properties but because there will no longer be anything there to have mental properties.

And why should my response *not* be the same as Athena's? Have we not both been asked essentially the same question?—to wit, What would it be like to cease to exist? And, if we have given the right answer to that question, it seems that the right answer to the question, 'What would the world be like if no one ever existed?' is 'It would not be like anything—a world in which no one ever existed would be a world without consciousness.

There is my intuition pump. If you resist having your intuitions pumped by it, here is what you will believe: a world in which no one ever existed (and in which, therefore, no one was ever conscious) would not necessarily be a world without

consciousness. It would contain consciousness if elementary particles were arranged and interacted in certain very specific ways—the way they are arranged and interact in the actual world, for example. I can't believe that. Perhaps others can.

My intuition pump faces the following metaphysical difficulty. A correct answer to the Special Composition Question is *necessarily* a correct answer to the Special Composition Question. (See the definition of '$\phi$ is a correct answer to the Special Composition Question' above.) Therefore, the story that is the basis of my intuition pump is an impossible story, and is impossible no matter what answer to the Special Composition Question is correct. To ask yourself what you would expect to happen if the elementary particles that compose you suddenly (and without any significant alteration in the spatial and causal relations those particles bear to one another) stopped composing anything is to ask you what you would expect to happen if an impossible state of affairs obtained. I confess that I am therefore at best of two minds about whether my intuition pump makes any sense at all.

One final point, a point about the "project" undertaken in *Material Beings*. Sider and I both agree that the following proposition is true

> The way particles are arranged in space-time in the actual cosmos is sufficient for the existence of consciousness.

The difference between us is that I think that this proposition is true only because the way particles are arranged in space-time in the actual cosmos is sufficient for the existence of conscious *beings*, things that *are* conscious. Sider believes that it is possible for consciousness to exist without there being anything that *is* conscious—just as I believe that it is possible for liquidity and gaseousness to exist without there being anything that *is* liquid or *is* gaseous. I can do no more than remind the reader that the proposition that I exist (and that you and other human beings exist) "in the strict and philosophical sense" (that is, if the sentence 'I exist' is understood à la Tarksi) was not one of the *conclusions* of *Material Beings*. This position was rather one of the *constraints* on an answer to the Special Composition Question that the book presupposed. The project of the book was to provide an answer to the Special Composition Question that was consistent with certain propositions, among them 'I exist' and 'I persist through time' and 'I am a material thing'. Although I gave arguments in support of the truth of those propositions, they were presuppositions of the book, not conclusions of the book. All I have ever asked my readers to believe is that organicism is the only known answer to the Special Composition Question that is consistent with those propositions. Naturally enough, those who—like Rosen and Dorr and Sider—reject some or all of them will find this thesis less interesting than those who accept all of them. I wonder, however, whether they will agree that this thesis, however uninteresting it may be, is true.