

A Cartesian argument against compositional nihilism

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1. Introduction

Nihilism, i.e., compositional nihilism, is the thesis that there aren't any composite entities, entities that have proper parts.¹ (More on matters of formulation in section 2.) According to nihilism, *simples* are the only things that there are. Standardly the simples are said to be small things like spacetime points or elementary particles², but there's also a version of the view that says that the universe as a whole is one big simple.³ Intermediate versions are available too. In this paper I will have the standard version of the view in mind.

In his (1990), van Inwagen defended a view – call it *organicism* – that's just a short step from nihilism. According to organicism, only simples and living organisms exist. When some simples are arranged living-organism-wise, they compose a further entity, an organism.⁴ But when some simples are arranged table-wise or mountain-wise, they don't compose anything at all.

Having done all the work necessary to defend eliminativism about non-living composites such as tables and mountains, why not go all the way and eliminate organisms too? Granted, this would involve eliminating human beings, including ourselves, presumably, but if tables can be eliminated in favor of simples arranged table-wise, why can't we humans be eliminated in favor of simples arranged human-wise? van Inwagen's answer is vaguely Cartesian. Something about the nature of consciousness or thinking justifies me in being certain that I exist:

things cannot work together to think – or, at least, things can work together to think only in the sense that they can compose, in the strict and mereological sense of the word, an object that thinks. . . . Now, surely, planning for tomorrow and feeling pain cannot be activities that a lot of simples can perform collectively, as simples can collectively shine or collectively support weight (1990: 118)?

But nihilists have not found this compelling, and van Inwagen admits that it 'will perhaps be thought to beg the question' (1990: 117).

I want to give it another try. I'll develop a new *cogito*-style argument against nihilism, one that is more detailed and, I hope, more persuasive than extant versions of the argument. My version will also stay a bit closer

¹ 'x is a proper part of y' means 'x is a part of y and x is not identical to y'.

² Hossack (2000), Rosen and Dorr (2002), Dorr (2002), Cameron (2010), Sider (2013), Contessa (2014). For discussion, see McGrath (2005), Olson (2007), Markosian (2008), Cotnoir (2013), Wallace (2013), and Gilmore (2015).

³ Rea (2001), Horgan and Potrč (2008).

⁴ 'xx compose y' means 'each of xx is a part of y, and each part of y overlaps (shares a part with) at least one of xx'. I use 'xx', 'yy', and so on as plural variables.

to the *cogito* itself, though I will not engage in Descartes exegesis. Roughly, the idea will be that the nihilist owes us a paraphrase of sentences like ‘I think’ or ‘I am conscious’, and none of the natural candidates is acceptable: none of them captures the certainty that is knowable introspectively when the *cogito* is carried out. Here is a preview of the candidates:

- CF If all the simples were just as they actually are but composition were universal, I would be conscious.
- GP There are some things that are [collectively] conscious.
- R There is an experience.
- C This is an experience.
- PP These are [collectively] conscious.

The failure of these alternatives gives us reason to believe that Descartes and van Inwagen were right all along, and ‘this conclusion, *I think, therefore I am*, is the first and most certain of all that occurs to one who philosophises in an orderly way’⁵.

It is not my goal to defend organicism or any other general theory of composition. I will argue that I *am*, that there is such a thing as myself. I will assert, more or less without argument, that if I am, then I’m composite. I’ll then conclude that composition occurs at least sometimes. But I won’t try to say when composition occurs.

2. Preliminaries

I defend non-nihilism, the proposition expressed by the following sentence:

- (a) ‘There are composite entities,

where ‘there are’ is the unrestricted quantifier of English, symbolized in first-order logic as ‘ \exists ’. Some philosophers say that non-nihilism is too obviously true to be worth arguing for at length but that there is some other proposition in the vicinity that is much less obvious and very much worth arguing for. Different philosophers offer different suggestions as to what the nearby proposition is. One might think that such a proposition can be expressed with one of the following sentences:

⁵ Descartes (1967: 221), originally published in 1644.

- (b) $\exists_O x$ x is composite.
- (c) *It is really the case that* there are composite entities.
- (d) $\exists_a x$ x is composite or $\exists_m x$ x is composite.

Start with (b). Following Korman (2015), I use ‘ \exists_O ’ in to symbolize the unrestricted *Ontologese quantifier*, which Sider (2009: 412) introduces with the stipulation that, if it has any meaning at all, it has the most natural quantifier-like meaning. In other words, (b) says that *there are_O* composites, where the meaning of ‘there are_O’ is as similar to the meaning of the unrestricted quantifier in English as is consistent with the fact that the meaning of ‘there are_O’ is perfectly natural.

Next turn to (c), which uses Fine’s primitive, non-truth-functional ‘in reality’ operator. According to Fine, this operator allows us ‘consistently to affirm that something is the case and yet deny that it is really the case’ (2001: 3). The proposition expressed by (c) says that in reality there are composites.

Finally, consider (d). McDaniel (2009, 2010) suggests that there might be, not just one, but several perfectly natural quantifier-like meanings, each associated with a different ontological category, each more natural than the meaning of the unrestricted quantifier of English, and each more natural than any quantifier-like meaning whose associated domain is the union of their domains.

To simplify, we can pretend that there are exactly two such meanings, one of which is the mode of being enjoyed by abstract entities, the other of which is the mode of being enjoyed by concrete entities. Following McDaniel (2010), I use ‘ \exists_a ’ to express the former and ‘ \exists_m ’ to express the latter. So understood, what (d) says, roughly, is that there are composites, in one or the other of the two fundamental senses of ‘there are’. (McDaniel discusses the hypothesis that the English ‘ \exists ’ ranges over entities that are not in the domain of any fundamental quantifier. He calls such entities *beings-by-courtesy*, and he briefly considers the suggestion that composite objects – perhaps even ourselves – are beings-by-courtesy.)

Let us say that any proposition expressed by any of (b), (c), or (d) is a version of *deep* non-nihilism.⁶ This leaves open the hypothesis that none of those sentences expresses a proposition at all. It also leaves open the hypothesis that one or more of them does express a proposition, but that in each case the proposition expressed is just non-nihilism itself, which is also expressed by (a). So it might turn out that non-nihilism is a version of deep non-nihilism. This is odd but harmless.

⁶ Cameron (2010) and Sider (2013) are pretty explicit in recognizing the distinction between non-nihilism and deep non-nihilism, and they take themselves to be attacking only the latter.

I argue for non-nihilism. I do not know whether there are versions of deep non-nihilism that are distinct from non-nihilism. If there are, I do not argue for them. My reason for setting them aside is not that I ‘reject the ideology’ used to express them (I don’t), nor is it that I think that non-nihilism is more important than any of them (I don’t).

Rather, my reason is this. First, I have what I take to be a forceful argument for non-nihilism, but I can’t at the moment see how to argue for any version of deep non-nihilism. Second, I have been convinced, mainly by Korman (2015), that non-nihilism is worth defending in its own right, whether or not (b) – (d) express propositions that are even *more* worth defending. Korman argues that the familiar, well-understood arguments against composite objects – the arguments from vagueness, from arbitrariness and anthropocentrism, from causal overdetermination, from parsimony, and from the puzzles of material constitution – are arguments against *non-nihilism*, not against any of the above versions of *deep* non-nihilism. So, one reason why non-nihilism is worth defending is that there are famous and potentially convincing arguments against it.

But isn’t non-nihilism just obvious? My view is that non-nihilism is true. It might be obvious, but it is not obvious to me whether it is obvious. In any event, there do seem to have been some philosophers who doubted, not (or not just) deep non-nihilism, but non-nihilism itself. So it is worthwhile to find out whether there is anything we can say that might increase their credence in non-nihilism.

3. The *cogito*

In the context of their qualified defense of nihilism, Rosen and Dorr discuss a version of the *cogito* (without endorsing it):

An important part of the compositional nihilist’s strategy for undermining your belief in galaxies and tables and molecules and even other people is the observation that things would seem the same way to you whether or not those composite things existed, provided that the atoms continued to be arranged in the same way. . . . But when your own existence is challenged, you might well respond: “No one *else* would be able to tell the difference if my atoms were arranged as they are even though I didn’t exist. But *I* can tell the difference. If I did not exist, things would not seem any way at all *to me*. My own existence is immediately evident, for while I can doubt that things really are the way they seem to me, I cannot doubt that things do seem that way to me.” (2002: 159, italics original)

It is unclear whether Rosen and Dorr think that there is an argument for ‘I exist’ in the neighborhood of these remarks, or whether they see that claim as basic. I’ll treat it as the conclusion of an argument. I’ll also switch from ‘exist’ to ‘have being’, to avoid objections from those who take the former to be stronger than the latter. My official statement of the *cogito* as an argument for non-nihilism will be this:

- | | |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| Premise 1 | I am conscious. |
| Premise 2 | Anything that is conscious has being. |

- Conclusion 1 I have being.
 Premise 3 If I have being, then I am composite.
 Premise 4 If I have being and am composite, then non-nihilism is true.
 Conclusion 2 Non-nihilism is true.

Nihilists have typically granted the Premises 2 – 4 and rejected Premise 1. Let me say a few words about each of these.

Premise 4 won't be in doubt. I include it (along with Conclusion 2) just as a matter of taste. I've stated nihilism as the view that there aren't any composite entities. If there is such a thing as myself and if that thing is composite, then there's at least one composite entity, in which case non-nihilism is true.

I don't expect Premise 2 to face any resistance either. Maybe 'I have being' is a logical consequence of 'I am conscious' and Premise 2 is just an idle logical truth. But maybe not. Maybe there are false instances of the schema 'Anything that is F has being'. ('Anything that is fictional/unreal/dead/entirely past/possible has being'?) Even so, surely Premise 2 is not like that. Whether or not there are, say, unreal things that don't have being, surely there are no *conscious* things that don't have being. In any case, nihilists haven't pushed back on Premise 2, and I won't say any more about it.

Premise 3 has been challenged in other contexts.⁷ But it's plausible and nihilists tend to accept it. The main motivation for it runs as follows. First, I'm not an abstract, non-spatial, causally inert entity such as a set, number, property, relation, or proposition. If I exist at all, I'm a concrete entity such as a soul, a body, an electron, a spacetime region, a field, or maybe even an event or a trope. Second, we have (partly empirical) grounds for denying that there are souls or other concrete non-physical entities. Third, among concrete physical entities, the only plausible candidates for being me are medium-sized objects such as human organisms, brains, parts of central nervous systems, things that mereologically coincide⁸ with such objects – or perhaps events involving such entities. All these things are composite. Among concrete physical entities with a strong claim to be *simple*, none is even remotely plausible as a candidate for being me. I am not a subatomic particle. I am not a spacetime point. I am not a trope. This gives us a sketch of the case for Premise 3: if I have being, I'm composite.

⁷ Substance dualists – e.g., Swinburne (1997) – often take themselves to be purely spiritual, non-physical simples. But there are others who take themselves to be *simple* though not spiritual or non-physical in any straightforward way. E.g., Chisholm (1989) presents an argument to the effect that he is a small physical particle, and Lowe (2001) takes himself to be an extended simple whose shape, size, mass, and spatial location match those of his body. Contessa (2014) argues that nihilists should say that I exist and am *some* ('a plurality of') *simples*.

⁸ 'x mereologically coincides with y' means 'x overlaps (shares a part with) exactly the same things as does y'.

Finally we turn to Premise 1. According to defenders of the argument, myself included, Premise 1 is a Cartesian certainty. Among contingent a posteriori propositions at least, nothing is more evident to me, or better justified for me, than that I am conscious.⁹ None of the usual skeptical scenarios call Premise 1 into any doubt. These scenarios may give me reason to be less than certain that I'm awake, or that the universe is more than five minutes old, or that other people are conscious, or that there is an external world, or that I *was* conscious four seconds ago, but none of them gives me reason to be less than certain that I am conscious. Premise 1 has a more secure epistemic status for me than do my beliefs about the past, other minds, or tables and chairs – not to mention electrons and quarks.¹⁰

Nihilists are not convinced. Sometimes they seem to concede that there is something in the neighborhood of Premise 1 that really does have the status of a Cartesian certainty, knowable introspectively, but they deny that status to Premise 1 itself. However, they have not always been explicit about what the real certainty is.¹¹

4. The counterfactual response

In his (2005), Dorr suggests that nihilists can paraphrase ordinary talk about composite objects in counterfactual terms, as talk about how things would be if the simples were all just as they actually are but some non-nihilist theory of composition were true. The details of his proposal are complicated, however, and he never applies the proposal to the *cogito* or to talk about the self.

⁹ By 'conscious', I mean *phenomenally conscious*, as opposed to (e.g.) access conscious. To say that x is phenomenally conscious is to say that there is something it is like to be x, and to say, of some things (a plurality) xx, that they are collectively phenomenally conscious is to say that there is something it is like to be xx. I will use 'conscious' as a predicate of *subjects* of experiences, not as a predicate of experiences themselves (if there are such entities). So, if you are in pain, then *you* are conscious, as I use the term 'conscious', but the particular event that is your pain experience – if there is such an entity – is *not* conscious, not unless it is also in pain, or happy, or consciously thinking about philosophy, etc. I will use the expression 'an experience' as a catch-all for particular ('token') mental events, if such there be, such as episodes of consciously thinking, consciously dreaming, consciously perceiving, and so on.

¹⁰ I will not try to say *how* I know that I am conscious. For discussion of an argument to the effect that self-knowledge is actually more problematic than is knowledge of the external world, see Dretske (2003). For an introduction to the philosophy of self-knowledge more broadly, see Gertler (2014).

¹¹ In reply to their own version of the *cogito* argument quoted earlier, Rosen and Dorr write that the compositional nihilist has a response: "you don't exist; but the things you used to think of yourself as doing get done all the same. Certain atoms jointly think those thoughts, dream those dreams, and so forth. Things seem the way they do to those atoms jointly, but not to any single thing." . . . Whatever I might do to convince myself that I exist, it is possible that some atoms might collectively do – but when those atoms collectively think "I exist", they express a falsehood (2002: 159).

Rosen and Dorr make it clear that the nihilist should be a pluralist about the *subject(s)* of consciousness; she should say that some simples are collectively conscious, rather than that any individual thing is conscious. But Rosen and Dorr don't explicitly concede that there is any introspectively knowable certainty in the vicinity of the proposition that I am conscious, much less do they specify the content of any such certainty.

Elsewhere, in a defense of nominalism (2008), he makes a similar but less complex suggestion regarding abstract objects. There he invokes a distinction between fundamental and superficial uses of sentences, and he states nominalism with a fundamental use of the sentence, ‘there are no abstract objects’. Nominalists, Dorr says, are free to hold that sentences that are ontically committed to abstract objects (e.g., ‘spiders and insects share many anatomical properties’) are true taken superficially, as long as they deny that these sentences are true taken fundamentally. Further, he claims that nominalists can offer *paraphrases* of such sentences (and of sentences in general), where a paraphrase of a sentence S is a sentence S* ‘that, when taken in the fundamental sense, says how things would have to be for the original sentence [S] to be true in the superficial sense’ (2008: 36).

He proposes the following principle for generating these paraphrases: sentence S is true taken superficially iff the sentence rif there were abstract objects and the concrete world were just as it actually is, it would be the case that S_1 is true taken fundamentally. The idea, then, is that the sentence ‘spiders and insects share many anatomical properties’ is false taken fundamentally, since, fundamentally speaking, there are no properties or other abstract objects, but the sentence is still true taken superficially, since, fundamentally speaking, if there were abstract objects (such as properties) and the concrete world were just as it actually is, spiders and insects would share many anatomical properties.

One might adapt this more streamlined system of paraphrases to the case of composite-object talk. One might say that a sentence S is true taken superficially if and only if the sentence rif the simples were all just as they actually are but composition were universal, it would be the case that S_1 is true taken fundamentally.¹² A nihilist could then say that the sentence ‘Obama is over six feet tall’ is false taken fundamentally (on the grounds that, fundamentally speaking, there is no such thing as Obama), while saying that the given sentence is true taken superficially (since the sentence ‘if the simples were all just as they actually are but universalism about composition were true, Obama would be over six feet tall’ is true taken fundamentally).

As it stands, the view says nothing about what, if anything, is certain when the *cogito* is carried out. For example, the view does not say that ‘Descartes believed with certainty that he was thinking’ should be paraphrased as ‘Descartes believed with certainty that if the simples were just as they actually are but universalism about composition were true, he would be thinking.’ And with good reason: Descartes probably never had that counterfactual belief.¹³

¹² ‘Composition is universal’ is shorthand for ‘for any things xx, there is some y such that xx compose y’. Alternatively, one might replace ‘composition is universal’ with a sentence expressing some other non-nihilist theory of composition, e.g., a common-sense theory. Nothing here depends on this issue, so I will ignore it.

¹³ Rather, the view says that the original sentence about Descartes should be paraphrased as ‘if the simples were just as they actually are but composition were universal, Descartes would have believed that he was thinking’. The view says that the former is true taken superficially iff the latter is true taken fundamentally.

But the view does say that ‘I am conscious’ should be paraphrased as ‘if all the simples were just as they actually are but composition were universal, then I would be conscious’. So it’s worth asking whether the latter sentence (used fundamentally) expresses the real certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious>.¹⁴

Let me formulate the counterfactual response a little more precisely. Throughout the paper I will put things from own perspective and focus on my own case, though of course the reader will want to focus on the corresponding propositions about herself. Those who recognize a distinction between superficial and fundamental uses of sentences should assume that I am using sentences fundamentally, except where I say otherwise or where context makes this clear. With all this in place, the counterfactual response can be stated thus:

The proposition that I am conscious – call it p_I – is not introspectively knowable-with-certainty by me. There is exactly one proposition that is both (i) appropriately similar to p_I and (ii) introspectively knowable-with-certainty by me, or by these simples collectively, or from the perspective of this episode of thinking, or ‘in here’, etc. In other words, there is exactly one *certainty in the vicinity of* p_I . That certainty is the proposition – call it CF – that if all the simples were just as they actually are but composition were universal, then I would be conscious.

The counterfactual response does not claim that the proposition CF is in fact introspectively known-with-certainty by me, but merely that it is *knowable* (with certainty, introspectively). The idea is that the proposition CF is *in a position* to be so known. Roughly, it would be so known were it entertained explicitly and attended to carefully.

What should we make of this proposal? Some of the problems that it faces are very general, in the sense that, *prima facie*, they apply equally to similar counterfactual paraphrases of many other sentences. Thus one might worry about the status of CF as a counterpossible,¹⁵ and one might worry about whether there is such a proposition as CF if I don’t have being. (It’s natural to think that CF is a singular proposition about me.) I will set these general objections aside.

My argument against the counterfactual response is just that CF is too weak to capture what is knowable introspectively when the *cogito* is carried out. What is knowable in that situation is a proposition that logically entails that some thing or things are conscious (perhaps collectively), or that there is an experience. CF has no

¹⁴ ‘<I am conscious>’ is short for ‘the proposition that I am conscious’.

¹⁵I am inclined to believe that nihilism is necessary if true. So, if nihilism is true, then CF has an impossible antecedent, which according to Stalnaker (1968) and Lewis (1973) entails that CF is vacuously true. And it’s not plausible that the

such entailment. CF is logically consistent with the hypothesis that, to put it roughly, our world is totally devoid of consciousness and experiences. Here is a logically consistent (not to say metaphysically possible) hypothesis according to which CF is true but nothing is conscious:¹⁶

Simples Arranged Zombie-wise. The simples are just as they actually are, but there are no composite entities. Further, no individual thing is conscious, no (plurality of) things are *collectively* conscious, and there are no experiences. It is metaphysically possible that the simples are just as they actually are but that composition is universal, so that when some simples are arranged person-wise, they compose a person. And it is a metaphysically necessary that an entity is conscious only if it is a composite physical object that is undergoing the appropriate internal ‘consciousness-constituting’ causal processes. The simples are so arranged that, if composition were universal, some of the resulting entities would be composite physical objects that undergo the appropriate causal processes; and in particular I would have being, have proper parts, and be conscious.

In short, *Simples Arranged Zombie-wise* is what results when we start with a common sense ‘substance physicalist’ picture of the world, then subtract the composite objects and consciousness, and then stipulate that the modal facts are such as to make it true both that (i) the composite objects *could* be brought back without altering the simples and that (ii) if the composite objects *were* brought back, consciousness would come back too.

One thing that I can rule out with certainty when I run through the *cogito* is that our world is a zombie world. But if the only certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> were the counterfactual proposition CF, then I wouldn’t be able to rule out *Simples Arranged Zombie-wise*, and hence I wouldn’t be able to rule out the hypothesis that our world is a zombie world. So the counterfactual response is false.¹⁷

So far the lesson is this. The certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> logically entails that (to put it roughly) there is actual, categorical consciousness, not merely that there would be consciousness if things were different in a certain way. I now turn to a few responses that take this lesson on board.

relevant introspective certainty is vacuously true. But like Dorr (2008: 37) and Kim and Maslen (2006), I am inclined to say that some counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are true and that some are false.

¹⁶ I will treat cases as entities that have propositions as logical consequences, so officially these ‘cases’ should be propositions or sets or pluralities of them. But for stylist reasons I will sometimes speak of them as obtaining or occurring. Nothing depends on this.

¹⁷ Rosen and Dorr say that if one is an agnostic about composite objects, one should ‘adopt a general policy of committing oneself only to the atomistic adequacy (or truth according to some theory of composition) of what one says or thinks’ (2002: 170). In this vein, one might wonder whether the certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> is just the proposition

5. The general plural response

The nihilist might be tempted to say that what is introspectively certain when the *cogito* is carried out is merely that there are some simple particles that are collectively conscious. Sider hints at something like this:

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 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**? (2013: 268, boldface added)

This can't be quite right, however, since one can't be certain via introspection that there are such things as particles or simples. For all I can tell introspectively, I might be gunky¹⁸ or made of some homogeneous, non-particulate ectoplasm, and similarly for everything else. Perhaps, then, the certainty is just that

GP there are some things that are [collectively] conscious.

In terms of plural quantifiers and variables and a monadic predicate 'C' (which takes both singular terms and plural terms) for being conscious, this can be regimented as: $\exists xx Cxx$. One nice feature of this response is that it predicts that I can rule out the possibility that this is a zombie world: unlike CF, GP *does* have, as a logical consequence, the proposition that some thing or things are conscious. (GP *is* that proposition!)

The response can be generalized somewhat. Consider a situation that we would ordinarily describe as one in which I'm in pain and am introspectively certain of it. The nihilist who endorses the general plural response would say that it is *not* introspectively certain that *I* am in pain. Instead, she would say, what is introspectively certain is that *there are some things that are [collectively] in pain* ($\exists xx Pxx$).

Of course, I can't be certain introspectively that there are *many* things that are collectively conscious, as opposed there being just a *single* thing that is conscious. But GP doesn't require this. From the claim that Maria is conscious ('*Cm*'), it follows that there are some things, *xx*, that are conscious (' $\exists xx Cxx$ '). An individual thing such as Maria counts as some things (a plurality), specifically, some things which are such that there is only one of them. So GP is consistent with the view that there are some things such that *there is only one of them* and it/they

<according to the theory that composition is universal, I am conscious>. It is not. The latter proposition is logically consistent with, and seems to be metaphysically necessitated by, Simple Arranged Zombie-wise.

¹⁸ 'x is gunky' means 'each of x's parts has a proper part'. Given the reflexivity and transitivity of parthood, it follows that gunky objects have no simple parts.

are conscious. The plural variable ‘xx’ is simply broader than the singular variable ‘x’: ‘xx’ is *neutral* between singularity and plurality, whereas ‘x’ enforces singularity and excludes plurality.

6. Missing *de re* content

However, GP is too weak. It is logically consistent with:

I, *Zombie*. There are many people who are conscious and are having experiences. However, although I do have being and am physically a normal human being, I am not conscious and am not having any experiences. I’m a zombie. Nothing that overlaps me is conscious. And nothing that overlaps me is one of some things that are collectively conscious. In particular, it is not the case that *these* are conscious. (More on ‘these’ in section 9.)

This scenario can be immediately ruled out on the basis of what is introspectively certain in the vicinity of <I am conscious>. I am introspectively certain of something that is logically inconsistent with *I, Zombie*. But if the only certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> is GP (<some things are [collectively] conscious>), then I wouldn’t be able to rule that scenario out. After all, GP is consistent with, and in fact logically entailed by, the scenario. In the scenario, many individual people are conscious. Hence there is at least one (single-membered) plurality of things are conscious.

The lesson here is that, when the *cogito* is carried out, the relevant certainty is something *de se* or at least *de re*: it is a singular proposition directly about *me*, or *this* experience, or *these* things. The counterfactual response respects this point. It says that the certainty is that if the simples were all just as they actually are but composition were universal, *I* would be conscious.

7. Negative certainties

Many *cogito*-style certainties seem to be atomic propositions that predicate ‘positive’ mental properties such as being conscious or being in pain. But there are other propositions, with equal claim to certainty, that are negative.¹⁹ For example, as I would ordinarily put it, I am certain that

¹⁹ Negative propositions figure prominently in Williams’s (1978: 95-101) criticisms of Lichtenberg’s (1793-6/2000: 190) response to the *cogito*. Lichtenberg writes that ‘we should say *it thinks*, just as we say *it lightens*. To say *cogito* is already to say too much as soon as we translate it *I think*’ (1793-6/2000: 190). Lichtenberg’s view is quoted approvingly by Mach (1885/1959: 85). Schlick claims that the certainty in the vicinity of ‘I think’ is expressed by ‘the contents of consciousness exist’ (1925/1985: 85).

To the extent that I can understand Lichtenberg and Schlick, they are defending, in rather obscure terms, the response given more clearly and explicitly by Russell, which I discuss in section 8. For discussion of Williams’s argument, see Van Cleve (1999: 256-257), Johnston (2010: 142), and Peacocke (2014: 127-146). For further discussion of Lichtenberg’s

NEG I am not in excruciating pain.²⁰

I am not saying that NEG can play the same role in the *cogito* as the proposition that I am conscious.²¹ The point is rather that NEG is no less certain for me than is the proposition that I am conscious.

Might it be that I really am in excruciating pain but due to some quirk of my neural wiring I lack access to it? I think not. I remain convinced that NEG is certain, *modulo* the question of how it might need to be paraphrased. Perhaps certain parts of my brain or body are in pain. I can't rule that out. But if they are, then I am not identical to any of them, since I am not in pain. That is certain.

I maintain, then, that the nihilist's paraphrase strategy needs to be able to handle the negative certainties along with the positive ones. The counterfactual response has no trouble with this. It says that the certainty in the vicinity of NEG is that if composition were universal and all the simples were as they actually are, then I would not be in excruciating pain. But what can the general plural response offer us in place of NEG?

One might suggest the proposition that there are no things that are in excruciating pain. But far from being certain, this is almost certainly false, in light of how things are elsewhere, with other people.

Alternatively, the friend of the general plural response might suggest the proposition that there are some things that are not in excruciating pain. This avoids the problem of being falsified by how things are with others. But it is starting to seem *ad hoc*. Other things being equal, the certainty in the vicinity of <I am not in pain>, whatever it turns out to be, ought to be the negation of the certainty in the vicinity <I am in pain>, whatever *it* turns out to be. The 'alternative' general plural proposal just mentioned is not the negation of its 'positive' counterpart. To be fair, the same is true of the counterfactual response. But at least the latter is systematic. As for the general plural paraphrase of NEG, it is unclear whether it can be seen as issuing from any more general principle.

Further, the alternative proposal still misses the relevant *de re* content. As the obvious variant of the *I*, *Zombie* case brings out, what is certain is not merely that some things are not in pain, but that it is I, or these, or whatever, who are not in pain.

reply to Descartes, and of views about the semantics of 'I' (e.g., Anscombe (1990)) that are Lichtenbergian in spirit, see Katz (1990). For a discussion of *how* one might know negative propositions introspectively, see Stoljar (2012).

²⁰ Moore gives another example that I cannot resist quoting: 'There is nothing of which I am more certain than that I am *not* at this moment experiencing those extremely striking and unmistakable sense-data, which I can only describe as those which I should be experiencing if a brass-band were playing loudly in this room' (1953: 253).

²¹ I am also not endorsing any generalization, such as the claim that anyone who believes him or herself to be in excruciating pain really is in excruciating pain, or the claim that anyone who is in excruciating pain and who reflects on the matter will come to believe him or herself to be in excruciating pain.

8. Russell, Carnap, and experiences

The propositions <I am conscious> and <there are some things that are collectively conscious> both entail that there are ‘thinkers’ or ‘subjects of experience’ – individuals or pluralities that (perhaps collectively) *do* the thinking. Critics of the *cogito* sometimes say that the hypothesis that there are thinkers, in this sense, is not introspectively certain. What is certain, they say, is merely that there are experiences or episodes of thinking. Russell, for example, wrote that

“I think” is [Descartes’s] ultimate premiss. Here the word “I” is really illegitimate; he ought to state his ultimate premiss in the form “there are thoughts” (1945: 567).

As I understand him, Russell would say that the certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> from this perspective is the existentially generalized proposition that

R there is an experience ($\exists xEx$).

This response predicts that when I run through the *cogito*, I can rule out the possibility that the world is devoid of consciousness and experiences. So it avoids the problem that confronted the counterfactual response.

However, it offers no help with negative certainties. Russellian surrogates for <I am not in excruciating pain> are either false in light of how things are with others (<there is no excruciating pain experience>) or *ad hoc* (<there is an experience that is not an excruciating pain experience>). Further, Russell’s response is vulnerable to the problem of missing *de re* content. So far as R goes, it might be that many other people have experiences but, though I have being, I am not conscious and have no experiences. In other words, R is logically consistent with the *I, Zombie* scenario.²²

A more promising proposal is gestured at by Carnap in the *Aufbau*:

The *sum* does not follow from the *cogito*. It does not follow from “I experience” that “I am”, but only that an experience is. . . . [A] more fitting expression than “I experience” would be “experience” or, still better, “this experience”. Thus, we ought to replace the Cartesian dictum by “this experience; therefore this experience is”, and this of course is a mere tautology. (section 163, p. 261, 1976, trans. Rolf A. George)

As I read this passage, Carnap is saying, in an extremely garbled manner, that what was certain for Descartes was the proposition expressed by ‘this is an experience’ in the relevant context, where the word ‘this’ is accompanied by whatever intentions or acts of inner ostension might be necessary to secure reference.

Carnap interpretation aside, the natural suggestion is that the certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> is the singular proposition that

C this is an experience (*Ea*).

This proposal deserves much more attention than I will give it here. Three questions arise right away. (1) Does Carnap's response deal successfully with the problem of missing *de re* content? (In view of C's status as a singular proposition about a particular experience, Carnap's response seems well-placed to handle this problem – though, strictly speaking, C is still logically consistent with *I, Zombie*.) (2) Does Carnap's response, or some variant of it, deal successfully with the problem of negative certainties? (3) Can there be ownerless experiences? I can't do justice to any of these issues here. Instead, in the next section, I focus on a problem about invoking experiences in the context of a defense of nihilism.

Before that, however, I want to deflate a bit of the hype surrounding proposals like Russell's and Carnap's. There is a tendency to think that Russell, Carnap, and their allies are adopting a more *cautious*, *parsimonious* view about what we have a right to be certain of, on the basis of introspection, than does Descartes. The tendency is to embrace the following picture. Descartes thinks that the certainty is <I am conscious>, which is logically strong enough to imply²³ <I have being>. But Russell and Carnap think that the relevant certainty is logically weaker than this, and too weak to imply <I have being>. According to them, the certainty is merely <there is an experience> or <this is an experience>.

But much of this picture is badly wrong, in a way that unfairly benefits Russell and Carnap. True, <I am conscious> implies <I have being>, whereas <there is an experience> and <this is an experience> do not. But it doesn't follow that the Russell/Carnap propositions are logically weaker than the Descartes proposition! They're not. After all, they imply <there is an experience>, but <I am conscious> doesn't.²⁴ The Descartes proposition is *logically independent* of the Russell/Carnap propositions.

Accordingly, the Russell-Carnap view is not any more *cautious* or *parsimonious* than is the traditional Cartesian view; it's just different. Descartes thinks that introspection suffices to rule out 'No Self' views of mental phenomena. That strikes some philosophers as a rather bold claim. After all, such views have been

²² For other criticisms of Russell's views on this issue, see Moore (1962: 193-222).

²³ Or, if not imply, then obviously metaphysically necessitate. In the remainder of this section, by 'imply', I mean 'imply or obviously metaphysically necessitate'.

²⁴ At least not obviously. Perhaps there is some route from event semantics to the conclusion that <there is an experience> follows from <I am conscious>. On event semantics, see Parsons (1990).

developed in detail over many centuries,²⁵ they are not obviously incoherent, and on the whole they are highly respectable options in the metaphysical arena. But, by the same token, Russell and Carnap are committed to the view that introspection suffices to rule out eliminativism about experiences and events generally. That strikes *me* as a bold claim. After all, the view that there are events is a substantive metaphysical thesis, and one that has been denied by many. Its negation, eliminativism about events, has been developed in detail and is apparently coherent. van Inwagen (2014), for one, has defended the view that (i) there are people and other substances (which are all concrete particulars), and (ii) there are properties, relations, and propositions (which are abundant, hyperintensionally individuated, causally inert abstract entities), but (iii) there are no tropes or events or processes or token states or similar entities, and so no experiences.²⁶ Thus, e.g., some people are in pain and instantiate the property of being in pain, but there are no pains. According to the Russell-Carnap view, we can be certain on the basis of introspection that van Inwagen's theory is false. The Cartesian view makes no such claim. <I am conscious> leaves it open that there are no experiences (though see note 24).

9. Experiences as composite

The proposals of Russell and Carnap are worth taking seriously. But when treated as replies to the *cogito* on behalf of nihilists, they are pretty useless. They exchange commitment to *selves*, which are plausibly composite if they have being, for commitment to *experiences*. But experiences, too, are plausibly composite if they have being – no less than selves are.²⁷ (More on this in a moment.) So, if one's goal is to capture the certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> and let the ontological and mereological chips fall where they may, then the Russell-Carnap approach is a real contender. However, if one's goal is to defend the radically sparse, physics-based ontology that

²⁵ For a brief and accessible entry point into the literature on the No Self theories of Nāgārjuna and other Indian Buddhist philosophers, see Sorabji (2006: 278-297).

²⁶ Merricks (2015: 26, note 15 and elsewhere) endorses (i) – (iii) as well. Prior (2003: 7-20) and Skow (2015: 26, 41) hold that there are things/substances but not events or properties, relations, or propositions.

²⁷ And even if they are *not* composite they will be objectionable to nihilists for some of the same reasons that we ourselves are. (1) Sider (2013: 238-245) gives an argument from ideological parsimony against composite objects such as ourselves. (If composites exist, we need a joint-carving predicate, 'part of', to state facts about the relations between composites and their parts. Without composites, no such predicate is needed.) A parallel argument can be run against experiences. Experiences, if there are such entities, are events. But if there are events, then some joint-carving piece of ideology will be needed to state the facts about the relations between events and their participants. So realism about events has ideological costs in addition to its obvious ontic costs. (2) Relatedly, if experiences and other events have being, they would still plausibly be non-fundamental entities in the sense that the facts about them would be *grounded* in other facts. For example, let *o* and *o** be simple particles and suppose that there is such an event as the collision of *o* and *o** at *t*. Call this event *e*. Then the fact that *e* has being is at least partially grounded in the fact that *o* and *o** collided at *t*. Put differently, *e* has being because *o* and *o** collided at *t*. If, as most nihilists seem to think, one's ontology should not include any entities that are non-fundamental in this sense, and if the example generalizes, then nihilists should deny that there are events. Finally, I suspect that event talk is no harder to paraphrase (in a manner acceptable to eliminativists about events) than is talk of composite objects.

is typically favored by nihilists – e.g., that everything is either a simple spacetime point or a causally inert abstract entity such as a set²⁸ – then the Russell-Carnap approach is a non-starter.²⁹

As to the specific nihilist ontology just mentioned, it should be obvious that experiences, if they exist, are not spacetime points. Which spacetime point is identical to this pain? Nor are they abstract entities. If there are such entities as this pain and that itch, they have causes and effects, and one is earlier than the other; hence they are concrete, not abstract. So the Russell-Carnap approach is off limits to those who defend the view that everything is either a spacetime point or an abstract entity. No surprise there.

Further, it is plausible that experiences, if they have being, are *composite* entities: they have proper parts. There are at least three arguments for this claim. (1) *From phenomenal complexity*. According to one natural realist view about experiences, some experiences are *manifestly* composite – they wear their compositeness on their sleeves, so speak – in virtue of having other experiences as proper parts.³⁰ For example, one might hold that there are multi-modal experiences, e.g., an experience as of feeling a chunk of apple in one’s mouth while hearing oneself chew it. And one might hold that such a multimodal experience will at least typically have, as a proper part, an experience as of feeling a chunk of apple in one’s mouth. (2) *From temporal extension*. Experiences, if such there be, are events and are, arguably, at least typically temporally extended. (See Lee 2014b: 152.) But temporally extended events have proper parts; specifically, they have proper temporal parts.³¹ It follows that experiences, if such there be, are at least typically composite. (3) *From complexity of physical basis*. Suppose that there are instantaneous, phenomenally uniform experiences. There is a case to be made that even these experiences have proper parts. Given physicalism, experiences are either identical to or realized by (or constituted by or grounded in) *physical* events – presumably highly complex physical events involving the properties of and relations between a great many subatomic particles or spacetime points. But any event that is so realized will itself be composite: it will have, as proper parts, less complex events involving some of the particles or points whose activities help to realize the experience in question.

Granted, the fundamental parthood relation that holds between events might be different from the one that holds between material objects. But nihilism, as I understand it, is that view that no entity in any ontological category has proper parts. And I assume that if there is a fundamental parthood relation that holds between one

²⁸ See Sider (2013: 253, note 33).

²⁹ Obviously the same goes for any reply to the *cogito* – such as that of Johnston (2010: 139-142) – that invokes experiences. As I understand him, Johnston holds that the real certainty in the vicinity of <I am in pain> is <there is a pain experience that is occurring *here* [at the center of this ‘arena of presence’]>. But Johnston does not defend nihilism.

³⁰ E.g., Bayne (2010: 21). See Lee (2014a) for discussion and many further references.

³¹ This is a standard view about events. It is endorsed even by philosophers who hold that material objects persist without having proper temporal parts. See, e.g., Thomson (1977: 125) and Simons (1987: 129). Philosophers disagree about how to define ‘temporal part’ (see Hawley (2010) for an entry point into the literature), but they agree that proper temporal parts are proper parts.

event and another, and if that relation really is a *parthood* relation, then some events have proper parts, and nihilism is false. One might reply by saying that events have proper constituents, not proper parts. But this strikes me as a distinction without a difference. What is constituency, and how does it differ from parthood, such that there are good reasons to believe that nothing has proper parts, but no good reasons to believe that nothing has proper constituents?

10. The particular plural response

The final response that I will consider is the particular plural response, PPR. According to PPR, the certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious> is the proposition that

PP these are conscious,

where (i) this is a Russellian proposition that is directly about certain things and (ii) it predicates of them the plural property of being collectively conscious. (There may be just one of them; there may be many.) If we use ‘*aa*’ a plural name, we can regiment PP as: *Caa*. Contessa (2014) proposes that ‘I’ is *already* a plural term like ‘these’ or ‘*aa*’, so his view fits together quite naturally with PPR. But the two views can be evaluated independently.

Setting aside doubts about the existence of token thoughts and their components, the idea is this. Just as the ‘I’ in an ‘I’-thought refers to the thinker of that thought, the ‘these’ in a ‘these’-thought refers plurally to the thinker(s) of that thought. So, if the thought has an individual entity (say, a composite physical object) as its thinker, then the ‘these’ refers to that entity, and if the thought has 20 billion simples as its ‘collective thinkers’, then the ‘these’ refers plurally to those continuum-many entities – from which it does not follow that it refers to any one of them individually. (I suspect that most nihilists will want to deny the existence of such entities as token thoughts, for reasons sketched earlier. These nihilists may wish to restate this paragraph by judicious use of phrases like ‘if the simples were as they actually are but there were such entities as token thoughts’.)

The particular plural response avoids several of the problems that the other responses have encountered. It avoids commitment to experiences. It predicts that I am able to rule out the hypothesis that the world is devoid of consciousness. And it predicts that I can rule out the *I, Zombie* scenario as well, since it’s built into that scenario that these are not conscious. So it avoids the problem of missing *de re* content. Finally, there is the problem of negative certainties. Eventually I will argue that a version of this problem is fatal to PPR. Initially, though, PPR seems to handle the problem of negative certainties quite naturally. It allows us to say that the certainty in the vicinity of NEG is just that these are not in excruciating pain.

11. Criticism of the particular plural response: Warmup

I turn now to criticism of PPR. Roughly, the argument is just that, if nihilism is true, then <these are not in excruciating pain> puts me in a position to know certain propositions that I am not in fact in a position to know. Hence <these are not in excruciating pain> is not such a certainty. As for the propositions it puts me in a position to know, it's best to begin with a pair of warm-up examples.

First Example: the Nation of China. Recall the 'Nation of China' thought experiment from Block (1980). We set up a one-to-one correspondence between the people in China and the neurons in someone's brain. We give people radios that they can use to signal to certain other people, so that the radio links between the people mirror the electrochemical links between the corresponding neurons. The people in China then use their radios to implement a pattern of signaling that precisely mirrors the pattern of neural firings in the brain of a conscious person over, say, a one-minute-long interval. It might take the people much longer to implement this pattern via radio signaling, but the pattern of causal relations will be the same. Block takes this case to be a counterexample to functionalism about mental properties. He argues that the Nation of China would not in fact be conscious, and that functionalists must say that it would be. For present purposes, it's not important whether Block is right about these specific claims.

Second Example: AM-FM. This is like the Nation of China example, except that the people in China simultaneously model the neural firing patterns of two different human brains, undergoing radically different experiences. They do this by using radios that have an AM channel and an FM channel. Using the AM channel, they model the neural firing pattern P_F of a person who is happy and pain-free. (For reasons that will become clear in the next section, the 'F' is for *familiar*.) Using the FM channel, they model the neural firing pattern P_U of someone who is in excruciating pain. (The 'U' is for *unfamiliar*.) What would result from this state of affairs, with respect to the realization of mental properties? This is a hard question, and we need not take a stand on it. My guess is that there would be two different entities composed of the very same people and radios, and one of these entities, 'Ms. AM', would be happy and pain-free, while the other, 'Ms. FM', would be in excruciating pain.

12. The canvas

The AM-FM case might make one start to wonder, 'Can I be certain on the basis of introspection that I am not in Ms. AM's situation?' In developing this thought, it will help to consider two ideas from David Lewis. First is his claim that

there might be several populations, interpenetrating without interaction in the single spacetime where all of them live. If so of course the inhabitants had better not interact with the shape of their spacetime as we do with the shape of ours; else this interaction enables the different populations to interact indirectly with one another (1986: 72).

Call a world like this a *no-interaction world*. Now consider supersubstantivalism, the doctrine that material objects are identical to the spacetime regions they occupy. Or, in Lewis's words,

we have the parts of spacetime, and their distance relations are the only spatiotemporal relations. The properties that we usually ascribe to occupants of spacetime – for instance properties of mass, charge, field strength – belong in fact to parts of spacetime themselves. When a part of spacetime has a suitable distribution of local properties, then it is a particle, or a piece of a field, or a donkey, or what have you (1986: 76).

Lewis tentatively endorses supersubstantivalism, but he is careful to refrain from claiming that it's a necessary truth. Taken together, the two passages above raise an interesting question that Lewis does not address: are there possible no-interaction worlds at which supersubstantivalism is true?

It seems to me that the answer is 'Yes'. The parts of spacetime might instantiate two non-interacting families of fundamental properties³², call them the F(amiliar)-properties and the U(nfamiliar)-properties. We can suppose that the F-properties are the familiar physical properties – masses, charges, spins, etc. – or whatever ultimately replaces them, and that the U-properties divide up into sub-families in an analogous way, but are unknown to us. The two families are non-interacting in the sense that F-properties are never causally relevant to U-properties or vice versa, and there are no laws connecting them. Moreover, all this might hold despite the fact that the bearers of the F-properties – spacetime and its parts – are identical to the bearers of the U-properties. With this in mind, consider the following proposition:³³

Canvas. There are some xx such that:

- (i) xx are many in number;
- (ii) each of xx is a simple spacetime point;
- (iii) xx collectively implement pattern P_U , via causal relations involving the instantiation of U-properties;
- (iv) some thing or things instantiate the property *being in excruciating pain*, and they do so at least partly in virtue of the fact that xx implement pattern P_U . Specifically: either xx compose something that is in excruciating pain or xx are collectively in excruciating pain;
- (v) if I have being, I am composed of xx; and if they compose anything, they compose me and I have being. If I don't have being, *these* are xx.

³² And/or relations. Henceforth I omit this qualification.

³³ I appeal to event-like entities in describing this case. Those who doubt the possibility of such entities should re-describe the case in a way that avoids any mention of events, perhaps along the lines suggested by van Inwagen (2014).

We can think of spacetime as a canvas upon which the fundamental physical properties are painted. We might then consider the hypothesis that one family of properties is painted on one side of the canvas, and a whole other family of properties is painted on the other. Given the lack of interaction between the two families, if a certain event occurs on one side of the canvas, then all of its causes and effects will be confined to the same side of the canvas. Presumably this hypothesis is consistent with all of our observational data.

But if so, then it seems that Canvas is consistent with all of my observational and introspective data too. For it might be that, purely by coincidence, the chunk of canvas that is most closely associated with me happens to host a pain-realizing pattern of properties and causal relations on its reverse side.

To begin to see how this bears on PPR, recall that, as I would ordinarily put it, I am introspectively certain that I am not in excruciating pain. Still, for all I can tell introspectively, Canvas might be true. My simples are, I assume, implementing a causal pattern involving F-properties, a causal pattern that gives rise to ‘these thoughts and experiences’ – happiness and bodily comfort. But as far as I can tell on the basis of introspection, these simples might also be implementing some other causal pattern, via causal relations involving the U-properties, and this other pattern might be giving rise to excruciating pain.

This suggests two arguments against the conjunction of PPR and nihilism: an epistemic argument and a counterfactual argument. I begin with the former.

13. The epistemic canvas argument

I cannot know with certainty that Canvas is false just on the basis of introspective data, even together with certain knowledge of the true theory of composition (if somehow I could have that). Introspection does not give me access to facts about the paint on the other side of the canvas.

To be sure, parsimony, simplicity, or some other *a priori* principle may give me reason to assign a low probability to Canvas. But such considerations would apply uniformly to the entire ‘reverse side of the canvas’; they wouldn’t give me better access to the reverse side of *these* simples than to the reverse side of some other, far-away plurality of simples.

So here is a fact that should constrain our theories of composition and our theories about the certainty in the vicinity of NEG:

No Differential Access. I do not have better evidence for the proposition that

(a) Canvas is not true

than I do for the proposition, concerning some arbitrarily-chosen, far-away plurality *oo*, that

(b) it is not the case that:

- *oo* are many in number;
- each of *oo* is a simple spacetime point;
- *oo* collectively implement pattern P_U , via causal relations involving the instantiation of U-properties; and
- some thing or things instantiate the property *being in excruciating pain* at least partly in virtue of the fact that *oo* implement pattern P_U . Specifically: either *oo* compose something that is in excruciating pain or *oo* are collectively in excruciating pain.

Likewise – if it is *these* rather than *I* who do the believing around here – these do not collectively have better evidence for (a) than they do for (b). For any argument that would make it rational for me, or these, to assign a certain credence to (a), there is a parallel argument that would make it rational for me, or these, to assign that same credence to (b).

The problem for PPR+nihilism is that it is in tension with No Differential Access – as are certain other, more popular packages of views. But there are packages that avoid the tension, as we will see.

Let's start with PPR+nihilism. If nihilism is true, then presumably I can know it, by believing it on the basis of some of the arguments for it. Moreover, if I can know that there are no composite entities and if PPR correctly specifies the certainty in the vicinity of NEG, then the following argument allows me to know (a) above:

Argument A

1. These are not in excruciating pain. (This is the introspective certainty in the vicinity of NEG, if PPR is true.)
2. If Canvas is true, then these *are* in excruciating pain. (This is true given nihilism.)

Therefore:

3. Canvas is not true. (modus tollens)

But I wouldn't have any analogous argument for proposition (b) above, since I have no introspective reason to believe that the far-away plurality *oo* are not in excruciating pain. Thus, loosely speaking, the PPR+nihilism package gives me a kind of access to the reverse side of *these* simples that I don't have to the reverse sides of other pluralities of simples. This conflicts with No Differential Access. So, I conclude that either nihilism or PPR is false. Nihilists should not endorse PPR.

14. The coincidental solution

The epistemic canvas argument targets the conjunction of nihilism and PPR. It doesn't target nihilism *per se*, and I suspect that nihilists who reject PPR in favor of, e.g., the counterfactual response or the Carnapian response can avoid the underlying problem. (It does not pay to go into the details.)

More importantly for us, the underlying problem can also be avoided by rejecting nihilism in favor of coincidentalism, the view that in some cases two different objects are composed of the same plurality of things. Coincidentalists are free to say that the certainty in the vicinity of NEG is just that proposition itself: <I am not in excruciating pain>.³⁴ Given these views, I should refrain from believing (2) in Argument A; hence my route to (3) is undercut.

I am certain on the basis of introspection that I am not in excruciating pain. But for all I can tell on the basis of this knowledge, even together with my knowledge of the true (coincidental, non-nihilist) theory of composition, I am composed of some simples that also compose some other person who *is* in excruciating pain, though the simples themselves are not collectively in pain.³⁵ This would make (2) false: Canvas would be true, but neither I, nor the simples that compose me, would be in pain. Rather, those simples would compose at least two things, one of which would be in pain and one of which wouldn't.

Suppose that such a situation obtains. Then, although this other person and I are both composed of the same things, she is 'on the reverse side of the canvas': her mental properties arise from causal patterns among the U-properties, whereas mine arise from causal patterns among the F-properties. My introspective certainties concern me and my mental properties; hers concern her and hers. Thus any knowledge I might have regarding the reverse side of the canvas is general and uniform. I don't have better access to the reverse side of this region than to the reverse side of any other region. No Differential Access is apparently preserved.

15. Does the argument prove too much?

The epistemic canvas argument may seem to prove too much. There's a parallel argument against the package consisting of the uniqueness of composition³⁶ and the view that the certainty in the vicinity of NEG is <I am not in excruciating pain>.

³⁴ Having rejected nihilism, I could, if I liked, retain PPR. If I have being, and if, when I think, 'these are not in excruciating pain', I am the thinker of the token 'these'-thought, then that token refers to *me*, not to the simples that compose me. So that leaves me, unlike the nihilist, free to reject (2). I can say: Canvas is true, but these (i.e., I) are (am) not in excruciating pain.

³⁵ This hypothesis is consistent with my favored theory of composition plus what I take to be the certainty in the vicinity of NEG, namely, NEG. But can the hypothesis be shown to be false on the basis of other combinations of introspective data plus more or less *a priori* philosophical truths? One might, e.g., take it to be *a priori* that if *x* and *y* are composed of the same things, then they do not differ in their mental properties. Fortunately for me there are independent reasons to think that objects composed of the same things often *do* differ mentally. See Shoemaker (1999).

³⁶ The view that no *xx* compose more than one entity.

Consider a slight variant of Canvas. According to the variant, *Canvas**, these simples are not collectively in excruciating pain; rather, they compose something that is in excruciating pain.³⁷ (The original proposition is neutral as to whether it is these simples themselves, or something they compose, that is in excruciating pain.) Now, if the uniqueness of composition is true, then presumably I can know it, by believing it on the basis of some of the arguments for it. But if so I can reason as follows:

Argument B

- 1*. I am not in excruciating pain. (Introspection)
- 2*. If *Canvas** is true, then these simples compose someone who is in excruciating pain, and the only thing they compose is me.

Therefore:

- 3*. *Canvas** is not true. (modus tollens)

Since I have no similar route to facts about arbitrary patches of canvas, the given assumptions force me to say that I have better access to the reverse side of *this* patch than to the reverse side of other patches. So, given No Differential Access, either the uniqueness of composition is false or <I am not in excruciating pain> does not correctly specify the certainty in the vicinity of NEG.

Do these arguments prove too much? I don't think so. In my view they provide forceful new considerations in favor of independently attractive conclusions – that there are composite objects, and that sometimes two different objects are composed of the same things (Thomson 1998). The Canvas argument also harmonizes with the view that pairs of coinciding objects often differ mentally (Shoemaker 1999). I'm happy, but it's independently plausible that I coincide with something (a body? a spacetime region?) that is neither happy nor sad.

16. The counterfactual canvas argument

The epistemic argument has force. But it would be nice to have another route to the same destination, especially a route that does not rely on the epistemic premise, No Differential Access. I suggest a route that runs through two counterfactual premises instead.

³⁷ Suppose that we continued to focus on the original Canvas case. Then it might turn out that (i) I am not in excruciating pain, (ii) I am composed of oo, (iii) oo are involved in a Canvas situation, and (iv) I am the only entity that oo compose. For it might be that, while *I* am happy and not in pain, oo themselves *are* collectively in pain. Thus we lack support for anything like (2), in the main text above, or (2*), in the main text below.

Let's use 'CERTAINTY' as a rigid name for that proposition, whatever it may be, that is actually the certainty in the vicinity of NEG. Finally, let's let *oo* be some (two or more) simples which are such that, if I have being, then I am composed of *oo*, and if I don't have being, then *these* are *oo*. So, if nihilism and PPR are both true, then CERTAINTY = <*oo* are not in excruciating pain>.

Now consider the following situation: things, including *oo*, are just as they actually are with regard to composition and with regard to the distribution of the F-properties, but Canvas is true. Call that 'the given situation'. Then we can state the argument as follows:

1. If the given situation were to obtain, then: (i) there would be no phenomenal difference 'in here' or 'from this perspective', and so (ii) CERTAINTY (whose truth is guaranteed by how things are phenomenally from this perspective) would still be true.
2. If nihilism and PPR are both true, then not [1].
3. So, nihilism and PPR are not both true: at least one is false. (1, 2, modus tollens)

The case for 2 is straightforward. Suppose that nihilism and PPR are both true. Then, as I mentioned in the set-up, CERTAINTY = <*oo* are not in excruciating pain>. But clearly *that* proposition would not be true if the given situation were to obtain – *contra* 1. If the given situation were to obtain, then, since nihilism is actually true (we are assuming), nihilism would still be true, but there would be U-properties distributed across the 'reverse sides' of *oo* in such a way that either *oo* themselves, or something they compose, is in excruciating pain. Given nihilism (plus the fact that there are two or more of *oo*), *oo* do not compose anything, so the only remaining option is that *oo* themselves are in excruciating pain. And in that case, the proposition <*oo* are in excruciating pain> is true, so its negation, <*oo* are not in excruciating pain>, i.e., CERTAINTY, is not true. This shows that if nihilism and PPR are true, then 1 is not true. So 2 is true.

The case for 1 is no less compelling. CERTAINTY, whatever it may be, is true. That is guaranteed by how things seem 'in here' (or 'for me' or 'for these' or 'from this perspective', and so on). Now suppose that the facts about composition and the facts about the distribution of the (familiar) F-properties were held fixed, but that some U-properties were added, in such a way as to guarantee that *oo* themselves, or something they compose, was in excruciating pain. Given that the U-properties are causally and nomically unrelated to the F-properties, it is overwhelmingly likely that the addition of the U-properties would make no difference to how things seem 'in here'. But without any such difference, CERTAINTY cannot change in truth value, since it is simply a report of how things seem from the relevant perspective. So CERTAINTY would remain true were the given situation to obtain.

In short: CERTAINTY is true and would remain true were the relevant additions made. But if nihilism and PPR are both true, then CERTAINTY *wouldn't* remain true if the relevant additions were made. So either nihilism or PPR is false. Nihilists should not endorse PPR.

If one retains PPR and rejects nihilism, one can say that CERTAINTY is, not <oo are not in excruciating pain>, but <I am not in excruciating pain>, where I am composed of, but not identical to, oo. Having said that, one could go on to agree with 1 that CERTAINTY would remain true if the relevant additions were made. If there actually are composite objects, and if oo actually compose several coinciding things, then the relevant additions could make it the case, concerning one of those things in particular, that *it* be in excruciating pain, while making no difference to how things seem 'in here', and specifically, while allowing it to be true that *I* am not in excruciating pain, as CERTAINTY says.

Conversely, if one retains nihilism but rejects PPR, one can say that CERTAINTY is, not <oo are not in excruciating pain>, but one of the other candidates for being the certainty in the vicinity of NEG. Suppose, e.g., that the Carnapian response is correct, in which case CERTAINTY = <this is not an excruciating pain>. Presumably that proposition would remain true if the relevant additions were made. Given those additions, there would be some further token experience (on the 'reverse side of the canvas'), and it would be an excruciating pain. But *this* experience, the experience that CERTAINTY is actually about, would still occur, would still be an experience, and would still *not* be an excruciating pain. So CERTAINTY would remain true, as premise 1 claims. (I suspect that some of the other nihilist proposals about the certainty in the vicinity of NEG would also allow nihilists to accept 1. But, again, it does not pay to go into the details.)

As with the epistemic canvas argument, one might take the counterfactual argument to prove too much, since a parody leads to the conclusion that either NEG or the uniqueness of composition is false. My response is the same: I welcome the conclusion, and I take the parody to count in its favor.

I conclude that if nihilism is true, then then PPR does not correctly specific the certainty in the vicinity <I am not in excruciating pain> or, presumably, in the vicinity of <I am conscious>. Nihilists will need to look elsewhere.

17. Conclusion

This completes my survey of likely nihilist proposals regarding the real certainty in the vicinity of <I am conscious>. Some of these proposals (the counterfactual response, the general plural response, Russell's response) can be shown to fail regardless of the truth about composition. Another (Carnap's response) might succeed as a specification of the relevant certainty, but only by incurring a commitment to experiences, which are plausibly composite and thus in tension with nihilism. A final proposal (PPR) fails if nihilism is true but might

succeed if coincidental non-nihilism is true. So, in one way or another, the *cogito* generates a powerful case against nihilism.³⁸

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