

Consider the following scenario. At 3pm, I combine pieces of clay that are lying throughout my art studio into a single lump of clay (Lump). A statue (Peter) comes into existence at the same time. At 6pm, Lump and Peter are destroyed by a fire that burns down my art studio.

The question that this paper will address is this: was the statue (Peter) a different object from the lump of clay (Lump)? I take it that there are two primary motivations for saying “no”: (a) a desire for ontological parsimony and/or (b) a desire to have one’s ontology accord with how, in everyday practice, most people would respond to the question “how many?” when I point to what I made at 3pm.

However, saying “no” seems to commit one to an identity thesis that faces a serious problem. According to the law of identity, in order for object A to be identical to object B, it must be the case that object A’s properties are exactly the same as object B’s properties. At first glance, it might seem that Lump and Peter have the same properties: they both are made of clay, they both have a certain shape throughout their entire existence, etc. Yet, consider what would have happened if I were to have re-molded Lump into one big, shapeless lump at 5pm before the fire. In this case, the same lump of clay (Lump) would still have existed, but the statue (Peter) would not have. Taking this as a departure point, one might make the following claim: Lump and Peter have different modal properties. From this, following the law of identity, one can reason that because they have different properties, Lump and Peter cannot be identical.

In this paper, I will argue against this conclusion. That is: I will defend the “one-thinger” position that there is only one thing that I made out of clay at 3pm and that was destroyed at 6pm. My argument will be that, contrary to what the above “two-thinger” argument asserts, it is not the case that Peter and Lump have different modal properties.

However, before I explicitly advance this claim, let us first consider two objections to accepting the two-thinger hypothesis. Doing so will help us clarify the position that this hypothesis entails.

The first objection begins with this fact: if one accepts that Peter is not identical with Lump, then one must also hold that each of them has all the properties that they have in common (the properties, in other words, that motivate the identity thesis). One might argue that this commits the two-thinger to positions that are patently false. For instance, one might claim, it must be admitted that both Peter and Lump have the property of weighing a certain amount ( $x$ ). Yet, when we put both of these supposedly separate objects on the scale, we find that their combined weight is only  $x$  (not  $2x$ ).

How is the two-thinger to respond to this charge? I take it that she should deny the premise that Peter has the property of having a *weight*. Of course, in everyday practice, we sometimes talk as if statues like Peter have weights. But this is misleading. For, in this context, we are actually using the term “statue” not to refer to aesthetic objects like Peter (the statue) but rather to material objects like Lump (the lump of clay).

Here, the two-thinger might draw a parallel to casual talk about other aesthetic objects – such as songs, poems, and stories. Take the statement “my poem is written in black ink”. As in the case with the statue and the clay, it looks like one is here making a claim about the aesthetic object (my poem). Yet, the two-thinger might argue, one is not actually referring to the aesthetic object (my poem), but rather to the words on the page that constitute my poem in this case. And this might very well make sense. For it is surely possible that I could re-produce the very same poem in red, blue, or green ink just as Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself” is re-produced in many different books that contain different colors of ink. In short, then, the two-thinger might

argue that when we correctly analyze our discourse about a “poem’s” or a “statue’s” properties, we find that we are not actually committed to it having the properties that would lead to patently false beliefs. To put it in more general terms, the two-thinger’s response to this first objection is this: she is not committed to the veracity of patently false scenarios because the properties that the two non-identical objects have in common are different than what might initially seem to be the case.<sup>1</sup>

Even though I think that this is a good strategy to pursue, I am not convinced that it will in fact be successful in the context of Lump and Peter. Yet, its plausibility helps us to clarify both (a) how a two-thinger position might be made coherent as well as (b) what such a position would actually entail. Let us further clarify this position by considering the second objection.

The second objection attacks the two-thinger’s reliance on a difference between Peter’s and Lump’s specifically *modal* properties to motivate her conclusion. It can be put as follows. If two objects *do* have genuinely different modal properties, then they will not be identical. Yet, in order for two objects to have a difference in modal properties, it must be the case that these objects also have a difference in non-modal properties. This is because *all* differences in modal properties are parasitic on differences in non-modal properties. For example, the reason that the piece of glass X would shatter if I were to hit it with a hammer but my sofa Y would not is because X is made up of different stuff than Y is. Yet, in her argument, the two-thinger did not assert the existence of any non-modal properties that Peter has but that Lump does not. So, one might wonder, is there actually any non-modal property that Peter has but that Lump does not?

---

<sup>1</sup> Another possible response to the specific problem about weights should be mentioned. Let A=weight of object A and B=weight of object B. When one weighs two objects, one does not just the formula  $A+B$  to determine their combined weight. This formula is just the formula for a specific set of cases: those in which object A and object B do not intersect. The more general formula, which also covers cases of intersecting objects, is  $A+B-(A\cap B)$ . In the Lump/Peter case, Lump and Peter completely intersect. Their combined weight is thus  $x+x-x=x$ . I think that this is also a promising route to take.

I take it that the viable two-thinger response here should exploit the same general strategy used in response to the first objection: it should focus on the nature of aesthetic objects. More specifically, it should insist on the idea that *what it is* to be a statue (a statue's "essence") is different than *what it is* to be a lump of clay (a lump of clay's "essence"). Following Kit Fine's arguments in "Essence and Modality"<sup>2</sup>, it is at least plausible (if not correct) to maintain that the concept of "essence" cannot be reduced to modal concepts, but, instead, must be used to explain why different objects have the modal properties that they do. Thus, taking Fine's work as a starting point, the two-thinger can meet this second objection as follows: Lump and Peter have different essences, and thus their non-modal (as well as modal) properties are non-identical.

However, one might wonder if it is in fact true that Peter and Lump have different essences. Indeed, one might wonder how one could ever *know* such a thing at all. This brings me to the heart of my argument in favor of the one-thinger hypothesis. For what motivates the two-thinger claim that Lump and Peter have different essences? Even if essence is (correctly I think) given a non-modal definition, in order to use this position to support her argument, it must be that the two-thinger has epistemic access to the essences of Lump and Peter in a way that does not rest on any specifically modal claims. And, in this case, I think the two-thinger is in fact tacitly relying on a supposed difference in modal properties as epistemic support for her claim that Lump and Peter have different essences. Moreover – or at least so I will argue – these purportedly different modal properties are not ones that even exist.

My position is as follows. Call the totality of all the facts about Lump the "global account of Lump". In different contexts, one is concerned with different groups of facts in this global account. For instance, if I needed to move Lump to a museum, I would presumably be concerned with such things as Lump's height, weight, and fragility, but not with the precise shade of

---

<sup>2</sup> Fine, "Essence and Modality," *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 8, Logic and Language (1994), 1-16.

Lump's color. Similarly, in the context of aesthetic appreciation, one considers Lump as a statue (Peter) by taking into account certain of Lump's properties as opposed to others. But this does not mean that there are two things here – Lump and Peter. It just means that we can consider Lump as a statue by focusing on certain of Lump's properties. To put it in Fregean language, we can therefore say that “statue” is one mode of presentation of Lump: one way among many that we can refer to this object Lump.

In turn, this can be used to explain the apparent difference in modal properties between Peter and Lump. For when we consider how to apply a modal predicate to Lump, we do so by considering what would happen to Lump in another possible world. Now, Kripke argues in Naming and Necessity that one does not first have to stipulate possible world W qualitatively before one asserts that Lump is in it – one can just rigidly designate Lump in this world and stipulate that Lump also exists in W.<sup>3</sup> This might be true. However, even if it is, in order to consider whether it is consistent to believe that a world such as W could actually contain an object that *is* Lump (or Lump's “counterpart” if you accept Lewis' position that the same object cannot exist in more than world), one must have certain criteria for identifying what makes Lump what it is.

Thus, when we consider whether Lump's counterpart could exist in another possible world, this is done (often tacitly) by holding certain properties of Lump fixed and others not. Thus, as Lewis argues in “Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies”<sup>4</sup>, when I ask what would happen to Peter in x circumstances, what I am fact doing is just asking about what would happen to Lump as conceived of in a certain way (qua statue) in x circumstances. When conceived of in a different way, say, for instance, as a lump of clay, one will be taking certain properties of

---

<sup>3</sup> Kripke, *Naming and necessity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 44-46. .

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, “Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 7, Apr. 1971, 203-211.

Lump as salient; and, hence, one will have different criteria for identifying what object Lump is in another possible world. Thus, Lump has not one but *many* different “counterpart relations”. And this is why Lump and Peter appear to have different modal properties – one of Lump’s “counterpart relations” exists in a possible world where the other does not. But – at least so I am arguing – this does not mean there is more than one thing in our world. Indeed, the supposed “modal differences” between Peter and Lump reflect nothing more than the fact that we can imagine Lump without a group of properties (the properties that constitute its “being a statue”) just as we can imagine Lump without the property of “being in my art studio”.

I take it that a Kripkean might here insist that insofar as one makes an identity claim about Lump and Peter, one must also be committed to this identity holding true in all possible worlds once one has rigidly designated the self-identical Lump/Peter object in our world. Thus, insofar as my position suggests that there are worlds in which Lump exists but Peter does not, a Kripkean might object to my position. This might be a serious problem – and perhaps one that is insurmountable for the one-thinger position. Yet, I am not sure that “identity” (contingent) or otherwise is the best language for my position.

For, on my reading, I do not assert that “being a statue” is identical to “being a lump of clay”, but rather that “being a statue” and “being a lump of clay” both express sets of properties that an object can possess. The following example can help illuminate this position. Consider Andy Egan. Andy is both a philosopher and a basketball player. Yet, one would surely admit, when I look at Andy, I am not looking at two objects that co-exist in the same spatiotemporal position: a philosopher and a basketball player. Rather, I am just looking at one object that has the property of a) being a philosopher and of b) being a basketball player. In another possible world, Andy is a philosopher but plays tennis instead of basketball. But this does not tell us that

there are two objects in this world with different modal properties. Rather, it just tells us that Andy can possess one property without the other.

I think that there are two basic responses the two-thinger can make at this juncture. The first is to (A) assert that although the two-thinger thesis holds for the Peter / Lump case, this does not commit one to holding the same thesis for the Andy Egan case. Here, I think, the right move is to distinguish between (i) multiple properties an object might possess at the same ontological level and (ii) purported properties that actually express different ontological levels of the object under consideration.<sup>5</sup> Following this, the two-thinger can argue that, in the Andy Egan case, the two properties discussed (“being a philosopher” and “being a basketball player”) are properties at the same ontological level. In contrast, the property of “being a statue” is not actually a property *of* the lump of clay, but rather expresses a different ontological level. And this is why the two-thinger hypothesis holds in this case but not in others.

I think that this argument will be unsuccessful. This argument differentiates the two cases by making a strong disanalogy between playing a certain social role and being an aesthetic object. Yet, consider the case in which Andy Egan is a ballerina instead of a basketball player. In this case, when Egan dances on stage, one must surely grant that Egan constitutes an aesthetic object. Thus, insofar as the two-thinger asserts that “being an aesthetic object” involves the existence of another ontological level where a distinct object should be said to exist, the two-thinger is also committed to the position that there are two objects that exist when Egan dances. In other words, in virtue of why the two-thinger thinks her hypothesis is right for the Lump/Peter case, she is committed to also holding it true for a variant of the Egan case.

---

<sup>5</sup> I here draw on Judith Jarvis Thompson’s use of “ontological levels” in her rejection of the one-thinger position. See Thompson, “The Statue and the Clay,” *Nous*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1998, 149-173.

Of course, the two-thinger might not see this as problematic (response B). As I have already asserted, I propose a variant of the one-thinger hypothesis in which “being a statue” is a property that clay can possess. But, of course, this position will be open to second-thinger rebuttal: e.g. the second-thinger might claim that Peter and Lump really do have different essences. In the end, I have no knock-down argument for why this is wrong – and hence no knock-down argument for why response B is wrong. Ultimately, I just think that it is untenable.

For, once the two-thinger makes response B, we see that her view commits her to holding that more than one object exists in cases where – at least one might argue – she should not. Moreover, once she uses the idea of ontological levels to support her position, she will no longer be just a “two-thinger” but a “many-thinger” that thinks a different object exists at each lower ontological level – including in cases like the Egan example. These are hard pills to swallow. Thus, until the two-thinger can show why accepting these consequences is preferable to the supposed disadvantages of a one-thinger account, I think that we should accept a one-thinger position as our own.