

Comments on Problem Set 10
Brad Skow

1. 'According to van Inwagen, chairs are not unified wholes--they are nothing more than collections of particles.' Explain, as clearly as you can, what is wrong with this description of van Inwagen's position.

I was surprised by the number of people who, in answering this question, ended up agreeing that according to van Inwagen chairs are collections of particles. (Some people agreed even though they also said that according to van Inwagen there are no chairs. Answers like that just contradicted themselves.) It is difficult to resist the urge to talk about collections of particles, rather than the particles themselves, when discussing van Inwagen's position; but by doing this you are getting the metaphysics wrong.

Two more comments. Firstly, some of you used the word "constitution," as in "the particles constitute the chair." I am not sure what this word means. By 'the xs constitute y' you might just mean 'the xs compose y.' If so, use 'compose'; do not use 'constitute.' If that is not what you mean, then I do not know what you mean.

Secondly. Many people were tempted to write sentences like these: 'The thing you refer to as a chair is not a chair'; 'What people normally call chairs are really simple particles.' The problem with the first sentence is that, according to van Inwagen at least, it is false. There is nothing that you refer to as a chair. The problem with the second is that it is either obviously false or ungrammatical. If "Chairs are simple particles" means "Each chair is a simple particle," then it is obviously false. Probably people who used sentences like this meant to say, "Each chair is some particles." But that doesn't make any sense to me.

2. 'Whenever an object is such that every part of it overlaps some water molecule, if it is at a temperature of 4 degrees C, its density is 1 gram per cubic centimeter.' Give a 'paraphrase' of this little theory in mereologically-neutral terms, following the method described on pp. 18-19 of 'Composition as a Fiction.'

One correct (and very long-winded) paraphrase is 'Whenever there are some things such that, for any things at all, (if the second things are among the first things, then there are some things arranged hydromolecularly and there are some things which are among both the things arranged hydromolecularly and the second things) then, if they are at a temperature of 4 degrees C then their density is 1 gram per cubic centimeter.'

This paraphrase contains no singular terms, no singular predicates, and no mereological terms like 'part' or 'overlap.' 'Arrangement of particles' and 'group of particles' are singular terms, and if there were such things they would be composite material objects; so those terms should not occur in a correct paraphrase. Generally, I gave higher marks to paraphrases that succeeded in eliminating all of the 'bad' words, even if the paraphrase wasn't quite right.

(*) Some people gave sentences which were paraphrases, not of the sentence in the question, but of the sentence 'Whenever a water molecule is at 4 degrees C, its density is 1 gram per cubic centimeter' or of the sentence 'Whenever a water molecule or a part of a water molecule is at 4 degrees C, its density is 1 gram per cubic centimeter.'

3. *Van Inwagen says that his claim that there are no nonliving composite objects 'does not contradict our ordinary beliefs.' Is he right? If he is wrong, is that a problem for his view?*

Most people did well on this question. One problem did come up a few times, though. Some people began their answer by saying "van Inwagen's view does contradict ordinary beliefs." But then they said something later in their answer that amounted to "van Inwagen's view does not contradict our ordinary beliefs." I didn't really understand such answers: I take it that you didn't intend to contradict yourself, but I wasn't sure how else to make sense of what you were saying.

A reminder: van Inwagen does discuss how to paraphrase sentences like "There is an expensive chair in the next room" into sentences which clearly do not entail the existence of chairs. But it is no part of his view that when ordinary people utter the first sentence, they really mean the second sentence. The only claim he makes about the meanings of ordinary sentences is that when he says "There are no chairs" what he says does not contradict what ordinary people say.

4. *Choose any one of the following claims, each of which is defended in 'Composition as a Fiction.'*

- *The dispute between different theories of composition cannot be resolved by straightforwardly empirical means.*
- *The argument 'I exist; I am a composite object; therefore some composite object exists' does not succeed in giving us a decisive reason to reject nihilism.*
- *The fact that many scientific theories make assumptions about composition is not a good reason to believe those assumptions.*
- *The dispute between different theories of composition is not a merely verbal dispute.*

Briefly explain the reasons the authors give for this claim. Present and evaluate at least one objection to the claim.

People generally did well on this one.