

Comments on Problem Set 2

1. Give an argument (based on one of the paradoxes we discussed in class) for the claim that it can sometimes happen that something is a statue at one time without always being a statue. How plausible is this view?

Not many people gave the kind of answer I was looking for here. There were two possible interpretations of the claim 'it can sometimes happen that something is a statue at one time without always being a statue'. On the first interpretation, it would be enough for something not to always be a statue for it not to always *exist*. On this interpretation, the claim is almost trivial: no-one in their right mind thinks that statues are *eternal*. It is hardly worth arguing for such a claim, but you might do it by giving an example of some process which would, intuitively, destroy a statue—e.g. being squashed; being dissolved in acid; being swallowed up by a black hole...

The second interpretation is the one I had in mind when I wrote the question, and it is more controversial. On this interpretation, 'something is a statue without always being a statue' means 'there is something such that at one time, it exists and is a statue, and at another time, it exists and is not a statue'. We can argue for this claim by referring to the standard story: a lump of clay that is ball-shaped at t_1 is shaped into a statue by t_2 . Call the lump of clay that exists at t_1 'Lump'; call the statue that exists at t_2 'Statue'. Then we can give the following valid argument, with three plausible premises:

- P1. Statue exists at t_2 and is a statue at t_2 .
- P2. Lump exists at t_1 and is not a statue at t_1 .
- P3. Statue is Lump.

- C1. Therefore, Lump [alternatively, Statue] exists at t_1 and is not a statue at t_1 and exists at t_2 and is a statue at t_2 .
- C2. Therefore, there is something such that at one time, it exists and is a statue, and at another time, it exists and is not a statue.

Some people thought that there was something blatantly inconsistent about the claim that Statue, the statue that exists at t_2 , ever existed without being a statue. This view certainly is *counterintuitive*, since we normally would suppose that Statue didn't exist at t_1 and those other times when, according to the proponent of the view, it did exist but wasn't a statue. But it's not inconsistent, any more than the idea that a certain student was once not a student.

The view that things that are statues at one time aren't always statues is *not* the absurd view that statues are mere properties or features of material objects rather than material objects in their own right. No: it is a view according to which the things that are statues at any given time are just some of the perfectly ordinary material objects that exist at that time.

It's not the case that in order to believe that things that are statues at one time aren't always statues, you must believe the absurd view that the things that are

going to be statues exist at times when they are not statues in the form of “concepts” or some such abstract object. Surely this is false: an object can’t be a material object at one time and a “concept” at another time. At the times when they are not statues, the things that are going to be statues are just perfectly ordinary lumps of clay.

Many people took the instruction to give an argument ‘based on one of the paradoxes we discussed in class’ as an invitation simply to present some paradox and then free-associate. This was not what was required. The instruction was simply intended to give you a sense of the sort of situation that might provide the premises for a good argument.

2. State, in your own words, the theses of Mereological Essentialism and Mereological Near-Essentialism (van Inwagen, p. 192). How should someone who held one of these views describe the sort of process we would ordinarily describe as one in which a statue continues to exist despite the destruction of a part? Does it matter if the part is not destroyed but only removed somewhere far away?

A surprising number of people got the doctrines more or less right but got their names the wrong way round. You can look up van Inwagen’s way of phrasing the two claims; here’s how I would put them.

Mereological Essentialism: It can never happen that an object exists at two times, and has a part at the earlier time that it does not have at the later time.
Mereological Near-Essentialism: It can never happen that an object exists at two times, and has a part at the earlier time that it does not have, or have any replacement for, at the later time.

One thing to note is that MNE is *strictly weaker* than ME in the sense that it is a *logical consequence* of ME. A number of people got this wrong, stating the two claims as if they were incompatible.

The rest of the question asks you how the proponent of these views *should* describe certain kinds of process. It would have been acceptable to answer this simply by choosing *one* description of the cases that was compatible with ME and MNE, and claiming that this was more plausible than the other descriptions compatible with those doctrines. However, a lot of people took the opportunity to make a lot of false claims about what the proponent of these doctrines would *have* to say, in order to be logically consistent. Here are some descriptions of the case where part of a statue is destroyed, all of which are consistent with both ME and MNE

- The original statue ceases to exist; nothing comes into existence; an object which was previously a large undetached part of a statue becomes a statue.
- The original statue ceases to exist; a new object comes into existence, which is also a statue.
- There was never any statue in the first place

Here are some descriptions of the case in which the arm of the statue is taken away but not destroyed which are compatible with MNE and ME:

- The original statue ceases to exist.
- The original statue comes to be a “scattered object”, that is, it comes to occupy a disconnected region of space. It ceases to be a statue, and an object which was previously just a big proper part of a statue comes to be a statue.
- The original statue comes to be a scattered object, but it is still a statue despite having this odd shape.

3. Give an argument, along roughly the same lines as van Inwagen’s, for the claim that there is no such thing as your head.

The best way to do this was to rely on the possibility that you could survive—at least for a short time—the destruction of all of your body except for your head. Suppose that you have a head, and that this happens to you. Then you come to occupy the same space as your head, since your head is not destroyed by what happens. But you are distinct from your head, since you did, whereas your head did not, once have arms and legs. So two material objects occupy the same place at the same time, which is absurd. We must therefore deny that you have a head, if you are going to suffer the destruction of all of you from the neck down. But whether you have a head now can’t depend on whether this is going to happen to you in the future; so you don’t have a head now, even if you are going to die, whole, in your bed.

A lot of people didn’t think of this direct argument from the possibility of surviving the destruction of “everything except your head”. Instead, they gave an indirect argument against the existence of some *other* part of you, and argued that if that part doesn’t exist, neither does your head, since it would be arbitrary for one to exist without the other. This would be fine (though not as good as the direct argument) except that almost everyone who attempted this chose to argue against the existence of such a part of you as “you minus your head”. This argument is especially problematic, since it requires the assumption that if your head is destroyed, there is something that goes from occupying a big region of space that includes the head-shaped region of space, to occupying a small region of space that excludes it. This isn’t an assumption van Inwagen would be happy to make! The key difference between this case and the case of Descartes is that in the latter case, it is plausible to think that there is a *person* who survives the loss of the relevant bit. But it’s not plausible (at least from van Inwagen’s point of view) to think that any person could survive the destruction of his or her head.

4. Explain van Inwagen’s reason for thinking that if *D-minus* doesn’t exist, then ‘there was never any such thing as Descartes’ left leg.’ (p. 196) Is this argument persuasive?

Van Inwagen’s argument for this claim is that it would be ‘wholly arbitrary’ to accept the existence of Descartes’ left leg while denying the existence of *D-minus*. There is no relevant difference between the region of space that we normally call “the region occupied by Descartes left leg” and the region that contains all the space occupied by Descartes except for the first region which could make it

reasonable to think that the former, but not the latter, was occupied by a material object.

Many of you missed this argument completely. Instead, you described arguments based on the principle that whenever something has a (proper) part, there is such a thing as the thing “minus” that part: a principle which van Inwagen clearly rejects, since he believes in cells but not in people “minus” cells. Others presented arguments based on the principle that if anything has a proper part, DAUP must be true: again, this is clearly rejected by van Inwagen. Others presented what seemed more or less to be the invalid argument: ‘If DAUP is true, then Descartes’ left leg exists; DAUP is false; therefore Descartes’ left leg does not exist.’ Van Inwagen clearly does not endorse this argument.

Another common problem in the answers to this question was people wasting space describing van Inwagen’s argument for the conclusion that D-minus doesn’t exist. Those who did this should have read the question more carefully.

5. *Here is a different argument against the doctrine of undetached parts:*

Any undetached part of a person which included that person’s central nervous system would have a mental life just like that of an ordinary person. But ordinary people do not have parts which have mental lives just like those of ordinary people. Therefore, ordinary people do not have undetached parts which include their central nervous systems.

Is this argument valid (yes or no)? Which, if any, of its premises are true? Defend your answer.

The argument is supposed to be valid, and nothing anyone said in their answer convinced me otherwise. I accepted all kinds of arguments for and against the premises. Higher grades went to more interesting, convincing and original arguments.