

Comments on Problem Set 5

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1. (20%): Give your own example of a plausible supervenience thesis. Briefly explain why this thesis is plausible.

A lot of people didn't state their supervenience theses in the form 'the A-facts supervene on the B-facts', or failed to explain with any precision what sorts of facts they had in mind. Many people seemed unaware that for supervenience to hold it has to be *necessary* that if the B-facts are such-and-such, the A-facts are so-and-so; a mere *possibility* of difference in A-facts without difference in B-facts is enough to refute a supervenience thesis. It doesn't matter if the possibility in question is very *unlikely*, or if it could only happen at worlds very different from the actual world.

Here's a traditional example of a supervenience thesis: whether a person is bald supervenes on the facts about the the number and distribution of hairs on his head.

2. (40%) In Postscript B to 'Survival and Identity', Lewis gives a seven-step argument for the existence of 'person-stages', i.e. temporal parts of people. He writes

I do not suppose the doubters will accept my premises, but it will be instructive to find out which they choose to deny.

Which step in Lewis's argument should be disputed by someone who doubts the existence of person-stages? Begin by briefly explaining the role your chosen step plays in the argument, and why Lewis finds it plausible. Then say why a doubter should dispute this step of the argument. Does this step of the argument succeed, or is the doubter correct?

The question asked you *why* Lewis finds the step plausible, and *why* a doubter should dispute it. What was called for was an explanation of Lewis's *reasons* for believing the step, and the *reasons* a doubter might have for doubting it. Lots of people gave answers of the form 'Lewis finds step X plausible because he needs it for his argument for the doctrine of temporal parts to work' and 'The doubter should dispute step X because the doubter doesn't believe in temporal parts, and hence must dispute some premise in any valid argument for temporal parts.' *These aren't the sorts of answers that are called for in a philosophy paper. We really aren't interested in people's motivations for arguing as they do; we just want to know how strong the arguments are.*

Lewis's argument is of the form 'A; if A, then B; if B, then C; if C, then D; if D, then E; if E, then F; if F, then G; therefore, G': this is obviously valid. To "dispute" a "step" in the argument is to argue against one of these premises. To argue against a premise of the form 'If X, then Y', you must argue that *even assuming that X is true, Y still isn't true*. It's not enough to argue that X isn't true! Those who thought step 6 was the one to doubt generally made this mistake. If you dispute step 6, you dispute the premise 'If a world of stages would be exactly like our own simpliciter, then our world is a world of stages': this is

obviously true, since two worlds couldn't be exactly like each other if one was a world of stages and the other wasn't.

A few people attributed to Lewis the following complete howler of an inference: 'It's possible that there are person-stages; therefore, there are person stages'. This neglects five other premises which play a crucial role in Lewis's argument!

3. (40%) *Compare and contrast the first and third of the solutions to the problem of temporary intrinsics that Lewis considers in *On the Plurality of Worlds* (p. 204). Explain Lewis's reasons for rejecting the first solution. Are these reasons convincing?*

The most common problem with these answers was that people stayed too close to Lewis's presentation of the positions, making it hard to tell whether they really understood the issue. Several people didn't explain the first solution clearly: they said that shapes were relations, but didn't say that they were relations to *times*, so they left it obscure in what sense this was a solution to the puzzle of change. There were also some mistakes with regard to the content of the third solution (temporal parts): despite what some people claimed, the temporal parts theorist doesn't have to hold that nothing really changes, or that nothing lasts for more than an instant.