

More van Inwagen
April 4, 2001

1. Some claims

Mereological essentialism: no object can lose or gain parts. In other words,

ME For any t, t , if x is part of y at t , and y exists at t , then x is part of y at t .

A consequence of this principle is the following claim:

(*) for any t, t , if the x s compose y at t , and y exists at t , then the x s compose y at t .

A very similar claim:

(**) for any t, t , if the x s compose y at t , and the x s all exist at t , and the x s compose something at t , then the x s compose y at t .

2. Van Inwagen against Universalism.

- (A) I exist now and I existed ten years ago
- (B) I am an organism (in the biological sense), and I have always been an organism.
- (C) Every organism is composed of (some) atoms (or other) at every moment of its existence.
- (D) Consider any organism that existed ten years ago; all of the atoms that composed it ten years ago still exist.
- (E) Consider any organism that exists now and existed ten years ago; none of the atoms that now compose that organism is among those that composed it ten years ago.
- (F) If Universalism is true, then (**)

Suppose (**). By (A), (B) and (C) there are some atoms that composed me ten years ago. By (D) they still exist. By Universalism they compose something now. So by (**) they now compose me. But according to (E), they do not now compose me: contradiction.

3. Defence of premise (F)

Consider an object that is composed of the blocks at t , when they are widely scattered and moving rapidly in relation to one another. How long does it last? Only two answers seem possible. (1) It doesn't last at all; it exists only at t . (2) It lasts as long as its constituent blocks do. Any

compromise between these two answers would be intolerably arbitrary.
(77)

If (1) is true of the blocks, then *positional essentialism* is true: 'not only the identities of the parts of a whole are essential to that whole but their relative positions and attitudes as well. But this isn't true.

If (2) is true of the blocks, (**) must be true.

Note: this argument relies on the assumption that it never happens that some things compose more than one thing. If we dropped that assumption, we could say that for any things, there is *something* that they compose at every time that they exist, and also various additional things that they compose only while they are arranged in some favourable way.

4. Van Inwagen's answer to the Special Composition Question

The xs compose something iff the activity of the xs constitutes a life, or there is only one of the xs.

What is a life? A certain kind of self-maintaining event, that is 'reasonably well-individuated' and 'jealous' (it never happens that the activity of some things constitutes two different lives).

A consequence of this view: there are no tables or computers or statues or lumps of clay or ships or grains of sand.... For surely if there was such a thing as a table, etc., it would have to be composed by some things whose activity did not constitute a life (and which were more than one in number).

NB: pay attention to the paragraph on pp. 99-100.