

Comments on Problem Set 5

1. According to some philosophers, it sometimes happens that an object is a statue at one time without being a statue throughout the period of its existence, just as a person can be a student at one time without being a student throughout his or her existence. Present and assess an argument for this view.

This question asked you to give an argument for a particular conclusion: that an object can be a statue at one time without being a statue throughout the period of its existence. Many people did not give arguments for this conclusion. Some of those who did not give an argument for this conclusion, did something close; they gave an argument for the conclusion that a person can be a student without being a student throughout their existence. Make sure that your answers in fact answer the question asked.

A very straightforward argument for the conclusion that an object can be a statue at one time without being a statue throughout the period of its existence is as follows. First we tell the following story which certainly is possible. I buy a lump of clay from the store at t_1 and leave it on my desk until an hour later at t_2 when I shape it into a statue of Mark Messier. Now the argument:

1. At t_1 , the lump of clay, call it Lump, is not a statue.
2. At t_2 , Lump is a statue.

Therefore, there is an object, viz. Lump, that is not a statue at one time but is a statue at another time.

Therefore, there is an object that is a statue at one time but not a statue throughout the period of its existence.

Instead of an argument of this form, some people gave arguments for the non-existence of statues. This was not what was asked for.

2. State in your own words, the theses of Mereological Essentialism and Mereological Near Essentialism. 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?

Many people mixed up Mereological Essentialism (ME) and Mereological Near Essentialism (MNE). (This may be because the van Inwagen passage in which he defines these two terms, though quite clear, must be read carefully to discriminate between ME and MNE.)

Mereological Essentialism: if a part is removed from an object, then that object therewith ceases to exist.

Mereological Near Essentialism: if a part is removed from an object, and no new part is added to the “remainder” then that object therewith ceases to exist

MNE is weaker than ME in that ME entails MNE, but MNE does not entail ME.

Many people wrote things that indicated that MNE entails that if someone removes a part from an object and then adds a part to it at some time later the old object would come back into existence. MNE does not entail this. (Though someone who held MNE might think this.)

Most people answered the second part of the question correctly. An MNE- or ME-proponent would describe the scenario as one in which the statue ceased to exist. Whether the part is removed or destroyed matters only insofar as whether an object's losing a part requires more than removal. If one believed in scattered objects, one might think that more must be done to make an object lose a part than remove that part far away from the object.

3. If medical technology were a bit more advanced, we would be able to do something that would normally be described as 'keeping a person alive despite the destruction of all of the person's body except her head.' Give an argument based on this possibility, for the claim that there is no such thing as your head.

Many people gave arguments for the claim that there is no such thing as your head, but did not give arguments based on the possibility described in the question. As the question asked for an argument based on that possibility any answer that did not make reference to it did not adequately answer the question.

What we were looking for here is an argument along the same lines as that given by van Inwagen in "The doctrine of arbitrary undetached parts". The argument we were looking for can be obtained by substituting "your head" for "D-minus" in van Inwagen's argument against the existence of D-minus (substituting "you" for "Descartes" as well). Some people constructed a van Inwagen style argument for the conclusion that you have no head but they supposed that after your body (where body is understood as everything but your head) was severed from your head, you are identical with your body. This argument fails because it is implausible to think that you are identical with your body in such a situation, for no one it seems can survive the loss of their head. (Note also that the possibility mentioned in the question involves the destruction of the body, not just its being severed from the head.)

Many people were confused about the conclusion for which we wanted you to argue. The conclusion we wanted was not that if your body except for your head is destroyed you will then not have a head. The conclusion we wanted an argument for is that you don't have a head now, even if nothing has happened to your body. (Note: van Inwagen's argument was not that D-minus does not exist if Descartes's leg is destroyed, but that there is no thing as D-minus, period.)

*4. Here is a different sort of argument for the claim that there is no such thing as your head:
If your head exists, it has a functioning brain. But any object that has a brain in the same state as yours has a conscious mental life indistinguishable from your conscious mental life. Therefore, if there is such an object as your head, it has a conscious mental life indistinguishable from your conscious mental life. But if this were true, you would have*

no good reason for believing that you are a human being rather than a mere head, which is absurd. Therefore your head does not really exist.

Does this argument succeed? Why/why not?

This was a hard question. Though the question did not ask for it, it would have helped if you tried to formalize the argument and make explicit its premises and conclusion. The conclusion of the argument is quite counterintuitive and many people railed against it. But to address the argument one must challenge one of the premises of the argument or question its validity. Very few people did either of these things. Some people said that the argument was invalid because it left out the premise that you do have good reason for believing that you are a human being rather than a mere head. The argument did not omit this premise; rather, it is implicit in the phrase “which is absurd” at the end of the second to last sentence.

Some people confused x 's being distinct from y with x 's not being a part of y (or y 's not being a part of x). The argument assumed that a person and that person's head are distinct in the sense of not being identical. But it does not follow from the fact that two things are distinct in this way that one of them is not a part of the other.