

The Special Composition Question

October 28th, 2002

1. The range of options

Nihilism — Organicism — “The Common Sense View” — Universalism

...and many others.

Being clear about the meaning of ‘there are no chairs’.

2. How should we decide?

By using empirical methods?

3. The appeal to common sense.

Consider a typical *sceptical hypothesis*: the hypothesis that we are all brains in vats, for example. Presumably it is reasonable to believe that this hypothesis is false. Why?

According to some epistemologists, it’s because *we find it so natural to believe* that the sceptical hypothesis is false. Alternatively: because *we already believe* that the sceptical hypothesis is false.

Suppose that this is a good account of our justification for rejecting outlandish sceptical hypotheses. Could we have justification of a similar sort for rejecting Universalism? Nihilism? Etc.

A fact that R&D think is relevant: when common sense says “surely there are chairs!”, it does so without even *considering* the sorts of alternative hypotheses that Nihilists and Organicists believe.

4. Unity and thinking

Question 1: How strong is the support for each of the premises in the following argument against nihilism?

- P1 I exist
- P2 If I exist, I am a composite thing
- C Therefore, at least one composite thing exists

Question 2: Does it make sense to suppose that *some things* might jointly think, believe, desire, feel, etc., without composing anything?

5. Problem or pseudoproblem?

Many philosophers (and non-philosophers!) suspect that this allegedly metaphysical debate is really just a verbal dispute—a dispute about how to talk.

The idea: Nihilists speak a language, “Nihilish”, in which “There are no composite objects” is a true sentence; Universalists speak a different language, “Universalese”, in which “Any things compose something” is a true sentence; etc.

(Which words have different meanings in these different languages? Given the different meanings of sentences like ‘There are exactly seven things’, I suppose it must be the *quantifiers*—expressions like ‘something’, ‘there are’, etc.)

How can we translate between these languages? The obvious way to do the translations is the one suggested by R&D: the Nihilish sentence ‘There are no chairs’ goes over into the Universalish sentence ‘There are no chairs *among simple things*’; the Universalish sentence ‘There are chairs’ goes over into the Nihilish sentence ‘If unrestricted composition were true, then there would be chairs’.

Is this translation manual really credible?

(Also, what’s the relevance of the question whether *actual* Nihilists, Universalists, etc. really disagree with one another? *We’re speaking English*: we want to know which answer to the SCQ is true *in English*.)

6. Fictionalism