I Do Not Exist, Never Existed, and Shall Never Exist

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Introduction

In problematizing the existence and identity of material objects, it has often been assumed that individual objects combine to form composite objects. However, is it necessary that composition always occurs? "The Special Composition Question" (SCQ) problematizes the very presumption of composition and claims that it is *not* a brute fact. Accordingly, it asks about the conditions in which composition occurs. It is the question for any individual object, when is it the case that there is a composite object such that the former composes the latter? (Ney, 2023, p.100). To avoid denoting individual objects the property of being a collection, Peter Van Inwagen (1990) introduces the plural variables and uses "∃ xs" (there exist some xs) instead of ∃x. When formalized in first-order predicate logic, the question becomes as follows: "For any xs, when is it true that ∃y (the xs compose y)?" (Ney, 2023, p.100), which is to be answered in the following form: "∀xs∃y (the xs compose y iff the xs . . .) where the ellipsis (. . .) is filled in by the condition required to get any xs to compose something" (Ney, 2023, p.100). This will be the context in which I will formulate and support my own non-existence.

Once the SCQ is asked there are several theories and answers available to us. Some of them are called the moderate views, others called the extreme views, as well as there is Inwagen's organist view. The arguments for and against each view need a detailed discussion worth an entire paper.[1] In this paper, I will only discuss Inwagen's organism and Unger's nihilism in relation to the SCQ. In the first section, I will introduce Inwagen's organism as well as mereological nihilism and offer Inwagen's criticism of nihilists. In the second section, I will offer my arguments against Inwagen's counterargument based on *sorites and paraphrasing*. In doing so, I will be able to explain Unger's nihilism as well. The third section will consider potential objections to my objections against Inwagen, which can be named arguments from epistemicism and—following Churchland's (1981) terminology—folk psychology, respectively. There, I will show why they fail to refute my arguments. In the end, we will see that *I do not exist, never existed, and shall never exist.*

[1] Roughly, the moderate views are the *Contact, Fastening, Cohesion*, and the *Fusion* views, whereas the extreme views are the mereological universalist and nihilist views (see Ney, 2023, pp. 100-109; Van Inwagen, 1990).

I. Inwagen and Mereological Nihilism: Do Xs Ever Compose Y?

What is Inwagen's organism? According to Inwagen, "(∃y the xs compose y) if and only if the activity of the xs constitute a life" (Van Inwagen, 1990, p.90). Why this is an organism, one may ask. Mainly because the term "life" refers to a biological composite object, we call organism (Van Inwagen, 1990, p.83). What follows is that for atoms to compose an object they must be doing a complex activity, which somehow results in life, in a functioning biological organism. In any other way, the mereological simples do not compose an object. However, if ordinary objects do not exist, how are we to make sense of our referring proper names, and accordingly, of our given language? Inwagen offers the paraphrasing method: if we paraphrase our ordinary propositions that commit us to the existence of things we do not want our ontology to commit to, then we would be able to talk about those things within our language without necessarily committing to them. Suppose the following proposition: "There are two cars in front of me". Now we should ask, are cars living organisms? No. Therefore they do not exist. Yet, the above proposition seems to commit us to their existence. What to do? Here is a potential Inwagen paraphrase: ∃xs∃ys(((C$_w$xs [xs are arranged car-wise] ∧ Ixs [the xs are in front of me]) ∧ (C$_w$ys [ys are arranged car-wise] ∧ Iys [the ys are in front of me])) ∧ xs ≠ ys). Here what we have accomplished is not to commit to cars but to things arranged car-wise.

Now I turn to mereological nihilism. What is mereological nihilism (henceforth, nihilism)? According to nihilists, only mereological simples exist and no simple come together—unless they are one, since they compose themselves—to compose another composite object (Ney, 2023, p.105). Hence the SCQ formulation appears as follows: "(∃y the xs compose y) if and only if there is only one of the xs" (Van Inwagen, 1990, p.73). It is important to see here that nihilists do not reject any existence once and for all (Schaffer, 2007, pp. 175-76; Sider, 2013, p.2). They are not claiming nothing exists, not even Peter Unger. What they are saying is that no arrangement of xs (if they are more than one) is beyond their p-wise arrangement: *there is nothing new in the picture.* Now, Inwagen is of course not happy with this because, after all, nihilism would imply the non-existence of even living organisms. He offers a counterargument against this nihilist view. It goes as follows:

> [P1] I exist. [P2] I am not a mereological atom. Therefore, [C1] At least one object exists that is not a mereological atom. Therefore, [C2] Nihilism is false. (Van Inwagen, 1990, p.73, as cited in Ney, 2023, p.106)

Now, if a nihilist would like to argue against the conclusion(s), she should argue against at least one of the premises above (given that the argument is valid). Arguing

against the second premise would lead us to some kind of substance dualism, which is outdated and also, I think, is not interesting. Accordingly, throughout the paper, I will be dealing with his first premise and show why it should be rejected. This way I can reject the conclusion as well.

II. Against Inwagen's "I Exist": Sorites and Paraphrase

First Objection: My Existence Reduced to Absurdity

Why does Unger think that he or any other human being does not exist? The answer lies in the sorites paradox. He uses the sorites *method* of decomposition to reduce our existence to absurdity (via the indirect method of supposing that he does exist and then arriving at inconsistencies/absurdities) (Unger, 1979). The absurdity achieved via indirect method will allow him to conclude that he does not exist. Before though, we should understand what sorites paradox is. The sorites paradox is a paradox based on the vagueness of composition and has two versions: "sorites of accumulation" and the "sorites of decomposition". I begin with the first one.

Now, consider again that I have a "composite car" in front of me, (if we believe in science and physics) we will say that it is "composed" of atoms. Suppose that a hundred billion atoms coming together "compose" a car. Hence it follows that just one atom can never give rise to a car. We go a step further. If one atom cannot give rise to a car, it seems, neither two atoms coming together can give rise to a car. Accordingly, if not two then not three, and if not three then not four, and so on. This means though that "if a hundred billion minus 1" atom cannot give rise to a car then neither can "hundred billion" atoms coming together. Therefore, a hundred billion atoms coming together cannot give rise to a car. This conclusion seems false, despite the premises being true.

Now to the second version I turn: *sorites of decomposition*, as articulated in Unger (1979). Decomposition has the same logic, only with the difference that now we start from the car and go backward: if a hundred billion atoms "compose" a car, then also "hundred billion minus 1" atoms do, and "if hundred billion minus 1" atoms do compose a car, so does "hundred billion minus 2" atoms, and so on. This means however that, in the end, we arrive at: "if two atoms 'compose' a car, so does one atom" and the conclusion: "one atom 'composes' a car", which is false despite the premises being true. Now, what Unger does is to apply these paradoxes to his own existence. He detects two presuppositions in the sorites paradoxes, which are according to him unscientific to object: first, that any physical object consists of atoms and a finite

number of them, and second, that removal of one or a few without replacement (in certain conditions that do not destruct the thing) should not make a difference in the that thing's existence (Unger, 1979, pp. 237-38, p.243). In addition to these, when he adds the indirect supposition of his own existence "I exist", it gives rise to inconsistency (Unger, 1979, p.243). Hence, we should reject it and say: *I do not exist.* All put in a premise form, we have:

> (1) I exist. (2) If I exist, then I consist of many cells, but a finite number. (3) If I exist (and consist of many cells, but a finite number), then the net removal of one cell, or only a few, in a way which is most innocuous and favourable, will not mean the difference as to whether I exist. (Unger, 1979, p.243)

Suppose that (as Inwagen argues) I exist, then I am made of cells and again of a finite number (and given that cells are made out of atoms, for the sake of argument we can use cells and atoms interchangeably). Now apply the sorites of decomposition: if I remove one cell out of me, I still do exist, if I remove two, I still am around. If three, still I am not going anywhere. This means that however at some point I will miraculously turn out to not exist (Unger, 1979, p.245). At some point, the removal of only one cell or a few would result in my non-existence (Unger, 1979, p.245).[2] Is this plausible? I do not think so. The same applies to accumulation as well: one cell does not compose me, and neither do two cells. Nevertheless, at some point miraculously the addition of one more cell (or a few) would result in my coming into existence out of non-existence. Can the addition of one cell would make such a difference? No. What decomposition and accumulation show is that I *did* not exist in the first place (Unger, 1979, p.245). So, we reject our first premise via an indirect method. When we accept Inwagen's "I exist", we end up with inconsistencies. Therefore, *I do not exist.*

Second Objection: I Do Not Exist But Arranged Me-Wise

Another refutation I would like to employ is with regard to a potential paraphrase of Inwagen's premise "I exist". Now, we can rewrite this in the first-order predicate form as follows: $\exists xs(\mathbf{MN}_{w}xs$ [xs are arranged MN-wise]).[3] Inwagen by

2 Note that the conclusions of the sorites paradoxes are always false, and that is why they are paradoxes in the first place. In our case, the conclusion is "one cell composes me", which is false. That is why I say I miraculously turn out to not exist, which would have been the true conclusion of a sorites case. Unger uses the sorites method to demonstrate how absurd is the supposition of his existence, he is not replicating the paradox in his argument.

3 MN is short for "My Name". In the original draft, I used my name in place of MN. Throughout the paper, to preserve anonymity, I will use MN instead of my name.

postulating "I exist" actually puts forward the presuppositions of his own theory as a refutation. The premise "I exist" already implies that a living thing is something that exists. It is almost like saying, "if 'I' is a living thing, then it exists". However, this conditional is what the nihilist rejects in the first place. After all, for the nihilist, although the antecedent may be true, the consequent is false ($T \supset F$). What follows is that Inwagen and nihilists differ in their presuppositions. Inwagen's reasoning is circular. He cannot simply posit "I exist" as a counterargument to nihilism, he needs to show why we should accept his presupposition in the first place. In other words, he must show why I cannot formulate "I exist" as an "MN-wise arrangement of xs".

III. Refutations of Potential Objections: I "Still" Do Not Exist

I anticipate two objections to my objections. With regards to the sorites argument one may argue against the third premise by saying that the premise has an implicit presupposition: there is "no critical point" where the addition or removal of one cell makes a difference and so everything is gradual (Unger, 1979, p.239). That is why, they would argue, Unger claims that if we accept our own existence, at some point we should expect a miracle such that suddenly we come into existence out of non-existence or become non-existent out of existence. However, there is no miracle. Ontologically speaking, there may be a breaking point where the addition or removal of one cell makes a difference, although we can never know it. This would be a counterargument from epistemicism against Unger (and me thereof).[4] Now how to respond to it? If epistemicism is true, then at some point *ontologically* just a minus or plus one cell should make a difference. This would imply, for instance, that at the *six billion and hundredth* cell I exist, and yet at the *six billion and ninety-ninth* cell, I do not exist. Is this plausible? Not at all. The problem we face when we posit our existence is not about *knowing the n-th number* at which I decay into non-existence, it is just that it is *nomologically impossible* that "one unit change" in atoms/cells makes any difference in a world governed by our physical laws.

Now I turn to the second possible objection, which I think is a strong one: if we paraphrase "I exist" as "xs arranged p-wise", how are we to give an account of propositional attitudes such as "I believe that p" as well as statements like "I think that p" and "I feel that p". In other words, If the "I" does not exist, how are we to explain the fact that we think, believe, and feel, and so on? Fair enough. However, I do not think we are at an impasse. Paul Churchland (1981) shows us that our folk psychology is misguided and when we use propositional attitudes such as "I believe" we are

4 Epistemicism claims that vagueness results from ignorance, that is from us not knowing the existing critical boundaries and not from the fact that there is no breaking critical point in the physical world (Ney, 2023, p.110).

actually referring to neurophysiological and electrochemical firings occurring in our brain and nothing else, and accordingly, our folk psychological language can be revised (eliminated) to coopt with the scientific developments in neuroscience (Churchland, 1981). He argues that statements including propositional attitudes are in "logical form" not different than those scientific laws and so a paraphrase of the former in the language of the latter is always possible (see Churchland, 1981, p.82). Now, in a way by combining Churchlandean paraphrase and Inwagen's method, I can paraphrase "I" "believe", "feel", and "think" in a similar fashion.

I offer the following: "I believe that there is a car" can be paraphrased as "in the MN-wise arranged xs, there are some ys, which are arranged in a way to give rise to belief-wise electrochemical firings that are about the car-wise arranged zs". In the first-order predicate logic, I have thus the following: $\exists xs \exists ys \exists zs((((MN_w xs$ [xs arranged MN-wise]) $\wedge$ ($B_w ys$ [ys arranged belief-wise]) $\wedge$ ($Ib_w yse_w xs$ [belief-wise arranged ys are *in* MN-wise arranged xs]) $\wedge$ ($C_w zs$ [zs arranged car-wise]) $\wedge$ ($Ab_w ysc_w zs$ [belief-wise arranged ys are about car-wise arranged zs]) $\wedge$ ($xs \neq ys \neq zs$)))). I can extend this paraphrase to all "conscious-wise" states (such as I think that…, I feel that…, etc). What I accomplish by doing thus is to combine mereological nihilism and eliminative materialism in a way to account for "conscious-wise" states. It is important to keep in mind that neither nihilists nor eliminative materialists deny there is some "conscious-wise" activity happening (Sassarini, 2021, pp. 7987-88). What we are rejecting is that the simples compose a complex and *not* that the simples exist. So, why can't we say that some simples' being arranged together give rise to a certain "conscious-wise" activity, if we hold that those arranged simples do not compose anything?

In a slogan form: *The grounding relation between the fundamental and derivative is different from the composition relation between the xs and the y* (Ney, 2023, pp. 208-209; Schaffer, 2010).[5] That is, belief states, thinking states, or feeling states can be grounded on the neurons' particular arrangement only as belief-wise, thinking-wise,

5 The explication of this argument by itself needs an entire paper. Here, suffice it give an example to demonstrate why I think this is so. Think of the explanatory gap between the physical and the phenomenal feel. The gap says that the properties of the latter cannot be explained by those of the former. Now, phenomenal properties are grounded on the physical (at least in this physicalist account that I am pursuing in this paper, we should take this for granted). That is, the physical is the fundamental level and the phenomenal is the derivative level. However, if we claim that the grounding relation between the fundamental and derivative levels is also a composition relation, then the derivative becomes an "entity" different from the fundamental. It becomes an "emergent" entity. However, consistency-preserving principle between fundamental and derivative entities tell us that if a derivative entity has the property X, it should not be the case that the property X cannot be a priori derivable from the fundamental

and feeling-wise arrangement, *without being* beliefs, thoughts, and feelings per se. Now, one may further argue here that if some simples are "giving rise" to something such as the belief-wise state, then this means that *from some arrangements come into existence new entities such as neurons.* After all, without neurons, no belief-wise, thinking-wise, or feeling-wise arrangements could have occurred. Thus, there are derivative entities even though there are no fundamental entities. Further, the argument could say due to the consistency required between the fundamental and derivative levels, there should be fundamental entities as well, from which the properties of derivative entities are a priori derivable. Well, had there been derivative entities, then this criticism would have been valid, but I do not see why we should commit to neurons in the first place. There is no need to postulate neurons as derivative entities. There are no neurons, only neuron-wise arranged particles. They are at most *derivative arrangements* grounded on *fundamental arrangements*. Hence, nowhere in the hierarchy ladder composition occurs, and so the consistency between the fundamental and derivative levels is preserved.

I think finally we can freely deny our own existence. I do think that nihilism is still very strong and as far as I am concerned no evidence shows *why and on what grounds* should we call the "p-wise" arrangement of particles compositions per se.[6] There seems to exist objects, you and I, but actually we are nothing more than simples arranged together. One final time "I" declare: *I, MN, do not exist, never existed, and shall never exist!*

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level, which is precisely the case when we talk about phenomenal consciousness. Yet, if we say grounding does not necessitate composition, then we do not have derivative "entities" but only derivative "arrangements" which are not "emergent" entities different than those at the fundamental physical level. Hence, there is no consistency problem to begin with: they are the same simples (the fundamental and the derivative) only in different arrangements. Also, Jonathan Schaffer in Schaffer (2010) argues that whole-part relation is one thing, and the prior-posterior relation is another. So—even if we assume that composition occurs—it may be the case that something is a part of a whole that is responsible for its composition but not fundamental and similarly a whole that is composed but not derivative: his "priority monism" is set out to demonstrate this.

6 For a detailed analysis of the impossibility of a priori ruling out nihilism as false, see Schaffer (2017).

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