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A Case for Nihilistic Dualism

Abstract

Both Roderick Chisholm and Dean Zimmerman consider mereological essentialism to accurately describe the relationship between parts and wholes. Chisholm supports mereological essentialism because he believes it solves the paradox of coincidence, while Zimmerman embraces it because he believes it helps him defend dualism and refute materialism. In the first part of this paper, I will prove that neither form of mereological essentialism solves the paradox of coincidence because constitution does not entail identity. I will also prove that only nihilism solves the paradox of coincidence because constitution is impossible. In the second half of my paper, I will prove that Zimmerman's argument against materialism that assumes mereological essentialism works better if you assume nihilism. I will then prove that nihilism is incompatible with materialism, and a new form of nihilistic dualism is the best way to maintain the existence of each person as one persisting thinker.

A Case for Nihilistic Dualism

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Abstract

Both Roderick Chisholm and Dean Zimmerman consider mereological essentialism to accurately describe the relationship between parts and wholes. Chisholm supports mereological essentialism because he believes it solves the paradox of coincidence, while Zimmerman embraces it because he believes it helps him defend dualism and refute materialism. In the first part of this paper, I will prove that neither form of mereological essentialism solves the paradox of coincidence because constitution does not entail identity. I will also prove that only nihilism solves the paradox of coincidence because constitution is impossible. In the second half of my paper, I will prove that Zimmerman's argument against materialism that assumes mereological essentialism works better if you assume nihilism. I will then prove that nihilism is incompatible with materialism, and a new form of nihilistic dualism is the best way to maintain the existence of each person as one persisting thinker.

Part One: How nihilism better solves the paradox of coincidence

1.1: What is the paradox of coincidence?

One famous example of the paradox of coincidence is the Tibbles/Tib paradox. Assuming Leibniz's Law, two entities are numerically identical if and only if they have all the same properties. On Monday, Tibbles the cat is a normal, domestic cat. Tib is the proper part of Tibbles that encompasses all of Tibbles except for his tail. On Tuesday, a car runs over Tibbles's tail and removes it. Tibbles survives the accident because cats can live without their tails, and Tib survives being separated from the tail. Tibbles has the property of having had a tail, and Tib does not; by Leibniz's Law, they are numerically distinct entities. After Tibbles's tail has been severed, both Tibbles and Tib take up the exact same region of space. Therefore, two numerically distinct objects are located in exactly the same place.

1.2: What is mereological essentialism?

Chisholm's mereological essentialism seeks to solve this paradox by asserting that in a strict philosophical sense of identity, no object can survive the loss of a part. Every part of an object is essential to it, meaning that at all times (and in all possible worlds) when that object exists, it will have all the same parts.¹ Tibbles-on-Monday no longer exists on Tuesday because he has lost his tail, an essential part of his identity. All that remains on Tuesday is Tib-from-Monday (assuming Tib did not gain or lose any parts). However, on Tuesday, Tib-from-Monday becomes a constituent of the *ens successivum* Tibbles-the-cat (as long as Tib-from-Monday does not gain or lose any parts during that time).

Entia successiva are Chisholm's way of uniting strictly distinct objects into everyday continuants. Chisholm believes that everyday objects persist through time in a loose sense of identity. Tibbles-on-Monday is the "same" cat as Tibbles-on-Tuesday just as I play the "same" instrument as Yo Yo Ma.² The renowned cellist and I do not share the exact same cello, but we play the same type of instrument, a cello. An *ens successivum* is a collection of successive objects that gain and lose parts but are tied together through a loose sense of identity. For example, Tibbles-on-Monday and Tibbles-on-Tuesday (aka Tib-from-Monday) are numerically different entities, but they are loosely united within the *ens successivum* Tibbles-the-cat. To maintain the cello analogy, Tibbles-on-Monday and Tibbles-on-Tuesday are like individual cellos but Tibbles-the-cat is like the category, cello.

Plantinga formalizes the criteria for both *entia successiva* and their constituents so we can better talk about mereological essentialism. Each numerically different entity within an *ens successivum* is a primary object. A primary object is an entity with only strict parts (S-part).³ If x is an S-part of y, then Plantinga says x and y must fulfill three criteria:

- (1) If y is an S-part of z, then x is an S-part of z;
- (2) y is not an S-part of x; and
- (3) y is such that in every possible world in which y exists, x is an S-part of y.⁴ For example, his tail is an S-part of the primary object Tibbles-on-Monday because if Tibbles-on-Monday were part of a larger entity, the tail would be part of that as well; Tibbles-on-Monday is not a part of his tail; and Tibbles-on-Monday cannot exist without his tail.

Even though Tibbles-on-Monday is a primary object, the *ens successivum* Tibbles is an ordinary object. An ordinary object is an object that is made up of both S-parts and nonstrict parts.⁵ (*Entia successiva* are all ordinary objects.) A nonstrict part of an ordinary object is a strict part of a primary object that constitutes the ordinary object.⁶ For example, the tail that is an S-part of the primary object Tibbles-on-Monday is a nonstrict part of the ordinary object Tibbles because Tibbles-on-Monday constitutes Tibbles. A primary object constitutes an ordinary object if it takes up the exact same space as the ordinary object.⁷

However, constitution does not entail identity. For example, the ordinary object Tibbles has the property of being able to survive losing its tail while the primary object Tibbles-on-Monday does not. Therefore, by Leibniz's Law, the two entities are not identical, even though they take up the exact same amount of space. Another way to think of the relationship between constitution and identity is to think of a river. If a river is identical to the water molecules that compose it, then Heraclitus was right to say, "You can never step into the same river twice." However, we say that there is only one Ganges, Mississippi or Potomac, regardless of which particular water molecules are present at any moment.

1.3: How does mereological essentialism solve the paradox of coincidence?

Now that we understand the basic tenets of mereological essentialism and how to talk about it, let us examine how it attempts to solve the paradox of coincidence. Chisholm states that there are two ways we can treat ordinary objects: either they do exist or they do not exist.⁸ If you accept that ordinary objects exist, then you have not solved the paradox of coincidence. Chisholm asserts that if ordinary objects do exist, they must be constituted by primary objects.⁹ In this case, both the ordinary object

Tibbles and the primary object Tibbles-on-Monday exist on Monday, and the latter constitutes the former. Therefore, there are two numerically distinct entities taking up the same amount of space, which is the problem we were hoping to solve in the first place.

Those who defend the existence of ordinary objects could either refute Leibniz's Law or argue that two entities can be wholly co-located. Refuting Leibniz's Law would require a new theory of identity. David Lewis argues that in many ordinary cases, partial identity is what matters.¹⁰ All of the primary objects that constitute Tibbles are almost identical, differing by only a few hairs, atoms or a limb or two. Therefore, we can just round down to there being one ordinary object, Tibbles. But partial identity can be subject to vagueness. At what point are two entities no longer "almost identical?" A particular *ens successivum* ceases to exist when there are no primary objects to constitute it. But what is the minimum percentage of original parts a particular primary object can have to constitute a particular *ens successivum*? Vague identity is incompatible with Neo-Quineanism (let us assume Neo-Quineanism is correct), the view that there is only one type of existence, and it is that expressed by logical quantifiers. For Neo-Quineans, existence is determinate; it can never be vague. If identity is vague, then existence is also vague. So denying Leibniz's Law is incompatible with Neo-Quineanism, leading to bigger problems than it may solve.

To argue that co-location is possible, one would have to assert that two numerically identical objects have different persistence conditions.¹¹ But Trenton Merricks argues that by definition, two objects with "numerically identical microstructure" cannot have different persistence conditions. Merricks states that a dog and its "atom for atom duplicate" are "qualitatively identical," meaning that one could survive death if and only if the other could, because they have numerically identical microstructure.¹² But the idea of co-location implies that the set of atoms can survive being crushed while the dog cannot. So this is a contradiction.

Now that we proved that accepting the existence of ordinary objects does not solve the paradox of coincidence, then for mereological essentialism to effectively do so, ordinary objects must not exist — only primary objects can exist. Every part of an object must be a strict part of that object. In this sense, *entia successiva* are "logical constructions" that reconcile our ordinary language to the ideas of mereological essentialism.¹³ If you believe in a fundamental level, the primary object Tibbles-on-Monday is constituted of a certain number of partless fundamental particles, or monads. Let's call the amalgamation of monads that constitute Tibbles-on-Monday Tibbles-sum. According to Plantinga's criteria, Tibbles-sum is still a primary object. But Tibbles-on-Monday has the property of being a cat — of eating, sleeping, and purring — while Tibbles-sum does not. By Leibniz's Law, the two are numerically distinct entities. Therefore, two numerically distinct objects coincide in the exact same place, and the paradox of coincidence remains unsolved.

Those who are still devoted to mereological essentialism could argue that there is no fundamental level, Tibbles-sum does not exist or Tibbles-sum can eat, sleep, and purr. If there is not a fundamental level, we can just reformulate Tibbles-sum to suit that ontology. For example, Tibbles-sum could be the sum of all the hairs, red blood cells, enzymes, etc. that constitute Tibbles-on-Monday. By Plantinga's criteria, this amalgamation of all the primary objects that constitute Tibbles-on-Monday is still a primary object in itself, but it is not identical to Tibbles-on-Monday, so co-location occurs again.

Asserting that Tibbles-sum does not exist but Tibbles-on-Monday does is merely arbitrary.¹⁴ Both fulfill Plantinga's criteria for being primary objects so there is no reason that one would exist and the other would not.

If you argue that Tibbles-sum can eat, sleep, and purr just like Tibbles, you encounter a puzzle similar to the Too Many Thinkers puzzle. The Too Many Thinkers puzzle is as follows: My brain is co-located with a swarm of atoms arranged brain-wise. Both have the capability to think. The swarm of atoms can survive my death but my brain cannot; therefore, they are two numerically distinct entities. So there are two thinking things writing this paper. But we know there is only one. In the case of Tibbles, if both Tibbles and Tibbles-sum can eat, sleep, and purr, they are still not identical because Tibbles-sum can survive a heart attack while Tibbles cannot, so there would exist two eating, sleeping, purring things instead of the one we know is there.

1.4: What is nihilism?

We proved that neither form of mereological essentialism solves the paradox of coincidence, so now we must analyze nihilism. Nihilism entails that no objects have proper parts.¹⁵ The only entities that exist are partless fundamental particles, or monads. These monads are arranged in different ways to produce everyday objects. Unlike Chisholm's primary objects, these arrangements of monads do not exist. Only the monads exist. Therefore, instead of saying, "I'm sitting on a chair," I would say, "I am sitting on a swarm of monads arranged chair-wise." These arrangements can be thought of like the non-existent *entia successiva*. They unite in a loose sense of identity a sum of truly existent objects, but instead of uniting composite primary objects, they unite partless monads. And instead of the composite primary objects strictly coming in and out of existence when they gain and lose parts, these monads persist through time without any problems because they have no parts.

1.5: How does nihilism solve the paradox of coincidence?

According to nihilism, in the case of Tibbles and Tib, there is no Tibbles and there is no Tib. There is a sum of monads arranged Tibbles-wise and a smaller sum of monads arranged Tib-wise. On Tuesday, some of the monads arranged Tibbles-wise become scattered, leaving a smaller sum of monads arranged Tib-wise. Both sums of monads fit the logical construction of a cat, but the cat does not exist as a separate entity.

In this case, constitution does not compete with identity because constitution is impossible. Monads are the only things that exist, and each is identified merely by itself; therefore, co-location is impossible. In the case of Tibbles-on-Monday and Tibbles-sum, proponents of nihilism say the two are identical logical constructions that do not exist on their own, but only the monads swarming together in the shape of a cat (if a cat were to exist) actually exist.

It is obvious that nihilism solves the paradox of coincidence, but some object that nihilism contradicts common sense. We are taught that there exist composite objects, and these objects have parts. Sider responds that it is unnecessary to think composite objects exist independently of their parts. For example, if we have three monads, why should we automatically say there is also a triangle present?¹⁶ It is much simpler to assert that the monads exist, and there is not an additional entity present. Another related objection is nihilism does not conform with the way we talk about the world around us. Sider responds that it is plausible to think that our everyday language refers to logical constructions and not

separately existing entities.¹⁷ Just because we say, “There is a table” does not mean we can immediately rule out that, “There is a swarm of monads arranged table-wise.”

Part Two: The combo of nihilism and dualism best describes personal identity

2.1: What are dualism and materialism?

In part two of this paper, I will prove that the combination of nihilism and dualism best describes personal identity. Zimmerman supports emergent dualism, the belief that each person has an immaterial soul generated by and dependent on his brain, which, together with his body, constitutes a person.¹⁸ Materialists believe people are identical to their material bodies and do not possess immaterial souls.

2.2: What is Zimmerman’s argument against materialism?

Zimmerman accepts Chisholm’s mereological essentialism and believes all everyday material objects are *entia successiva*. Zimmerman’s argument against materialism states that if materialism and mereological essentialism are true, human beings are *entia successiva*. If *entia successiva* exist, the primary object that constitutes the person has the same mental states and intrinsic characteristics as the ordinary object. For example, the primary object President-Obama-on-Monday shares the same mental states as the ordinary object President Obama, so on Monday there are two thinking things leading the United States. But we know that a person is only one thinker; so materialism is false. If *entia successiva* do not exist, then a person is identical to the primary object that constitutes him. A primary object goes out of existence when it gains or loses a part, and so would human beings. But we know that people are persisting entities, so materialism is false.¹⁹

2.3: What happens to Zimmerman’s argument if nihilism is true?

I proved in part one of this paper that mereological essentialism does not solve the paradox of coincidence, so philosophers should not accept it. But Zimmerman’s argument against materialism is not lost if we assume nihilism instead of mereological essentialism.

If we assume strict materialism, then people are identical to their bodies. But according to nihilism, bodies do not exist. There are only monads arranged body-wise. If we assume nihilism and strict materialism, then people do not exist. But to say that people do not exist is absolutely absurd. Each of us knows we exist, an integral part of personhood. So this is a contradiction.

A materialist could object to this argument by assuming a modified form of materialism instead of strict materialism. This modified form of materialism states that people are merely monads arranged body-wise, reconciling nihilism and materialism. But I cannot be identical to one thinking thing in this picture. If I am identical to billions of monads, then there are billions of thinkers writing this paper. But I am only one thinker. So materialism cannot hold in a nihilistic picture.

2.4: How does nihilism combined with dualism explain personal identity?

To maintain the truth that each person is one thinking thing that persists through time in a nihilistic picture, each person must have an immaterial soul that counts for his identity. Immaterial objects are not composed of monads and are not subject to the paradox of coincidence. This immaterial soul is united with a swarm of monads arranged body-wise to form a human person. There is no issue of too many

thinkers because only the soul exists so only it can think. And people persist through time in this picture because their immaterial souls do not go in and out of existence.

Some would argue that if the body does not exist, then this view is not dualism at all but idealism, the belief that people are only immaterial entities. But under this nihilistic dualism, people's immaterial souls control a particular formation of monads. The body does not exist as a composite object, but a person is composed of his soul and the monads arranged body-wise that it controls, which change throughout a person's life. One's identity is based on his soul (so I am always one persisting thinker), but the monads arranged fingernail-wise are equally a part of me as my soul is for as long as my soul controls them. Once the formation of monads loses its structure and fails to support the soul, the soul ceases to control this set of monads.

Granted, the typical objections to dualism concerning causal interaction between the immaterial and material still remain, but when materialism is completely ruled out of the nihilistic picture, dualism seems more plausible.

2.5: Conclusion

Mereological essentialism and nihilism provide plausible methods for describing the relationship between parts and wholes. But mereological essentialism cannot rule out the possibility of co-location, making the theory more trouble than it is worth. This fatal flaw is apparent when applying mereological essentialism to the paradox of coincidence and the debate between dualism and materialism. Nihilism better solves the paradox of coincidence, and when combined with dualism, maintains the existence of each person as one persisting thinker.

¹ Plantinga, Alvin. "On Mereological Essentialism." *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Mar., 1975), pp. 468-476.

² Chisholm, Roderick. "Chapter 3: Identity Through Time." *Person and Object*. 89-214.

³ Plantinga

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Chisholm, Roderick. "Mereological Essentialism: Some Further Considerations." *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Mar., 1975), pp. 477-484.

⁷ Chisholm "Chapter 3"

⁸ Chisholm "Mereological"

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Lewis, David. "Many But Almost One." *Ontology, Causality, and Mind: Essays on the Philosophy of D.M. Armstrong*.

¹¹ Merricks, Trenton. "Considerations in Favour of Eliminativism." *Objects and Persons*.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Chisholm "Mereological."

¹⁴ Merricks.

¹⁵ Sider, Theodore. "Against Parthood."

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Zimmerman, Dean. "Should a Christian Be a Mind-Body Dualist?"

¹⁹ *Id.*