Composition as Identity, Mereological Essentialism, and Counterpart Theory*

Trenton Merricks

Australasian Journal of Philosophy 77 (1999): 192-195.

Some philosophers claim that a composite object 'just is' or 'is nothing over and above' or 'is not distinct from' its parts. One way to understand such claims is as asserting that any composite object O is identical with the objects $O_1...O_n$ that are its parts, the objects that compose it. We can call this claim—as does its chief defender, David Lewis[1]—'composition as identity'.

I

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. There is no possible world in which Locke, Berkeley, and Hume exist and even one of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume does not exist. And Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in every possible world.[2] Similarly, there is

*Thanks to David Lewis, Michael C. Rea, and two anonymous referees for very helpful comments.

[1]Lewis, Parts of Classes (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 81-87. Other defenders include David Armstrong (Cf. A World of States of Affairs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 12) and Donald Baxter (Cf. 'Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense', Mind 97 (1988), pp. 575-582); E.J. Lowe is at least a sympathizer (Cf. 'Coinciding Objects: in defence of the "standard account"', Analysis 55 (1995), pp. 171-178).

In Parts of Classes, pp. 84-87, Lewis distinguishes the 'broadened' sense from the 'ordinary one-one' sense of identity. Naturally enough, he thinks that one-one identity holds only one-one and so cannot hold between a single whole and its many parts. Composition, according to Lewis, is identity in the broadened sense.

[2]That is, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are identical with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in every possible world in which they exist. In what follows, claims about an object's identity 'in all possible worlds' are to be understood as implicitly restricted to all possible worlds in which the object exists.

no possible world in which $O_1...O_n$ exist and even one of $O_1...O_n$ does not exist. And $O_1...O_n$ are identical with $O_1...O_n$ in every possible world.

Now suppose that O, the object composed of $O_1...O_n$, is identical with $O_1...O_n$. From this, the fact that $O_1...O_n$ are identical with $O_1...O_n$ in every possible world, and the indiscernibility of identicals it follows that O is identical with $O_1...O_n$ in every possible world.[3] Therefore, if composition as identity is true, there is no world in which O exists but is not composed of $O_1...O_n$.[4] So composition as identity implies that O—and, of course, every other composite object—must, in every world in which it exists, be composed of the parts that actually compose it. Composition as identity entails mereological essentialism.

---

[3]Lewis hedges on whether broadened identity implies indiscernibility:

> ...even though the many and the one are the same portion of Reality, and the character of that portion is given once and for all whether we take it as many or take it as one, still we do not really have a generalized principle of indiscernibility of identicals. It does matter how you slice it—not to the character of what's described, of course, but to the form of the description. What's true of the many is not exactly what's true of the one. After all, they are many while it is one. (Parts of Classes, p. 87)

But as long as we have indiscernibility of the 'character' of the one and the many, my argument in the text that invokes the indiscernibility of identicals goes through. And in a 1998 conversation, I asked Lewis whether his understanding of composition as identity allows one to infer that the whole is indiscernible from the parts—and specifically whether it sanctions the inference I make in the sentence to which this footnote is affixed—and he said that it did.

As for the concern that the one is not many and the many not one: I think Lewis et al ought to respond that their view just is the view that one and the same thing—so to speak—can be both one and many. The claim that being one is incompatible with being many seems to me just a way of denying that many things can be identical with the single whole they compose.

[4]Those who accept that the many are always identical with the one they compose will also accept that the many always compose the one with which they are identical. (This is required for the inference in the text to be valid in every possible case.)

II

If one grants the necessity of identity, the above argument goes through. But, surprisingly, contingent identity alone is not enough to undermine the argument. I'll illustrate this with a discussion of counterpart theory which provides, I believe, the only way to render contingent identity coherent.[5]

The counterpart theorist will say that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume can share a single counterpart in another world—a world in which there is, say, just one British Empiricist. Thus the friend of counterpart theory can insist that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume all exist in a world in which there is, so to speak, fewer than three of them. Note that in that world, by the counterpart theorist's lights, Locke is identical with Berkeley is identical with Hume. Yet that identity is contingent. In the actual world, they are distinct.

Similarly, the counterpart theorist might say that $O_1...O_n$ can exist in a world in which there are fewer than n of them; for several of $O_1...O_n$ might have the same counterpart—and so be contingently identical—in that world. In this way, the friend of counterpart theory and composition as identity can maintain that O, the object composed of (and identical with) $O_1...O_n$, can exist in a world in which it has fewer parts than it actually has.

One might conclude that this—O's possibly having fewer parts than it actually has—shows that counterpart theory allows one to accept composition as identity while rejecting mereological essentialism. But that conclusion is mistaken. For note that—according to the counterpart theorist-cum-devotee of composition as identity—the world in which O has fewer than n parts, fewer than it actually has, is ex hypothesi one in which

---

[5]Sometimes it is said that two four-dimensional objects that share a temporal part are, at the time at which they share a part, 'contingently identical'. This sort of contingent identity—overlap of temporal parts—is coherent without counterpart theory, but is irrelevant to the issues of this paper.

it nevertheless has $O_1...O_n$ as parts. (Although in that world, but not in this world, some of $O_1...O_n$ are contingently identical with each other.) It is by saying this—by insisting that O's counterpart in every world has counterparts of $O_1...O_n$ as parts[6]—that she maintains that her view is consistent with composition as identity.

This shows something surprising.[7] Mere sharing of counterparts, and so mere contingent identity, is not enough to undermine the argument of Section I for composition as identity's entailing mereological essentialism.

III

Although counterpart theory as such does not undermine the argument of Section I, a species of counterpart theory does. That species insists that objects do not have counterparts simpliciter, but rather only qua certain features of those objects.[8] Thus Locke qua influential Enlightenment figure might have a counterpart C in W, a figure that exemplifies a Lockean influence on the (counterpart of) the Enlightenment in W. But Locke qua descendent of ancestors $A_1...A_n$ might have a counterpart in W distinct

---

[6]Note also that even if O (that is, $O_1...O_n$) has two counterparts in some world—thus giving us a case of contingent identity in that world—both counterparts will be composed of counterparts of $O_1...O_n$.

[7]Here's another surprise: Given counterpart theory, an object's having all of its parts essentially turns out to be consistent with an object's possibly having fewer parts than it actually has. I find this so counterintuitive that I think it shows counterpart theory fails to provide an intuitively plausible account of what it is for a whole to have all its parts essentially; so I think this counts against counterpart theory.

[8]David Lewis defends a view along these lines (Cf. 'Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies', Journal of Philosophy 68 (1971), pp. 203-211 and On the Plurality of Worlds (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 248ff). The rejection of counterparts simpliciter is perhaps more understandable when we note that the counterpart relation is a similarity relation. It is reasonable to insist that similarity is always relative to a certain set of features or context. Thus A and B could be more similar qua profession to each other than either is to C; B and C more similar qua gender to each other than either is to A; and questions of who is more similar simpliciter to whom might be ill-formed.

from C, one whose ancestors are (counterparts of) $A_1...A_n$. So, although Locke qua Enlightenment figure is actually identical with Locke qua descendent, possibly—e.g., in W—this identity does not hold.

Similarly, this species of counterpart theory says that O (that is, $O_1...O_n$) qua the plurality $O_1...O_n$ exists in other worlds only if counterparts of $O_1...O_n$ exist in those worlds. But O qua—for example—the single object named 'The Eiffel Tower', standing in Paris, and having shape S and mass M, presumably exists in other worlds if those worlds contain a tower of shape S, mass M, standing in (the counterpart of) Paris, and called 'the Eiffel Tower'; and it does so even if those worlds fail to contain counterparts of O qua $O_1...O_n$.

Thus, the counterpart theorist could grant that O is identical with $O_1...O_n$, yet note that O, qua something-other-than-$O_1...O_n$, is possibly not identical with $O_1...O_n$—and so can possibly fail to have $O_1...O_n$ as parts. The species of counterpart theory according to which objects do not have counterparts simpliciter provides a relativized version of contingent identity that undermines my argument for composition as identity's entailing mereological essentialism.

IV

Unless identity is both contingent and relative (in the way noted in the previous section), composition as identity entails mereological essentialism. But many of us reject the contingency or the relativity of identity or both. So we must accept that if composition as identity is true, so is mereological essentialism. But many of us also reject mereological essentialism. So we must, therefore, reject composition as identity.