'No Statues'[*]

Trenton Merricks

Australasian Journal of Philosophy 78 (2000): 47-52.

A: So, have I convinced you that there are no statues, that statues don't really exist?[1]

B: Well, no. I can't really follow your arguments, since I'm confused about their conclusion, about what you mean by 'there are no statues' or 'statues don't exist'. Let me see if I understand. I think I see a statue over there; you must think I'm hallucinating.

A: No no no. Don't caricature my view. Your visual experience is no hallucination; but it is caused by atoms arranged statuewise, not a statue.[2]

B: So atoms arranged statuewise work in concert to produce visual and—presumably—tactile and other experiences. I suppose they serve as landmarks and are sold at auctions. Your 'atoms arranged statuewise' seem exactly like my statues. Indeed, all I or most anyone else means by 'there are statues' is that there are some things arranged statuewise.[3]

A: I find that surprising; in fact, I'm inclined to deny it. But, on the other hand, who am I to tell you what you mean by 'there are statues'? And I don't want to waste time fighting about, or figuring out, what most other people mean by it. I'm a metaphysician, not a pollster. So let's suppose—just for the sake of argument—that most people mean by 'there are statues' what you say they do. Even if true, this would not undermine my position; actually, it would be helpful. For it would mean that my statue-eliminativism is consistent with what ordinary folk mean when they say 'there are statues'.

B: It isn't helpful. If you concede that 'there are statues' is true in ordinary English, then you can't be speaking ordinary English when you say 'there are no statues'. I don't know what language you are speaking. And I do not, as a consequence, have any inkling of what you mean by 'there are no statues'.

A: I'm speaking English. But it may clarify things if I show you a further difference that results from the disagreement I have with my metaphysical opponents. Suppose, then, there are

some atoms arranged statuewise. Suppose we remove—and then replace—a third of those atoms. Now consider the question: After the process of removal and replacement, does the same statue still exist? My metaphysical opponents must say that the true answer to that question is one of the following: 'Yes', 'No', or 'It is indeterminate whether anything existing after that process is identical with the original statue'. (If my opponents grant that the third could possibly be the right answer, they must say something about the thorny issue of vague identity.) I, on the other hand, have an answer not available to my opponents. I can say that once we have all the facts about the atoms, we have all the facts. There really is no statue. So there is no residual question of its persistence through change of parts.

B: I still don't understand your thesis. You say you have a view consistent with the truth of 'there are statues'—although you also seem to think there aren't any—that makes difficult questions about statue persistence just disappear. Simply saying 'I have a mysterious view that makes difficult questions disappear' is not to explain your view; it is to praise it.[4]

A: Let me introduce another sort of disagreement I have with my metaphysical opponents. Suppose there are a million atoms arranged statuewise in a certain region of space. And suppose we ask how many (non-subatomic) things are in that region. My metaphysical opponents would say that there are at least one million and one (the atoms and the statue). I would say there are only one million. I grant, nevertheless, that we might refer to the million things—atoms all—as 'the statue'. We may speak in whatever way we find most convenient.

B: Given what the words 'there is a statue' mean, 'there is a statue in the region' is true if atoms are arranged statuewise in the region. So, there is a statue in the region. So, when counting things in the region, we should count the statue.

A: What words mean is merely a matter of convention. Which and how many objects exist, on the other hand, is not a matter of convention. You mistakenly assume that a statue-shaped object exists in the region because of the workaday meaning of 'there is a statue'.

B: I assume no such thing. The 'metaphysical truth' of the matter may be as independent of language as you please. But sentences, even sentences stating metaphysical theses, are not.

And, given what English words actually mean, 'there is a statue in the region' is true when there are atoms arranged statuewise in the region.

A: Consider the relation of composing something, the relation that holds between all and only the parts of each composite object. For instance, because I am a physical organism among whose parts are atoms, it follows that the composing something relation holds between the atoms of my body.[5] The atoms arranged my-left-earwise and the atoms arranged your-right-handwise, in contrast, do not come together to compose some further object; so the relation of composing something does not hold between the atoms arranged my-left-earwise and your-right-handwise. Given that you understand what the relation of composing something is, you can understand the claim that atoms arranged statuewise fail to stand in the relation of composing something one to another. You can therefore understand—although you will reject—my thesis.

B: Since 'there are statues' is true, there are statues. And statues have atoms as parts. Because it is trivial that an object's parts are interrelated by composing something, it is trivial that a statue's atoms are interrelated by composing something. You seem to deny this triviality. But surely things can't be as they seem. If you denied, in all earnestness, that bachelors were unmarried, I would conclude that I just don't know what you mean by 'bachelor'. Likewise, when you deny that the atomic parts of statues are interrelated by composing something, I must conclude that I just don't know what you mean by 'composing' . So I still don't understand your thesis.

A: Let's back up a bit. Originally, I took 'there are statues' always to imply that there are things arranged statuewise that stand in the relation of composing something one to another. I thus thought that 'there are statues' is always false. But then you told me that in everyday contexts 'there are statues' means only that there are things arranged statuewise. Since you worry more (a lot more) about everyday language than I do, I defer to your expertise here. The moral, then, is that 'there are statues' sometimes expresses one proposition and sometimes another. Which proposition it expresses will depend on context.[6] You have consistently claimed that because 'there are statues' is true in everyday contexts, where it is merely a claim about

things arranged statuewise, it follows that 'there are statues' is true in contexts where it implies a claim about composition. But this inference is invalid. At least, rejecting such an inference is the heart of my position. For, strictly speaking, when it comes to alleged statues, there just are atoms in statuesque arrangement and nothing else at all.

B: To claim that there are atoms arranged statuewise just is to claim that those atoms compose a statue. So how can you object to my 'inferring' from statuesque arrangement to statue composition? Just what could you mean by saying that—although there are atoms arranged statuewise—there are not, in some especially strict sense, really any statues? This was my original question, and you've yet to answer it.

A: I've answered it over and over. You're just not trying.

A: Let me try a different approach, an approach that puts you on the defensive for a change. I take it you at least understand the claim that the atoms arranged my-left-earwise fail to stand in the composing something relation—interpret 'composing' in the way you normally do—to the atoms arranged your-right-handwise.[7] Suppose that claim is true. Suppose, in other words, that nothing exists that is composed of those atoms.

Now imagine a world just like ours insofar as which things exist. So you and I exist there. And, in that world, there is nothing composed of the atoms arranged my earwise and your handwise. In the world we are imagining, moreover, everyone speaks English. But in the dictionaries of that world there is an entry for 'slithy tove' which reads: 'the object composed of the atoms of A's'—that's my—'left ear and B's'—that's your—'right hand'. Let us add that this definition of 'slithy tove' is widely known in that world and the expression itself widely used. Moreover, in that world there is an arbitrary and unfair law which reads: 'The slithy tove may not enter—in part or in whole—an airport.' This law precludes you and me from entering airports, absent amputation. Surely this imagined world is possible, being like ours in which objects exist, differing from ours only in linguistic and legal convention.

I assume a philosopher in that world could grant that there is a loose sense in which 'there is a slithy tove' is true. If there weren't a slithy tove in any sense, he might note, you and I could freely enter airports. And—I insist—he could also state the truth. He could say that, strictly speaking, there is no slithy tove, that is, that the atoms arranged my-left-earwise and your-right-handwise do not, in concert, compose any object at all. Yet all your objections to my claim that, strictly speaking, there are no statues seem to apply, mutatis mutandis, to that philosopher's claim that, strictly speaking, there is no slithy tove. Doesn't this show something is wrong with your objections?

B: The philosopher you have imagined speaks a slightly different language than I do. In his language 'compose' (and its cognates) does not mean exactly what it does in mine. To see this, note that he uses 'composing something' to refer to a relation that holds between the atoms of your ear and my hand. I don't use 'composing something' that way. And, in that philosopher's language, 'the atoms of A's left ear and B's right hand do not compose an object' is false. Of course, that philosopher could claim that that very same sentence would be true given some deviant meaning of 'compose'—the meaning that term has in the English of our world, for instance. But I doubt that would be particularly interesting to him or his worldmates.

A: When we first started talking, I expected you to say my claim that atoms arranged statuewise do not compose a statue was false. But instead, you claimed not to understand it. Now I finally see why. You reject even the possibility of false beliefs about composition. Every time people claim that some word refers to what is composed of some xs—any xs—you seem committed to saying that 'the xs compose something' becomes true. And, even more strikingly, every time someone (like me) responds by saying 'the xs do not compose something', you seem committed to saying that that someone is also correct—or at least not saying something false—on the grounds that he must be using 'compose' in some novel way. You think—wrongly—that we cannot err about when composition occurs; you also think—wrongly—that we cannot really disagree about its occurrence, but instead can only use the word 'compose' in competing ways.

B: All I think is that, if certain other changes occurred in English—or perhaps even in one's idiolect—the meaning of 'compose' in that same language would also change. Perhaps this involves a kind of infallibility and immunity to disagreement about sentences that use the word 'compose'. But it does not imply infallibility or immunity to disagreement about composition.

A: I still don't see how you can allow the possibility of mistakes or disagreement about composition itself. For every time it looks like there is a belief about composition that is false, your arguments seem to imply that the belief in question is not false, because not really about composition. And every time it looks like there is a disagreement between two parties about composition, your arguments seem to imply that the two parties are using 'compose' in different ways and so simply talking past each other. Indeed, I think you are committed to a similar position regarding existence. For we can state disagreements about composition as disagreements about whether something exists that is composed of such and such things. It looks like you must say that just as apparent disagreement about composition is not real disagreement, so apparent disagreement about whether the (alleged) relevant composite object—be it statue or slithy tove—exists is not real disagreement. But I think that we are woefully prone to both error and deep disagreement about metaphysical topics like composition and what really exists.

B: I suspect that our disagreement about the ways one can be mistaken about composition—and the ways one can be mistaken about which composite objects 'really' exist—results from even deeper disagreements about how metaphysics is related to language. But I digress. To see whether my arguments imply that all cases of seemingly false belief about composition are not really cases of false belief about composition—and to see whether that implication would be unsavory—we'd have to examine such cases one at a time. And it is not an unsavory implication of my view that, in your imagined world with its unfair airport restrictions, there is no false belief regarding composition (nor, as a result, regarding the existence of something called 'slithy tove'). Nor is it an unsavory implication of my view that there is no disagreement between the utterance, in your imagined world, of 'the atoms of A's left ear and

B's right hand compose an object', and my utterance in this world of 'the atoms of A's left ear and B's right hand do not compose an object'. For, to repeat, in the language of the imagined world, 'compose' does not mean compose. And, as a corollary, in the language of that world, 'exist' does not mean exist; after all, in that world, but not in ours, 'there exists a referent of 'slithy tove'' is true.

A: In that world, they no more speak a language different from the English of our world—as far as the meaning of 'compose' and 'exist' is concerned—than I do.

B: At least we agree on something.

Virginia Commonwealth University

Notes

*This dialogue is a direct result of a lengthy correspondence with Eli Hirsch, in which, roughly, I played the part of A—whom I would defend to the last jot and tittle—and he played the part of B. Indeed, Hirsch could be considered a co-author of this paper, although I do not mean to imply that he said, or would endorse, everything B says. Thanks to Anthony Ellis, Eli Hirsch, Eugene Mills, Mark Murphy, Michael Rea, Peter Vallentyne, Peter van Inwagen, and two anonymous referees for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[1]Peter van Inwagen and an earlier version of Peter Unger agree with A about the non-existence of statues (but only van Inwagen maintains—as A supposes below for the sake of argument—that this is consistent with what is ordinarily meant by 'there are statues'). See van Inwagen's Material Beings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Unger's 'There Are No Ordinary Things,' Synthese 41 (1979): 117-154.

[2]A adds: Atoms are arranged statuewise if and only if they both stand in certain spatial and causal interrelations and are 'suitably isolated'. Thus, for example, atoms imbedded at the center

of a large homogenous block of marble (i.e., atoms imbedded at the center of atoms arranged large-homogenous-block-of-marblewise) would not be suitably isolated; they would thereby fail to be arranged statuewise. The locution 'arranged statuewise' is inspired by van Inwagen's 'arranged chairwise', introduced on p. 109 of Material Beings.

[3]B qualifies: Were I being pedantic, I'd say that 'there are statues' means that there are some things arranged statuewise or there is some simple shaped like a statue.

[4]B continues: And your view, insofar as statue persistence is concerned, sounds suspiciously like the view that there are statues, but that they are 'reduced' to their constituent atoms.

A responds: Reductionism of that sort sounds exactly like the claim that there are no statues. But let's not pursue this now.

[5]A believes in A: So I believe that I—and, of course, other human organisms—exist. Once you are clear on what my eliminativism amounts to, I'll be happy to return to arguments for both its truth and limited scope.

[6]A acknowledges: Peter van Inwagen offers a reply along these lines—that the proposition expressed by sentences like 'there are statues' varies with context—to Eli Hirsch's B-ish objections. See van Inwagen's 'Reply to Reviewers,' Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 53 (1993): 709-719.

[7]A clarifies: I need you only to understand this claim, not believe it; if you can understand it, I will argue, you can understand my main thesis. Some philosophers think any two objects compose a third and so they (and presumably they alone) do not believe this claim, but rather think that the atoms arranged my-left-earwise and your-right-handwise compose something.