An Unexciting Solution to the Problem of the Many

Michael Pelczar

Abstract

In this paper, we (1) survey proposed solutions to Peter Unger's widely-discussed problem of the many, with a view to drawing out the controversial metaphysical implications of each, (2) propose a new solution to the problem that does not have controversial metaphysical implications, and, (3) argue that this solution applies to all versions of the problem, including versions that have surfaced since Unger's original discussion. Along the way, we distinguish the problem of the many from the problem of vagueness and Peter van Inwagen's special composition question.

1 The problem

Giant pandas are endangered. Or are they? If we accept a much-discussed line of reasoning due to Peter Unger, pandas are proliferating out of control—unless they are entirely mythical. The reasoning is as follows:[1]

P1 If there is a panda, there is a complex of atoms that is identical with that panda.

P2 If there's a complex of atoms *C* that is identical with some panda, then there are trillions of complexes of atoms that differ minutely

[1]See (Unger, 1980). Unger states the target argument in terms of clouds.

from C.

P3 So, if there is a panda, then there are trillions of complexes of atoms that differ minutely from a complex that is identical with a panda. [from P1 and P2]

P4 If a complex of atoms C' differs minutely from a complex C that is identical with a panda, then C' is identical with a panda distinct from the panda with which C is identical.

P5 So, if there's a panda, there are trillions of pandas. [from P3 and P4]

"Atoms" are just the simplest objects that things can have as parts, or, if there are no simplest objects, the objects that are simplest as far as we can tell (maybe elementary particles). A complex of atoms is a totality of atoms that stand to one another in various relations (such as causal and spatial relations). A complex of atoms C' differs minutely from a complex C just in case C' differs from C only by lacking one of the atoms in C.[2]

Reactions to the target argument vary. Some authors accept the argument and conclude that there's no such thing as a panda, on the grounds that there clearly are not trillions of pandas. Some authors accept the argument and conclude that there are (at least) trillions of pandas, on the

[2]We could define minute difference more broadly, so that C' also counted as differing minutely from C if C' included one more atom than C (where this additional atom is suitably related to the atoms in C).

grounds that pandas clearly do exist. Some authors reject the argument on the grounds that one or another of its premises is false. In the next section, we survey the main reactions to the argument. As we'll see, each reaction carries a commitment to some controversial metaphysical claim. In that sense, they are all *exciting* solutions to the problem of the many.

2 Exciting solutions

Nihilism

According to Peter Unger, the target argument is sound. Also according to Unger, it is false that there are trillions of pandas. Unger concludes there are no pandas at all. Nor are there things of any other composite kind: plants, mountains, books, human beings: according to Unger, none of these exist.[3]

The claim that there are no pandas (or people, or whatever) can easily seem ludicrous. Well, maybe it is ludicrous. But there's a way of construing the claim so that it is at least not immediately repellant to reason. On this construal, the idea is not that there is a property, *being a panda,* that nothing has; rather, the idea is that there is not even such a property. One might try to put this by saying that the word "panda" does not represent a set of necessary and sufficient conditions (for being a panda), but plays some other, non-cognitive, role in our thought and speech, somewhat as the word "immoral" plays a non-cognitive role, according to certain

[3] See (Unger, 1980, 462).

metaethical theories.[4]

Other authors of a nihilistic bent do not go as far as Unger. Peter van Inwagen thinks that the target argument fails, as does any variant of it that replaces "panda" with a word for some other kind of living thing. But van Inwagen agrees with Unger that all versions of the argument that replace "panda" with a word for a composite non-living thing are sound. So, according to van Inwagen, there are living pandas, but no bamboo forests, rain, or dead pandas.[5]

It's hard to make out van Inwagen's reasons for thinking that the problem of the many pertains to non-living but not to living things. The reasons have something to do with the fact that living things are self-maintaining systems or "homeodynamic events." But that can hardly be the whole story, since, as van Inwagen himself seems to acknowledge, many non-living things are also homeodynamic events.[6]

A different reason to make an exception of living things, or at least some living things, has to do with consciousness. According to Trenton Merricks, the target argument is sound when run for non-conscious

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[4] Actually, this can't be Unger's position, since words are no better off than pandas, as far as the problem of the many is concerned. But I'm not sure how else to construe Unger's suggestion that "there is no available thought that is adequate to concrete reality, and what passes for that is really as to nothing." (Unger, 1980, 462)

[5] See (van Inwagen, 1990, 81-97).

[6] Jupiter's Great Red Spot, for example; see (van Inwagen, 1990, 86-87).

entities (mountains, noodles, etc.), but unsound when run for any kind of conscious entity, like pandas or people. People exist, but their dental work does not. Merricks, like Unger and van Inwagen, takes the problem of the many to compel us to deny the existence of very many things whose existences we would ordinarily not dream of denying.[7]

Partial identity

David Lewis agrees with Unger that the target argument and all its variations are sound. But instead of taking this as a reason to deny the existence of pandas, Lewis takes it as a reason to affirm the existence of astronomically more pandas than we would ordinarily think exist. Ordinarily, we would say that there is just one panda at the National Zoo. Lewis believes that the National Zoo contains many more than that: trillions, at least. To make this palatable, Lewis suggests that all of the trillions of pandas at the zoo are, while different from one another, *almost* the same as one another. That's why it's so easy to mistake them for a single panda.[8]

When Lewis says that the many pandas are "almost one," he means that they exhibit a high degree of partial identity; i.e., have a high proportion of their parts in common. A problem with this suggestion is that at some level of resolution, a panda has infinitely many parts. Conse-

[7]See (Merricks, 2001).

[8]See (Lewis, 1993). Actually, there are now zero pandas at the National Zoo, but there was one from 2005 until 2010.

quently, the percentage of parts that any two pandaform complexes have in common is, at some level of resolution, zero (or else undefined). Since promoters of the problem of the many are free to run the target argument at whatever level of resolution they like, they can always ensure that the many complexes of atoms implicated in the existence of a panda are *not* almost one, if "almost one" is understood in terms of partial identity.

(Even if actual spacetime doesn't have a continuous structure, so that actual pandas aren't infinitely divisible, we can conceive of a situation in which spacetime is continuous, which is enough to yield a problem of the many. For, we don't ordinarily think that a continuous spacetime must contain an infinite number of pandas in order to contain even one.)

In those cases where Lewis's solution does get traction, it has surprising implications. For, on the plausible assumption that conscious beings like us are complex entities (consisting of physical or mental parts), the problem of the many pertains to us too. That means that if you accept Lewis's solution to the problem, you must accept that you are never alone in your study, but always accompanied by myriad conscious beings who are almost, but not quite, you.

So, in its own way, Lewis's solution to the problem of the many is just as exciting as Unger's, van Inwagen's, or Merricks's—it's just that the excitement here is the excitement of ontic explosion, rather than ontic collapse.

Sortal-relative identity

We now consider solutions to the problem of the many that work by criticizing the argument, rather than by trying to make the argument's solution palatable. We'll start with P.T. Geach, who was arguably the first person to raise the problem.[9]

Geach rejects the target argument, on the grounds that the phrase "is identical with" that occurs within it is meaningless. According to Geach, there is no such thing as "absolute identity," but only identity relative to a sortal. As he puts it,

> it makes no sense to judge whether things are 'the same,' or a thing remains 'the same,' unless we add or understand some term—'the same *F*'.[10]

Geach's rejection of absolute, non-relative-to-a-sortal identity is controversial—at least, it generated a lot of controversy at one time. Today, few people share Geach's views on identity. So if it turned out that we had to accept those views in order to solve the problem of the many, that would be an exciting result.[11]

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[9] In (Geach, 1980, 215-16).

[10] (Geach, 1980, 63-4).

[11] For trenchant criticism of Geach on identity, see (Hawthorne, 2007, 111-23).

The primacy of *praxis*

Many critics of the target argument focus on its first premise, arguing that the individuation conditions for ordinary objects differ from the individuation conditions for complexes of atoms. As Mark Johnston puts it,

> On ordinary ways of talking, when counting the number of clouds we do not contemplate a count of all the distinct, precise, cloud-shaped clusters of water droplets in the nearest vicinity of any cloud. These do not count as clouds. Despite their being quantities of matter which constitute clouds, we do not count them *as* clouds.[12]

In terms of our target argument, the idea is that we should reject P1 on the grounds that pandas are not identifiable with complexes of atoms. A complex of atoms may *constitute* a panda, but no such complex *is* a panda.

Well, why not? Take a complex of atoms that constitutes a panda. Presumably, the complex can't constitute a panda without there being a panda that it constitutes. So, if a complex of atoms constitutes a panda, then there is some panda such that the existence of that complex is sufficient for the existence of that panda. But then what is there to prevent the complex from *being* a panda? Here is Johnston's answer:

[12](Johnston, 1992, 100).

> The insistence on no distinction between an F and its F-shaped constituting matter without a difference to justify the distinction is uncontroversial on its face. It is a certain seductive conception of what a justifying difference must consist in which ought to be controversial. The conception has it that the justifying difference has to be substantial and characterizable independently of our practice of making judgements which exhibit certain patterns and demarcations.[13]

Johnston continues:

> The better conclusion is that our practice and the distinction it embodies is acceptable as it stands and what is bogus is the conception of justifying our practice which requires that, for the distinction to be justified, the difference between an F and its constituting matter must be a deep metaphysical difference secured by an extra ingredient of the F.[14]

In other words: nothing prevents a complex of atoms from being a panda, but we can still rightfully insist that no complex of atoms is a panda, because it's part of our ordinary practice to insist on this.

Johnston presents his solution to the problem of the many as "minimalistic," in the sense that it forgoes "the postulation of extra ingredients

[13](Johnston, 1992, 102).

[14](Johnston, 1992, 103).

which it is the peculiar privilege of philosophy to discover."[15] But there is at least one respect in which Johnston's solution is radically inflationary: it attributes extraordinary powers to ordinary practice. Do the folk insist on a moral distinction between killing and letting die? Case closed. Is it customary to distinguish goodness from pleasure? End of conversation. Does our practice embody a fundamental contrast between mind and body? *Praxis dixit!*

In short, Johnston's solution to the problem of the many turns anthropology into first philosophy. As solutions to the problem go, this is about as exciting as they come.

Three-dimensionalism

Like Johnston, E.J. Lowe rejects the first premise of the target argument on the grounds that the individuation conditions for ordinary objects differ from the individuation conditions for complexes of atoms. But, unlike Johnston, Lowe attempts to justify the latter claim.

According to Lowe, the key difference between a panda and a complex of atoms is that the former, but not the latter, can gain or lose parts. For example, a panda can grow a new hair, or shed an old one. Such changes are, for a panda, survivable. But according to Lowe, the "lump of matter" that constitutes a panda cannot survive this kind of change. Plucking a hair from a panda leaves you with the same panda, but a different lump of

[15](Johnston, 1992, 103).

ailuropod tissue. So, from the fact that pandas can shed, it doesn't follow that there are at least as many pandas as panda hairs. There are as many pandaform lumps of matter as there are panda hairs (in fact many more), but not as many pandas.[16]

An objection to Lowe is that his account fails to block the target argument when "atoms" are understood not as the simplest *particles* of which things are made, but the simplest and variously-related *events* that constitute the existence of a thing. If we can't equate a panda with a changeless complex of atoms, surely we can at least equate a panda with a spatiotemporally extended and variegated network of simple events.

But now we just run the target argument in terms of four-dimensional complexes of simple events (or, if there are no simple events, in terms of the simplest events known to us, such as point-events or events on the Planck scale). Lowe can't say that a four-dimensional event-complex fails to be a panda because it can't exhibit change, because it *does* exhibit change: all the change that characterizes the life of some panda. But if any such complex is a panda, then there are many other complexes that are also pandas—those that differ minutely from the given complex by lacking just one of its constituent events—and we are again left with an excess of pandas.

In order to get around this problem, Lowe denies that there are such things as four-dimensional complexes; as he puts it, he is "no friend of

[16](Lowe, 1982).

temporal parts." A panda exists in and changes over time, but not by having temporal parts. It persists and changes by being "wholly present," in different forms, at each moment of its existence. Since at each moment *all* of the panda's parts are present, the panda cannot be a four-dimensional complex of non-simultaneous events.[17]

It is actually unclear that rejecting four-dimensional complexes (or temporal parts) solves Lowe's problem. We could speak more broadly of complexes of states of affairs, such as the state of affairs of its being the case that such-and-such simple events occurred in such-and-such ways, or that such-and-such other simple events will occur in such-and-such other ways. This makes no commitment to four-dimensionalism. But if any complex of states of affairs is the life of a panda, then many other complexes of states of affairs are also lives of pandas, yielding, once again, an apparent excess of pandas, or at least panda lives. (Common sense says that one could kill a panda without taking trillions of lives.)[18]

In any case, Lowe's three-dimensionalism is certainly controversial. So if, as Lowe contends, the best solution to the problem of the many requires us to accept three-dimensionalism (and reject four-dimensionalism), that is an interesting and at least mildly exciting result.

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[17] At least, this was Lowe's position when he proposed his solution to the problem of the many: see (Lowe, 1987) and (Lowe, 1995, 180). He seems to have changed his mind later: see (McCall & Lowe, 2006).

[18] More on event-complexes, below.

Vague objects

Like Lowe, Michael Tye rejects the first premise of the target argument on principled grounds. But Tye's principles are different from Lowe's.

Tye begins by noting that there are two things one might mean by "complex of atoms."

One thing we might mean by "complex of atoms" is an entity that contains whatever atoms it contains, related in whatever ways they are related, *necessarily,* if at all. That is, we might individuate complexes in such a way that for any given complex of atoms, there is a set of atoms, and a pattern of relations among those atoms, such that *necessarily,* that complex of atoms exists if and only if those atoms exist and stand in that pattern of relations. So a complex containing more, or fewer, or different, or differently-related atoms from a given complex of atoms C would not have been the same complex of atoms as C.[19]

If this is what we mean by "complex of atoms," then P1 of the target argument is false. For it is false of any panda (or cat, or cloud) that there is some atom without which that panda could not possibly have existed. Any given panda could have been different in many different ways, and certainly in a way that would have involved only the non-existence of a single atom. Pandas have a modal ductility that complexes of atoms lack, if we individuate such complexes as in the preceding paragraph. Pandas are modally ductile; complexes of atoms (thus individuated) are modally

[19] (Tye, 1996, 222).

fragile. Not only *can* pandas exist as something besides modally fragile complexes of atoms, they *must* exist as something besides modally fragile complexes of atoms, if they are to exist at all.

So if the target argument is to succeed, it must rely on some alternative understanding of complexes of atoms. What might this alternative understanding be? According to Tye, the alternative is to think of a complex of atoms as an arrangement of atoms such that there is an objective, determinate fact of the matter concerning any given atom whether that atom belongs to that arrangement.[20]

But, according to Tye, if this is what we mean by "complex of atoms," then P1 of the target argument is false for a different reason. For, according to Tye, it is false that for every atom, there is an objective, determinate fact of the matter as to whether that atom is part of a panda; false that for every water droplet, there is an objective, determinate fact of the matter as to whether that droplet belongs to a cloud; etc. According to Tye, "all the ordinary objects with which we interact in our day to day lives are vague . . . the world is a very fuzzy place." Tye calls this view "fuzzy realism."[21]

We normally think of vagueness as a feature of language or thought, not a feature of ordinary objects. On the face of it, at least, the idea of a vague panda makes no more sense than the idea of an ambiguous,

[20](Tye, 1996, 222).

[21](Tye, 1996, 215).

subconscious, or hyphenated panda. So if the best solution to the problem of the many goes by way of fuzzy realism, that is an unexpected and exciting result.

3 The unexciting solution

Before moving on, let's shift from talk of "atoms" to events. The rationale for this shift is just that it yields a more general version of the problem of the many: subtracting an atom from a cloud entails subtracting some fundamental events from that cloud's career, but you can subtract a fundamental event from a cloud's career without subtracting any atoms from the cloud (unless the atoms are durationless, in which case they are themselves good candidates for fundamental events). Fundamental events are just the simplest events that occur, or, if there are no simplest events, the events that are simplest as far as we can tell (maybe point-events, or events on the Planck scale). A complex of fundamental events C' differs minutely from a complex of fundamental events C just in case C' differs from C only by lacking one of the fundamental events in C.

According to the usual story, an ordinary thing (cat, cloud, panda, or whatever) is a spatial complex of atoms. Restated in terms of events, the usual story is that an ordinary thing is a spatiotemporal complex of fundamental events. So, for example, we can, according to the usual story, equate the existence of a cloud with the occurrence of various fundamental events at various times and places (where we can understand this "occurring" in three- or four-dimensionalist terms).

The unexciting solution to the problem of the many rejects the claim that an ordinary object is a spatiotemporal complex of events (and, *a fortiori*, the claim that an ordinary object is a spatial complex of atoms). No panda is a complex of events (or atoms); nor is any cat, cloud, etc. Rather, a panda is a that-which-exists-iff-there-exists-at-least-one-out-of-a-certain-set-of-possible-complexes-of-events.

Consider a particular panda. Call him Paul. On the usual view, Paul exists, if at all, as a complex of fundamental events; he is, so to speak, a distribution of fundamental events over spacetime. On this view, Paul's existence comes to the existence of a certain event-complex. By contrast, on the view I favor, Paul's existence comes to the satisfaction of a disjunction of the form:

C_1 exists *or* C_2 exists *or* C_3 exists *or* ...

—where C_1, C_2, etc. are modally fragile event-complexes, the "*or*"s are Boolean, and the entire disjunction may have a finite or infinite number of disjuncts.

The guiding intuition here is this. Suppose that after Paul dies, you form the belief (perhaps on very good grounds) that exactly n fundamental events occurred in Paul's life. Now suppose that you learn that in fact one of those n events that you thought occurred in Paul's life never actually occurred. From this, do you infer that Paul never actually existed? Do you conclude that the panda you thought was Paul, with his n-event life, was actually a different panda (with a life consisting of $n - 1$ events)? I think not. Rather, you conclude that Paul's life included one less fundamental event than you thought.

Take all of the possible event-complexes each of which is such that we consider (or, would consider) the existence of that complex to be sufficient for Paul's existence. Put all those event-complexes into a set. Paul = that which actually exists iff that set has at least one actual member.

Paul is that which actually exists iff a certain set of event-complexes has at least one actual member. But which set is this?

There is no easy answer to this question. That's because the concept of a panda, or of a particular panda, like the concept of any ordinary thing, is vague. If we imagine subtracting atoms from a panda one by one (or fundamental events from the life of a panda one by one), we'll eventually find ourselves imagining a non-panda (since we'll eventually find ourselves imagining a solitary atom or fundamental event). At what stage of the subtraction do we cross the line from panda to non-panda? Is there even a line?

This is the Sorites paradox. It is a problem, but not the problem of the many. That is clear from the fact that you can have a problem of the many without having a corresponding Sorites problem. Define a schmeap as a heap of sand that contains at least one million grains. Schmeaps don't generate a Sorites paradox: if you start with a two-million grain schmeap, and remove one grain at a time, the pile changes from a schmeap to a non-schmeap with the one-million-and-first grain-removal. But schmeaps still generate a problem of the many. For if you have a two-million grain schmeap, you also have two million 1,999,999 grain schmeaps—or so the target argument purports to prove.[22]

On my view, a panda is simply that which actually exists iff a certain (vaguely determined) set, S, of event-complexes has at least one actual member. My view is *not* that a panda is that which exists iff a certain (vaguely determined) set of event-complexes has one *and only one* member.

Let n be the largest number of fundamental events that we are prepared to include in Paul's life—the life he actually lived. Then S contains at least one event-complex comprising n fundamental events. But then there will almost certainly be another event-complex that contains $n-1$ fundamental events, and that also belongs to S. In fact, there will almost certainly be a vast number of distinct event-complexes, each belonging to S, and each containing $n-1$ fundamental events.

The actual existence of all these event-complexes entails the existence

[22]While it is clear that you can have a problem of the many without having a corresponding Sorites problem, it is less clear whether you can have a Sorites problem without having a corresponding problem of the many, although the predicate "is a number close to 1" might generate such a problem. If a number n is close to 1, so is a number barely greater than 1, but successive additions take us to numbers that are not close to 1; so, we have a Sorites problem. But we don't have a problem of the many: the implication that one number close to 1 can't exist without others (even infinitely many others) that are close to 1 is unproblematic. (I owe this example to [acknowledgement].)

of Paul, but it does not entail the existence of more than one panda. Paul exists just in case C_1 exists or C_2 exists or etc.; but that doesn't mean that Paul exists twice over if both C_1 and C_2 exist. It just means that Paul's existence is overdetermined. But we already knew that, since we knew that Paul's life could have included fewer events than it actually did.

How does the unexciting solution solve the problem of the many? By allowing us to reject the first premise of the target argument, that if there is a panda, there is a complex of events (or atoms) that is identical with that panda. We reject this, on the grounds that there are pandas, despite the fact that no panda is identical with any complex of events (or atoms).

What *is* a panda identical with, on my view? Well, with itself, but more illuminatingly: with an entity, X, such that X actually exists if, and only if, a certain (vaguely determined) set has at least one actual member. We could give this entity a special name, but that would be pointless, since we already have a name for it. It's called a panda.

4 Virtues of the unexciting solution

The unexciting solution actually solves the problem

Given the controversial metaphysics they entail, you would think that the exciting solutions to the problem of the many would at least solve the problem in a completely general way. But this is often not the case.

Take Lewis's solution in terms of partial identity. As Lewis himself points out, this solution does not solve all versions of the problem:

> The almost-identity solution won't always work well. . . Fred's house taken as including the garage, and taken as not including the garage, have equal claim to be his house. The claim had better be good enough, else he has no house. So Fred has two houses. No! [23]

To deal with Fred's house, Lewis recommends supplementing his almost-identity solution with a supervaluational solution.

It is a virtue of the unexciting solution to the problem of the many that it works for Fred's house just as well as it works for pandas. Fred's house is that which actually exists just in case a certain set of event-complexes has at least one actual member. One member of the set in question is the complex of events that make up Fred's house including garage; another is the complex of events that make up Fred's house minus garage. Both of these members of the set are actual, so Fred's house exists (by the account I have proposed). But since the existence of multiple actualized members of the set does not, on my view, entail the existence of multiple houses, we don't have to say that Fred has more than one house.

The unexciting solution also applies to a version of the problem of the many devised by Neil McKinnon. You can divide Paul's life (conceptually) into a series Σ of arbitrarily brief events occurring at arbitrarily brief intervals. You can also divide Paul's life into a distinct series Σ' of distinct arbitrarily brief events occurring at arbitrarily brief intervals. In fact, as-

[23] (Lewis, 1993, 35).

suming that time is continuous, there are infinitely many series like Σ and Σ'. Each of these series should count as a panda, since if time were discontinuous, pandas would have been such series. So we must conclude that there can't be one panda without there being infinitely many pandas.[24]

McKinnon argues that existing solutions to Unger's problem of the many don't apply to his (McKinnon's) version of the problem. But the unexciting solution does solve McKinnon's problem. McKinnon's various series of events (Σ, Σ', etc.) are examples of what I've been calling event-complexes. If Paul consists of a succession Σ of arbitrarily brief events occurring at arbitrarily brief intervals, then Paul could have consisted of a succession of events Σ' offset from Σ by some arbitrarily brief interval. (We can think of this in terms of a panda having the modal capacity to occupy one disconnected region of spacetime versus another.) The existence of a panda, or a given panda, is insensitive to the precise distribution of events at the Planck scale, as shown by the fact that one can know that a particular panda exists without knowing precisely how events are distributed at the Planck scale.

By the account I've proposed, Paul is that which exists if and only if Σ exists or Σ' exists or Σ'' exists or etc. It follows that if infinitely many of these series exist, then there exists a panda (viz., Paul). But it doesn't follow that if infinitely many of the series exist, there exist infinitely many pandas.

[24](McKinnon, 2008, 82-3).

The unexciting solution confounds questionable philosophy of mind

The unexciting solution is a refutation of the target argument, but it also refutes a certain argument against physicalism, which goes like this:[25]

(1) There is a conscious being sitting in my chair.

(2) If physicalism is true, then conscious beings are complexes of (physical) atoms.

(3) So, if physicalism is true, there sits in my chair a complex of atoms that is a conscious being. [from (1) and (2)]

(4) If there sits in my chair a complex of atoms that is a conscious being, there sit in my chair multiple complexes of atoms that differ minutely from that one.

(5) So, if physicalism is true, there sit in my chair multiple complexes of atoms each of which differs minutely from a complex that is a conscious being. [from (3) and (4)]

(6) Any complex of atoms that differs minutely from a complex that is a conscious being B is itself a conscious being distinct from B.

(7) So, if physicalism is true, there sit in my chair multiple conscious beings. [from (5) and (6)]

(8) But there aren't multiple conscious beings sitting in my chair.

(9) So physicalism isn't true. [from (7) and (8)].

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[25] See (Unger, 2004) and (Zimmerman, 2010).

We should reject (2). A physicalist need not, and should not, equate a conscious being with a complex of physical atoms (or events). He should equate it with a that which actually exists just in case at least one member of a suitable set of complexes of physical atoms (better: events) is actual.

The unexciting solution doesn't prejudge the special composition question

The problem of the many is one of three philosophical problems that often crop up together. The other two are the problem of vagueness, and the challenge of answering the so-called special composition question.

We've already seen that the problem of the many is distinct from the problem of vagueness, and solvable independently of the latter. The same goes for the special composition question.

Simply put, the special composition question is whether, or under what circumstances, two or more things compose or constitute a further thing. Three answers are possible:

Unrestricted Composition:

For all x and all y, there is a z such that x is part of z and y is part of z and nothing besides x and y (or the parts of x or y, if they have parts) is part of z.

Restricted Composition:

Unrestricted composition is false, but for some x and some y, there is a z such that x is part of z and y is part of z and nothing besides x and y (or the parts of x or y, if they have parts) is part of z.

Nihilism (about complex entities):

For all x and all y, there is no z such that x is part of z and y is part of z and nothing besides x and y is part of z.[26]

Which of these three we should opt for depends on what we should accept as values of z; that is, it depends on what the person asking the special composition question ("under what circumstances do multiple things constitute a further thing") means by "thing." If z can be anything that has necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence, then Unrestricted Composition is true. For, a pair of things consisting of A and B has necessary and sufficient conditions for its existence, and the pair exists if (and only if) A exists and B exists. (Likewise for triplets of things, quadruplets of things, etc.) If the values of z are restricted to things without parts, then Nihilism is true (since no two things can both be parts of a partless thing). Restrictions on z weaker than this, but stronger than the mere restriction to things with identity conditions, yield various forms of Restricted Composition. (For a crude but transparent example: we get Restricted Composition if we allow as values of z only entities whose parts are in direct physical contact with one another.)

Many proposed solutions to the problem of the many entail Restricted Composition (van Inwagen, Merricks, Lowe, and probably Unger). By contrast, the unexciting solution is completely neutral on the special composition question. Not only does the unexciting solution not commit us

[26]For the special composition question, see (van Inwagen, 1990, 21-32).

to Unrestricted Composition, Restricted Composition, or Nihilism: it is even compatible with the view (correct, in my opinion) that the right answer to the special composition question is: It depends on what the person asking it means by "thing."

The fact that the unexciting solution to the problem of the many is non-committal about the special composition question makes the unexciting solution superior to solutions (like van Inwagen's) that do require their proponents to take a stand on the question.

The unexciting solution is unexciting

Last, but not least, the unexciting solution has the virtue of being . . . unexciting. It allows us to solve the problem of the many without committing ourselves to the existence of anything whose reality we would otherwise deny, and without committing ourselves to the non-existence of anything whose reality we would otherwise affirm. It lets us remain neutral on various questions of identity, persistence, and vagueness. It does not require us to worship at the altar of *praxis*. In short, it allows us to see the problem of the many for what it really is: not a deep paradox, but a distracting riddle.

5 Conclusion

The problem of the many is big philosophical business, motivating a variety of eye-opening metaphysical proposals. In this paper, we have found a way to solve the problem without undertaking any interesting metaphysical commitments. This is bad news for those with a vested interest in the problem, but good news for everyone else.

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