

The Special Composition Question

Designation of “material object” has three requirements. These requirements are the occupation of space, the extension or occupation of time, and the quality of mass or ability to interact with the world. An indisputable material object is the mereological atom. It is the object that cannot be broken into proper parts. A disputable material object, however, is you. Your ontology is clear, but the *nature* of your existence isn’t. How can we say you are a material object if you are made of *things* that are material objects in their own right? Alyssa Ney says, “many philosophers concede common sense counts for something.”¹ Thank you for your concession, philosophers... There is still hope that human beings, rocks, and books are material objects like we’ve always thought.

Turning hope on this matter into certainty was the goal of metaphysician Peter van Inwagen who designed what is called the Special Composition Question.² A correct answer to the Special Composition Question will confirm that material objects can compose a material object. His question is “in what circumstances do some objects compose something?”.

Importantly, van Inwagen uses a new logical faculty called *plural quantification* that allows one to refer to multiple things while avoiding the assumption they are together constituents of a larger thing. That is, it allows us to ad-

¹ Ney, Alyssa (2023) ‘Metaphysics: An Introduction.’

² van Inwagen, Peter (1990) ‘Material Beings.’

dress the Special Composition Question without our statements being self-referential.”

The Special Composition Question is presented formally:

For any x s when is it true that $\exists y$ (the x s compose y)
...
For any x s, when is it true that there exists a y such that the x s compose y ?

And it demands solutions in the following formal form:

$\forall x$ s $\exists y$ (the x s compose $y \iff$ the x s {some condition})
...
For all x s there exists a y such that the x s compose y if and only if the x s meet some condition.

So, as long as there can be a condition provided that makes the above argument sound, we can show that material objects can contain other material objects.

Let us apply the Special Composition Question and say that the condition that needs meeting is *contact*. The reader can then consider fastening, or the scenario whereby it will take considerable force for separation without deformation; cohesion, or association so strong that separation results in deformation; or fusion, the lacking of a boundary. When inserted to the Special Composition Question, none of these conditions lead to a logically sound statement. Take

shaking hands, for example. Are you and I one material object because we are in contact?

The position of *brutal composition* is such that there is actually no true, finite condition that allows xs to compose y ; therefore arriving on the belief that mereological atoms are the only material objects.

Van Inwagen, the creator of this important question, is pretty close to this belief but with a small caveat. He says only if the behavior of xs in question *constitute life* do they compose a material object. At surface level this solution seems absurd! You may be a material object but the wax figures they make of you in museums are not? The intention here is not to disregard what we've known and considered material objects. He hopes to specify that material objects (specifically inanimate ones) should be thought of as compositions of things in an orientation that resembles the idea of what they seem to be. For example, two 'chairs' exists in a room because:

$$\exists xs \exists ys \left(\left(\text{the } xs \text{ are arranged chairwise} \wedge \text{the } xs \text{ are in this room} \right) \wedge \right. \\ \left. \left(\text{the } ys \text{ are arranged chairwise} \wedge \text{the } ys \text{ are in this room} \right) \right) \\ \wedge \text{the } xs \neq \text{the } ys$$

...

There exists xs and ys such that the xs are arranged chair-wise & the xs are in this room and the ys are arranged chair-wise & the ys are in this room and the xs are not the ys .

In this example, there exists no material chairs! There are only mereological sums that are arranged *chair-wise*.

If a material object is a mereological sum of mereological atoms that constitute life, then does this make social groups material object? For example, should we consider the Chemistry Department at Drexel University a material object? Based off the advancement of metaphysics by van Inwagen and others, metaphysician Katherine Hawley, through her essay "Social Mereology," says yes.³ She states clearly: "social groups are particular, singular, concrete, and composite. They are large material objects which have smaller material objects, including individual human beings, as parts."

Hawley addresses different examples of social groups and defends her position. She generally breaks down social groups into: formal groups such as institutional entities or legally bound groups; informal groups such as clubs, teams, and even sub-groups within a larger, formal institution; and coextensional groups and group overlap wherein multiple entities/groups share the same members. Coextensionality was a popular point of skepticism against the social mereology view. If considering social groups material objects, then social groups must be subject to Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility Of Identicals. Hawley addresses this issue through Ofra Magidor's use of *predicational shift*.⁴ For example, if there is a friend group that forms both book club and music-listeners club, Hawley would say that the manner of predication on each entity changes what property is being addressed. Leibniz's Law claims objects with all the same

³ Hawley, Katherine (2017) 'Social Mereology.'

⁴ Magidor, Ofra (2011) 'Arguments By Leibniz's Law in Metaphysics.'

properties are necessarily identical. It would follow, then, to assume the book club and the music-listeners club are identical since their membership is made of the same grouping of friends. Predicational shift allows us to deny this assumption because though the same people belong to both clubs, other properties such as meeting times and group foci are different. This line of logic continues to individuals who hold multiple roles in different social groups, such as a mother in a family and boss at work. Predicational shift allows one to conclude, in such a case, that the mother and the boss are not multiple people. This was never refuted before.

Response

It is my belief that when one arrives – through philosophizing or experimenting – to a concept that is closer to truth, other remaining questions in other realms of thought get clearer. I find this to be upheld with Hawley's social mereology.

Historically discussions of material objects have been plagued by difficult problems such as the Ship of Theseus and the Puzzle of the Statue and the Clay. Thinkers have taken for granted the role our socially adapted minds play in forming issues that need not be formed! The dilemma brought by the puzzle of the warrior statue and the clay that it's made of quickly breaks down with simple understandings of time, persistence, and diachronicism. In the case of the Ship of Theseus, whereby a ship is renovated plank-by-plank calling into question which version of the ship is the correct one, the issue is not concerned with

material objects but really social ones. Whichever ship Captain Theseus sails is the ship that his country legally recognizes.⁵ By adopting a version of social-material convergence, Hawley's idea of social mereology bring more confidence to the belief that we're on to something.

⁵ Credit to my teacher, Dr. McPeak!