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Coinciding objects: reply to Lowe and Denkel

MICHAEL B. BURKE

In 1994a and 1994b, I offered a novel solution to some identity puzzles. E. J. Lowe (1995) and Arda Denkel (1995) have raised objections to that solution. I will reply here to each of them, and also address a relevant point made recently by Dean Zimmerman (1995).

1. Lowe is an advocate of what I call the 'standard account' of identity through time, an account developed mainly by Wiggins (1980). I, too, accept most of the elements of that account, including the absoluteness of identity, the essentiality of sort, the reality of the objects of our ordinary ontology, such as tables, stones, trees, cats, and cats' tails, the 3-dimensionality (rather than 4-dimensionality) of those objects, and the capacity of many of them to survive mereological change. I call it the 'standard' account both because of its popularity (see Burke 1992: 12–13, fn. 1) and because of its consistency with the metaphysic implicit in ordinary ways of thinking.

There is one consequence of the standard account that many have found uncongenial, if not intolerable: that it is possible, indeed common, for one object to coincide with another. (As I use the term, objects 'coincide' just in case (a) they differ numerically, and (b) the whole of one wholly occupies the place wholly and simultaneously occupied by the whole of the other. I use 'coextension' and its cognates for the corresponding reflexive relationship. By an 'object' I mean an individual continuant.) In Burke 1992, I argue that coinciding objects indeed are intolerable and that the standard account is therefore untenable. In 1994a and 1994b, I offer an alternative. I dispense with coinciding objects, but without relativizing identity and without engaging in revisionist metaphysics, that is, without surrendering the elements of the standard account that are mentioned above.

Lowe 1995 is an article of three sections. The first provides a nice summary of much of my account, as presented in 1994b. The second shows that certain arguments in that article do not constitute a refutation of the standard account. But as Lowe comes to 'suspect' (176), those arguments actually have no such purpose. They are meant only to show the viability of my own account. (My attempt to refute the standard account is Burke 1992, which Lowe does not address.) The third section contains objections to *my* account. It is to those objections that I will reply.

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The objections concern my handling (in 1994b: §2) of this case: An artist selects a piece of copper, P1, alters its shape by artful hammering, and thus fashions a copper statue. Coextensive with the statue is a piece of copper, P2. On the standard account, P2 is identical with P1 and diverse from the statue. P2 and the statue are different objects occupying the same place. On my account, P2 is identical with the statue and, surprisingly, diverse from P1. When the statue comes into existence, P1 goes *out* of existence and is replaced by P2, which is a statue as well as a piece of copper.

I offer three explanations for the initial counterintuitiveness of my claim that P1 ceases to exist.¹ The one relevant here is this. Presumably, there is a distinction, though one easily neglected, between P1, which is a *piece* of copper, and the copper of which it consists. (It seems right to say that the copper, but not the piece of copper, would survive if cut into ten pieces.) Now the copper of which P1 consists presumably *does* survive the artist's hammering. And that, I think, is part of what explains our initial conviction that P1 survives.

Of course, this explanation concedes that the statue (= P2) shares its place with *something*, namely, the copper. So am I not allowing coinciding objects after all? No, I am not, since I deny that the copper is a single object. Following Laycock (1972), I claim that the copper is a plurality. It is *many* objects: the many copper atoms of which the statue is composed. (Or if copper is not copper essentially, then the copper is the matter, that is, the material *particles*, of which the statue is composed.) The case of the statue and the copper is not a case of coinciding objects because it is not a case in which one object occupies the same place as any one other.

To the foregoing Lowe makes this objection:

If it is admitted that *many* objects can collectively occupy the same place as one other object, in what way is this supposed to be preferable to admitting that *one* object can occupy the same place as one other object? ... Is *each* of the many [copper atoms] a *part* of the one

¹ First, of course, I explain *why* P1 ceases to exist: it undergoes a change in shape and a change in its relationship to an artist, changes that would make it, if it survived, a statue. My explanation assumes that statues are *essentially* statues. And it assumes that P2, the piece of copper coextensive with the statue, is *identical* with the statue. The latter is an assumption that Lowe would reject. But if I have been able, *on* that assumption, both to explain why P1 ceases to exist and to explain why we initially think it doesn't, then I have gone far toward showing that there is no *need* to reject the assumption, no need to say that P2 and the statue are different objects occupying the same place. (My account of P1, P2, and the statue requires an accommodating account of the relations among objects, sortals, and persistence conditions. I provide one in 1994b: §4.)

[statue]? If not, then we shall still have a case of one object coinciding with another, namely, one of the many and that part of the one which exists in the same place as that one of the many. If so, on the other hand, then it may be questioned whether, after all, the one may not be *identified* with the many (cf. Baxter 1988, p. 193: 'in cases of a whole of parts, I argue, the many parts together are identical with the single whole'). (Lowe 1995: 177, 177 fn.)

Well, I hold that each of the many *is* a part of the one, but I deny that the many parts collectively are *identical* with the one. Here is an argument in support of that denial: Trivially, the many are many. But it is not individually that they are many. (They are one each.) So the many *collectively* are many. But 'many' and 'one' are contrary. So the many collectively are not one. But, again trivially, the one *is* one. So it is false that the many collectively are identical with the one.

Throughout the argument I use 'is' and 'are' in their predicative rather than their constitutive sense. And I assume that identity is absolute. Accordingly, I would reject any suggestion that the many are many parts but one statue – or that the one is one statue but many parts. That is, I would insist that 'many' and 'one' truly are contrary.

I expect the argument to convince *Lowe*, who is a vigorous defender of the absoluteness of identity (Lowe 1989: ch. 4), although it will not move Baxter. The latter has offered an interesting alternative to the familiar conception of identity as one-one (Baxter 1988). On Baxter's conception, on which identity is relative to 'counts', and discernibles need not be diverse, not only is the one identical (cross-count) with the many collectively, the one is identical (cross-count) with *each* of the many! But as Baxter himself emphasizes (1988: 209), it is *only* on a relativist conception of identity that either of those positions is tenable. My account assumes the standard, absolutist conception. Indeed, dealing with the puzzle cases without surrendering that conception was part of my declared objective.

Even if Lowe does withdraw the objection just discussed, he will not be ready to agree that the copper fails to be a single object. Conjunctivists hold that for any set of two or more material objects, there is a material object, an 'aggregate', which is composed of all and only the members of that set. If conjunctivism is true (which I doubt), and if the copper is properly identified not with the many copper atoms but with their aggregate (which does not follow from the proposition that there *is* such an object as their aggregate), then the copper is indeed one object rather than many. It is evident that this is the view that Lowe favours (1995: 178) – or would favour, if convinced that there is a distinction between the many atoms and the one aggregate.

Furthermore, Dean Zimmerman (1995), who shares my distaste for coinciding objects but wants a way of avoiding them that does not depend on contingent features of the actual world, argues that it is true contingently, if true at all, that no masses of matter are homeomerous (continuous and homogeneous). Zimmerman argues further that homeomerous masses would not be pluralities, even if other masses are.² I agree. Suppose, then, that we have a second statue, this one composed of a homeomerous mass. How are we to avoid saying that the statue is one object, that the mass is also one object (since it's not a plurality), and that the statue and the mass are different objects occupying the same place? Zimmerman's solution (1995: 105–10) is to say that only *masses* are place-occupying objects. He holds that statues, ships, and trees are either abstracta (such as functions from times to masses), processes 'passing through' masses, or else mere fictions.

In opposition to Lowe and Zimmerman, I deny the objecthood both of the copper composing the first statue and of the homeomerous mass composing the second. I can understand wanting to say that for any material stuff (any mass), homeomerous or not, and no matter how widely scattered, there is an object (whether an aggregate or some other type of object) which the stuff composes. But why say that there is an object which the stuff *is*? True, we can refer to the stuff by means of singular expressions, such as 'it', 'the stuff of which the statue consists', and (if the stuff is scattered) 'the stuff of which some is this stuff and the rest is that stuff'. But the same is true of the junk in my attic – and of the stuff on my desk, meaning the books, lamp, pens, and telephone on the desk. Conjunctivists would insist that the various objects on the desk *compose* an object. But if they are absolutists with regard to identity, they would not say that the various objects *are* (predicatively) an object. They would say, as I do, that the stuff on the desk is a plurality, that it is *many* objects.³ Of course, I have conceded that the stuff composing the second statue is *not* many objects. But perhaps it is not *an* (one) object either. The fact that we refer to it by means of a singular expression doesn't show that it is.

² For Zimmerman (and for me), any matter, massed or not, is a 'mass'.

³ Lowe remarks that 'it is hard to see why the copper of which the statue consists should *not* qualify as a "single" object, since it seems clear we can indeed single it out in thought as a subject of predication' (1995: 177). But 'single it out in thought as a subject of predication' means nothing more than mentally focus precisely on *it*, as a subject of predication. And that, too, we can do with respect to the stuff on the desk. Admittedly, if the many objects on the desk are *a* subject of predication (rather than many subjects), as they are if we predicate of them that they take up most of the surface of the desk, then it is collectively that they are the subject, not individually. But as I have already argued, many objects collectively are *many* objects, not one.

Here is an argument to show that it isn't, one that applies equally to the stuff of the first statue: The statue is an object. So if the stuff composing the statue is an object, then an object composes an object. But no object composes an object.⁴ Therefore the stuff composing the statue is not an object.

That no object (wholly) composes an object is asserted also by Peter Simons (using 'individual' where I use 'object'). Simons makes the pertinent observation that 'composes' is narrower in meaning than 'constitutes': A hand, when clenched, constitutes a fist; it doesn't compose a fist. A stone might constitute a marker; it doesn't compose one. In a discussion of what can compose what, Simons (1987: 232–33) classifies thirteen combinations as clearly acceptable, four as borderline, and just one as clearly unacceptable: one object's composing one object.

One plurality is not one object. Neither, I hold, is one mass. But suppose it is. Suppose, for instance, that the copper of the copper statue is, as Lowe believes, an 'aggregate'. In that case, I would exercise the option I described in 1994b: 617–18. I would identify the copper with the statue, just as I identify the *piece* of copper with the statue.⁵ And just as I claim that the piece of copper coextensive with the statue is diverse from the original piece of copper, I would claim that the *copper* coextensive with the statue is diverse from the original copper. I would make the latter claim on the same basis I make the former. (See fn. 1.) Thus I would still avoid coinciding objects.

⁴ Don't some mereologists say that every object composes itself? Yes, but probably they just find it convenient to use 'composes' to mean 'composes or is numerically identical with'. (See Simons 1987: 9–11.) In its ordinary sense, I believe, 'composing' denotes a relation that is asymmetrical and, therefore, irreflexive. In any case, I could make do with the weaker claim that no object composes *another* object, since I am opposing the claim that the statue and the stuff composing it are different objects occupying the same place.

⁵ And I would amend what I have said about composing. The mass of copper, although identical with the statue, would nevertheless *compose* the statue. (It would still be false that the statue composes the mass, since '. . . composes ___' would be a non-extensional context. Where 'F' and 'G' are sortal dummies, 'the F composes the G' would mean something like this: (a) any matter that is part of the F is part of the G, and vice-versa; and (b) being a G entails possession of a wider range of properties than does being an F. For an explanation of clause (b), see Burke 1994b: 610–14.) This would align my view of composition with my view of constitution. When one object constitutes one object, as when a piece of copper constitutes (forms) a statue, I am committed already to saying that the constituting object is identical with the object it constitutes. Note that where 'constitutes' means 'serves as', as in 'the stone constitutes a marker', even Lowe must say that. 'Marker' denotes a role, not a sort. Even those who believe in coinciding objects would identify the marker with the stone.

With regard to this option, Lowe makes a good point (1995: 177–78): denying the identity of the original and later copper would deprive me of one of the means by which I have sought to explain away the initial implausibility of my claim that the artist’s hammering destroys the original *piece* of copper. (For that explanation, see p. 12 above.) Lowe might add that it would create a need to explain away the implausibility of the claim that the hammering destroys the original *copper*.

I have two replies. First, I would still have two *other* ways of explaining away the implausibility of the two claims. (I won’t discuss them, since Lowe doesn’t, but interested readers are referred to Burke 1994b: 133–37.) Second, and more important, I could simply recast my explanation. Even if the hammering destroys the original copper as well as the original piece of copper, it would not destroy any of their parts. That would help to explain our conviction that the original copper and the original piece of copper *themselves* survive. After all, it requires both sophistication and attentiveness to avoid hasty inferences from compositional to numerical identity.

Before closing this section, I want to reiterate that the position outlined in the preceding three paragraphs is a fallback position, one to which I would retreat only if it were shown that a mass is a single object. I continue to hold the position set forth earlier, on which the original copper is diverse both from the original piece of copper and from the statue, and is not destroyed by the hammering.

2. In 1994a, I discuss the case of the man Dion and his ‘torso’ Theon, the latter being that part of Dion which consists of all of Dion except his left foot. Following Chrysippus, I claim that when Dion loses his left foot Theon ceases to exist (and thus does not coincide with Dion). Arda Denkel (1995) asks us to suppose that the severed foot is later reattached and says, reasonably, that the torso had by Dion after the reattachment, which Denkel calls ‘Peon’, is none other than Theon. Denkel correctly anticipates that I would consider the case to be one of intermittent existence, that I would say that Theon returns to existence when the foot is reattached. As Denkel notes, that is how I handled a related case in 1994b. I said there that in an earlier article (1980) I had argued ‘that there need be nothing problematic about intermittent existence in cases ... in which the *components* of the intermittently existing object exist continuously’ (1994b: 598, fn. 6). Denkel quotes this remark and interprets it (neglecting the ‘need be’) as a claim to have shown that ‘*any* intermission in existence [providing the components exist continuously] is ontologically tolerable’ (169). Saying that intermittences in existence are tolerable only if they can be explained, he proceeds to show something I would not deny: that an intermittence in

Theon's existence could not be explained in precisely the way I explained intermittences in the existence of the artifacts of Burke 1980: as a consequence of disassembly and reassembly. As Denkel points out, Theon undergoes no disassembly.

To explain the intermittence in Theon's existence, I need to explain (1) why Theon ceases to exist when Dion loses his foot and (2) why Theon is nevertheless identical with Peon.

I explain Theon's *ceasing* to exist as follows: Because of the maximality of *person*, Theon is initially a nonperson. When Dion loses his left foot, Theon undergoes a relational change that would make it, if it survived, a person. Because nonpersons are *essentially* nonpersons, Theon ceases to exist. (For details, see Burke 1994a.) Of course, one might argue against the assumptions on which I rely. But Denkel does not, apart from suggesting (167) that they are impugned by the strangeness of the proposition they entail.⁶ Well, all solutions to the puzzle involve *something* that seems strange, at least initially. Denkel does not address my efforts to *mitigate* the strangeness (1994a: 138–39).

Perhaps the reason Denkel passes lightly over my explanation of Theon's ceasing to exist, and considers a different one at length, is that he doesn't recognize my explanation *as* an explanation. Denkel writes (167): 'For the sake of argument, I will hold Burke's assumptions true [the very ones from which I deduce that Theon ceases to exist] and explore a certain consequence' [the possibility of Theon's existing intermittently]. This suggests that Denkel missed my claim (1994a: 137) that the assumptions from which I *argue* that Theon ceases to exist serve also to explain *why* Theon ceases to exist. (If he had noted that claim, but thought that my assumptions fail, *even if true*, to explain the cessation, surely he would have said so, and said why, before considering a different explanation.)

To explain why Theon, although it ceases to exist when Dion loses his foot, is nevertheless identical numerically with Peon, I would cite these facts: (a) Peon and Theon are identical qualitatively, sortally, and compositionally; (b) no torso competes with Peon for identity with Theon. Denkel himself allows that these facts suffice to assure the numerical identity of Theon with Peon (167, 169). They do so, I would add, in spite of the gap in Theon's existence. Since the *parts* of Theon, which exist continuously, are identical numerically with the *parts* of Peon, there is a basis for asserting, not just the qualitative identity of Theon and Peon, but their numerical

⁶ Denkel reports that elsewhere he has criticized the argument (in Burke 1992) that I cite in support of my assumption that Theon, if it survived its separation from Dion's left foot, would then be a person. But to criticize an argument *for* a proposition is not to argue *against* that proposition, at least not when the proposition is independently plausible, as is my assumption concerning Theon.

identity as well. It is in this respect, and only in this respect, that I would assimilate the case of Theon and Peon to the cases of Burke 1980.⁷

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⁷ I am grateful to John Tilley for very helpful suggestions.