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Constitution

Does the material constitution of an object determine its identity? Metaphysicians ask “Is constitution identity?”

Material particles (e.g., atoms) alone, what PETER VAN INWAGEN describes as partless “simples,” are nothing more than a “mereological sum.” They do not “compose” an integrated “whole” unless we know something about the teleonomic processes that create and maintain the object, as we saw in the previous chapter.

An eliminative materialist metaphysics that ignores immaterial information condemns metaphysicians to doing philosophy with one hand tied behind their backs.

Information philosophy says that we must know something about the abstract form of an object. Without specific information about the arrangement and organization of the material particles, and in the case of living things any information that is being communicated inside the organism and between organisms, we know little about the object’s internal “form.”

It is the matter plus the form that informs us about an object’s identity. In general, we cannot have matter without form. But this raises the problem of recognizing a dualist idealism that has as much reality as pure materialism.

Given a lump of material, it is the form as a function of time that allows us to study change and the object’s persistence conditions over time.

It is arguably the colocation¹ of form and matter that has generated several of the ancient puzzles that are still plaguing analytic language metaphysicians, problems like the Statue and Lump of Clay, the Ship of Theseus, the Problem of the Many, and Dion and Theon (a/k/a Tibbles the Cat).

Is Constitution Identity?

This is the argument that the constitutive material alone (the simple material particles) establishes an object’s identity. This

1 See chapter 7.



would be reasonable if the complete arrangement of the particles (the form, the total information about the material) is included.

A materialist metaphysics asks questions about the underlying substrate that constitutes all the objects in the universe. Unfortunately, most modern philosophers think that the material substrate is all there is. JAEGWON KIM thinks that matter exhausts the contents of the world. To think otherwise would be to posit “entities other than material substances, such as immaterial minds, or souls, outside physical space, with immaterial, non-physical properties.”²

But clearly the form of an object – the information it contains – plays a major role in identity, if not the dominant role for identity over time. Information philosophy posits immaterial entities.

Because all material things change in time (the Heraclitean “flux” or Platonic “Becoming”), the concept of “identity over time” is fundamentally flawed. Even in the case of a hypothetical completely inert object that could be protected from loss or gain of a single particle, its position coordinates in most spacetime frames are constantly changing.

Perfect identity over time is limited to unchanging ideas or concepts – Parmenidean “Being.” These are some of the abstract entities, like numbers and logical truths.

But identity over time “in some respects” is always available. Instead of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, we have *la change à tout le temps, et seulement la même chose à la même temps*.

We thus have proposed three axioms of identity:

Id1. Everything is identical to everything else in some respects.

Id2. Everything is different from everything else in some other respects.

Id3. Everything is identical to itself in all respects at each instant of time, but different in some respects from itself at any other time.

For biological entities, complete identity should include the practically inaccessible knowledge of all stored information (memories of experiences stored in the *experience recorder* and

2 Kim (2007) *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*, p. 71



reproducer) and all the instantaneous communications of information between the organism's proper parts (from the cellular up to the mental level).

In his compilation of essays on metaphysical problems, *Material Constitution: A Reader*, MICHAEL REA cites several ancient puzzles, all of which he believes are puzzles of material constitution.

There are many different kinds of puzzles about material constitution. Some involve artifacts; others involve organisms. Some show that growth, diminution, or part replacement is paradoxical; others show that even shape change is paradoxical. Some show that actual changes are paradoxical; others show that the mere possibility of change is paradoxical. But all of them present us with scenarios in which it appears that an object a and an object b share all of the same parts but are essentially related to their parts in different ways. This is what qualifies them as “puzzles about material constitution.” The fundamental problem that they all raise is what I call “the problem of material constitution.”

It seems most reasonable to begin our discussion by looking at a few examples. We have already seen one: the Debtor’s Paradox. This puzzle is also known as the Paradox of Increase or the Growing Argument since, if the debtor’s argument is sound, it follows that growth—which involves the addition of particles to an organism—is impossible...I will discuss three other puzzles: the Ship of Theseus, the Body-minus Puzzle [a/k/a Dion and Theon or Tibbles, the Cat], and Allan Gibbard’s Lumpl/Goliath [a/k/a Statue and the Clay] Puzzle.³

We agree with Rea and will separately analyze all these puzzles of material constitution in part 2 below. Many of these puzzles are analyzed by Rea as problems of identity and/or coinciding objects (the idea that two things can be in the same place at the same time).

3 Rea (1997) *Material Constitution: A Reader*, pp.xvi-xvii

