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Tibbles, the Cat

PETER GEACH was a younger colleague of LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN. Geach worked on problems of identity and some time in the early 1960's reformulated CHRYSIPPUS's ancient problem of Dion and Theon as "Tibbles, the Cat."

In his 1968 article "On Being in the Same Place at the Same Time," DAVID WIGGINS described Geach's first version of Tibbles. Although Geach himself never published this version, Wiggins cites Geach as his source of a variation on the ancient problem of Dion and Theon, where Theon is identical to Dion except he is missing a foot. Wiggins describes a metaphysical cat named Tibbles and a second cat named Tib who lacks a tail.

Where Theon is defined as identical to Dion except he is missing a foot, we now have a cat named Tibbles and a second cat named Tib who lacks a tail.

Wiggins begins his argument with an assertion S^*

" S^* : No two things of the same kind (that is, no two things which satisfy the same sortal or substance concept) can occupy exactly the same volume at exactly the same time.

This, I think, is a sort of necessary truth...

A final test for the soundness of S^* or, if you wish, for Leibniz' Law, is provided by a puzzle contrived by Geach out of a discussion in William of Sherwood. A cat called Tibbles loses his tail at time t_2 . But before t_2 somebody had picked out, identified, and distinguished from Tibbles a different and rather peculiar animate entity—namely, Tibbles minus Tibbles' tail. Let us suppose that he decided to call this entity "Tib." Suppose Tibbles was on the mat at time t_1 . Then both Tib and Tibbles were on the mat at t_1 . This does not violate S^* .

But consider the position from t_3 onward when, something the worse for wear, the cat is sitting on the mat without a tail. Is there one cat or are there two cats there? Tib is certainly sitting there. In a way nothing happened to him at all. But so is Tibbles. For Tibbles lost his tail, survived this experience, and then at t_3 was sitting on the mat. And we agreed that Tib



≠ Tibbles. We can uphold the transitivity of identity, it seems, only if we stick by that decision at t_3 and allow that at t_3 there are two cats on the mat in exactly the same place at exactly the same time. But my adherence to S^* obliges me to reject this. So I am obliged to find something independently wrong with the way in which the puzzle was set up.”

This is a clear case of Peter van Inwagen’s *Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts*¹

“It was set up in such a way that before t_2 Tibbles had a tail as a part and Tib allegedly did not have a tail as a part. If one dislikes this feature (as I do), then one has to ask, “Can one identify and name a part of a cat, insist one is naming just that, and insist that what one is naming is a cat”? This is my argument against the supposition that one can: Does Tib have a tail or not? I mean the question in the ordinary sense of “have,” not in any peculiar sense “have as a part.” For in a way it is precisely the propriety of some other concept of having as a part which is in question.”

As an arbitrary undetached part, Tib has been picked out and defined as coinciding with Tibbles, except for the tail Tibbles is about to lose. This violates S^*

“Surely Tib adjoins and is connected to a tail in the standard way in which cats who have tails are connected with their tails. There is no peculiarity in this case. Otherwise Tibbles himself might not have a tail. Surely any animal which has a tail loses a member or part of itself if its tail is cut off. But then there was no such cat as the cat who at t_1 has no tail as a part of himself. Certainly there was a cat-part which anybody could call “Tib” if they wished. But one cannot define into existence a cat called Tib who had no tail as part of himself at t , if there was no such cat at t_1 . If someone thought he could, then one might ask him (before the cutting at t_2), “Is this Tib of yours the same cat as Tibbles or is he a different cat?”²

1 Van Inwagen (1997). in Rea, *Material Constitution*, 191-208.

2 “Being in the same place at the same time,” *The Philosophical Review*, p.94



In Geach's second account of Tibbles as an exemplar of a metaphysical problem, published some years later (1980), Tibbles is a cat with 1,000 hairs that can be interpreted as 1,001 cats, by "picking out" and then pulling out one of those cat hairs at a time and each time identifying a new cat..

Geach's second version of Tibbles is widely cited as a discussion of the problem of *vagueness* or what PETER UNGER called the *Problem of the Many*, also published in 1980. It is not the "body-minus" problem of the original Tibbles, but it is relevant to the problem of coinciding objects and the relation of parts to wholes.

If a few of Tibbles' hairs are pulled out, do we still have Tibbles, the Cat? Obviously we do. Have we created other cats, now multiple things in the same place at the same time? Obviously not.

Nevertheless, Geach attempts to show that removing one of a thousand hairs from Tibbles may mean that there are actually 1,001 cats on the mat.

"The fat cat sat on the mat. There was just one cat on the mat. The cat's name was "Tibbles": "Tibbles" is moreover a name for a cat.—This simple story leads us into difficulties if we assume that Tibbles is a normal cat. For a normal cat has at least 1,000 hairs. Like many empirical concepts, the concept (single) hair is fuzzy at the edges; but it is reasonable to assume that we can identify in Tibbles at least 1,000 of his parts each of which definitely is a single hair. I shall refer to these hairs as h_1 , h_2 , h_3 , . . . up to $h_{1,000}$.

Now let c be the largest continuous mass of feline tissue on the mat. Then for any of our 1,000 cat-hairs, say h_n , there is a proper part c_n of c which contains precisely all of c except the hair h_n ; and every such part c_n differs in a describable way both from any other such part, say c_m , and from c as a whole. Moreover, fuzzy as the concept cat may be, it is clear that not only is c a cat, but also any part c_n is a cat: c_n would clearly be a cat were the hair h_n plucked out, and we cannot reasonably suppose that plucking out a hair generates a cat, so c_n must already have been a cat. So, contrary to our story, there was not just one cat called 'Tibbles' sitting on the mat; there were at least 1,001 sitting there!



All the same, this result is absurd. We simply do not speak of cats, or use names of cats, in this way; nor is our ordinary practice open to logical censure. I am indeed far from thinking that ordinary practice never is open to logical censure; but I do not believe our ordinary use of proper names and count nouns is so radically at fault as this conclusion would imply.

Everything falls into place if we realize that the number of cats on the mat is the number of different cats on the mat; and c_{13} , c_{279} , and c are not three different cats, they are one and the same cat. Though none of these 1,001 lumps of feline tissue is the same lump of feline tissue as another, each is the same cat as any other: each of them, then, is a cat, but there is only one cat on the mat, and our original story stands.

Thus each one of the names " c_1 ; c_2 , . . . $c_{1,000}$ " or again the name " c ", is a name of a cat; but none of these 1,001 names is a name for a cat, as "Tibbles" is. By virtue of its sense "Tibbles" is a name, not for one and the same thing (in fact, to say that would really be to say nothing at all), but for one and the same cat. This name for a cat has reference, and it names the one and only cat on the mat; but just on that account "Tibbles" names, as a shared name, both c itself and any of the smaller masses of feline tissue like c_{12} and c_{279} ; for all of these are one and the same cat, though not one and the same mass of feline tissue. "Tibbles" is not a name for a mass of feline tissue.

So we recover the truth of the simple story we began with. The price to pay is that we must regard "is the same cat as" as expressing only a certain equivalence relation, not an absolute identity restricted to cats; but this price, I have elsewhere argued, must be paid anyhow, for there is no such absolute identity as logicians have assumed."³

As Geach has argued, we only have *relative identity* between any two objects.

And as Geach also recognizes so clearly, his selecting out arbitrary parts and giving them a separate identity from the whole is just an exercise in verbal quibbling. He has multiplied his original problem of Tibbles, which was just a restatement of the Academic Sceptic's Dion and Theon.

3 Geach (1980) *Reference and Generality*, 3rd edition, p.215



Geach might as well have removed a single atom of material from the cat and declared it was another cat, in which case he would have produced of the order of 10^{26} cats.

The puzzle of Tibbles, the Cat is closely related to these classic metaphysical problems:

- **Constitution.** For those metaphysicians who think that material constitution is identity, there is a doubt that Tibbles can survive the loss of his tail or Dion the loss of a foot. Chrysippus's so-called "growing argument" was designed to show that Dion survives, despite Skeptic claims.
- **Composition.** If we remove something inessential (say one atom, or one hair from Tibbles), do we have the same thing? Or are some "proper parts" mereologically essential to the identity of the whole?
- **Identity.** Different aspects of an single object may have different persistence conditions. Some of Tibbles' hairs fall out naturally. Does that create a new identity for Tibbles? Perdurantists deny the possibility of identity through time. Endurantists emphasizes the subsets of total information that are unchanging over time as constituting the essential Tibbles.
- **Coinciding Objects.** The metaphysical notion of two things occupying the same space and time has always been a verbal quibble, a "picking out" of a part and seeing it as coincident with a part of the whole has been an absurd language game.
- **Individuation.** Given two equal amounts of matter, they are distinguished by their shape or form. Given two things with identical form, they are individuated by being embodied in different material. A living thing is a composite object that has a telos in the form of all its genetic information.

