

Précis of *Objects and Persons**

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 67 (2003): 700-703.

TRENTON MERRICKS

University of Virginia

There are no statues or chairs or rocks or planets. But there are microscopic objects.

Let's call them—whatever they may turn out to be—‘atoms’. And although there are no statues, there are atoms “arranged statuewise.” There are also atoms arranged chairwise, atoms arranged rockwise, and atoms arranged planetwise.

I “eliminate” many familiar composite macroscopic objects. But I say there are atoms arranged as if they composed the eliminated objects. The burden of Chapter One is to show that this “eliminativism” is neither contradictory nor obviously false.

It is not obviously false. At the very least, it can't be refuted by our “seeing and feeling statues.” For atoms arranged statuewise do all that statues supposedly do, including accounting for all of our visual or tactile “statue” experiences (pp. 2-3), a point to which I return in Chapter Three.

Atoms arranged statuewise can do the work of statues. Some might object that this is because ‘there are statues’ just means that there are atoms arranged statuewise. If so, eliminativism is contradictory. But—so I argue—this objection is clearly mistaken given what I mean by ‘atoms arranged statuewise’. That atoms are arranged statuewise means approximately that, if there were statues, then those atoms would compose one

* Unless otherwise noted, all references here and in my replies are to *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). Other works referenced in this précis are included in the bibliography at the end of my replies. Thanks to Mikes Bergmann and Rea, Cian Dorr, Ted Sider, and Dean Zimmerman for helpful comments.

(pp. 4-8; 12-20). And ‘there are statues’ does not mean that there are some atoms that would compose statues if there were statues.

Consider the idea that a statue “just is” or “is nothing more than” its atomic parts. Understood one way, this reductionist sentiment supports eliminativism (pp. 11-12). But understood in another—understood as the claim that a statue is identical with its constituent atoms—it is a threat. I argue, however, that it is false that a single statue could be identical with its many atomic parts (pp. 20-28).

Chapter Two further clarifies eliminativism, and further demonstrates its intelligibility, by showing eliminativism’s novel and interesting solutions to a number of philosophical puzzles. The arguments of this chapter also support the truth of eliminativism.

In Chapter Three I argue that anything a baseball causes—if baseballs exist—is also caused by the baseball’s atoms working in concert. Moreover, a baseball is “causally irrelevant” to what its atoms cause. These two claims imply that baseballs, if they existed, would be at best mere overdeterminers of whatever they cause.

(What does it mean to say that a baseball is causally irrelevant to its atoms causing an effect E? First, the baseball is not one of the atoms. Second, the baseball is not a “joint cause” of E alongside the atoms. Third, the baseball does not cause the atoms to cause E. And, fourth, the atoms do not cause the baseball to cause E. (pp. 57-59))

A baseball is at best a mere overdeterminer. Whatever a baseball causes—if the baseball exists—is already fully causally accounted for without the baseball. It is already fully causally accounted for by the relevant atoms. From this we can draw two conclusions.

First—as hinted at in Chapter One—our perceptual reasons for believing in baseballs are no good. (I discuss this in detail in my reply to Sider below.) The belief in baseballs, I argue, has the same epistemic status as the belief in objects like the sum of my nose and the Eiffel Tower. Whether baseballs exist, just like whether arbitrary sums exist, can be decided only by philosophical argument (pp. 72-79). (This gives the arguments of Chapter Two increased relevance and importance.)

Second, there aren't any baseballs. For we should resist causal overdetermination. We should assume, unless forced to do otherwise, that effects are not systematically causally overdetermined. Baseballs would systematically causally overdetermine the effects of their constituent atoms. And so the bias against systematic causal overdetermination gives a positive reason—in addition to those of Chapter Two—to deny that baseballs exist (p. 66-83). (I say more about the bias against overdetermination in my reply to Sider.)

The arguments of Chapters Two and Three support eliminating any object that would be a mere overdeterminer, any object that would cause effects only by overdetermining the effects of its constituent atoms. Thus I eliminate statues and baseballs and rocks and planets. But not every macrophysical composite must go. For we exist. And I say that we are human organisms. We are therefore composite objects.

I need to show why the arguments of Chapters Two and Three do not lead to our elimination. The first step is to show that we are not mere overdeterminers. We can show this given two claims. The first is that we cause effects in virtue of having mental properties. The second—and far more controversial—is that our existing and having causally efficacious mental properties does not supervene on the intrinsic features and

spatiotemporal and causal interrelations among atoms. I do not say that it is obvious that, given these two claims, we are not mere overdeterminers. I say, rather, that given these two claims, we can then argue that we are not overdeterminers. In Chapter Four I defend these two claims and present that argument. (And I say more about this argument in my reply to Dorr.)

In defense of the second and more controversial claim, consider the atoms — $A_1..A_n$ —that compose all of me except for my left index finger. $A_1...A_n$ do not compose a conscious being. (If they did, then there would be at least two conscious beings sitting in my chair right now; but there is only one such being: me.) Now annihilate my left index finger, leaving $A_1...A_n$ unchanged in their intrinsic features and spatiotemporal interrelations. $A_1...A_n$ then compose me, a conscious being. Thus we have a difference in whether atoms compose a conscious being without a difference in their intrinsic features or spatiotemporal interrelations. This—along with the claim that being conscious is intrinsic—leads me to conclude that our existing and having causally efficacious mental properties does not supervene on the intrinsic features and spatiotemporal and causal interrelations among atoms (pp. 93-104). (More discussion of this argument is found in my reply to Dorr; see also Hawley, 1998; Merricks, 1998; Noonan, 1999; Merricks, 2003; and Sider 2003.)

As we have seen, in Chapter Four I argue that we are not mere overdeterminers. As noted, that argument involves our having conscious mental properties. I think that other conscious beings—dogs and dolphins, for example—would be likewise causally non-redundant. So I see no reason from Chapter Three to eliminate them. And while I am sure that statues and baseballs and rocks and planets would be mere overdeterminers,

I remain agnostic about whether there are any non-conscious composites that are causally non-redundant. In Chapter Five, I argue that the puzzles and arguments of Chapter Two do not support our elimination.

Chapters Four and Five are primarily focused on defending the existence of us human organisms. But those chapters also offer further support for eliminating statues and baseballs and other mere overdeterminers. For example, Chapter Five's defense of our existence trades at certain points on our causal non-redundancy. This might be somewhat surprising, since the puzzles of Chapter Two do not initially seem to have anything to do with causal overdetermination. But the fact that mere overdeterminers in particular are vulnerable to the arguments developed in Chapter Two confirms our earlier conclusion that they should be eliminated.

More generally, Chapters Four and Five show us that the considerations of Chapters Two and Three do not support eliminating every conceivable composite object. Rather, Chapters Two and Three are truly discriminatory, giving principled reasons to reject some alleged composites (statues, baseballs, arbitrary sums) but not others (human beings).

My defense of our existence relies on mental causation. My objections to statues and baseballs involve overdetermination. Given all this, it is incumbent upon me to address the Exclusion Argument against mental causation, an argument primarily associated with Jaegwon Kim. In Chapter Six, I show that the Exclusion Argument is self-defeating and should be rejected by everyone. A new version of the Argument—the “Micro Exclusion Argument”—does not undermine itself. But, I argue, we should reject that argument in light of positions defended earlier in the book.

In Chapter Six I also consider whether we merely overdetermine effects that we cause, but do not directly cause by having a mental property. I argue that we do not overdetermine such effects. (More on this in my reply to Dorr's final objection.) In that chapter I also present a new argument against free will, an argument which presupposes incompatibilism. I then show that those who believe in non-redundant mental causation of the sort I defend in Chapter Four can resist that argument. And so, I suggest, incompatibilists who believe in free will should embrace my most controversial claims about mental causation.

Chapter Seven argues that—because eliminativism is true—folk beliefs about statues and chairs are indeed false. But I make the case that, insofar as practical matters and justification are concerned, such beliefs are “nearly as good as true.” And I argue that whether a claim of (for example) statue identity over time is “nearly as good as true” can be, to some extent, a matter of convention. But, I argue, nothing similar can be said about claims of personal identity over time. Thus my ontology yields a principled defense of the intuitively plausible claim that personal identity over time can never be a matter of convention, whereas the “identity of artifacts” can be.