

Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001)

Many otherwise reasonable philosophers are impatient with ontology. These philosophers will probably have little time for *Objects and Persons*, which claims that while there do exist “atoms arranged statuewise”, there do *not* exist statues; while there do exist atoms arranged tablewise and atoms arranged chairwise, there exist no tables and chairs.

Though I join these philosophers, at the end of the day, in rejecting Merricks’s claims, that day is long, whereas they want a quick verdict. But why? Do our impatient friends think that Merricks’s claims are contradictory, analytically false, or otherwise conceptually incoherent?

They may say that the conventional meaning of “there exists a statue” is “there exist atoms arranged statuewise”, but this does not stand up to scrutiny. Someone could, of course, just *decide* to mean such a thing by “there exists a statue”, but then her pronouncements would be irrelevant to Merricks, who intends to be using a “legitimate and straightforward existential quantifier” (Chapter I, section III) to deny the existence of statues. As I see it, the challenger must assume that there are multiple equally good candidate meanings for the (unrestricted) existential quantifier, corresponding to various competing views of the ontologists. For if there is just one, “distinguished”, candidate meaning for existence, then that is what we all mean by ‘exists’, whatever our conventions are, and there would be no guarantee that the truth conditions of existence statements would track our conventions. I doubt the assumption of multiple candidate meanings can be sustained without lapsing into Carnapian relativity, but would have liked to hear more from Merricks about “legitimate and straightforward” existential quantifiers.

Our philosopher’s impatience might instead be metaphysical, but here Merricks’s responses are powerful (Chapter I, sections II and IV). Is denying the existence of statues incoherent because statues are “nothing over and above” their parts arranged statuewise? Philosophers do sometimes say such things, but reading Merricks should get them to stop. If statues did not exist then statues would clearly be “nothing over and above” their parts, but that is obviously not the intended interpretation. Does the saying mean instead that statues are not *mereologically* distinct from their parts arranged statuewise? That is true, but trivial and irrelevant. One can decide to mean ‘non-overlapping’ by ‘distinct’, and so truly say that statues would not be distinct from their parts, but it does not follow that it is metaphysically incoherent to believe in the parts while rejecting the statues. Does the saying mean that statues are identical to their parts? Thus understood, the saying appeals to the controversial and obscure doctrine of “composition as identity”, according to which identity can sometimes hold many-to-one. In addition to pointing out the conceptual difficulties with this view, Merricks gives a very interesting argument that it leads to the dreaded thesis of mereological essentialism.

Perhaps the impatience is rather epistemic, indeed Moorean, belief in statues allegedly being maximally certain. But, as Merricks points out, i) it is *not* so clear that statues exist *as opposed to* atoms arranged statuewise (chapter I, section II; pp. 72-79); and ii) the believer in statues faces some awkward questions of her own (chapter II). Merricks cannot be dismissed out of hand; his arguments must be faced. I myself find the arguments interesting but quite resistible.

Merricks gives two arguments for eliminating statues, tables and chairs. First, a number of well-known philosophical conundrums may be avoided by renouncing those entities (chapter II). This is certainly right, though of course other theories purport to dissolve those conundrums as well. The final analysis of these arguments is complex. The second argument – and the core of the book – is a novel transformation of the exclusion argument from the philosophy of mind:

statues would *causally overdetermine* their effects since any putative effect of a statue is also an effect of its microscopic parts; such overdetermination does not occur; therefore statues do not exist (chapter III). (I reply to this argument in “What’s so Bad about Overdetermination?”, forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.)

Merricks makes an exception to his causal overdetermination argument for human beings. In addition to atoms arranged human-wise, there also exist humans. On its face, this exception is theoretically unsatisfying, all too convenient, and even tender-hearted. But Merricks’s justification for the exception is interesting: humans have causal powers beyond the causal powers of their micro-parts. Indeed, the property consciousness, instantiated by human persons, does not even globally supervene on microscopic physical properties, and it conveys distinctive causal powers (chapter IV).

Merricks’s argument for this deeply non-naturalistic philosophy of mind feels a bit like a magic trick. (Even more than arguments involving zombies and inverted spectra.)
Oversimplified version:

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| | 1. | I am the only conscious being in my immediate vicinity. |
| So, | 2. | The set of all my atoms except those in my right index finger does not compose a conscious being. |
| But, | 3. | If my right index finger were chopped off, an identically propertied and arranged set of atoms <i>would</i> compose a conscious being. |
| So, | 4. | Whether atoms compose a conscious being doesn’t supervene on their properties and arrangement. |

Naturalists can agree so far. They should grant 4, and conclude that consciousness is a *relational property* whose instantiation by x depends not only on the properties of and arrangement of x ’s parts, but also on what else x is attached to. Thus, while not supervening on the micro-properties of the objects instantiating it, consciousness nevertheless supervenes globally on the total micro-arrangement of the world. There is an intrinsic property that is a lot *like* consciousness, call it consciousness*, that *does* supervene on the micro-properties of its instances; to be conscious is roughly to be conscious* and not be part of a slightly larger conscious* being. Consciousness and consciousness* are each perfectly good properties, but the English predicate ‘conscious’ picks out the former, for many English predicates F are *maximal*, in that large parts of an F are disqualified as themselves counting as F s. Merricks’s premise 1 is compelling for a *semantic* reason: the English predicate ‘conscious’ is maximal. (See my “Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience”, forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, for more details.)

Merricks disagrees with all this, claims that consciousness itself is intrinsic, not relational, and concludes that consciousness does not even globally supervene on microphysics. He regards distinguishing between consciousness and consciousness* as “fiddling with the words”, since it is “both false and incredible” that there are many conscious* beings in my vicinity (103). I disagree: since these beings share nearly all the same parts, it seems both true and mundane that all are something like conscious. At any rate, an argument against the plurality of conscious* beings is needed. Merricks obliges, arguing that the plurality implies the absurd conclusion that I cannot tell whether I am conscious, since I and the conscious* beings all have the same phenomenology.

This latter argument has surfaced in a number of places recently, against a number of different targets. If persons are distinct from the masses of matter from which they are constituted, how does one know that one is a person as opposed to a mass of matter? If persons are aggregates of temporal parts, how does one know one is a person, rather than a shorter-lived temporal part? (See Eric Olson, *The Human Animal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 106-108, 166; Peter Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 290, n. 45; Dean Zimmerman, "Material People", in Dean Zimmerman and Michael Loux, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).) The proper reply, I believe, is that reflexive thought is not in the first instance about *I*, but rather involves a distinctively reflexive *this*. Since there are many objects in the neighborhood that this *this* might pick out, sensible reflexive thought will supplement this internal demonstrative with a sortal expression. Thus one might think reflexively about *this person*, or *this conscious being*. (No doubt unreflective reflexive thought is indeterminate among various alternatives.) Suppose, then, that I have reflected upon Merricks's arguments and concluded that I have a plurality of proper parts each of which is conscious*, only one of which is conscious. (Let us ignore vagueness and the "problem of the many".) Ought I to wonder whether *I* am conscious? No. The only questions I could be asking myself are "Is *this conscious being* conscious?" and "Is *this person* conscious?". The first question should worry no one, as its answer is trivially *yes*. Nor should the second question give me pause: I can be sure by conceptual analysis that 'this person' picks out the one and only conscious thing in my vicinity: both 'person' and 'conscious' are maximal. Thus, a plethora of conscious* entities in one's vicinity does not lead to skepticism about whether one is conscious. Mutatis mutandis, the presence of masses of matter or proper temporal parts in one's vicinity does not lead to skepticism about whether one is a person.

Objects and Persons is challenging and interesting. Its argumentation is generally direct (though there are a couple lapses, in which the dialectic becomes overly tangled). Merricks's writing is refreshingly clear. His claims are striking and important. The book should be read.

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