Metaphysical Language, Ordinary Language and Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings*[*]

Peter van Inwagen
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Material Beings is an immensely important work in contemporary metaphysics, even though hardly any metaphysicians accept its central conclusion. (Many works of contemporary metaphysics are like this: metaphysicians are a disputatious lot). There is a lot of value in *Material Beings* about the metaphysics of parts and wholes, material addressing the metaphysics of existence over time, puzzles about existence of people over time, and a surprising defence, in the final two chapters of the book, of abandoning classical logic in metaphysics in favour of a three valued logic. In this commentary, however, I will focus on what I take to be the main conclusion of the book, what van Inwagen says to sugar the pill of this conclusion, and a new problem that arises for van Inwagen's theory which is very similar to the sort of problem he is at such pains to solve. Finally, I suggest that reflection on this new problem raises an epistemic challenge to van Inwagen's position.

The main conclusion of *Material Beings* is perhaps the second-most surprising claim in that book. It is, to put it baldly, that the only material objects that exist are either ultimate material particles, or living beings. No other kinds of material objects exist: no cups, no clouds, no clothing, no mountains, no benzene molecules, no dead bodies, no planets or stars. This conclusion is useful for answering a number of traditional puzzles about material objects: in dealing with a tricky case of personal identity over time involving brain removal, for example, van Inwagen can say, as he does, «[t]he

solution to this paradox is simply that one's brain does not exist» (p. 172). Since the only things that exist are living creatures or ultimate particles, the only parts that living beings have are themselves either living beings or ultimate particles: I may have electrons or maybe cells as parts, but not things like hands or a brain.

The theory that there are no material objects besides living things and ultimate particles is unpopular, in my view deservedly unpopular. But there are important theoretical pressures pushing us towards van Inwagen's position, and it is the genius of *Material Beings* that van Inwagen marshals his case for the view in such an intriguing way.

Van Inwagen begins by posing what has become a central question in the metaphysics of parts and wholes: the «Special Composition Question» (pp. 30-31), hereafter "SCQ". It is the question of what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for some objects (the *x*s) to *compose* another object (*y*): where for the *x*s to compose *y* is for all the *x*s to be parts of *y*, distinct *x*s to not overlap, and for every part of *y* to overlap one of the *x*s. That is, when do some things make up something? Van Inwagen argues against some representative answers to the SCQ, and proposes his own solution: that the only way some *x*s can compose something is either if 1) there is only one of the *x*s, and it is an ultimate particle with no parts other than itself, or 2) «the activity of the *x*s constitute a life» (p. 115): the *x*s make up a living thing. Much of the last part of van Inwagen's book consists of examining how different problems about parts and wholes are resolved in the light of his answer to the SCQ.

I believe van Inwagen has another motivation for his preferred answer besides giving a good answer to the SCQ, which surfaces at a number of points in his discussion.[1] There are a host of paradoxes about parts and wholes: arguments with apparently plausible premises that yield contradictory conclusions. Consider, for example, the ancient paradox of Dion and Theon. Dion is a man, and Theon is the large part of him which includes everything except his left foot. Suppose Dion has his foot amputated. Plausibly, he and Theon become the same entity, since Theon underwent no change but now all Dion's parts are Theon's parts. But on the other hand it seems that they cannot be the same entity: at the later time, it is true that Dion used to have two feet, for example, while it is not true of Theon that it used to have two feet.

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[1] See e.g., pp. 69-71, 78, 179.

Or consider a case involving a valuable antique car which at the beginning of the story only has three wheels, having lost one long ago. Call the car at the beginning "Ridge" (contracted from "Original"). Suppose I attach a garish new wheel, complete with shiny hubcap, to Ridge. It seems I will then have a four-wheeled car: let me dub the four-wheeled car after the attachment "Hercules". Hercules, it seems, has a large part with old components: all of it except the new wheel (and screws). Call that large part of Hercules "Hercules Minus". What happened to Ridge? It seems I did not destroy that car, so it still exists. Cars can gain wheels, so maybe Ridge is now Hercules. But Hercules Minus also has a good claim to be Ridge – it is entirely antique, like Ridge was, and is made of the same parts as Ridge. But it seems Ridge cannot be both, since Ridge did not have the features "about to gain a fourth wheel" and "about to continue to have exactly three-wheels" at the same time. All the consistent ways to resolve this puzzle seem initially unattractive. But the puzzle does not arise if there are no cars to begin with. Heavily restricting what material objects his theory is committed to seems to enable van Inwagen to sidestep these vexing puzzles.

I said, above, that I thought van Inwagen's conclusion that no material objects except ultimate particles and living creatures was the second most surprising claim in *Material Beings*. The most surprising claim in *Material Beings* is this: that nothing that ordinary people say or think is in conflict with van Inwagen's solutions to these puzzles (pp. 98-102). Despite what you may have thought, you probably have never said or believed anything that implies that some people own cars, or that chairs can be found in your home, or anything else that entails that objects such as cars or chairs or seas or stars exist. (Except perhaps if you have engaged in metaphysics). Van Inwagen does not spell out in detail how his claims in *Material Beings* are consistent with ordinary beliefs and utterances: he says «I do not propose to defend my philosophy of language in the present work» (p. 102), and as far as I know he never gives an entirely systematic treatment of this issue elsewhere. Instead, he illustrates his thesis with analogies (pp. 101-102): just as someone who, when asked whether it's raining, can sometimes properly reply "It is and it isn't", or someone who accepts Copernicanism can still, in the ordinary course of events, talk about the sun moving during the course of an afternoon, ordinary people can say "There are two chairs in the next room" and say something true even though, by van Inwagen's lights, there are no chairs anywhere.

Here is a suggestion that I hope is true to van Inwagen's intentions here. Let us suppose that there are two ways of talking about what material objects there are. There is a "strict" and careful way, which philosophers typically engage in when discussing metaphysics or ontology, and a more loose or less constrained way which is what we all use in the ordinary course of events in describing the world and also describing our beliefs about the world. When asking, in the strict way, what material objects exist, van Inwagen thinks the answer is that every material object is either a simple or a living creature. For most claims apparently involving material objects to be true in this strict sense, according to van Inwagen, those objects must exist and be the way they are characterised: under the strict interpretation, "there are two red chairs in my office" requires, for its truth, at least the existence of two chairs which are red. However, that sentence also has a loose or popular reading on which it can be true even if "two chairs exist" is false in the strict sense. If I wish to say, strictly speaking, what it takes for the sentence "there are two red chairs in my office" to be true *when interpreted loosely*, all it requires is that there are tiny ultimate particles arranged in a certain way. Van Inwagen's hypothesis, then, is one that he offers in the strict mode of talking: speaking strictly, for example, no chairs exist. Van Inwagen takes himself to be disagreeing with other metaphysicians who he takes to be speaking strictly and say that chairs do exist when they speak strictly. Van Inwagen takes himself to have no direct dispute with people speaking only loosely about this issue: indeed, he agrees that loosely speaking, chairs exist. (And he will agree, loosely speaking, that people own cars, or that chairs can be found in your home, or anything else that entails that objects such as cars or chairs or seas or stars exist. So he might complain that I put the surprising feature of his view in a misleading way, above. I think he is only committed to the view that what is meant by "people own cars", for example, when *interpreted strictly* is something that virtually no ordinary speaker or thinker says or believes).

Interpreted this way, van Inwagen's claim that his thesis does not conflict with much of what we ordinarily say and believe does not seem as incredible. Indeed, it can make his central claim seem far less incredible as well. Many of us are very reluctant to think that a clever philosopher could show us that, after all, there were no brains or chairs or cars. But if it turns out that he only intends to show us that "no brains exist" *in a special sense*, furthermore one which we do not ordinarily use when discussing anatomy, then he is perhaps not

disagreeing with our ordinary opinion about the world, at least not to the extent it might have first appeared.

Let us grant, for the sake of the argument, that metaphysics is carried out in a special "strict" jargon, and that when van Inwagen says that there are no tables or chairs or brains he does not say anything in conflict with what we ordinarily say when we tell our children that there are brains inside our skulls, or when we tell a colleague that there is a spare chair in our office they can borrow. Let us also grant, for the sake of the argument (though only for the sake of the argument!) that van Inwagen is right that, speaking strictly, there are no material objects besides simple ultimate particles and living beings. Speaking with the metaphysicians, then, there is no puzzle about a car that gains a new wheel, because there are no cars and no wheels.

But what happens if we re-ask our puzzle about the car and its new wheel in ordinary "loose" language? Suppose we make clear that we are not talking in any special strict way, and then tell the story of a certain car, Ridge, and the fact that a wheel was attached to it, that the four-wheeled car was dubbed Hercules, and then we ask whether Ridge is the same thing as Hercules or not. Now, since we are speaking loosely, van Inwagen should agree, on pain of changing the subject, that there are cars (in the sense in play), and that sometimes they continue to exist and get renamed, and sometimes they go out of existence.

When I ask the "loose" question whether e.g., Hercules used to have three wheels, or whether Ridge now has four tyres or only has three (but is attached to a wheel with another tyre), it looks like we face a challenge very similar to the one described above. We face the same problems with each answer. Loosely speaking, cars can lose a wheel and later regain another one. Loosely speaking, the new wheel is attached to an old object which is not destroyed by fixing a wheel to its exterior. We feel the temptation to say that Ridge is identical to Hercules – to say that they are the same car, which has just grown by a wheel, and we also feel the temptation to think that Ridge is still in existence (and still has three wheels), as a large part of Hercules but differing from Hercules by a wheel. It is not even loosely true, at the later time, that there is something that is both identical to Hercules and only has three wheels, when Hercules has four wheels.

When we speak loosely, we are tempted to accept all the premises stated for the argument, and deny the apparently contradictory conclusion, even when it is stated in our ordinary idiom. Being told that there is another way of speaking where we would not talk that way seems only of limited help: of course the

problem might not come up in conversation if we no longer talked about cars or wheels, but that would be avoiding thinking about the problem rather than solving it.

If we accept van Inwagen's central contention, and then accept his thesis that it does not conflict with what we ordinarily say, then it seems we can re-ask the puzzle that motivated us in an ordinary idiom, and we seem to have a very similar puzzle back again. Indeed, it may even be the original puzzle: van Inwagen does not tell us when people started to speak in his strict metaphysical idiom, but it may be that those thinkers who originally posed this sort of challenge had not yet shifted to the rarefied form of speech van Inwagen attributes to metaphysicians today.

Without an answer to the loose question, van Inwagen's picture seems incomplete. Were we to say to him "Look, in the sense that there are cars and wheels, is Hercules identical to Ridge?", what is the best reply he has available? He could argue that by using expressions like "is identical to", we have, despite ourselves, slipped into the strict idiom, and so must be answered "neither Hercules nor Ridge exist (or are identical to anything)". But that insistence seems forced, especially since e.g., holding up two "before" and "after" photos and asking "is this the same one as this" seems a pretty ordinary thing to ask (and might be asked for a non-philosophical purpose, such as working out whether our attempt to find a stolen car is successful). So he should not adopt this reply.

Van Inwagen does have some things to say about some puzzles about identity through change of parts. When he describes the Ship of Theseus, a paradox about a ship gaining and losing parts, he admits we can speak loosely of ships, but says that after his speaking about the relevant events in his strict vocabulary «there is no philosophical question to be asked about the events I have described» (p. 129). Later, he says more generally, «we shall be able to formulate no *philosophical* questions about the identities of artifacts at all» (p. 130, *his emphasis*). Perhaps by "*philosophical* questions" he means questions posed in the strict way of talking, in which case his insistence that these problems do not arise when speaking that way is entirely understandable. But perhaps he is suggesting that questions asked in loose speech (such as the question of whether, loosely speaking, Hercules was Ridge) are not questions that philosophy should notice or address. If I granted that, I would then want to ask the questions nonetheless, "philosophical questions" or not. And it does seem a sociological error to think that these questions are not ones that

philosophers are interested in asking and answering, even if van Inwagen would prefer not to do so. So I think it would be better for van Inwagen (or at any rate some proponent of his view) to indicate what answers he thinks are the correct ones to these questions, when the questions and answers are spoken in the ordinary "loose" way of talking.

Van Inwagen has a range of other options here: most have been thrashed out in the literature on identity across time and identity through change of parts, which for the most part does assume that there are things like cars and wheels. Perhaps, loosely speaking, Ridge at the earlier time has become *both* Hercules and Hercules-minus-a-wheel: if we say this, we will probably want to resist inferring, by the transitivity of identity, that since Hercules=Ridge and Ridge=Hercules-minus, then Hercules is identical to Hercules-minus: but perhaps, when we speak loosely, we can say that identity is not transitive, or is only transitive at a time but not across times. (Van Inwagen would not be prepared to admit counterexamples to the transitivity of identity when we speak strictly, of course, but saying "identity is not transitive" in a loose context may not mean anything inconsistent with the principle we endorse in the strict context). Or we may want to allow, speaking loosely, that while Hercules-minus used to be Ridge, it was never true that Ridge was going to be Hercules-minus. Or we might want to say, speaking loosely, that Hercules and Hercules-minus were never the same object, but both used to exist exactly where Ridge existed, with the same shape, colour, and so on. Again, van Inwagen objects to thinking that, strictly speaking, there are ever two material objects in the same place at the same time, but perhaps it is okay to talk loosely in this way, just as we might loosely talk about the "double life" of an accountant-by-day, DJ-by-night, or even speak of Jenna-the-accountant and Jenna-the-DJ as if they were two women, even though strictly speaking they are the same person.

There are other options as well: van Inwagen may even be prepared to let us talk loosely of temporal parts of objects. He objects to a temporal parts metaphysics as any part of the truth, strictly speaking, of material objects, but I do not know of anything he has said against the idea that we could help ourselves to that sort of way of talking when we are talking loosely. In the case of Jenna, above, perhaps van Inwagen would allow it does no harm in ordinary talk to speak of Jenna-the-accountant being around for nine hours, then being replaced by the other Jenna for the night: provided we do not take the talk with metaphysical seriousness.

As well as selecting from the standard menu of options, van Inwagen could also allow that *any* of these ways of talking are all right when it comes to ordinary, loose talk about cars and their wheels. (Though we might want to avoid mixing several ways of talking on one occasion – presumably we should not say in the same breath that Hercules and Hercules-minus were always distinct, *and* that they used to both be identical to Ridge). Or that it is an indeterminate matter which way is the way we ought to speak when we speak loosely. Or maybe all the ways of speaking loosely are somehow defective, so none is how we ought to talk, but one or more of them is good enough for practical purposes. This last option is less friendly to ordinary talk than van Inwagen seems to be: when van Inwagen tells us the metaphysical truth «does not contradict our ordinary beliefs» (p. 98), and affirms that people very often say true things with sentences about chairs or stars (p. 100), presumably the ordinary talk is not so defective that it stops us saying the truth – and surely expressing the truth about subjects at issue is pretty good!

The puzzle about what to say when speaking loosely about what happens when Ridge gains a wheel seems to call out for a solution. As I have suggested, a number of responses seem available to van Inwagen: though by the same coin this suggests that what he has told us so far does not deliver an answer about which response is correct (or which responses are correct).

Once van Inwagen allows that even one of these responses are acceptable when we speak loosely (two things becoming one, dividing things into temporal parts, saying that there are two things in the same place at the same time), another issue arises. If van Inwagen allows that one (or more) of these ways of talking can be used to express truths when we say, loosely speaking, that cars sometimes gain and lose wheels, presumably whatever judgements van Inwagen relies upon to yield his *strict* answer to questions about gaining and losing parts are not incompatible with what we express when we talk in these loose ways. But we might wonder about the epistemic credentials of the premises that van Inwagen insists are strictly true.

We might start off convinced that (speaking strictly) if $a=b$, then anything true about how a will be in the future is true about how b will be in the future, for example. But suppose we are then forced, by reflection on the case of Ridge, to allow that "if $a=b$, then anything true about how a will be in the future is true about how b will be in the future" was not universally true when interpreted as loose talk. Or suppose we started by thinking that "no two material objects occupy exactly the same place at the same time" is strictly

speaking true, but then concede that the sentence "no two material objects occupy exactly the same place at the same time" expresses a generalisation with exceptions when understood loosely. (e.g., we do not allow that one object becomes two, but rather that, loosely speaking, Hercules and Hercules-minus used to occupy the same place and there were two objects there all along). One principle, stated strictly, being true while another principle, said loosely, being false is of course quite possible, even if the two principles sound the same – sound is not an infallible guide to meaning. But it may make us wonder whether we really have good reason to believe the principles when stated strictly. After all, our pre-theoretic beliefs about these matters may not have been very sensitive to the difference between the two claims we can now distinguish. And once we concede that those principles, interpreted loosely, are untrue, we may wonder whether any certainty we initially had about the strict-speaking version of those principles is still warranted. If someone speaking loosely speaks truly when he says "two things can become one thing" or "two material objects can be in the same place at the same time", why should we be so sure that someone speaking strictly could not be speaking the truth when she says "two things can become one thing" or "two material objects can be in the same place at the same time"? Especially since those people can coherently say, speaking strictly, what van Inwagen cannot: that there are tables, chairs, cars, planets, and all the other things which many of us believe in, even when we are speaking with the metaphysicians.

Nothing I have said is intended as a knock-down objection to van Inwagen: as far as I can tell, his is an internally coherent position to hold onto, and I expect once one gets used to saying and thinking that, strictly speaking, all that exists are ultimate particles or living creatures, it can even come to seem an intellectually comfortable position. And *Material Beings* raises important challenges for those who do not wish to follow van Inwagen, which we would do well to pay serious attention to.

But for those of us who think we would need a compelling reason to accept the conclusion that e.g., strictly speaking I have never worn any clothes (for there are no clothes to wear), van Inwagen's position often fails to convince. In this note, though, I have tried to focus attention on a set of questions which van Inwagen does not give detailed answers to. Speaking loosely, when do some objects make up a whole that contains only parts that overlap those objects? Speaking loosely, in the case of Ridge and Hercules, is Ridge Hercules, or Hercules-minus (or both, or neither)? And so on for the many other questions

about parts and wholes which we can ask in our ordinary loose way of talking. I suspect once a philosopher who holds van Inwagen's views answers these questions in loose talk, the answers might sound just like answers given by some or others of van Inwagen's apparent opponents. And the answers will involve allowing that premises that van Inwagen relies upon, when he speaks strictly, sound just like sentences which, when said loosely, are mistaken. Perhaps van Inwagen or his allies will be able to explain to us how we can be sure that the claims made with the strict sentences are true while the claims made with the loose sentences which sound very like them are false. But this is work that remains to be done.