

McGrath on Universalism

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Mereological Universalism is the thesis that, for any disjoint Xs, the Xs automatically compose something. In his book, *Material Beings*, Peter van Inwagen provides an argument against Universalism that relies on the following crucial premiss:

- (F) If Universalism is true, then the Xs cannot ever compose two objects, either simultaneously or successively.¹

I have argued elsewhere (Rea 1998) that van Inwagen's defence of (F) fails because it relies on the false assumption that Universalism is incompatible with the view that, for some Xs, what the Xs compose depends upon how the Xs are arranged. However, Matthew McGrath (1998) has recently provided a new – and in his opinion, better – formulation of van Inwagen's argument for (F). Furthermore, he claims (contrary to what van Inwagen himself apparently thinks) that four of the ten assumptions listed at the outset of *Material Beings* are 'jointly sufficient for the falsity of Universalism'. (1998: 121) Those assumptions, as they appear on page 121 of McGrath 1998, are as follows:

- (2) Material things endure through time.
(5) Every material thing is composed of things that have no proper parts.
(6) Two objects cannot be composed of exactly the same proper parts at the same time.
(8) Persons are material objects.²

I will show that McGrath's argument for (F) suffers from the same defect as van Inwagen's, and I will show that he is mistaken to think that (2–8) are jointly sufficient for the falsity of Universalism.

Let us begin with McGrath's argument for (F). The argument relies on two definitions and three premisses:

¹ The argument appears on pp. 75–77 of van Inwagen 1990.

² Since van Inwagen believes that there is at least one person – namely, God – who is not a material object, he cannot accept (8) as McGrath formulates it. But, of course, this complication makes no real difference in the present context; and so from here on I'll ignore it, proceeding on the false assumption that 'person' means 'human being'. Van Inwagen's own presentation of his assumptions appears on pp. 4–6 of van Inwagen 1990.

- (D1) The Xs automatically compose something at $t =_{df}$ the mere existence of the Xs at t is necessarily sufficient for there being, at t , a Y such that the Xs compose Y.
- (D2) The Xs automatically compose object O at $t =_{df}$ the mere existence of the Xs at t is necessarily sufficient for the Xs composing O at t .
- (P1) If the Xs automatically compose something at t , there is exactly one object O they automatically compose at t , their sum.
- (P2) For any object O, if the Xs automatically compose O at t , they automatically compose O at any time when they exist.
- (P3) For any object O, if the Xs automatically compose O at time t , then for any object O that the Xs compose at a time t , they automatically compose O at t .

According to McGrath, (P1) and (P2) are ‘unexceptionable’. (1998: 119) (P3) he defends at some length. The upshot of that defence is that, given (P2), the price of rejecting (P3) is pluralism about composition – i.e., the view that there are some Xs such that the Xs compose more than one object at the same time. To see why, suppose that (P3) is false. Then there is an object O such that: (i) the Xs automatically compose O at t , and (ii) there is an object O such that the Xs compose O at t but do not automatically compose O at t . But the conjunction of (i) and (P2) entails that the Xs automatically compose O at t . Thus, at t the Xs compose both O and O. Hence, O and O are spatially co-located.

How is it that (P1–P3) entail (F)? Suppose that Universalism is true. Then, for any Xs and any time t , the Xs automatically compose something at t . Thus, by P1, there is exactly one object O that the Xs automatically compose at t . This, together with P3 implies that whatever the Xs compose at any time whatsoever they automatically compose. P1 and P2 imply that the Xs automatically compose O at every time at which they exist. And P1 entails that they automatically compose nothing else at any time (since, at any given time, if the Xs automatically compose something they automatically compose exactly one thing). Therefore, it is impossible that the Xs compose anything but O; hence, it is impossible for the Xs to compose more than one object, simultaneously or successively.

As I have said, McGrath regards P1 as unexceptionable. But in fact it seems rather easy to take exception to P1. Consider the following claim:

- () For some Xs, what the Xs compose depends upon how the Xs are arranged.³

³ Perhaps you will object that if is true, the following stronger principle must be true: for any Xs, what the Xs compose depends upon how the Xs are arranged. This may be so; but all I need to make my point here is the weaker principle, .

is quite plausible. But, of course, someone (like me) who rejects the possibility of co-location and who endorses the conjunction of P1 and Universalism will think that P1 is false. For such a person will hold that for some Xs, the mere existence of the Xs is necessarily sufficient for their composing something but is not necessarily sufficient for their composing what they now in fact compose.⁴ For example, consider the particles that currently compose me.⁵ On the view I am advocating, the mere existence of those particles is necessarily sufficient for their composing something; but it is not necessarily sufficient for their composing me. If they were to be scattered across the face of the earth, they would compose something, but that something surely would not be me.

Earlier I said that van Inwagen's own argument for (F) is unsound because it relies on the false assumption that, on Universalism, the arrangement of the Xs is always irrelevant to what the Xs compose. McGrath's improved version of the argument suffers from the same defect. McGrath considers the possibility that the Universalist might embrace P1 . But he says that the price of doing so is pluralism about composition. But this is a mistake. The Universalist might embrace P1 and along with the view that, necessarily, whenever some Xs are re-arranged so as to compose a new object, the original object that the Xs composed ceases to exist. (In other words, the Universalist might just embrace P1 together with the view that co-location is impossible and P1 is false.) Thus, to remedy the defect in their respective defences of (F), van Inwagen and McGrath must give some reason for thinking that P1 is incompatible with the view that Universalism is true and co-location is impossible. Otherwise, embracing P1 seems to be a perfectly acceptable way for the Universalist to preserve her view.⁶

I would like to close by explaining why McGrath is mistaken to think that (2–8) above are jointly sufficient for the falsity of Universalism. In defence of this claim, all McGrath says is that the conjunction of Universalism with (2–8) entails 'the absurd conclusion ... that each person is

⁴ Perhaps there will be some Xs for which P1 holds. For example, it does not seem crazy to think that it is truly impossible for two simples ever to compose anything other than a mere aggregate. And if that is right, then, for any two simples, not only do they automatically compose something, but there is some particular thing such that they automatically compose that thing. But, having now acknowledged this complication, for ease of exposition I will proceed to ignore it in what follows.

⁵ I'll assume with McGrath and van Inwagen that human beings are material objects.

⁶ Some will object that P1 has the counterintuitive consequence that one way to destroy an aggregate is to rearrange its constituent parts so that they compose a human being. The objection is out of place here since it effectively just amounts to reasserting P1 . But, in any case, Michael Burke and I have argued in separate articles (Burke 1994 and Rea 1999) that there are very good reasons for accepting the consequence.

automatically composed by one and the same set of atoms at every moment of his existence.’ (1998: 121) But this is incorrect. The conjunction of (5) and (8) entails that persons are composed of mereological simples. And if Universalism is true, it follows that, for every person S, the simples that compose S automatically compose something. But this does not imply that, for every person S, the simples that compose S automatically compose S. And adding premisses (2) and (6) into the mix won’t help to establish this conclusion. But, of course, if we cannot show that, for every person S, the simples that compose S automatically compose S, then we also cannot show that each person is automatically composed by one and the same set of simples at every moment of her existence. Thus, there is no way that McGrath can derive the conclusion he claims to derive from the conjunction of (2–8) and Universalism. To get that conclusion, he needs to add premisses (P1–P3). This is important because McGrath makes a point of saying that ‘the price of common sense metaphysics [i.e., metaphysics consistent with (2), (5), and (8)] is pluralism about composition’. But that is false. The only route to this conclusion is through P1; and, as we have seen, the Universalist can avoid P1 – and hence avoid the claim that co-location is possible – by accepting .⁷

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