In Defense of Mereological Universalism

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This paper defends Mereological Universalism(the thesis that, for any set S of disjoint objects, there is an object that the members of S compose. Universalism is unpalatable to many philosophers because it entails that if there are such things as my left tennis shoe, W. V. Quine, and the Taj Mahal, then there is another object that those three things compose. This paper presents and criticizes Peter van Inwagen's argument against Universalism and then presents a new argument in favor of Universalism. It turns out that the most reasonable way to resist the argument for Universalism is to deny the existence of artifacts; thus, if we believe in artifacts, we have no real choice other than to embrace Universalism.

The universe of common sense is populated by a wide variety of material objects. Most people are inclined to think that, among the composite objects in the universe, there are ships, statues, and station wagons; we also think there are stars, planets, fruits and vegetables, dogs, germs, viruses, subatomic particles, and (of course) people. But the philosopher's catalog often doesn't include such a potpourri of things. According to many philosophers, most of the things just mentioned do not really exist.

Why do philosophers repudiate objects that most people just take for granted? There are various reasons. Peter Unger once held that not much exists, strictly speaking, besides mereological simples, and he held this view because he thought that various kinds of sorites arguments force one to hold it.[1] Similarly, Mark Heller holds that nothing exists except (four-dimensional) hunks of matter, and his view is motivated both by sorites arguments and the problem of material constitution.[2] Peter van Inwagen, on the other hand, claims that there are no composite objects other than living organisms, and he holds this view because it is entailed by what he takes to be the necessary and sufficient conditions for composition.[3]

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[1]   Unger defends this view in several places (see, e.g., Unger 1979a and 1979b). Recently, however, he has moved away from this radical view (see Unger 1990).

[2]   Heller 1990.

[3]   van Inwagen 1990.

These are powerful and persuasive reasons. However, I and many others remain unconvinced. It just seems obvious that there are tables, chairs, computers, and cars. The fact that some philosophical arguments suggest otherwise seems simply to be an indication that something has gone wrong with those arguments. But what is not so obvious, and what I intend to show in this paper, is that if we admit the existence of artifacts, then we must admit the existence of a lot else besides. For example, we must admit the existence of an object whose parts are my left tennis shoe, W. V. Quine, and the Taj Mahal.

The purpose of this paper is to defend Mereological Universalism—the thesis that, for any set S of disjoint objects, there is an object that the members of S compose.[4] Universalism is unpalatable to many philosophers because it entails that if there are such things as my left tennis shoe, W. V. Quine, and the Taj Mahal, then there is another object that those three things compose. However, I am inclined to accept Universalism because (i) the only serious philosophical argument against it that I know of is unsound, and (ii) there is a very persuasive and straightforward argument for endorsing it. In what follows, I will present and respond to the argument *against* Universalism and then I will present the argument *for* Universalism. It will turn out that the most reasonable way to resist my argument for Universalism is to deny the existence of artifacts. Thus, if we think it is unreasonable to disbelieve in artifacts, we have no real choice other than to embrace Universalism.

1. The Argument Against Universalism

In *Material Beings*, Peter van Inwagen rejects Universalism because it is inconsistent with the following six assumptions:[5]

(A) I exist now and I existed ten years ago.

(B) I am an organism (in the biological sense), and I have always been an organism.

(C) Every organism is composed of (some) atoms (or other) at every moment of its existence.

(D) Consider any organism that existed ten years ago; all of the atoms that composed it ten years ago still exist.

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[4]   The name "Universalism" is due to Peter van Inwagen (1990). Others (e.g., van Cleve 1986) refer to this thesis as "Mereological Conjunctivism."

[5]   van Inwagen 1990, pp. 75–77.

(E) Consider any organism that exists now and existed ten years ago; none of the atoms that now compose that organism is among those that composed it ten years ago.

(F) If Universalism is true, then the xs cannot ever compose two objects. That is, the xs cannot compose two objects either simultaneously or successively. More formally, if Universalism is true, then it is not possible that $\exists y \exists z \exists w \exists v$ (the xs compose y at the moment w, and the xs compose z at the moment v, and y is not identical with z).

If these assumptions are true, then Universalism is false. From (A), (B), and (C) it follows that I am now composed of atoms and ten years ago I was composed of atoms. Let S1 be the set containing all and only the atoms that composed me ten years ago, and let S2 be the set containing all and only the atoms that compose me now. (D) tells us that all of the members of S1 still exist; (E) tells us that S1 and S2 are disjoint. Now, if Universalism is true, the members of S2 automatically compose something, as do the members of S1. Thus, ten years ago the members of S2 composed something other than me (perhaps a cloud, or a sum, or a heap); now they compose me. But, of course, if (F) is true this could not be. For from (F) it follows that if the members of S2 ever compose me, then they always compose me; but the members of S2 have not always composed me. Therefore, if (A–F) are true, Universalism is false.

Are they all true? Perhaps (A–E) are true; I will not comment on those. My concern is with (F). I will argue that (F) is false, and therefore even if we grant (A–E), the argument against Universalism fails.

van Inwagen's defense of (F) proceeds as follows. Consider a set of blocks, scattered at one time and arranged as a model of the Salisbury Cathedral at some later time. According to the Universalist, the arrangement of the blocks at any particular time is irrelevant to the question of whether they compose something. The blocks automatically compose an object when and only when they all exist, even if they are scattered miles away from one another, even if they stand in no causal relations to one another, and so on. But, according to van Inwagen, if the arrangement of the blocks is irrelevant to the question of whether they compose anything, then it should also be irrelevant to the question of what they compose. If the blocks already compose something when they are scattered, we should not suppose that they compose something *new* when they come to be arranged as a model of the Salisbury Cathedral.

But why should we agree with this? Why not think that arranging blocks *as* a model of the Salisbury Cathedral is necessary and sufficient for creating an object that is essentially a model of the Salisbury Cathedral? This seems

to be a rather plausible view of models.[6] However, if it is right, then it turns out that when we arrange our scattered blocks into the shape of the Salisbury Cathedral, we *do* bring something new into existence. So, on this view, the arrangement of the blocks does help determine what they compose. I do not see why this view should not be open to the Universalist. But if it is open to the Universalist, then (F) is false and the argument against Universalism is unsound.

As far as I can see, van Inwagen gives us only one reason for rejecting this view. The reason is this:

Consider an object that is composed of the blocks at *t*, when they are widely scattered and moving rapidly in relation to one another. How long does it last? Only two answers seem possible. (1) It doesn't last at all; it exists only at *t*. (2) It lasts as long as its constituent blocks do. Any compromise between these two answers would be intolerably arbitrary: If the blocks "automatically" compose an object, then either any rearrangement of the blocks must destroy that object, or else no rearrangement could destroy it. And the former answer seems intolerably severe: It implies a doctrine beside which mereological essentialism pales: *positional* essentialism, according to which not only the identities of the parts of a whole are essential to that whole but their relative positions as well.[7]

The horns of this dilemma are formidable. Suppose we label the object that is composed of the blocks when they are widely scattered and moving rapidly in relation to one another 'Fred'. I take it that Fred is an aggregate and that aggregates can undergo at least *some* rearrangements of their parts. Therefore alternative (1) is not to be embraced. However, I also want to say that once Fred's parts come to compose a model, they compose something *new*; and (like van Inwagen) I do not want to admit that it is possible for Fred to be spatially co-located with the model. Therefore, I am committed to the conclusion that when the parts of Fred come to compose a model, Fred ceases to be. Hence, alternative (2) is not to be embraced either.

Fortunately, however, the dilemma is a false one. I take it that the reason it is counterintuitive to claim that Fred passes out of existence when its parts come to compose a model is that even when those parts do compose a model, they still compose an aggregate, and it is natural to think that they compose the *same* aggregate that they composed prior to the model's coming into existence. It is natural to think this; but in recent articles, Michael Burke and I both have given reasons for thinking that this intuition is false.[8] I will not repeat those reasons here; my main point is simply that here lies the way out of our difficulty. The view I recommend is the following: Fred is an aggre-

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6   Note that I am not at all endorsing the *general* claim that, for any K, arranging objects K-wise is necessary and sufficient for creating something that is essentially a K. That claim would conflict with theses that I do endorse later in this article, whereas the present claim about models does not.
7   van Inwagen 1990, p. 77.
8   Burke 1994, Rea (forthcoming).

gate of blocks, nothing more. Fred exists so long as the blocks that compose it compose an aggregate and nothing more. Thus, if the blocks come to be arranged as a model of the Salisbury Cathedral, Fred ceases to exist and something else (a model) comes into existence. The blocks still compose an aggregate, but that aggregate is not Fred—it is the model. If the blocks are subsequently scattered, we can say either that Fred comes back into existence (he is, in other words, an intermittently existing object) or that a new thing comes into existence. In any case, positional essentialism is false because there are some rearrangements of the blocks that Fred *can* survive (namely, those that do not result in the blocks composing anything more than an aggregate), alternative (2) is false because Fred does *not* exist just so long as its constituent blocks do, and (F) is false because the blocks compose more than one object in succession. This view depends on the assumption that it is possible for an object to be both a model and an aggregate; but I take it that this assumption is not unreasonable (and it does not commit us to contingent identity, counterpart theory, or any other unusual view about *de re* modality) so long as we do not assume that, for every kind K, wherever there is a K there is something that has the essential properties of a K.[9]

Perhaps you will object that *model* is not a genuine kind and therefore the only kind Fred could belong to is *aggregate*. I disagree, but I need not press the matter. Let "Sam" be an aggregate of atoms. Now suppose the atoms that compose Sam come to compose a human being. 'Human being' is a paradigmatic example of a kind term, and it seems quite plausible to say that Sam exists only until the atoms that compose it come to compose a human being. It seems plausible because clearly the human being is not identical with Sam; but neither is the human being numerically distinct from but co-located with Sam. Thus there is something very plausible about saying that Sam simply passes out of existence when the atoms that compose it come to compose a human being. But, of course, if this is right, then (F) must be false. And if (F) is false, the argument against Universalism is unsound.

2. The Argument for Universalism

I have addressed one major reason for *dis*believing Universalism. Now it is time to present reasons for believing it. I'll begin with a definition and an assumption. First the definition: Let *W* be a way of arranging objects. Then:

> *W* is kind constituting $=_{DF}$ there is an object-kind K such that an object is a K if and only if its parts exemplify *W*.

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[9] Both claims (that it is possible for one object to belong to two kinds and that it is false that every member of every kind has the essential properties associated with that kind—are controversial. For a more complete defense of both, see Burke 1994 and Rea (forthcoming). See also section 3 below.

The assumption is that whether the members of a set S compose anything depends *only* on how they are arranged—it does not depend upon human intentions or attitudes toward that arrangement. I will not defend this assumption here, but a lot of what I say will depend on it. So one might resist my argument for Universalism simply by rejecting this assumption and endorsing a kind of conventionalism about material objects.

Given all this, my argument for Universalism is as follows:

(1) For any kind K, arranging objects K-wise is both necessary and sufficient for bringing an object of kind K into existence. (Premise.)

(2) Every way of arranging objects *can be* kind constituting. (Premise.)

(3) If every way of arranging objects *can be* kind constituting, every way of arranging objects *is* kind constituting. (Premise.)

(4) Every way of arranging objects is kind constituting. (From 2, 3)

(5) The members of every set of disjoint objects are arranged in some way or other. (Premise.)

(6) Therefore: The members of every set of disjoint objects compose something. (From 1, 4, 5)

I take it that the controversial premises in this argument will be (1), (2), and (3); therefore, they will be the focus of the discussion in this section.

Let us begin with the first premise: for any kind K, arranging objects K-wise is both necessary and sufficient for bringing an object of kind K into existence. I take it that if this premise is controversial, it is so because arranging objects K-wise does not seem to be *sufficient* for bringing an object of kind K into existence. As far as I can tell, there are two kinds of example that might support this objection.

Example 1: Consider Tibbles, Geach's famous feline who is now best known among philosophers for having suffered the amputation (or, as some tell the story, the annihilation) of her tail.[10] Let the name 'Tail' refer to Tibbles's tail, and let the name 'Tib' refer to that part of Tibbles that includes all of her except for Tail. Now, one *might* think that the parts of Tib are (or could be) arranged the same way both immediately prior to and immediately after the amputation or annihilation of Tail. After the amputation the parts of Tib are clearly arranged catwise (since they compose a cat), and so it seems that they must have been arranged catwise prior to the amputation as well. However, clearly the parts of Tib did not compose a cat prior to the amputa-

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10 See, for example, Wiggins 1968. For other references see Rea (ed.) 1997.

tion; they simply composed a part of a cat. Therefore, it seems that arranging objects catwise is not sufficient for the existence of a cat.

Example 2: Suppose that 'statue' refers to a genuine kind and that, by some cosmic accident, lightning strikes a block of marble and creates a qualitative duplicate of Michelangelo's *David*. Here again one might think that premise (1) fails. Surely, one might argue, lightning cannot create a statue. A statue is a work of art and nothing counts as a work of art that is not the product of intelligent design. Therefore, arranging objects statuewise is not sufficient for the existence of a statue.

Of these two examples, the first seems to be the least persuasive. Consider a marble statue that has been sculpted in the usual way by chiseling pieces away from a block of marble. I take it that the parts of the finished product might be spatially and causally related to one another in exactly the same way as they were when the block of marble was fully intact, but nobody would (or should) seriously claim that those parts were *arranged statuewise* until the sculptor had finished (or nearly finished) chiseling away those parts of the block that were not to be parts of the statue. The reason is that whether the members of a given set are arranged statuewise depends partly upon how they are spatially and causally related to one another *and* partly upon how they are spatially and causally related to nearby objects that aren't members of that set. For the same reason, it is extremely implausible to think that the parts of Tib are arranged catwise prior to the removal of Tail. Objects are arranged catwise only if their activity constitutes a life; but whether the activity of the members of a given set constitutes a life depends partly upon the spatial and causal relations those objects bear to one another and partly upon the spatial and causal relations they bear to other nearby objects. Prior to the amputation the activity of the parts of Tib clearly does not constitute a life, whereas after the amputation their activity does constitute a life.

The second example is a bit more persuasive. After all, art does require an artist, and so it seems just obvious that no work of art can come into existence as a result of cosmic accident. My reply to this is that *work of art* is not a genuine kind, so if being a statue entails being a work of art then *statue* is not a genuine kind either.[11] The reason *work of art* is not a genuine kind is that something counts as a work of art not by virtue of the way that its parts are arranged but by virtue of the intentions and desires of the person who arranged those parts. Thus, if *work of art* were a genuine kind, then it would turn out that what there is depends in part upon human intentions and desires. Piles of trash could come to be statues simply by an act of stipulation on the

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11   I am not convinced that *statue* is not a genuine kind, and this is because I am not convinced that being a statue entails being a work of art. My only point is that *if* it does, then *statue* is not a genuine kind.

part of an avant garde artist, and so the fact that there are statues would depend in part upon whether any artist had made such a stipulation. But, as I said earlier, I reject this sort of conventionalism. So if *statue* is a genuine kind, then anything that is a statue must be so simply by virtue of how its parts are arranged, regardless of how it came into existence. But then, if *David* is a statue, any qualitative duplicate of *David* will be a statue as well—regardless of how it came into existence. Therefore, this example fails as a counterexample to premise (1).

So, premise (1) seems to be true. Now what of premise (2)? Why should we think that just *any* type of organization can be kind constituting? In short, the answer is that any type of organization can count as *functional* organization. Historically, living organisms have typically been seen as paradigmatic examples of composite material objects. And it is not hard to see why. The objects that compose a living organism are functionally organized; and it is because they serve the collective function they do that we are inclined to regard them as *parts* of a unified whole.[12] Indeed, we cannot help but recognize the objects that compose a living organism as parts of a whole, and the reason is that those objects are functioning collectively whereas (say) the objects scattered on the floor of my garage apparently are not. (Hence the tendency on the part of many philosophers to identify living organisms as ontologically basic.) So being functionally organized is at least sufficient for being parts of a whole.[13] But then the natural question arises: Are there some objects that together exhibit enough functional organization to count as parts of a whole but are not parts of a living organism? I think that there are. For example, I think that objects arranged computer-wise are functionally organized; and I think that they exhibit enough functional organization to count as parts of a whole. And common linguistic practice seems to be on my side in this. But once we admit *some* non-living objects into our ontology, it seems we are no longer able to keep any out. The distinction between lives and non-lives seems to be the only principled distinction we have at our dis-

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[12] There are controversies about what it means to say that an object or a part of an object has a function, but I will ignore these here. Even if it were to turn out that the parts of a living organism are *not* functionally organized, clearly they could have been. (For example, any living organism could have been designed exactly the way it is by a sufficiently intelligent agent.) And, as shall become clear, that is all I really need for the points I am trying to make in this section.

[13] There are some who would say that it is necessary as well. And there are some (e.g., Aristotle) who would say that functional organization is *constitutive* of objecthood: what it is to be an object just is to be matter functionally organized in some way or other. The problem with both of these views, however, is that it is not clear that anything other than living organisms and their parts can have any sort of *intrinsic* function, and so it will turn out that non-living objects depend for their existence upon our abilities to endow their parts with a collective function. In other words, it will turn out that what exists depends not only on how things are arranged, but on human attitudes and interests as well. And this, as I said earlier, is a view that I reject.

posal for separating ontologically important types of organization from onto-logically unimportant ones. And once we admit that this isn't the distinction that separates the sheep from the goats, it is hard to see why any other should. Any type of organization can be *endowed* with a purpose or function (broadly construed) by an intelligent agent with interests and desires; there-fore, any type of organization can count as functional organization. So if some "artificial" types of organization can count as kind constituting, it seems that *all* can count as kind constituting.[14]

Thus any type of organization can be kind constituting. But then, it seems, every type of organization *is* kind constituting. For suppose this were not the case. Suppose, for example, that two men shaking hands do not com-pose anything—there is no kind of object whose members are all and only objects whose parts are arranged "men-shaking-hands-wise." Being arranged "men-shaking-hands-wise" is not a kind constituting type of organization; but, by hypothesis, it *can* be. We can recognize an object-kind a member of which exists just in case there are objects arranged "men-shaking-hands-wise." Let's call such an object a "handaman." Are there any handamen? Given that there are, in fact, men who shake hands, and given that a handaman exists just in case two men shake hands, I am inclined to say that there are handamen. But have there always been handamen? Given what a handaman is, it seems that there have been—at least as long as there have been men who shake hands. We did not define handamen into existence; we simply invented a kind concept which enables us to pay attention to objects that already exist but to which we never previously paid any attention. Kind concepts enable us to recognize objects; they do not create them. Thus, if we say that any type of organization *can* be kind constituting if we recognize it as such, we com-mit ourselves to the claim that every type of organization *is* kind constitut-ing, though some in fact are not recognized as such. Thus, premise (3) is true.

We have now seen reasons for thinking that premises (1)–(3) are true. And if (2) and (3) are true, then premise (4) is true as well. For convenience, let us give the name 'Aristotelian Universalism' to the conjunction of premises (1) and (4):

(AU) Every way of arranging objects is kind constituting, *and* for any kind K, arranging objects K-wise is both necessary and sufficient for bringing an object of kind K into existence.

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[14] Let me just stipulate that an artificial type of organization is one exemplified by objects that do not compose a living organism.

Together with premise (5), Aristotelian Universalism entails Universalism proper.[15]

One might resist this argument by embracing some sort of conventionalism about material objects. If what I have said so far is correct, rejecting either premise (1) or premise (3) will in all likelihood lead to such a view. Embracing conventionalism seems to me to be more reasonable than rejecting premise (5), but it seems much less reasonable than rejecting premise (2). If we reject premise (2), however, we commit ourselves to there being some metaphysically important distinction between different types of organization that renders some kind constituting and others not. And, though it is initially plausible that there be such a distinction, the only principled one seems to be the distinction between life and non-life.[16] Thus, if we reject premise (2) it seems that the most reasonable claim to make is that there are no composite objects other than living organisms.[17] It is easy to see why one might be tempted to bite the bullet here and deny the existence of artifacts; but, to my mind, that is unacceptable. It seems to me much more obvious that there is

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[15]   Because of this, one might object to the label 'Aristotelian'. According to Aristotle, only natural objects and the forms of such objects exist in the primary sense of 'exists', so one might think that such an overpopulated ontology as mine hardly deserves to bear his name. But in fact my view is not as un-Aristotelian as it initially appears. According to Aristotle, to say that *x* doesn't exist in the primary sense of the term is not at all to say that there is no such thing as *x*. Granted, on his view only natural objects and their forms count as primary substances; but in *Metaphysics* H.2, for example, Aristotle countenances a wide variety of artifacts as well. On his view, there is *some* sense in which books, caskets, beds, thresholds, and a variety of other artifacts exist. And elsewhere he countenances even stranger objects: such things as seated-Socrates, for example—an object distinct from Socrates that comes into existence when Socrates comes to be seated and passes out of existence when Socrates ceases to be seated. (See Matthews 1982 and Rea 1999 for references and details.) These things do not exist in the primary sense, but they exist in *some* metaphysically important sense. Therefore, since we do not now make distinctions among different senses of the term 'exists' in the way that Aristotle did, and since Aristotle did not go so far as to utterly repudiate things that exist in various secondary senses, it seems that my view is appropriately called Aristotelian after all.

[16]   More exactly, this distinction seems to be the only principled one that does not lead to conventionalism. For example, one might say that the only non-living composite objects that exist are those that are the product of intelligent design; but that view obviously entails that what there is depends upon more than just how matter is arranged.

[17]   One might notice a connection between my argument for Universalism and James van Cleve's argument for the same thesis. Van Cleve (1986) argues that if we believe in some *scattered objects* (objects whose parts are not in contact with one another) then we have no principled way of excluding the rest. But strictly speaking this view seems to be mistaken. We might, for example, follow van Inwagen and endorse the view that the members of a given set compose something if and only if their activity constitutes a life. I take it that living organisms are scattered objects at the microphysical level; hence van Inwagen's view provides a principled way of letting in some scattered objects while excluding many others. But if we are not prepared to endorse van Inwagen's view—if we think (as van Cleve does) that artifacts are among the scattered objects whose existence we must concede—then van Cleve seems to be correct. Hence, I take it, van Cleve has arrived at roughly the same conclusion I have: if we believe in artifacts, we must believe Universalism.

such a thing as my car than that there is no such thing as the object composed of my left tennis shoe, W. V. Quine, and the Taj Mahal. Therefore it seems that the right course of action is to accept Universalism.

3. An Objection

Before closing this paper, there is one important objection that I must address. Consider the following thesis about kind membership:

(KM) For any kind K, there is a set S of properties such that, necessarily, for any x, x is a K if and only if x constitutes something that has the members of S essentially.[18]

In short, KM tells us that wherever there is a K, there is something (either identical with or co-located with the K) that has the essential properties of a K. I think that most philosophers who believe in objects, kinds, and essential properties would be initially inclined to accept KM. For I take it that KM just expresses what Michael Burke refers to as the "standard account of the relations among objects, sorts, sortals, and persistence conditions."[19] But if we accept KM, then Aristotelian Universalism commits us to the possibility of co-location. However, I said in section 1 that I am unwilling to accept such a possibility. Thus it appears that I face a dilemma: either I must accept the possibility of co-location, or I must reject Aristotelian Universalism (and with it my argument for Universalism).

To see why the conjunction of KM with AU entails the possibility of co-location, consider the set S of objects whose members compose Socrates at a certain time. Obviously the members of S compose a human being. But if AU is true, they also compose a lump of tissue. Thus, by KM, the members of S compose something that has the essential properties of a human being *and* something that has the essential properties of a lump of tissue. But human beings and lumps of tissue have incompatible essential properties. Thus, it follows that the members of S must compose two distinct things co-located with one another.

If this were the extent of the problem, it might be tempting just to concede the possibility of co-location. After all, the view that co-location is pos-

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18   In my usage, *a* constitutes *b* if and only if, for any x, x is a proper part of *a* if and only if x is a proper part of *b*. Thus, constitution is symmetrical, reflexive, and transitive.
19   According to Burke (1994, p. 598), the following three propositions constitute the core of the standard account:
    (1) Associated with every sortal is a set of persistence conditions.
    (2) Objects that satisfy a given sortal invariably have the persistence conditions associated with that sortal.
    (3) Two sortals are co-satisfiable only if the persistence conditions associated with the one are compatible with the persistence conditions associated with the other.
    In Rea (forthcoming) I describe in detail my reasons for preferring KM over Burke's formulation.

sible is not at all uncommon. In fact, however, the problem can be made to seem much worse than this. One common objection to Universalism is that it lets too many objects into our ontology. For any two objects you pick, there is some further object that they compose. But Aristotelian Universalism goes even farther. Not only have I conceded that two men shaking hands compose an object, I have also conceded that there are many other kinds of object the likes of which we have never imagined before—as many, in fact, as there are types of organization. And if KM is true, it follows from this that millions of different objects, all co-located with you, come into and pass out of existence whenever you go for a walk, read a book, or digest your lunch. Universalism alone gives us an over-inflated ontology; Aristotelian Universalism does so *in excelsis*. Thus, one might think both should be rejected.

But there is a way out of this problem. The way out is to reject KM in favor of something like KM*:

(KM*) For any kind K, there is a set S of properties such that, necessarily, for any x, K is x's *dominant kind* if and only if x has the members of S essentially,

where the term 'dominant kind' is to be understood as follows:

K is x's *dominant kind* $=_{DF}$ x belongs to K and any term that refers to K is a (metaphysically) better answer to the question "What kind of thing is x?" than any term that does not refer to K.[20]

KM* is consistent with the view (recommended above) that a single thing can belong to more than one kind, even when the kinds in question have different essential properties associated with them. Moreover, unlike KM, KM* does not entail that wherever there is a K, there is something that has the essential properties of a K. Thus, if we reject KM in favor of KM*, we can say, for example, that in the region occupied by Socrates there is a lump and there is a human being, but the lump and the human being are the *same* thing—namely, Socrates. We avoid the commitment to coincidence because, in rejecting KM, we are no longer committed to saying that 'the lump' and 'the human being' pick out objects with *different* essential properties. Socrates is a member of (at least) two different kinds, but he has only one set of essential properties—those associated with his dominant kind.[21] Moreover, in recognizing that some kinds dominate others, we can take the sting out of

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20 This definition assumes that (i) only kind terms count as good answers to the question "What kind of thing is x?," and (ii) if a term T refers to a kind K*, and if x does not belong to K*, then T is not a good answer to the question "What kind of thing is x?"

21 Let us say that the essential properties *associated* with K are just those in the relevant set S.

the fact that millions of different kinds begin and cease to have members that fill the various regions occupied by a human being as she goes about her daily business. On the standard account, we had to say that, for every natural or artificial kind K, if there is a K that fills the region of space filled by a human being at some time, then there is a distinct object located in that region that has the essential properties associated with K. But once we reject the standard account, the way is clear simply to say that every region filled by a human being is filled by just *one* object which belongs to many different kinds and which always has *human being* as its dominant kind.

Of course, if we follow this route we *are* committed to the claim that, for any filled region of space, there are better and worse answers to the question "What kind of object fills that region?" That is, we are committed to the claim that, for any object, among the kinds to which it belongs, one dominates the rest. And perhaps this will strike some as implausible. One man's garbage is another man's treasure, as the saying goes; why not think, along similar lines, that one man's statue is another man's piece of bronze and one man's cat is another man's heap of cells? The answer is that, if we think that material objects have essential properties, we are already committed to the claim that, for every material object, there is some best answer to the question, "What kind of object is it?" For if it has essential properties at all, presumably it has the essential properties associated with one or another of the kinds to which it belongs; and clearly the better answers to the question "What kind of object is it?" will be those that pick out that kind. One could always deny that objects have essential properties; but short of that, there should be no problem with saying that, for any object, among the kinds to which it belongs, one of them dominates the rest.[22]

4. Conclusion

I have argued that van Inwagen's argument against Universalism is unsound. I have also shown that Universalism is entailed by Aristotelian Universalism, and that there are strong considerations in support of the latter thesis. Aristotelian Universalism appears to have several counterintuitive consequences, but those consequences can be mitigated by rejecting KM. And since there is already precedent for rejecting KM in order to provide a solution to the prob-

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[22] One might wonder why there couldn't be two kinds such that (i) there is some object that belongs to both, (ii) neither of the two kinds dominates the other, but (iii) both dominate all of the other kinds to which the object belongs. I take it that this scenario is impossible because, were it to obtain, either the object in question would have the essential properties associated with *both* of the two kinds, or it would have no essential properties at all. The former is impossible because in such a case the object in question would have conflicting essential properties (otherwise there would be no reason to think that there were *two* dominant kinds rather than one). And the latter is impossible because (I assume) every object has essential properties.

lem of material constitution,[23] I do not see this as any great price to pay in the present context.[24]

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[23] See Burke 1994 and Rea (forthcoming).

[24] This article has benefited greatly from the advice and criticism of Tom Crisp, Michael Loux, Trenton Merricks, Alvin Plantinga, Philip Quinn, Peter van Inwagen, Dean Zimmerman, and the referees for this journal. I am also indebted to audiences at the University of Delaware, the University of Notre Dame, and Talbot Theological Seminary for helpful comments.