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There are More, or Fewer, Things than Most of us Think

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Abstract: In Chapter 12 of his book *Material Beings* (Van Inwagen, Peter. 1990. *Material Beings*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press) van Inwagen argues that there are no artefacts, or very few, certainly fewer than most people believe. Artisans very rarely create, at least in the sense of causing things to come into existence. The argument in Chapter 12 is a very powerful one. I do not think that it establishes van Inwagen's conclusion, but it does, I think, given its (plausible) premise, establish that if there are not far fewer material things in the world than we ordinarily believe, then there are far more. In this sense it establishes, as Russell once said, 'the truth about physical objects must be strange'. Furthermore, I argue at the end, we cannot avoid this conclusion *even if* we reject van Inwagen's premise. Thus the defender of our common sense ontology is caught on the horns of a dilemma. So our commonsense ontology is indefensible.

Keywords: Van Inwagen; artefacts; essential properties; intentions

1 Introduction

In Chapter 12 of his book *Material Beings* (1990) Peter van Inwagen argues that there are no artefacts, or very few, certainly fewer than most people believe. Artisans very rarely create, at least in the sense of causing things to come into existence. They generally merely rearrange the furniture of the world: 'the labors of Michelangelo and the most skilled watchmaker are … devoid of true metaphysical issue' (1990: 127).

Of course, that he says this will come as no news to most readers of the book (those who have not been skimping). At this point van Inwagen has already set

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out his main argument that there are no complex non-living things, from which it follows, of course, that the only artefacts are simples or living organisms, so the only way to create an artefact is to create a simple or living organism. But for those who have not been convinced by van Inwagen's previous argument (me among them) the argument in Chapter 12 is of interest. And in fact, it should be of interest to everyone. It is a very powerful argument. I do not think that it establishes his conclusion, but it does, I think, given its (plausible) premise (what I call, below, 'the brickyard principle'), establish that if there are not far fewer material things in the world than we ordinarily believe, then there are far more. In this sense it establishes, as Russell once said, 'the truth about physical objects must be strange'.

However, most importantly, I shall argue at the end, we cannot avoid this conclusion *even if* we reject van Inwagen's premise. Our commonsense ontology is indefensible.

2 The Argument

The argument of van Inwagen's I am concerned with has been discussed by Korman (2015: 153) and Evnine (2016: 69), who resist it, and respond by an appeal to creative intentions, which they assume to be usually successful, and to bring into existence things which could not have existed in their absence.[1] Van Inwagen does not believe that creative intentions are successful, have metaphysical issue, as he puts it, in general; only, as indicated above, in rare cases. He has a very good reason for denying that such intentions can have the ontological significance Korman and Evnine suppose. Absent an appeal to creative intentions as thus capable of bringing into existence things that could not have come into existence without them, we have no choice, if we accept van Inwagen's plausible premise, but to make a radical

1 Korman writes: 'Creative intentions are … relevant to which kinds of things there are. Suppose that a meteoroid, as a result of random collisions with space junk, temporarily comes to be a qualitative duplicate of some actual statue. Intuitively, nothing new comes into existence which, unlike the meteoroid, cannot survive further collisions that deprive the meteoroid of its statuesque form. Likewise, unintentionally and momentarily kneading some clay into [a certain] shape … does not suffice for the creation of something that has that shape essentially. When a piece of clay comes to be, and moments later ceases to be, [that]-shaped, this does not involve the generation of new objects, any more than a two-year-old's becoming a three-year-old involves the generation of a new object.' Evnine writes: 'van Inwagen assumes that a statue is simply something that has a certain shape essentially. This entirely disregards the fact that a statue is also essentially the result of intentional making by its maker …. Van Inwagen does … note that in his example the statue is made intentionally … but says that "[this] would seem to be irrelevant to any questions about the existence of the things produced" (126). But so far from being irrelevant, [it is] at the heart of the entire matter!'.

shift from our everyday beliefs about what there is, either by acknowledging fewer things (as van Inwagen recommends), or more (as I would recommend).

> Van Inwagen's argument (1990: 125–7) goes as follows (I have abbreviated for clarity)
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> Suppose a sculptor comes across a nondescript lump of clay and kneads it into the shape of a man. According to the philosophers I am thinking of the sculptor brings an object – a statue – into existence. But these philosophers say, the lump of clay continues in existence.… Pick a lump of clay and knead it into some complicated and arbitrary shape … our sculptor intended to produce something statue-shaped while you did not intend to produce anything.… But these facts would seem to be irrelevant to any question about the existence of the thing produced; if you can make a statue on purpose by kneading clay … then you must as you idly work the clay in your fingers, be causing the generation and corruption of the members of a compact series of objects of infinitesimal durations.… That is … incredible … with the unlikely exception of a few things … [a]rtisans do not create.

For clarity imagine the situation to be one in which shortly afterwards (a few hours or a day) the sculptor or someone else destroys the lump of clay and (what most of us would describe as) the temporarily coincident statue, so that the whole duration of the statue, if it exists, lies within that of the lump of clay.

3 Responses

So, what to say in response to van Inwagen? I think there are just four possibilities:

1. Accept the view van Inwagen describes as 'incredible': you must as you idly work the clay in your fingers, be causing the generation and corruption of the members of a compact series of objects of infinitesimal durations.
2. Accept van Inwagen's conclusion. There is not, in the sculptor's situation in addition a statue which exists only as long as the piece of clay is so-shaped, which comes into existence when the lump of clay is so-shaped. There is either no complex material thing in this situation (apart from the sculptor himself) at all, or the only complex thing is the lump of clay, which during the latter part of its existence possesses the property of being a statue (van Inwagen 1990: 126). The same is true generally of the work of sculptors, it has no metaphysical issue.
3. Say that the sculptor's intentions make the difference. Because the sculptor intended to make a statue by shaping the clay and I intended nothing as I idly worked the clay a new material object has come into existence in the sculptor's situation when he has finished his work, whereas no new material object has come into existence when my idle play with the clay results in it having the

exact shape the sculptor intentionally impresses on the clay. Nor has a new material object been brought into existence by me at any point in consequence of my unintentional repeated reshaping as new shapes are brought about. This is what Korman and Evnine say.

4. Say that in the case described indeed no new material object is created by the sculptor, but that this is not surprising since, after all, 'the statue' neither comes into existence before, nor continues to exist after, the lump of clay. It is no more a numerically distinct object than the three-year-old, to use Korman's example, coincident with a person is. However, if we imagine the situation differently a different verdict is required. Suppose after it has been kept for a while restoration work is needed on the statue. It is repaired and patched up, so it no longer remains coincident with the piece of clay, which in fact ceases to exist in consequence of the repairing and replacing of parts of the statue (the lump is a *piece* and cannot continue to exist in scattered form).[2] Then in this situation the statue cannot be thought of as comparable to the three-year old, who of course, does not outlast the person. Since the statue outlasts it, we cannot say that all that happens is that the lump of clay comes to have a new property. So in *this* situation we should say that the statue is numerically distinct from the lump of clay, either a new material object that comes into existence when the sculptor has shaped the clay, or (implausibly) a numerically distinct material object that was there all along coincident with the clay before the reshaping. However, in the original situation envisaged we are not required to say this.

4 Reflections

Of these four responses I think the fourth is least repulsive to common sense. But it is still repulsive to common-sense, as we shall see, and, given van Inwagen's premise, involves accepting the existence of many more material things than we ordinarily accept.

But what is wrong with option (3), the Korman/Evnine favoured solution, the appeal to the sculptor's creative intentions? In the quoted material van Inwagen dismisses this perfunctorily: 'These facts seem irrelevant'. I think he is here relying on one of his previously stated fundamental principles (1990: 12) (or rather an obvious variant of it): 'Whether certain objects add up to or compose some larger

2 Mackie (2008: 157, fn. 8). The situation envisaged is, in Mackie's terms, a case of 'different-origin' temporary coincidence where the statue outlives the piece of clay (2008: 153).

object does not depend on anything besides the spatial and causal relations they bear to one another. If, for example, someone wants to know whether the bricks in a certain brickyard make a composite object, he need not attend to anything outside the brickyard, for no information gathered from that quarter could possibly be relevant to his question. An important special case of this general principle is the following: he need not attend to the beliefs, attitudes or interests of any person outside the brickyard. …the essential point I want to make is that nothing outside *any* region or space that contains the bricks is relevant to the question whether they compose anything.'

I call this 'the brickyard principle'. This is van Inwagen's premise. As it will play a crucial role in what follows, it is worth spelling it out explicitly:

> BP: Whether a plurality of objects *x*1, *x*2, … *xn* compose a larger object *y* can depend only upon the relations between the objects *x*1, *x*2, … *xn*, and cannot depend on any relations that *x*1, *x*2 … *x* bear to any other thing *z* outside any region or space that contains them.

In particular, then, note that just as BP rules out intentions as being relevant to composition because of their extrinsic relational nature, so it also rules out any other thing of an extrinsic relational nature too. Hence it rules out any relations the *x*'s bear to other things as determining essential properties of the thing they compose. In the same way the obvious variant of the brickyard principle relevant to us rules out relational properties as essential properties of objects and hence rules out creative intentions as essential as a special case.

The brickyard principle and the obvious variant relevant to the case that concerns us seem to me undeniable. The basic thought is wholly convincing. It can be put like this: the *number* of material objects in a spatiotemporal region in one possible situation cannot differ from the number of material objects in that region in another possible situation if all the chains of events and causal processes and causal capacities of objects *within* that region are the same in both situations.[3] Of course, as Korman says, the intentions of beings outside that region can determine what

3 Hence, what the *distal* causes are cannot affect the number of material objects in the region. Compare the thought that whether you have a burn on your skin, or the treatment necessary for it, cannot be affected by whether the change is caused by exposure to the Sun or some other heat source of the same power (but whether it is correctly called a 'sunburn' is affected). Again, whether you have a wound cannot be affected by whether your skin has been pierced by a sword or a spear, but whether the cut is a 'spear wound' or a 'sword wound' is so affected. Again, the size of a group of men gathered in a forest cannot depend on legal activities elsewhere which have no causal effect on what happens in the forest, but how many 'outlaws' there are there can.

kinds of things there are in it.[4] There is no material object of the kind *statue* in the spatiotemporal region occupied by a meteorite which as a result of sudden random collisions with space junk temporarily comes to be a qualitative duplicate of some actual statue. But it cannot be that in one possible situation a region contains some thing of which it is an *essential* property (a *de re* necessary property) that it is a result of intentional activity and in another possible situation does not if the region is the same in the way just described in both situations, differing solely with respect to what has happened outside it. It is a *de dicto* necessary truth that all statues are the result of intentional activity, but it does not follow that anything which is a statue is essentially a result of intentional activity, any more than it follows from the fact that it is a *de dicto* necessary truth that all graduates have graduated that anyone who is a graduate is essentially someone who has graduated, and according to the brickyard principle in neither case is this so.

So let us suppose that the clay is shaped in the first situation by a sculptor into a shape S and in the second situation is shaped at the same time into the same shape S by a naughty monkey with no (relevant) intentions. Before the shaping everything that happens to the clay is the same in both situations. After the shaping everything that happens is the same. The statue, if there is one in the first situation, and the lump of clay, remain coincident until the moment they both cease to exist.

Then it seems to me that the spatiotemporal region wholly occupied by the clay in both situations contains the same number of material objects in each situation. Either nothing new comes into existence when the sculptor shapes the clay in the first situation, or something new comes into existence when the monkey plays with the clay in the second situation. It is indeed true regardless that there is a statue in the first situation (if there is a piece of clay there) and not in the second. That is because in order for something to be a statue something has to be a product of intentional activity. That is an analytic truth. So there is no statue in the second situation, since no intentional activity, and there is in the first, regardless of whether there is anything new brought into existence, since as van Inwagen says, the piece of clay there, given its existence, in the last period of its existence possesses a shape intentionally impressed on it by the sculptor and so possesses the property of being a statue.[5] But the fact that in the first situation the shape of the piece of clay is the

4 In fact, I dissent from nothing Korman says in the passage quoted in footnote 1. But Korman's position is identical with Evnine's: the things that are artefacts not only would not have been artefacts in the absence of creative intentions, they would not have existed at all since they are *essentially* products of these intentions. The fact that I need not dissent from the quoted passage shows that it does not support the position Korman shares with Evnine.

5 Korman's position (2015: 155) accords with this last statement. He writes that, when you use a piece of driftwood as a wine rack, 'nothing new comes into existence. The very thing that once was a piece of driftwood goes from not being a wine rack to being (identical to) a wine rack. So, although

result of past intentional activity and in the second situation is not cannot make it the case that there is something which is *essentially* a product of intentional activity in the first situation but not in the second. Past history cannot be relevant in this way. So says the brickyard principle and I agree.[6]

Consider another example. Imagine someone making wax statuettes by heating, cooling and turning pieces of wax (think about swordsmiths). He does this using modern technology, using a computer located at a distance in another room (perhaps he is working from home) to control the apparatus which adjusts the heat, and the twists and turns of the piece of wax being worked on, until the desired shape is created. Suppose all this happening in one situation. Now imagine a second possible situation in which everything remains the same in the room in which the wax is being molded, but the sequence of instructions is the result of the antics on the keyboard of a naughty monkey or a freak malfunction.

In this case also, van Inwagen's thought is – and I agree – something new comes into existence in the first situation when the lump of wax is shaped and the desired shape imposed *if and only if* something new comes into existence in the second situation when the piece of wax is molded into that shape. The intentional activity of the operator in the first situation is not creative; the historical fact that the final shape of the lump of clay in the first situation is the result of intentional activity cannot make the difference Korman and Evnine claim.

This seems to me common-sense. If it is accepted then Korman's and Evnine's appeal to creative intentions, option (3), must be rejected. If we accept that a new material object is created in the first situation when the sculptor (in either of the envisaged scenarios) has finished his work, we must say that at the same time in the second situation when exactly that shape is imposed on the clay/wax as a result of the activities of the naughty monkey an exactly similar new material object is created (which is of course, not a clay statue/wax statuette because it is analytic that a statue/statuette is an artefact and so the product of intentional activity.) But in the second situation when the exact shape of the statue/statuette is impressed upon the matter by the activities of the monkey this shape is not distinguished, as it is in the first situation, by being an object of intentional activity. So, it is not relevantly different in any way from the other shapes the matter has taken on in the course of the monkey's activities. So, if a new material object comes into existence when this

there is one more wine rack than there was before you came along, the number of objects remains the same.' However, he adds, in conflict with the brickyard principle: 'Something very different happens when a wine rack is *made*, for instance by being hewn out of a block of wood. In that case, something new comes into existence, and that thing is essentially a wine rack.'

6 Note that this is not in conflict with Kripke's essentiality of origin principle (though I think it is now generally agreed that there is no good argument for that). The statue in situation one and the material object created in situation two by the monkey, if they exist, have the same material origin.

shape is impressed on the matter in the second situation it is only one of an infinite number of objects which are brought into existence, 'the members of a compact series of objects' as van Inwagen says. But then if we accept (the variant of) van Inwagen's fundamental brickyard principle I have been appealing to and say that in the first situation a new material object is brought into existence by the sculptor's activities we must also accept that in this first situation too there is such an infinite series of objects, which if not incredible, is certainly far from the commonsense position.

Alternatively, we can accept option (2). Accept van Inwagen's conclusion that there is no material object which has come into existence when the sculptor has finished his work and accept that this is true generally. In particular, accept that no statue is created when the sculptor has finished his work even if subsequently the lump of clay goes through a process we would ordinarily describe as 'repair and replacement of parts' and 'being repaired with partly new clay'. What happens afterward does not make it the case that the sculptor's activities brought into being a new material object. So almost all that we think of as creative work by artisans is not. On occasion though, it can be. Suppose you have discovered the secret of life – you can make new living things come into existence (using a lot of electricity and material from a nearby swamp). So you decide to create a snake, a very long, thin snake, and you decide to multitask and create simultaneously a hammock, by creating the snake pre-woven appropriately (van Inwagen 1990: 126). In this case, then, according to van Inwagen, you do bring into existence a hammock and thereby add to the furniture of the world. Again, if you somehow gain the power to create simple extended objects van Inwagen will allow that you could add to the furniture of the world by bringing into existence a simple appropriately formed to be some sort of artefact, say a table. In these cases then van Inwagen thinks that the work of the artisan can be genuinely creative, but generally not. It seems to me that option (2), van Inwagen's position, is as repugnant to common sense as option (3), the Korman/Evnine position.

We are left with option (4). We accept that in the particular case described when 'the statue' is throughout its existence coincident with the piece of clay, no new material object comes into existence as a result of the reshaping; 'the statue' is just a designation of the lump of clay when it possesses a particular shape (van Inwagen 1990: 126).[7] And in general we accept that in situations we can describe using 'statue' as a *phase sortal* term nothing new comes into existence whether the activity in

7 Perhaps Korman's suggestion (205: 129) that nothing new comes into existence when I (intentionally) make a fist provides some motivation for this view. But it may be said that typically when a sculptor makes a statue his intentions are sufficiently different to be *truly* creative (irrespective of what happens afterwards).

the situation is intentional or not (and the same is true for all artefact terms). But in situations which cannot be completely described using 'statue' as a phase sortal term (like the repair-and-replacement-of-parts case) something new does come into existence. So, whether a new material object comes into existence at a time depends on what happens *after* that time.

This may seem strange. But it is not incoherent (cf. 'multiple occupancy' accounts of fission in the discussion of personal identity over time (Lewis 1976), according to which how many entities (of a sort) are present at a time (counting by identity) depends on what happens later). However, taking this line does not enable us to avoid the important conclusion that can be drawn from van Inwagen's reasoning: common-sense ontology either contains too few or too many material objects. If in the repair-and-replacement case a new material object is brought into existence by the activities of the sculptor at the earlier time, given what occurs later, then a second possible situation in which the same lengthy sequence of events, of shaping followed by later loss and gain of parts, where this does *not* involve any relevant intentional activity, must also be one in which a new material object is created in the region, given van Inwagen's brickyard principle. But in this second situation, in which human intention is absent or irrelevant, the shape which is the object of intentional creation by the sculptor in the first situation is not relevantly different from the other shapes the lump of clay has gone through. So in this second situation, again, if a new material object comes into existence when this shape is impressed on the matter it is only one of an infinite number of objects which are brought into existence each of which outlasts the lump of clay,[8] all having different origins. So, if we accept that in the first situation a new material object is brought into existence by the sculptor's activities we must accept, given van Inwagen's brickyard principle, that in the first situation too there is also such an infinite series of objects, which if not incredible, is certainly far from the commonsense position.

5 A Dilemma

Once van Inwagen's fundamental principle is accepted I therefore conclude that some departure from common-sense is inevitable. We must accept that there are more, or fewer, material objects than we usually think that there are. This may seem to provide a reason for looking more favourably at the Korman and Evnine position, i.e., option (3), and rejection of the brickyard principle.

8 I am assuming that the continued existence of a statue is tolerant to some change of shape; after all, that is involved when it is repaired and patched up. Anyway, of course, our topic is not really statues but artefacts in general.

However, in fact, as I shall now argue, it isn't. That there are more, or fewer, material objects than common-sense recognizes has to be accepted *even if* we deny the brickyard principle. Common sense is caught of the horns of a dilemma. This, I think, is the most important point to be made.

If we reject the brickyard principle we can say, with Korman and Evnine, that the statue is essentially and so necessarily a statue, and so essentially and necessarily a product of intentional activity. But if *this* relational property can be an essential property of a material object, in conflict with the brickyard principle, it is impossible to see why it could not also be an essential property of a material object that *in its production metal tools were used* or *in its production tools made in the USA were used.* If in conflict with the brickyard principle, being a product of *intentional activity* can be an essential property of a thing, how can it be denied, without total arbitrariness, that *these* other relational properties can also be essential properties of material objects? Again, if it can be an essential property of a statuette made by an operator working at a distance that it is a product of intentional activity, why can it not be an essential property of a material object created by the activities of a monkey on a keyboard that it is a product of *unintentional* activity by a living creature, or an essential property of an object created by a freak computer malfunction that it is a product of a freak computer malfunction?

I think that there is no answer to these questions. If we reject van Inwagen's brickyard principle and say that being a product of intentional activity can be an essential property of a thing, we must allow that this is true also of all these other relational properties. But if so we can have no reason to deny that, for example, when the lump of clay is worked on intentionally by the sculptor, using metal tools made in the USA, *many* new things are brought into existence: one which is an essential product of intentional activity, another which isn't but is an essential product of activity (intentional or not) involving metal tools, another which is essentially a product of activity involving tools (metal or not) made in the USA, and other new things too, combining these essential properties.

In short, whether or not we accept the brickyard principle, we are stuck with the conclusion that there are far fewer, or far more, material objects, than we ordinarily think. Given the intuitive plausibility of the brickyard principle, I think that we should therefore accept it, and of the options identified above go for option (4). This commits us to acknowledging that there are far more things than we ordinarily think but no material objects which are essentially the product of intentional activity.[9] But the proposition that common-sense doesn't notice many things that

9 Notice that in *one* way this is a parsimonious position. It entails the rejection of the strong pluralist position that there can be two wholly, all-time, coincident material objects, e.g., Goliath and Lumpl. For according to this position Goliath is not identical with Lump. And hence necessarily

there are seems easier to accept than the proposition that it denies the existence of what is before its eyes and there is no argument I know of that any material object is essentially a product of intentional activity. But, however this may be, my main conclusion is that one way or another our common-sense ontology needs adjustment.

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not. But if the view I am recommending is accepted, there is a situation in which it exists and is not a product of intentional activity (maybe a situation in which there are no sentient beings at all), so it is not a statue there. But Lumpl is there too. So two distinct things are there. But they are not of distinct sorts (since Goliath is there not a statue), nor modally distinguished in the ways Goliath and Lumpl are customarily described as being (e.g., with respect to the property *being capable of being rolled into a ball without being destroyed*) since these modal differences are assumed to depend on the sortal difference. They are distinct without any difference. But this is intolerable. Acceptance of the brickyard principle is incompatible with strong pluralism. I take this to be a good thing.