

The Special Composition Question

Phil 130: Special Assignment

Fall 2012

There will be no lecture on 16 October. Instead, students are asked to complete this special assignment. Up to 5 extra credit points can be earned by submitting the answers to the questions below.

We discussed the composition of material objects such as Theseus's ship. A question that we have bracketed in this discussion is the issue of under what conditions do objects combine to constitute another object? In other words, under what circumstances is an object a proper part of another? This issue has been coined the 'special composition question' by Peter van Inwagen (e.g. in his *Material Beings* (1990): 20, 31). It arises even for the mereological essentialist because even she needs to have a principled way of determining whether just at some fixed time or other, a particular mereological sum constitutes a composed object.

For your preparation for this assignment, you should read the selections from van Inwagen's book available on e-reserves, i.e. Chapters 2, 8, and 12. In Chapter 2, please concentrate in particular on the last two pages where the Special Composition Question is articulated.

Read the handout on the topic prepared by Cian Dorr and available at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfop0257/teaching/metaphysics2001/Handout17.pdf>, and try to make sense of as much as you can without having read the entirety of van Inwagen's book. Submit written answers to the following questions to earn extra credit. In these answers, you must use your own words rather than direct quotes or paraphrases.

1. Go back to the first part of Dorr's handout where he defines various mereological terms. Add the following definition:

Definition y is called a *sum* of the x s just in case "the x s are all parts of y and every part of y overlaps at least one of the x s." (van Inwagen, 1990, 29)

Which of the following statements are consequences of these definitions of mereological terms? [2 points]

- (a) Everything overlaps itself.
- (b) No two simple things overlap one another.
- (c) If the x s compose a and the y s compose b and a and b compose c , then the x s and the y s compose c .
- (d) If there are some x s such that the x s compose y , then y is composite.
- (e) If x is a proper part of y , then there is some z such that x and z compose y .
- (f) If the x s compose y , then y is a sum of the x s.
- (g) If y is a sum of the x s, then the x s compose y .

- (h) If there is exactly one of the x s, then the x s compose something.
 - (i) It never happens that some things compose more than one thing.
 - (j) For every x and y , there is something that is a sum of x and y .
2. Consider the two arguments against Contact. How do they relate to one another?
Hint: think in terms of how Contact claims a necessary and sufficient condition for composition. [1 point]
 3. Suppose the universe consisted just of two simple objects. Why should we think that the Nihilist and the Universalist have a real disagreement in this case, and that at most one of them can be correct? [1 point]
 4. Formulate your own answer to the Special Composition Question, motivate it, and defend it against obvious objections. [1 point]