

Each Thing Coincides With Nothing

The world we find ourselves immersed in is both composed of and populated by apparently many individually separated things, i.e. people, tools, buildings, other animals, planets, atoms, and so on. We seem to have the common intuition that each and every thing there coincides with nothing or, in other words, that each thing is itself and not some other thing. To put it yet another way, any two given things can neither be present in the same space nor share the same place at the same time. For many at this point any further discussion would only be a matter of obtuse scholasticism better left to clarifying the sprawling debates which litter the history of philosophy about these and other sorts of metaphysical entities - still technically open ended possibilities yet widely doubted upon by both ordinary people and professional philosophers alike. Clearly there is not such a thing as what will be referred to in this paper as “coincident objects” and so the debate must somehow be entirely without warrant, but we will find the strict rationalist claim that there are not coincident objects can turn out to be somewhat difficult to secure.

To deal with first is the counter intuition that there are many composite aggregations, or things which are composed of parts – and such things would necessarily be coincident precisely with whatever is the totality of all their collective parts taken together. There might also be things which entail a notion of relative identity in order to ground their existence; other potential types of coincident objects can only ever have their identities become acquired within the context of belonging to a certain kind. These things could then conceivably be seen as objects coincident of one another given that they in some way differed by kind in certain contexts and not in others. We will draw out in further detail these speculative cases arguing for the possibility of the existence of coincident objects. Finally, we will examine what it would mean to accept the negative case at face value, for it to necessarily be that each thing really is coincident with nothing. Specifically we will ask the following question, “What is that apparent nothing which there is for each thing to be the coincident of?”

A common rejection to the notion of coincident objects is that their possibility would always inherently entail something along the lines of our being able to walk through walls, ideas which are all clearly absurdities and so not worth consideration. I would respond to this skeptical tactic that the problem of our not being able to walk through walls is not simply a matter of logical conception, but rather one of positing a situation of material constitution – there is an impenetrable thing there that is separate from ourselves. This can either occur alongside an actual state of affairs or consist in an entirely illusory event such as a dream, but this decision will not change the nature of that which is being posited. Rather, it is the idea that our inability to bridge the gap between our positing of a material state of affairs and the reality of its actual existence without our positing of it, should somehow entail that we can formulate the problem in terms of being purely conceptual which is the real

absurdity. As Brassier says of the thing and its relevant conceptual identity, “The difference between the conceptual and the extra-conceptual need not be characterized as lack or negation, or converted into a positive concept of being as Ideal difference-in-itself: it can be presupposed as already-given in the act of knowing or conception. But it is presupposed without being posited. This is what distinguishes scientific representation and governs its stance towards the object” (Brassier Concepts 55).

It will then be a general presupposition of this paper that our concept of a thing is in some way intimately related to the material constitution of its own identity. Lewis relates of this naïve account, “Identity is utterly simple and unproblematic. Everything is identical to itself; nothing is ever identical to anything except itself. There is never any problem about what makes something identical to itself; nothing can ever fail to be” (Plurality of Worlds 192-193). When we speak about two things it is not just that we have in mind some useful bifurcation of what is rather in fact as clearly known by ourselves to be a wholly unified and singular world, but rather that there are in some way two things posited to be there. We can often be wrong about whether there are really two things there; in fact we can always be wrong as in cases of dreaming or delirium. But it seems that in order to be able to talk about things at all, it would need to have turned out that we were sometimes correct in our assertions, and not merely once in a while but often. For novelty, we will also later in this paper consider the absurd case in which there is in fact a world composed of one and only one thing.

We will begin though by providing a hopefully reasonable working definition for coincident objects that we might be able to explore whether they are conceivably a real possibility. While it is not necessarily the case that coincident objects should be founded on the problem of material constitution, it has often been found impossible to deal with a notion of coincident objects without quickly delving into the problem of the material constitution relation. As such the problem of coincident objects can at least first be illustrated through an analysis of the material constitution relation. The question can be posed as such, “What is the difference between a statue and the lump of clay from which it was originally composed of?” If it is taken to be the case as it would appear to be that the lump of clay in some way constitutes the statue, what is the status of such a relation of material constitution?

Leibniz’s law dictates a sort of banal and commonly accepted truth that if we have two things which are actually identical, then the “two things” necessarily share all of the same properties as one another. This would be to say that if Clark Kent is Superman, then there are not any properties which Clark Kent possesses while Superman does not and vice versa. In terms of the material constitution relation this would seem to suggest that if the thing under consideration is in fact identical with that which it is composed by under any sense of composition, there cannot be any way to discern the thing from its composition. Furthermore, we would have to ask why we are proposing a difference between the thing and

its composition at all if they are rather in fact one in the same thing. There are necessarily not any kinds of properties in the world we can draw recourse to which would allow us to discern between the thing and its composition, as they share all of the same properties.

Bennett provides another formulation of coincident objects but this time without a basis on the problematic notion of coincidence as material composition holding between separate things. Particularly she argues against the possibility of coincident objects being grounded in any property at all, let alone the material constitution relation, as that property would necessarily already be entailed within the scope of the thing in itself and not be somehow isolated from it. Instead, Bennett considers that every property which even might obtain of a thing does in fact obtain – including those wholly accidental properties which conceivably have nothing to do with the thing whatsoever. In regard to this difference it is noted, “We must either think that there is only one thing per spatio-temporal location, or else that there are lots and lots of spatio-temporally coincident things” (Bennett 2004 24). In this way Bennett reveals how a commitment to the coincidence even of only certain things (material composition, or more generally multi-thingism at large), almost certainly also entails that everything is coincident with very many other things.

While very bizarre, this so called bazillion-thingism as it takes its name, mere absurdity is not enough to negate the possibility of what is acknowledged by both sides of the debate to at least be a very difficult situation to comprehend. First though, it would seem that it should at least be no more bizarre for the skeptic than the possibility of the coincidence of any objects in general – or they themselves could be compelled to supply a sufficient reason as to why there are certain coincident objects which seem to be at least more plausible than others. We would expect that the skeptic should find no coincident objects to be plausible and always for the same reason. As Bennett explains about the problem inherent to their own skeptical position, “The idea is that because all of the complete modal profiles possible in a given spatio-temporal location are instantiated there, there is no contrast to be drawn between those that are instantiated and those that are not. We cannot expect there to be anything special about some particular modal profile M in virtue of which it (and not others) is instantiated in that place. That is why it is primitive that M is instantiated there.” (20).

The other benefit then of accepting Bennett’s proposition about bazillion-thingism is that we will not need to propose a way in which to discern the reality or lack thereof in the presence of certain properties attributed to things and not others. As materialists, we would indeed expect that every property a thing has is in some way ontologically constituent of itself, or would rather be no property at all. But that there is no reason we might be able to express as to how a property accidental thing could also in some way ground its own identity does not entail that these accidental properties are also necessarily absent from the space of causes holding between material things and not just

from the space of reasons attributed to states of affairs through the concepts of the understanding. Schelling offers a compelling conception of how we might be able to identify the world as such, “You recognize its true essence only in the link by which it eternally posits its unity as the multiplicity of its things and again posits this multiplicity as its unity. You also do not imagine that, apart from this infinity of things which are in it, there is another earth which is the unity of these things, rather the same which is the multiplicity is also unity, and what the unity is, is also the multiplicity, and this necessary and indissoluble one of unity and multiplicity in it is what you call its existence. Existence is the link of a being as one, with itself as a multiplicity” (Schelling History Philosophy 16). The difficulty then remains merely in our being able to discern the difference between the appearance and reality of material things in general, and presumably we can only remain appropriately skeptical about the being of coincident objects in exactly the way as we had started the paper from.

If we are unable to get the coincidence of objects working through aggregation, we might still be able to do so through relative identities. More than being a disagreement over multi-thingsism as a relation of material coincidence, the theory of relative identity is a firm rejection of the simple notion of identity we have been committed to so far up until now in this paper. For the relative identity theorist, our ideas about identity cannot be captured by the simple matter of self-relation between the thing and itself – a notion bordering on such complete banality as to end up actually expressing nothing at all. However this leaves us with the problem of how to provide an alternative account of identity, and seemingly it would necessarily be one which would entail coincidence between the “things” as they become relatively identified against one another under a given context. But the relative notion of identity seems to necessarily give up the game because we again become committed to the affirmation of a truth about nothing, everything taken in any respect under any given context is always absolutely identical with nothing – and we are left to figure out what by sense of the coincidence between a thing and nothing we are going to remain committed to.

From here we will examine two different potential dialectical forms of reasoning about the problem. The general form of this move is to accept that these are real ontological debates being held between significantly different positions each which may justifiably be taken up in contradiction with the other. Both sides of this further debate, the deflationary account as well as the eliminative materialist, are committed to a minimal ontology about what things there are. These will set out to avoid the necessary entailment of any bizarre ontological commitments in the way that more robust metaphysics will tend to do, and instead will claim to be arguing with each other over the scope of their respective semantics. The deflationist wants to be committed to a thick notion of semantics so that we may work from the broadest possible method of discerning the meaning of whatever it is that we are saying. Balaguer says of the deflationary account, “Our way of conceptualizing the world is thing-based at its core. We

want to carve the world (or the stuff) into objects. But if I'm right, then there's no fact of the matter as to how we should carve it into objects ... none of the ways of carving the stuff into objects is right, because there's no fact of the matter as to which objects really exist" (Balaguer Composition 28). We can all be committed to the same exact state of affairs and potentially there would be an endless verbal debate about the meaning of what there is in the sum of our mutually recognized empirical content.

The eliminativist on the other hand believes that the consequence of the empirical evidence we have been presented with up until now suggests that we must hold to both a minimal metaphysics and likewise a minimalist semantics which follows from our ontological commitments and is not rather prior to them. The deflationary account may contend that the eliminativist will have difficulty in explaining the difference between its own metaphysical commitments and all of those it very much wants to overtly reject. Unless it broadens the scope of its semantics so that it can deal with these other kinds of cases than the one it is committed to itself. Both the eliminativist and the deflationist accept that the nihilists and the universalists have a real ontological debate between the two of them, and suggest that the nihilists and universalists aren't taking the debate being put forward by the other side seriously, and we can put the question in its actual terms by translating the formulation of each side of the debate through their own language.

As the deflationary account will contend, so much as both sides of this debate are at least committed to the same expression of the differences which hold between themselves (i.e., there is a difference which does circumscribe the possible responses to the problem), then they are at least committed to one in the same difference holding between each other – and two isolated positions no longer. As such the two sides have resolved themselves to the real extent of their differences consisting in some form of verbal dispute which can either be cleared up through a matter of translation or which there is no hope for a resolution being achieved. The acknowledgement of this real difference is also conveniently a position from which the best attack at providing a solution to the now mutually recognized problem can get made, however the apparent acquisition of a real solution is not necessary for the reduction of these differences to have already had a perceptible effect on the problem. The part which ends up at least attempted at being resolved is that which both sides have taken to be irreconcilable against the others as a matter of linguistic difference and not purely ontological and indisputable difference. However, any ontological problems which are unable to be translated between languages also will not conceivably be a real ontological problem for both languages, as for at least one of them it can only be entirely a verbal dispute against the other.

The deflationary account will attempt to withhold judgment about the notion of nothing altogether, drawing on an Aristotelian idea about the capacity of demonstration, "Now some people actually demand that we demonstrate this also. They do this from lack of education; for we show our lack of education if we do not know what we should, and what we should not, seek to have demon-

strated. For in general it is impossible to have everything demonstrated, since there would be an infinite regress, and so even then there would be no demonstration; there are some things, then, of which we must not seek a demonstration” (Aristotle *First Principles* 180). Any act of demonstration is necessarily always a demonstration about something and not about nothing. To demonstrate that a thing coincides with nothing is merely to demonstrate the thing itself and the accompanying circumscription of the lack in everything which the thing being demonstrated itself is not. Nothing, then, merely does not demand demonstration – as it that which cannot be demonstrated, and it is only ever then a work of sophistry for the nihilist to attempt to speak any further about it.

There is always something left out of every deflationist account of the problem, and that is what it means to be saying different things whether or not we in some other sense really intend to mean the same thing. Hirsch has pointed out that a widely considered deflationist account such as Carnap’s can be summed up as ontological problems being nothing besides a choice between languages committed to the same set of empirical content we all each must mutually acknowledge in order for communication to begin. But what stands outside of the picture of reality as consisting in these sets of languages is precisely that which is nonsense based on their own account – the nonbeing of everything that which cannot be made sense of under this conception of ontology. The deflationist account is implicitly always only committed to a negative thesis whose consequence is necessarily nothing, without having an account for what that nothing is. In fact it even seems to possess a radical power by standing in such extreme opposition with that which has been posited to exist. The deflationary account will respond in agreement this nothing according to their doctrine is merely entirely without sense, and so that is why nothing further need be said about it. But its lack of sense is also what reasonably allows it to be drawn as a consequence or lack thereof. In this way, the nihilist takes the deflationary account maybe more seriously than it had originally intended itself to be taken in asking, “If we are always left with the necessity of nothing under this account, then what is that nothing which we are necessarily left with”? Hirsch goes on to say that, “As I stated at the outset, my position is roughly Carnapian, for it was Carnap who said that ontological disputes amount to nothing more than a choice of language” (35). And it is here that we ask in what sense “nothing more” is to be taken under this ontology in which there is only apparently the being of the collection of present languages and no conception whatsoever about that which could stand outside of these languages.

The nihilist’s primary move is also negative thesis but one about the non-existence of mereological sums, or to say that the things which are do not compose aggregations. For this sort of nihilist, nothing then is exactly that which stands outside of the totality as simples. Take each simple and remove it from the set of all simples there is until you have none left, and this is what for the nihilist will be nothing. The advantage of this over the universalist’s account is that it does not attempt to rope nothing back into the order of being. Turner will respond to this sort of reductivist eliminativism about the vast majority of

things in what makes for a readily apparent skeptical challenge, “It seems undeniable that our experiences are richly structured and differentiated, and that the structure of our experiences will somehow be accounted for by structure in the world.” But this is merely a theology about material states of affairs so much as they should be committed to our best possible conception of them and not merely how reality happens to become presented, for better or worse. He goes on to add, “And it seems reasonable that our ordinary beliefs, formed as they are on the basis of our richly-structured experiences, will thus track this worldly structure ... So the Ontological Nihilist owes us a story: a story about the kind of structure reality does have, and how this structure manages to account for the richness and variety of our experiences.” (Turner Nihilism 2). In the same way the deflationary account will contend that the nihilist only has a dispute about meaning in regard to the same content with the universalist - however the nihilist can respond that it is precisely this issue of how to affirm the non-being of nothing over which they do not merely have a dispute about meaning of the same content with skeptical criticisms leveled by the universalist or deflationary accounts.

Implicit within this thesis is another positive presupposition about the necessary existence of some set of things which are referred to as simples. The motivation of this sort of ontological nihilism is a materialist monism which is only attained through a formal dualism of thing and idea. Pitt will object to this sort of nihilism, “People have tried all kinds of solutions to this type of problem, including accepting that there can be “coincident entities” – distinct objects existing in the same place at the same time (the physicists are just wrong; what do they know about metaphysics?); denying that there really are such things as statues, fists, paper airplanes and ice cubes – or, for that matter, hands, pieces of paper and puddles of water: all there really is is elementary particles (quarks, or whatever) (ordinary citizens are just wrong; and physicists are better metaphysicians than philosophers)” (Pitt Objects Their Phases 2). We do indeed contend that ordinary citizens are sometimes just wrong, and also that physicists generally have probably not followed the consequences of metaphysics all the way through (their task after all is to perform physics).

This issue of the apparently primitive and non-conceptual being of some simples as the totality of everything there is can be related through the problem of the empty pure intuition without object in Kant’s philosophy. The question for Kant is how we can end up with an empty pure intuition without object when by specification we may only end up with a pure intuition through being provided with its object of intuition by the form of sensibility, “Without sensibility no object would be given to us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind ... The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything” (Kant Critique of Pure Reason 193-194). Simples would be precisely something which is not in any sense given to the understanding under some new form, nor which would entail any concepts relevant to their own being that would only serve to negate the original negative

principle of nothing which stands outside of the simples. Here, Kant realizes precisely the difference between the concept empty of any object which constitutes the deflationary account of nothing, and the notion of an object empty of any concept (which say refers to it or is in any way logically entailed alongside it), or the non-being of nothingness.

The deflationary account conflates the way in which these two different things lack sense, and thereby ends up anthropomorphizing the world in their demand that because the world can only be known conceptually its structure must somehow also be wholly conceptual. But in the case of the ‘object devoid of any concept’, what we have is a moment of the non-being of the conceptual in nothingness. Olson will say of the common difficulties found in materialist ontologies, “If I am right, there is simply no way of making ontological sense of the physical world without embracing some general metaphysical theory that many of us find at best very difficult to believe. There is no conservative ontology of material objects” (Olson Composition 20). The nihilist can accept this claim plainly in that the presupposition of any materialist ontology is necessarily always going to entail some radical speculative procedure. Brassier has stated this problem as such, “Thus the metaphysical exploration of the structure of being can only be carried out in tandem with an epistemological investigation into the nature of conception. For we cannot understand what is real unless we understand what ‘what’ means, and we cannot understand what ‘what’ means without understanding what ‘means’ is, but we cannot hope to understand what ‘means’ is without understanding what ‘is’ means” (Brassier Concepts 57). There is no place from which to most obviously begin carrying out this procedure as the deflationary account would seem to have hoped.

It is no doubt odd that while having begun with a thought experiment in which there are only a number of different things present, we have somehow arrived at nothing – precisely lack of any of the things with which was our only original presupposition. This is not to deny the existence of anything in particular, which the empirical sciences have proven themselves actually more than cut out for the task. But rather, it is to draw out the necessary consequences which follow from the resulting epistemological constraints we have been left with – constraints which philosophy has so far up until now largely refused to commit itself to. Hirsch points out how we should remain firmly committed to a strict notion of truth even about ordinary things in the face of these demanding epistemological constraints, “Our concept of “reference” varies with our concept of “what exists”, but it should be emphasized that our concept of “truth” does not thereby vary” (Hirsch Languages 30). This is to say that truth is still intimately wrapped up in our notions of being and non-being, and so we cannot therefore as nihilists simply affirm the non-being of truth. For much of philosophy however, it is still just a great perversion to be forced to so much as confront the truth about the non-being of nothingness itself, “How is it that the most urgent question which science poses to philosophy has become, as far as philosophy itself is concerned, the pointless question par excellence, viz. how is thought able to think what there can be when there is no thought!” (Meillassoux After Finitude 121). Since

there is no way to dissect away the notion of being from any concept of non-being, we can actually find the coincidence of each in everything there is (or is not). In this way we can see that each thing does coincide with nothing, only so long as there is nothing for each thing to be the coincident of.

References

- Aristotle. *Metaphysics Book IV*. ~350B.C. 3-5.
- Balaguer, Mark. "Why The Debate Over Composition is Factually Empty." 2013.
- Bennett, Karen. "Spatio-Temporal Coincidence and the Grounding Problem." 2004.
- Brassier, Ray. "Concepts and Objects." *The Speculative Turn* (2011): 50-60.
- Fine, Kit. "Acts, Events, and Things." 1982.
- Geach, P.T. "Reference and Generality." Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1962).
- Hirsch, Eli. "Ontology and Alternative Languages." *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford University Press (2009).
- Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell 1986.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude*. 2007.
- Pitt, David. "Objects and their Phases." 2013.
- Schelling, F. W. J. Andrew. *On the History of Modern Philosophy*. 1833.
- Turner, Jason. "Ontological Nihilism." 2009.