

Nihilism without Self-Contradiction

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1. Introduction

Last weekend, I made a bookcase. To begin with, I went and bought various pieces of wood and several screws. Then I screwed the pieces of wood together. In doing so, I created something new: my bookcase. And this bookcase is made up of the pieces of wood and the screws. In other words, they're parts of it.

It seems that many of the assertions we make when we're not doing philosophy imply that there are things that have parts. We think that there are bookcases, and that lots of them have wooden parts. There are many more examples. For instance, we think that there are houses, and that they have bricks among their parts; we think that there are bicycles, and that they have wheels and handlebars among their parts.

Things that have parts are philosophically puzzling. Let me briefly explain just one of the difficulties they raise. If I take a shelf away from my bookcase and replace it with a new one, I still have the same bookcase. But suppose I replace *each of* the pieces of wood and *each of* the screws, carefully storing the original parts in my shed. And suppose further that, after twenty years, I come across this useful collection and put them together into a bookcase. Which is the bookcase that I started off with? The bookcase made of the original parts? Or the bookcase made of their replacements?¹

There are many different ways of responding to puzzles such as this.² My purpose here is to discuss a particularly simple response: that of denying that anything has parts.³ The doctrine that nothing has parts is called *nihilism*. It is easy to see how nihilism deals with the bookcase puzzle. If there never was anything made up of the pieces of wood and the screws, then there can be no sensible debate about its identity.⁴ To a close approximation, this is the response that Peter van Inwagen favours. Actually, van Inwagen thinks that

¹ This is a version of the ancient Ship of Theseus puzzle.

² The introduction to Rea 1997 gives a systematic survey of the options.

³ For simplicity, I will stipulate that nothing is a part of itself. Equivalently, read 'proper part' for 'part' throughout.

⁴ Though for an argument that the puzzle remains, see McGrath 2005.

living organisms have parts, but he denies that anything else does. For ease of exposition, I'll ignore what van Inwagen says about organisms and treat him as a nihilist. Nothing will be lost, apart from a great deal of tedious qualification.⁵

I should stress that I am not arguing that van Inwagen's response to the puzzles is ultimately the best one; although I think van Inwagen's view demands to be taken seriously, I am not volunteering to defend it against all comers. Rather, my interest here is in an objection to van Inwagen's view which alleges that it is self-contradictory. I'll set out this objection in §3. Van Inwagen responds by claiming that certain sentences are context-sensitive: they have different truth-conditions in the context of philosophical discussions about ontology than they do in more ordinary contexts (§3). This claim is the focus of my discussion. I point out that it is problematic (§6), and I provide an alternative response to the threat of contradiction, which (I argue) is preferable to van Inwagen's (§7). I defend this from two objections (§§8, 9). Along the way, I defend van Inwagen from an attack launched by Trenton Merricks (§§4, 7). But, first, I must set out van Inwagen's views.

2. Plural Semantics

It might seem that if nothing has parts, then much of our everyday talk is untrue. It's tempting to hold that when I say, 'I made a bookcase at the weekend', or 'My bicycle's front wheel is missing a spoke', I'm implying that there's something that has parts. If so, then if nothing has parts, what I say implies something false. And that means that what I say is false.⁶ But I believed what I said. It seems, then, that anyone who denies that anything has parts must deny many of our everyday thoughts and assertions.

However, van Inwagen disagrees: he claims that, although nothing has parts, these thoughts and assertions are often true. In van Inwagen's view, sentences which seem to imply the existence of *composite* entities – that is, entities that have parts – do not genuinely do so.

Van Inwagen offers us paraphrases of these sentences. For instance, he paraphrases

⁵ Hossack 2000 and Merricks 2001 advocate similar replies to these puzzles.

⁶ Or, at least, untrue. Perhaps what I say lacks truth-value because it *presupposes* something false, in the sense of Strawson 1952: 175.

(C) Some chairs are heavier than some tables
as

(C*) There are *xs* that are arranged chairwise and there are *ys* that are arranged tablewise and the *xs* are heavier than the *ys* (1990: 109).⁷

Note that C* involves plural quantification ('There are *xs*') rather than the more commonly-encountered singular quantification ('There is an *x*').

It is not at all clear what van Inwagen thinks the relation is between the original sentence and the paraphrase. He claims that C* 'describes the same fact' as C but denies that the two sentences 'express the same proposition' (1990: 113, 112). On one hand he says:

I am not proposing an analysis of common language. . . . The only thing I have to say about what the ordinary man really means by 'There are two valuable chairs in the next room' is that he really means that there are two valuable chairs in the next room. (1990: 106)

On the other, he says that the sentence 'There are two valuable chairs in the next room' is "essentially existential", meaning that . . . a correct paraphrase – correct by the most pedantic and literalistic standards – of this sentence into the language of formal logic must start with an existential quantifier' (1990: 102).

It is, then, hard to fathom exactly what van Inwagen is offering us. What *ought* he to offer us? Van Inwagen claims that sentences like C only appear to imply the existence of composite entities: in his view, they don't really do so. To back this up, we would like van Inwagen to tell us what the truth-conditions of these sentences are, in a way that makes clear that these conditions can obtain even in a world where there are only *simples* (things without parts).

It would be unsatisfying just to be told what the truth-conditions of these sentences are, sentence by sentence. We would prefer to be given a systematic way of working out which truth-conditions each sentence possesses. To do this, van Inwagen needs to explain what contributions the words in these sentences make to their truth-conditions. In one sense of the term, then, we would like him to supply us with a *semantic theory* for this part of English.

⁷ For discussion of van Inwagen's paraphrases, see Mackie 1993, Sider 1993, O'Leary-Hawthorne and Michael 1996, Markosian 1998: 220–1, and Uzquiano 2004.

I will now sketch a theory of this sort, and – for simplicity’s sake – impute it to van Inwagen. I am not confident that van Inwagen would endorse this theory, even though his paraphrases are consequences of it; but since it provides what we would like van Inwagen to provide, I think it is worth discussing whether or not van Inwagen believes it.⁸

Consider the true sentence

(B) My bookcase is heavy.

It might seem as if this contains a singular term, ‘My bookcase’, referring to a composite entity; if so, it can’t be true unless there are such things as composite entities. Van Inwagen is thus faced with a choice. He can either affirm or deny that ‘My bookcase’ refers. If he affirms this, he must deny that its referent is composite. On this view, there are bookcases, but they are simples. Van Inwagen chooses the other option: he denies that there is any entity that the phrase ‘My bookcase’ refers to. Van Inwagen doesn’t think that the phrase is a singular term which fails to refer, like ‘Zeus’; if he did, he could hardly agree that B is true. Rather, van Inwagen denies that this phrase is a singular term at all.

What account, then, does van Inwagen give of the meaning of this phrase? Van Inwagen thinks that ‘My bookcase’ is a *plural* term: a phrase, like ‘The natural numbers’ or ‘The British Empiricists’, whose function is to pick out several things at once, not just one.⁹ Exactly which things, though?

Metaphysicians commonly assume that every material object is made of simple micro-physical particles, leaving it to science to determine the nature of these things. Perhaps they are quarks; or perhaps quarks will turn out to be built of particles of some more fundamental type. Those who believe in composition think that ‘My bookcase’ refers to the entity that is composed by a certain group of simple particles. Van Inwagen denies that these particles compose anything; if they did, it would have them as parts, and he thinks there’s nothing that has parts. Van Inwagen’s view is that ‘My bookcase’ refers, plurally, to these simple particles themselves.

⁸ A closely similar semantic theory is endorsed in Hossack 2000.

⁹ For more on plural terms, see Oliver and Smiley 2004: 640–3. I follow their terminology, which differs from van Inwagen’s (their note 30 on page 645 sets out the difference). Some deny that there are any genuine plural terms in English, maintaining that putative plural terms are really singular ones, referring to (say) the mereological sum of the British Empiricists, or the set of natural numbers. Arguments against this view are given in Oliver and Smiley 2001.

We apply various predicates to pieces of furniture and other material objects. For instance, we sometimes describe them as heavy, dilapidated, or wooden. Those who believe in composite entities will probably regard these as *singular monadic* predicates. They are monadic because they have just one argument place (unlike, say, ‘... is the brother of ...’), and they are singular because this argument place is to be occupied by a singular term. Van Inwagen agrees that these predicates are monadic, but he holds them to be plural ones: he thinks that each of them takes a *plural* argument. They’re like ‘... are sisters’, or ‘... form a square’. That’s just what we should expect from someone who thinks that apparent singular reference to a composite entity is really plural reference to some simple ones.

What goes for ‘... is heavy’ also goes for predicates like ‘... is a bookcase’. Where the believer in composites claims that there is an entity constituted by very many simple particles, van Inwagen believes that there are just very many particles arranged in a particular way. Believers in composite objects do not think that every collection of simples constitutes a bookcase: for that to happen, the particles have to be within a bookcase-shaped region of space, be of the right sorts to constitute the right chemical substances, and so on. Say that some simples are ‘arranged bookcasewise’ if and only if they satisfy this condition.¹⁰ Then van Inwagen’s view is that ‘is a bookcase’ just *means* ‘are arranged bookcasewise’.

Van Inwagen’s strategy for interpreting talk about tables and chairs is to interpret as plural what might look like singular reference and predication. This explains how sentences which seem to refer to composite objects can be true, even though there are no composite objects.¹¹ Van Inwagen’s view thus has considerable affinities with other projects of reductive paraphrase: for instance, the phenomenalist’s project of interpreting sentences which seem to refer to material objects as long conjunctions of conditionals about experiences; the modal fictionalist’s project of interpreting modal talk as talk about what is true according to David Lewis’s modal realism; and the modal structuralist’s project of

¹⁰ This way of explaining ‘are arranged bookcasewise’ is based on Merricks 2001: 3–4. For van Inwagen’s own explanation, see van Inwagen 1990: 105, 112–3; McGrath 2005: 472 offers ‘friendly amendments’.

¹¹ Purely for convenience, I am treating ‘My bookcase’ as a singular term. But van Inwagen does not *have to* treat it so. For instance, he could give a Russellian account, provided it used plurals; thus ‘My bookcase is heavy’ would be analysed as: ‘There are *x*s that are arranged bookcasewise and are (collectively) heavy and are (collectively) mine; and for all *y*s, if they are arranged bookcasewise and are (collectively) mine, then they are the *x*s’.

interpreting mathematics as talk about what the axioms of our mathematical theories entail.¹² There is at least one respect in which van Inwagen's project has greater initial plausibility than these. For van Inwagen attributes to each sentence about material objects a logical structure that closely resembles its syntactic structure: he interprets 'There is' as a quantifier and 'table' as a predicate, for example. In contrast, statements about material objects do not look like long conjunctions of conditionals; and modal fictionalism and modal structuralism are similarly unfaithful.

3. The Threat

Van Inwagen (1990: 100) writes: 'There are no tables.' Elsewhere, he denies that there are chairs, statues, houses, sticks, stones, severed limbs, ships, or 'any other visible objects except organisms' (1990: 1, 128).

On van Inwagen's view, as I have explained it so far, he is contradicting himself. On van Inwagen's view, 'is a table' is a disguised plural predicate, meaning 'are arranged tablewise'. Thus 'There are tables' means 'There are some things that are arranged tablewise'. (Note that this uses the plural existential quantifier rather than the more usual singular one. Compare: 'There are some things arranged in a square'.) Presumably, 'There are no tables' expresses the negation of this claim: it says that there are no things arranged tablewise. Yet van Inwagen does not deny that there are things arranged tablewise. So he should think that 'There are no tables' is *false*. He has no business asserting it (that is, asserting the proposition it expresses).

Van Inwagen is aware of this threat. He responds to it by claiming that 'There are no tables', and sentences like it, 'express different propositions in different contexts of utterance' (1993: 711; see also 1990: 101, 103). Ordinary utterances of them express claims about whether there are things arranged tablewise. But, says van Inwagen, when they are uttered in 'the philosophy room' – that is, in the context of a metaphysical debate – they express different propositions instead. I'll call this doctrine of van Inwagen's *contextualism*.

Once we take his contextualism into account, it is no longer clear that van Inwagen is contradicting himself. He only ever says 'There are no tables' when he's discussing metaphysics; he never asserts it 'in the ordinary business of life' (to borrow a phrase from van

¹² For introductions to these projects, see Dancy 1985: 85–91, Shapiro 2000: 270–275, and Brock and Mares 2007: 192–198 respectively.

Inwagen 1990: 102). And it's not clear that there's a clash between van Inwagen's belief that there are things arranged tablewise and the proposition that, in the philosophical context, is expressed by 'There are no tables'.

But that's only because we have not been told *what* proposition this is. Perhaps if we knew what it was, we could argue that it's incompatible with some other part of van Inwagen's view. We must therefore ask: what exactly is the content of 'There are no tables' when it is asserted in the philosophy room?

This question is particularly pressing, because some sceptics claim not to understand what is being discussed when metaphysicians engage in such ontological debates. Eli Hirsch (1993: 690) writes:

[I]t seems to me that I simply have no idea of what van Inwagen means when he says such things as, '...[T]here are no apples (though it would of course be correct to say in the ordinary business of life that there are a lot of apples round here)'. It seems to me that I don't grasp the sense of his words 'There are no apples'.¹³

Explaining what propositions philosophers are debating would lay Hirsch's worry to rest and remove the suspicion that the metaphysicians aren't making any sense.

We will be clear what it is that van Inwagen takes himself to be denying once we have examined the reasons he offers for denying it. The key claim is this (1990: 100): 'If there were tables, they would be composite material objects'. It suggests the following argument:

- (1) If there are tables, they are composite;
- (2) Nothing is composite; therefore
- (3) There are no tables.¹⁴

As (3) expresses something van Inwagen wants to assert, it cannot be read as 'There are no *xs* arranged tablewise'. Presumably, then, the argument has the obvious form:

$$\forall x(Tx \supset Cx); \sim \exists x Cx; \therefore \sim \exists x Tx.$$

¹³ Compare Carnap (1950: 209) on metaphysicians who ask whether there are numbers: 'Unfortunately, these philosophers have so far not given a formulation of their question in terms of the common scientific language. Unless and until they supply a clear cognitive interpretation, we are justified in our suspicion that their question is a pseudo-question. . . .'

¹⁴ Something like this seems to be offered on pages 99 to 100 of *Material Beings*.

If so, then we must find a reading of ‘is a table’ on which it takes a singular argument. Charity demands that it be a reading on which (1) is not a crazy thing to think, or – to be more accurate – not too crazy for van Inwagen to think.

A hypothesis that meets these requirements is that van Inwagen is using ‘table’ here with the meaning his opponents think it has. Many of these opponents think that phrases like ‘My table’ are singular terms; that these often succeed in referring; and that their referents are composed of entities arranged tablewise. If we use the word ‘table’ to apply to these referents, then ‘is a table’ takes a singular argument. And, read this way, (1) is definitely not too crazy for anyone to think. It is a common and appealing thought: after all, it seems that we sometimes remove parts of tables (when we chip them, for instance). And it follows from the meaning of ‘tablewise’ that tables, if they are composite, are composed of things arranged tablewise (compare the explanation of ‘bookcasewise’ given in §2).

Hirsch is a vociferous defender of ‘common sense ontology’ (see his 2002). He believes that there are things composed of things arranged tablewise. When, in the philosophy room, van Inwagen says that there are no tables, he is simply asserting the negation of this belief. Since Hirsch has the concept of negation, he is in a position to understand what van Inwagen means.

4. Contextualism contra Merricks

We have seen that van Inwagen responds to the threat of self-contradiction by claiming that ‘There are no tables’, and sentences like it, are context-dependent. Van Inwagen restricts his plural semantics to everyday uses of these sentences; although he does not explain what he thinks these sentences mean when philosophers are discussing the ontology of material objects, we have just seen that a way of doing so is available to him. I will now argue that his contextualism provides him with a response to an objection posed by Trenton Merricks.

Roughly speaking, Merricks agrees with van Inwagen that there are no composite objects, but disagrees with him about the semantics of talk about material objects. According to Merricks, many of our everyday utterances and beliefs do imply that there are composite objects. When I say, ‘My bookcase is heavy’, I say something that cannot be true unless there is something that has parts. Since there is nothing like that, the sentence I utter and the belief it expresses are both false.

Actually, I have just given a simplified version of Merricks's position. Merricks does think that there are some composite objects, namely, human beings, and he is agnostic as to whether there are other composite organisms (2001: 114–6). But I will ignore this in what follows.

For Merricks (2001: 1), *eliminativism* is the doctrine that there are no books, statues, rocks, tables, chairs, or any other macro-physical objects.¹⁵ Commenting on van Inwagen's interpretation of talk about tables, chairs, and so on, Merricks writes:

One reason to oppose [such claims] stems from eliminativism's undeniably striking and surprising nature. For – ask yourself – *why* is eliminativism striking and surprising? It cannot be because of its revisionary practical or empirical consequences; it has no such consequences. . . . Instead, eliminativism is striking and surprising simply because – and this is the obvious answer – it contradicts what nearly all of us believe.

Van Inwagen must reject this obvious answer. Indeed, I think that van Inwagen must say that eliminativism contradicts *only* some philosophers *qua* philosophers. But the claim that eliminativism is consistent with what all people believe – except for a comparative handful of professional ontologists, and even them only while they are working – does not do justice to its striking and surprising nature. (Merricks 2001: 163).

Merricks's line of thought is this. Van Inwagen's ontological view is striking and surprising; we can best explain this by saying that his ontological view is in massive conflict with our pre-theoretical beliefs about what there is; but van Inwagen's semantic views prevent him from endorsing this explanation. So van Inwagen has reason to drop his semantic views.

It is certainly true that that people often find van Inwagen's view striking and surprising. But van Inwagen's contextualism provides him with a way of explaining this. He can deal with Merricks's objection by claiming that we confuse different readings of 'There are no tables'. I imagine him saying something of the following sort:

All I'm attempting to deny is that anything is a table – where 'table' has the meaning my philosophical opponents think it has. In this sense of 'table', if 'There are tables' is true, then there are composite entities. My denial that there are such

¹⁵ Strictly speaking, it's the doctrine that there are no *non-living* macro-physical objects.

things is quite consistent with our pre-theoretical beliefs. But I think that ‘There are no tables’ ordinarily expresses something different. It expresses the claim that there are no things arranged tablewise – whereas we ordinarily believe that there are *many* clumps of things arranged chairwise. So when you hear me saying ‘There are no tables’, it’s easy to misinterpret me as denying that any things are so arranged, and thus denying our ordinary belief. No wonder my denial sounds so radical.¹⁶

Now this alternative has been put forward, it is no longer clear that Merricks’s proposed explanation of the strikingness of van Inwagen’s view is the best available. Unless Merricks can provide reasons to think that his explanation is superior, van Inwagen’s contextualism allows him to argue that he is at no theoretical disadvantage when it comes to explaining people’s amazed reactions to his ontology.

5. Explaining the Context-dependence

As we have seen, claiming that sentences like ‘There are no tables’ express different propositions in different contexts of utterance is useful to van Inwagen: it has allowed him to deal both with the threat of contradiction and with Merricks’s objection.

However, these advantages impose a duty: van Inwagen ought to provide us with a credible explanation of *how* this context-dependence takes place. For instance, does the word ‘table’ make different contributions to the meanings of the sentences it occurs in, depending on the context? Or is some other mechanism in play? If van Inwagen cannot provide us with a credible explanation, then it will be hard for us to accept that his contextualism is true. Without that claim to rely on, van Inwagen would have to start looking for new responses to the threat of contradiction and Merricks’s argument. So there is considerable theoretical reason to ask: can van Inwagen explain how ‘There are no tables’, and sentences like it, manage to express different propositions in different contexts?

We should begin by making it clear just what it is that van Inwagen is obliged to explain. Van Inwagen’s view is that utterances of ‘There are tables’ ordinarily express the claim that there are some things arranged tablewise; but in the philosophy room, they express another proposition. In §3 we identified this proposition as the view

¹⁶ This line of argument is suggested by van Inwagen 1990: 103 and 107, although not as a reply to Merricks’s objection.

that there are tables, where ‘table’ has the meaning van Inwagen’s opponents think that the word ordinarily has. In this sense, tables are the referents of singular terms like ‘My table’. Van Inwagen needs to give an account of how the same sentence expresses these two different propositions in the two contexts. No such account is presented in his writings;¹⁷ in the next section, I will assess the prospects for providing one.

6. Failed Explanations

The most obvious explanation for van Inwagen to use is that words like ‘table’ are ambiguous. We have already mentioned different senses of ‘table’. The idea would be that, whilst these words ordinarily function as plural predicates, in the philosophy room they transform themselves into singular ones. To state the proposal crudely: ‘is a table’ means ‘are arranged tablewise’ – except when philosophers use it, in which case it applies to all and only the things composed by things arranged tablewise.¹⁸

The most obvious explanation is awful. Neither believers in composition nor opponents like Merricks have any need to commit themselves to these ambiguity claims: they can say that ‘There are no tables’ *always* expresses the claim that there are none of a certain kind of composite entity. But Grice’s Razor, ‘Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity’ (Grice 1989: 47), tells us that these theories are to be preferred to this one, other things being equal. Since we should minimise the amount of ambiguity we postulate, for van Inwagen to postulate ambiguity would be playing into his opponents’ hands.

Were he to adopt the explanation we are currently discussing, van Inwagen could not confine himself to claiming that ‘chair’ is ambiguous. He denies that there are chairs, statues, houses, sticks, stones, or severed limbs, ships, or ‘any other visible objects except organisms’ (1990: 1, 128); he would therefore have to say that *every* predicate

¹⁷ On page 712 of his 1993, van Inwagen likens his views to Copernicus’s claim ‘clouds move but the sun doesn’t’. He then goes on to note that Copernicus does not claim that ‘motion’ has more than one sense. This suggests that van Inwagen would deny that ‘table’ is ambiguous. But that hardly amounts to an explanation of how ‘There are tables’ shifts its meaning. It is relevant to mention that van Inwagen 1998: 236–7 argues that ‘There are’ and other quantifier phrases have only a single sense.

¹⁸ As the two senses of ‘table’ are related, ‘polysemous’ might be a better word than ‘ambiguous’. But nothing hangs on which word we use.

which seems to pick out a sort of visible object is ambiguous. On one reading, the one used in ontological enquiries, these predicates take a singular argument; on the other, everyday reading, they take a plural argument. There is no obvious independent motivation for any of these claims.

It is therefore natural to look for other ways for van Inwagen to explain the context-dependence. For instance, can van Inwagen appeal to quantifier domain restriction?

Quantifier domain restriction is highly familiar. Often, when we say 'All the *F*s are *G*', what we say would be ludicrous if we meant *all the *F*s that there are*. We are better interpreted as meaning that *all the contextually salient *F*s are *G**. And the same goes for existential quantification. Often, 'There is an *F*' means something closer to 'There is an *F* in the contextually salient domain of things'. We are usually more interested in whether there is a café round here than whether there is a café in the universe.

Quantifiers do not have to be singular to be restricted. In the right context, for instance, 'Some people write things together' means 'Some people *who are philosophers* write things together'. Domain restriction is one way to get singular quantification from plural quantification, as I will now explain.

Consider the plural predicate 'are one', defined as follows: the *x*s are one iff there is a *z* such that for every *y*, *y* is one of the *x*s iff *y* is *z*. The *x*s are one iff there is exactly one of them. For instance, there is only one current UK prime minister; so the current UK prime ministers are one.

'Cook things' is a plural predicate. 'Some people cook things' means that there are some people such that they cook things. Now let us restrict the domain of the quantifier 'Some' to things that are one. The result: some people are such that they cook things *and are one*. Or, more naturally, there is somebody who cooks things. Plural has turned to singular.

Might the shift from the ordinary to the metaphysical context restrict the domain of plural quantifiers to things that are one? On this picture, in the ordinary context, 'There are tables' expresses the claim that there are things arranged tablewise, whereas in the metaphysical context it expresses the claim that there are things arranged tablewise *that are one*.

The problem with this proposal is that it generates the wrong meaning for 'There are tables' in the metaphysical context. When van Inwagen's opponents assert that there are tables, they mean that there are things which are composed of entities arranged tablewise and which we refer to with singular terms like 'My table'. Van

Inwagen's opponents do not mean that there is a single thing that is arranged tablewise; very likely, they will think that this is false. So the proposal fails. It is possible to combine quantifier restriction with an ambiguity claim: the position would be that shifting to the metaphysical context both restricts the quantifier to things that are one and also shifts the sense of 'is a table' from 'are arranged tablewise' to 'is a table'. But this position is little better than the ambiguity-without-domain-restriction view I have already dismissed.

Other mechanisms are sometimes invoked to explain context-dependence. For instance, van Inwagen might appeal to ellipsis: when in the 'ordinary business of life' we say 'There are tables', our utterance is short for 'There are things arranged tablewise'. But as 'arranged tablewise' is not a part of ordinary English but an artificial predicate introduced by philosophers, this is a non-starter.

Judging by this survey of the options, it looks as if van Inwagen will find it very difficult to explain the context-dependence he invokes. At the very least, the burden is on him to nominate a semantic mechanism that makes the shift happen.

Contextualism offered to rescue van Inwagen from apparent contradiction; it also promised a reply to Merricks's objection. I now show how these benefits can be obtained without postulating context-dependence.

7. The Benefits of Invariantism

I recommend a partial retreat. Van Inwagen should claim that 'There are tables' picks out the same proposition in all contexts. He should say that 'There are tables' always combines a plural existential quantifier and a plural predicate; both inside the philosophy room and out, the sentence means that there are things arranged tablewise. By his lights, this proposition is true. So van Inwagen should stop asserting 'There are no tables' – indeed, he should assert: 'There are tables'. And the same goes for 'There are chairs', 'There are bookcases', and so on. Call this stance *invariantism*.

Invariantism immediately deals with the threat of contradiction. The worry was that van Inwagen could not consistently assert 'There are no tables', given his ontological and semantic commitments. Once he stops making these assertions, no-one can sensibly worry that he is making them incoherently.

Merricks argued that van Inwagen cannot adopt the best explanation of why people find his view striking and surprising. If van Inwagen adopts invariantism, then there will be nothing to explain.

For he will cease to assert ‘There are no tables’, ‘There are no apples’, and so on: in other words, he will cease to assert the claims that make people gasp. Shorn of these claims, it is not clear that his view will be so startling.

However, van Inwagen’s claim that nothing has parts also causes incredulity. He should withdraw this claim too. Given the notion of some things being *among* other things, he can interpret everyday talk of parthood: ‘... is part of ...’ should be interpreted as ‘... are among ...’ (compare Morton 1975: 314, Hossack 2000: 424). This predicate takes two plural arguments (as it does in ‘Joe’s parents are among his relatives’): the *x*s are among the *y*s if every one of the *x*s is one of the *y*s but not vice versa.¹⁹ Thus ‘The arm is part of the chair’ becomes ‘There are things, the *x*s, arranged armwise and there are things, the *y*s, arranged chairwise, and the *x*s are among the *y*s.’ Van Inwagen should think that claims like this are often true. So he should say that some things are parts of other things. The problem is not with endorsing the sentence ‘Some things have parts’; it is with interpreting this sentence by means of singular resources rather than plural ones.

If he were to adopt my recommendations, what startling claims would van Inwagen now be committed to? None, it seems. Merricks’s objection has been undermined by removing the phenomenon for which it demanded an explanation.

Invariantism offers the same theoretical benefits as contextualism. But is it defensible, or are these benefits outweighed by invariantism’s theoretical costs? I will now show that invariantism is defensible, by defending it. In each of the next two sections I will present an objection to invariantism and defend invariantism from it.

8. Against the Misinterpretation Objection

Van Inwagen’s distinctive semantic view is that what might look like *singular* reference and predication is in fact *plural*. Once he swaps contextualism for invariantism, he must extend this interpretation to speakers in the philosophy room. Then he will say that ‘There are tables’ *always* expresses the proposition that there are some things that are arranged tablewise, and that ‘There are no tables’ always expresses the negation of that proposition.

¹⁹ ‘And not vice versa’ is included to ensure that parthood is irreflexive: see footnote 3.

It is natural to worry that adopting this view would commit van Inwagen to misinterpreting his philosophical opponents. For instance, when Merricks says ‘There are no tables’, we are wrong if we interpret him as asserting that there are no entities arranged tablewise. Merricks (2001: vii) explicitly says that there *are* some entities arranged in that way. What Merricks denies is that there is anything which has these entities as parts. When he says, ‘There are no tables’, his statement seems to succeed in communicating this. Similarly, when a believer in composite objects replies to van Inwagen by saying, ‘No, you’re wrong: there *are* tables,’ we will interpret them wrongly if we take them to be saying just that there are things arranged tablewise.

It therefore appears that van Inwagen will run into trouble if he endorses invariantism. However, this appearance is an illusion: the worry can be dissolved by appeal to pragmatics, as I will now explain.

Merricks sets out what he thinks he means: he presents a philosophical account of the truth-conditions of some of his own utterances. Merricks asserts: ‘There are no tables’. And he explains what truth-conditions he thinks this sentence has. On his view, ‘There are no tables’ expresses the claim that nothing is a table – in the singular, ‘philosophical’ sense of table explained above (§3).

Now it is common ground that we should take people at their word. We should accept the following principle of interpretation:

If a philosopher claims that sentence S picks out proposition P, then when they utter (or write) S assertorically, we should think that they are asserting P, or trying to assert it.

In other words, we should interpret philosophers as if their own theory of the meaning of their utterances were true, whether or not we agree with that theory.

Using this principle, van Inwagen can explain how, by uttering (or writing) ‘There are no tables’ assertorically, Merricks succeeds in telling us that he believes that nothing is a table (rather than that there are no things arranged tablewise) – even though the sentence does not express the claim that nothing is a table. For Merricks asserts, contra van Inwagen, that it *does* pick out that claim; so we should interpret him as trying to assert this when he utters the sentence assertorically. If no defeating conditions obtain (and in this case they seem not to), we should think he believes what he’s trying to assert: we should think he believes that nothing is a table.

A similar story applies when a believer in composite objects asserts: ‘There are tables’. What they say is the proposition that sentence expresses – on the invariantist view, the proposition that there are some things arranged tablewise. But what they communicate is that

they believe the proposition they are trying to assert. They believe that the sentence expresses the claim that there is something that is a table (where ‘there is’ is a singular quantifier), and so we should understand them as trying to assert this proposition.

None of this reasoning is out of the ordinary. When we meet someone who thinks, wrongly, that ‘refute’ means ‘deny’, we soon realise that they do not mean what they say; and we interpret them charitably. When they tell us, ‘He refuted Joe’s claim, even though Joe was right’, we do not ascribe contradictory beliefs to them.

So van Inwagen *can* explain how his opponents convey their philosophical views, without having to claim that the sentences they use change their truth-conditions from context to context. Moreover, van Inwagen can explain why Merricks and company are tempted to misinterpret everyday talk of tables using singular quantification. Ever since logicians started to deal with quantified sentences in the nineteenth century, they have dwelt on singular quantification at the expense of plural. This bias is reflected in philosophers’ education: the logic of singular predication and singular existential and universal quantifiers is a standard part of the syllabus, whereas the logic of plural predicates and quantifiers most decidedly is not. (For proof, simply browse through some undergraduate logic textbooks.) It is quite standard to interpret sentences of the form ‘There are Fs’ using a singular quantifier and a singular predicate. If van Inwagen is right, this tradition is mistaken. For lots of our ordinary talk concerns chairs, statues, houses, sticks, stones, and other visible objects; it is the sort of talk van Inwagen thinks we should interpret using plural quantification. English contains a large number of sentences which very plausibly should be interpreted using plural resources (‘The blocks form a square’, for instance); but plurals are not part of the standard philosophical tool-kit. This explains why few philosophers have considered whether sentences like ‘There are chairs’ should be understood as van Inwagen understands them.

9. Against the Unstability Objection

As we saw above (§3), Hirsch claims not to understand what van Inwagen means when he denies that there are chairs, tables, and so on. If van Inwagen adopts invariantism, he will cease to issue these denials; so Hirsch will have no legitimate complaint to make about them. But invariantism raises a related worry: can invariantists state their own view? Van Inwagen initially presented his position by saying that there are no tables, and that nothing has parts. But

invariantists are happy to assert sentences such as ‘There are tables’ and ‘Tables have parts’; according to invariantism, ‘There are no tables’ and ‘Tables do not have parts’ are false in both ordinary and ontological contexts. The worry is that adopting invariantism would block van Inwagen from stating his view. An invariantist version of van Inwagen’s position threatens to be not self-refuting, but self-suppressing.

Invariantism has nothing to say about the interpretation of the technical terms ‘singular’, ‘plural’, ‘quantifier’, or ‘predicate’. So it does not threaten van Inwagen’s entitlement to make his semantic claims. But van Inwagen’s view is not exhausted by his semantic claims alone; for these miss out his ontological doctrine, that nothing has parts. And ‘Nothing has parts’ is just what an invariantist cannot say.

But let us remind ourselves why van Inwagen wanted to say ‘Nothing has parts’. His aim was to resolve puzzles about constitution such as the bookcase puzzle I set out in §1. These puzzles assume that there is (singular quantifier!) an entity that has some things as parts; for example, in the bookcase puzzle, the bookcase is supposed to be constituted by the wood and the screws. Van Inwagen’s preferred way of dealing with these puzzles is to reject this assumption. In his view, if we use a singular quantifier then we can truly say that there is no such thing as the bookcase. For that reason, van Inwagen denies that there is any relation of parthood relating the bookcase to anything else.

Invariantists interpret ‘... is a part of ...’ as ‘... are among ...’: the *x*s are a part of the *y*s just when the *x*s are among the *y*s. Suppose the *y*s are one, in the sense of ‘are one’ introduced in §6. Then it follows that for no *x*s are the *x*s part of the *y*s.²⁰ So it is a consequence of the invariantist’s interpretation of ‘part’ that if the bookcase were one, it would not have parts.

While van Inwagen cannot say that nothing has parts, he can (and must) say that for all *x*s, if the *x*s have parts then they are not one; only things that are not one have parts. Equivalently, he can say that if ‘Something’ expressed the singular existential quantifier, then ‘Something has parts’ would be false. These formulations capture van Inwagen’s distinctive ontological doctrine: so invariantism does not bring unstability.

²⁰ Proof. The *y*s are one, so by definition there is a *z* such that for every *w*, *w* is one of the *y*s iff *w* is *z*. Suppose, for reductio, that *v* is one of the *x*s. As the *x*s are among the *y*s, *v* is one of the *y*s, so *v* is *z*. But then every one of the *y*s is one of the *x*s; so by the definition of ‘among’, the *x*s are not among the *y*s; thus the *x*s are not part of the *y*s. Contradiction.

10. Conclusion

Van Inwagen's contextualism enabled him to counter Merricks's objection and to deal with the threat of contradiction. I have shown that these benefits can be obtained without having to postulate any context-dependence (§7); I have defended the invariantist position from two objections (§§8, 9); and I have criticised contextualism (§6). My main conclusion is that thus van Inwagen should prefer invariantism to contextualism.

Let me offer three further conclusions. First, it is sometimes suggested that sentences of the form 'There are Fs', 'Fs exist', and so on, take on a special sense in the context of ontological discussions; these sentences have an unsophisticated everyday sense and a lofty philosophical one (Carnap 1950; Fine 2001; Hofweber 2005; Dorr 2005: §7 [though see footnote 27 for a qualification]). If invariantism is correct, then this suggestion is untrue, at least in the case of discussions of visible objects. Sentences about the existence of chairs and tables do not change their truth-conditions when we enter the philosophy room.

Second, as I noted in §2, van Inwagen has affinities with advocates of other paraphrase positions: philosophers who claim that, for some sortal 'F', sentences that might seem to entail the existence of Fs do not genuinely do so, and go on to offer paraphrases to make clear what they *do* entail. We may generalize the point I made in §2 to reach the following conclusion: these philosophers ought not merely to offer us claims about the truth-conditions of the sentences they are seeking to account for, but should also offer a semantic theory which explains how the parts of the sentences give rise to these truth-conditions.

Finally, these projects of reductive paraphrase are subject to problems that mirror the threat of contradiction I have been trying to help van Inwagen to escape. Suppose a paraphraser denies the existence of Fs and provides an account of the truth-conditions of F-discourse which reveals that its sentences can be true even if there are no Fs. The general form of the objection is this: the paraphrasers are committed to regarding the sentence 'There are Fs' as true, and are thus committed to the existence of Fs in spite of themselves.²¹ A natural way for a paraphraser to respond to such an objection is to deny that they must regard 'There are Fs' as true and to

²¹ For a version of this objection levelled at modal fictionalism, see Brock 1993 and Rosen 1993. For one levelled at modal structuralism and similar proposals for reductive paraphrase of mathematical discourse, see

attempt to disrupt the reasoning that is supposed to show they are saddled with that commitment.²² My discussion of van Inwagen suggests another way for paraphrasers to respond to these objections: insist that ‘There are Fs’ is true, and find a way to express their ontological claims which does not involve asserting ‘There are no Fs’.^{23,24}

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²² Noonan 1994 is an influential version of this response applied to the modal fictionalism case; see Divers and Hagen 2006 for criticism. Liggins MS argues that this move is seriously problematic in the mathematical case.

²³ For discussion of this response in the mathematical case, see Liggins MS. For discussion of this response in the modal case see Liggins 2008; Woodward (forthcoming) presents another way of developing the response.

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