How to be a Mereological Anti-Realist

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“It is a divine matter to possess sufficient knowledge, and at the same time sufficient competence, to mix a plurality into a oneness, and conversely to break a oneness up into a plurality; there is not now nor will there ever be any human being who is up to either of these tasks” – Plato, *Timaeus* (Plato 2008: 67)

1 Introduction

Peter van Inwagen’s “special composition question” asks more or less the following question: what must some objects be like in order for them to compose another object (i.e., in order for there to be some object of which those former objects are the proper parts)? (van Inwagen 1990). There have been a number of proposed answers to this question. In this paper I’m primarily interested in a type of answer to the special composition question which has not received a great deal of attention, namely an answer to the special composition question according to which the circumstances under which composition occurs have something to do with one or more (actual, or counterfactual) agent’s mental states. Call views of this sort “mereological anti-realism.” Mereological anti-realism has been defended by Uriah Kriegel (2008, 2012) and, under the label “mereological idealism,” Kenneth Pearce (2017).[[1]](#footnote-2)

In this paper I have two main tasks. First, I describe the variants of mereological anti-realism defended by Kriegel and Pearce, and present some objections. Second, I introduce and defend a theistic variant of mereological anti-realism. Theistic mereological anti-realism comes in a weaker and a stronger variety. According to the weaker thesis: there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. According to the stronger thesis: there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is some specific *y* which those *x*s compose.

To some extent my two projects in this paper are independent of one another: 1. my objections to non-theistic variants of mereological anti realism (specifically, the versions of mereological anti-realism defended by Kriegel and Pearce) do not rely on the truth of theistic mereological anti realism; 2. there is some motivation to accept theistic mereological anti realism, even if my objections to non-theistic variants of mereological anti realism fail. But it is also worth noting that the objections I present to non-theistic variants of mereological anti-realism fail to undermine theistic mereological anti-realism. So, to the extent that one is attracted to mereological anti-realism in general, the failure of non-theistic versions of mereological anti-realism lends some support to the theistic variety of mereological anti realism. One way to construe the paper, then, is as a sustained argument for the conclusion that the best way to develop mereological anti-realism is in theistic terms.[[2]](#footnote-3)

In the end I do not endorse any variant of mereological anti-realism. This paper’s arguments are nevertheless worth developing, for at least two reasons. First, extant varieties of mereological anti-realism have not to my knowledge received sustained critical attention. Second, while there has been some discussion of the relationship between God and composition (see *§*3 below), the theistic variant of mereological anti-realism has received little attention. To my knowledge, the only previous defense of theistic mereological anti realism is given by Eric Yang and Stephen Davis (2017) (although under the name “the Will of God Theory,” rather than under the name “theistic mereological anti-realism”).[[3]](#footnote-4) I think that theistic mereological anti-realism should receive more attention, and that it should be taken seriously by those interested in the metaphysics of composition, as well as those interested in the metaphysical import of theism.

Here’s the plan for the remainder of this paper. In *§*2 I discuss the non theistic variants of mereological anti-realism defended by Kriegel and Pearce. I argue that both views face formidable objections, objections which do not undermine theistic mereological anti-realism. In *§*3 I more fully introduce and develop theistic mereological anti-realism. In *§*4 I develop some motivations for theistic mereological anti-realism. *§*5 concludes the paper.

2 Non-Theistic Mereological Anti-Realism

Non-theistic versions of mereological anti-realism are “non-theistic,” not because they are incompatible with theism, but rather because God plays no special role in the formulation of these versions of mereological anti-realism. Non theistic mereological anti-realists think that the circumstances under which composition occurs have something to do with the thoughts or practices of non-divine beings. (It is open to the non-theistic mereological anti-realist to think that the circumstances under which composition occurs might *also* have something to do with the thoughts or practices of a divine being. For simplicity, I will generally ignore this possibility.) In practice, non-theistic mereological anti-realists (such as Kriegel and Pearce) emphasize the connection between the circumstances under which composition occurs and *human* thoughts or practices. Sometimes this sort of anti-realism is restricted to particular sorts of composite objects, rather than composite objects in general. Lynne Baker (2000: 29-30; 34-35), for example, contends that some composite objects (e.g., works of art) only come into existence as a result of human cognitive practices. The sort of mereological anti-realism I’d like to focus my attention on here is broader than this. Non theistic mereological anti-realism, as I conceive of that thesis, contends that *all* composite objects exist at least partially as a result of the actual or counterfactual cognitive activities of non-divine beings. Of course, composite objects may also depend on their parts for their existence. But according to non-theistic mereological anti-realism that some parts compose a composite object is a result of the actual or counterfactual cognitive activities of non-divine beings.

Mereological anti-realism should be distinguished from quantifier variance (although mereological anti-realism is *compatible* with quantifier variance). Proponents of quantifier variance such as Hilary Putnam and Eli Hirsch think that there are multiple possible quantifiers, and that which sentences talking about the existence of composite objects are true will depend on how we interpret the quantifiers used in those sentences (Putnam 1987: 18-19, 32-36; 2004: 33-40; Hirsch 2011: 144-146). On this sort of view there is no sense in which our cognitive practices create composite objects. Rather, proponents of quantifier variance think that, in some cases, our cognitive practices can pick out possible quantifier meanings according to which sentences involving composite objects are true, even if some such sentences turn out to be false when the quantifier expressions involved in those sentences are given other permissible meanings. Mereological anti-realism, as I think of it, says that, keeping our quantifier meanings fixed, the circumstances under which composition occurs is connected to our cognitive practices, in the sense described above.

A number of philosophers have endorsed views which might be described as anti-realism with respect to composite objects, non-fundamental objects, or even physical objects in general (see, e.g., Heller 2008, Chalmers 2009, Remhof 2018). In this paper I confine my attention to two philosophers who most unambiguously defend the sort of view which I aim to refer to with the label “non-theistic mereological anti-realism,” namely Kriegel (2008, 2012) and Pearce (2017). As we’ll see, the varieties of mereological anti realism defended by Kriegel and Pearce both fall prey to serious objections, objections which do not undermine *theistic* mereological anti-realism. I’ll begin by discussing Pearce’s view.

2.1 Pearce

Pearce (2017) defends a thesis which he calls “mereological idealism.” According to mereological idealism, composite objects come into existence as a result of their proper parts being “unified in thought under a concept” by some mind (Pearce 2017: 200). Some objects compose a further object if and only if they are unified in thought in this manner. For example, my desk exists as a result of my mentally unifying the proper parts of the desk under the concept of a “desk.” I see the parts of the desk, I conceptualize those parts as uniting to form an object which falls under the concept of a “desk,” and so, as a result of my mental activities, the parts of the desk *do* compose a desk.

For Pearce, it is very easy for this sort of mental “unifying” of parts to occur. For example, a natural worry to have about mereological idealism is that it fails to account for the existence of composite objects which, it seems, nobody ever thinks about. What about all of those boulders on Mars, for example, which nobody has ever thought about? If those boulders exist, then, according to mereological idealism, someone must have mentally unified their parts under a concept. But it is difficult to see who could have done that. Of course, the theist who also happens to be a mereological idealist will have an easy response to this concern: God thinks about all of the boulders on Mars, even if we do not. Pearce’s own response to the concern is that, simply by entertaining the question “who mentally unified the parts of all those boulders on Mars?” *we* mentally unify all of those boulder parts (Pearce 2017: 206-207). So, according to Pearce it is extremely easy to engage in this sort of mental unification of parts, since in fact we accidentally unify parts on another planet, simply by entertaining the question “who mentally unified the parts of all those boulders on Mars?”.

Notably, these observations undermine one of the motivations Pearce gives for mereological idealism. One motivation for mereological idealism is its purported ability to allow us to secure the existence of those composite objects which we tend to think exist (e.g., desks), without having to posit the existence of the sorts of exotic composite objects posited by mereological universalism[[4]](#footnote-5) (e.g., a composite object composed of my phone and the Eiffel tower). Plausibly, however, mereological idealism *does* lead to universalism, if it is as easy as Pearce thinks it is to mentally unify the parts of composite objects. Many philosophers think that universalism is true. These philosophers might very well unify all of the composite objects posited by universalism into existence. If I can (accidentally) unify all of the proper parts of boulders on Mars, and so bring all of those boulders into existence, it seems as if the universalist should similarly be able to unify *all* objects (or all non overlapping objects) in thought, and thereby bring into existence all of the composite objects which exist according to universalism. If we must specify some *concept* under which all of the parts are unified, there seems to me to be nothing stopping us from unifying all of the parts under the “composite object” concept.

By contrast, theistic mereological anti-realism does not lead to universalism – in fact, theistic mereological anti-realism might lead us to *reject* universalism. I discuss this point further in *§*4 below.

An additional concern for Pearce’s mereological idealism is that it seems to attribute to us spooky mental powers: on this view we have the ability to create large heavy physical objects with our minds, simply by mentally “unifying” some other objects. Pearce offers the following response to this concern: “Our ability to influence what there is by means of our thought is not some sort of spooky, supernatural power we have; it stems from the fact that the co-apprehension of the constituent parts is a metaphysically necessary condition for the existence of a composite object” (Pearce 2017: 203). Later he reiterates this point: the mind-dependence in question “does not involve attributing any spooky powers to minds; it merely rests on a particular account of the existence conditions for composite objects” (Pearce 2017: 206). But the fact that the existence conditions for composite objects make reference to our mental activities is precisely one of the things which makes mereological idealism “spooky”! In fact, this downplays the spookiness. According to mereological idealism, the existence conditions for composite objects don’t merely make reference to our mental states. In other words, the existence of composite objects does not merely *supervene* on our mental states. Rather, according to mereological idealism, composite objects partially *depend for their existence* on our mental states. Think, for example, of an object composed of Mount Everest and whatever book is nearest to your left hand. According to mereological idealism, this big physical object (bigger than Mount Everest) exists, in part, because we think about it. In fact, it partially owes its existence to the fact that I just told you to think of an object composed of Mount Everest and whatever book is nearest to your left hand. By reading this paper you’ve helped create a physical object which is larger than Earth’s tallest mountain. It just seems very implausible to me that human beings can change the furniture of the physical world so easily.[[5]](#footnote-6)

By contrast, there is nothing “spooky” about the idea that composite objects owe their existence to God, as theistic mereological anti-realists maintain. God, given God’s omnipotence, can bring composite objects into existence in all sorts of ways which are not available to us (cf. *§*4.1 below). For example, it may be spooky to suppose that we human beings could bring big heavy physical objects into existence simply by “unifying” their parts in thought. By contrast, however, there is nothing spooky about the supposition that an omnipotent God could bring physical objects into existence in a similar manner, by, say, “‘unifying” some objects in the sense of willing that those objects compose a further object.

2.2 Kriegel

I now turn to a discussion of Kriegel’s variant of mereological anti-realism (Kriegel 2008, 2012). According to Kriegel, composition occurs whenever a subject of a certain sort would think that it occurs. This basic idea could be construed in a few different ways, and Kriegel’s several formulations of mereological anti-realism are rather complicated. Here is one example:

Metaphysically necessarily, for any (non-overlapping) objects O1, ... , On, there is an object O, such that O1, ... , On compose O iff O1, ... , On are disposed to elicit the automatic and non inferential but intellectual judgment that there is an O in most subjects who are capable of producing automatic and non-inferential but intellectual judgments, and whose faculties dedicated to the production of such judgments are well-functioning, under forced choice conditions that do not perturb the exercise of the relevant faculties (Kriegel 2008: 367)

Kriegel goes on to suggest that facts regarding composition may not track intuitions regarding composition, but rather may track whether some proper parts instantiate properties or relations which would serve as the *categorical basis* for the disposition, in normal intuiters, to form the intuition that those proper parts compose a whole. In a later article Kriegel suggests that his thesis should be formulated in terms of *ideal* intuiters, rather than “normal” intuiters (Kriegel 2012: 29).

There’s no need at this point to get bogged down in the details of Kriegel’s proposal, although I’ve alluded to some of those details in order to give the reader a sense for some of the complications which crop up when Kriegel tries to give a precise formulation of mereological anti-realism. The basic idea, again, is that the circumstances under which composition occurs has something to do with the circumstances under which subjects of a certain sort (e.g., normal intuiters, ideal intuiters) would *think* that composition occurs. If, for example, some objects compose a table, this has something to do with the fact that normal intuiters judge (or would judge) that those objects compose a table, or it has something to do with the fact that (counterfactual) ideal intuiters would judge that those objects compose a table.

I think it is reasonable to make the assumption that, for Kriegel, facts regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs track the judgments of normal or ideal intuiters because the judgments of those intuiters *ground* or otherwise *explain* the fact that composition occurs under those circumstances. Kriegel himself is somewhat ambivalent on this issue (cf. Kriegel 2008: 376-378), but I don’t think that he should be. Kriegel should not be committed only to the weaker thesis that the judgments of normal or ideal intuiters are merely *correlated* with, but do not ground or explain, the facts regarding when composition occurs. If the relevant facts regarding composition neither explain, nor are explained by, the judgments of the relevant intuiters, then the correlation between the compositional facts and the judgments would be objectionably brute. If the correlation results merely from the fact that the relevant judgments are explained by the relevant facts regarding composition (e.g., an ideal intuiter would intuit that such-and-such objects compose something because in fact such-and-such objects *do* or *would* compose something), then Kriegel’s so-called “mereological anti-realism” is neither novel, nor a form of anti-realism, nor a view according to which, in Kriegel’s terms, composition is a “secondary quality” (and, in fact, Kriegel admits as much – see Kriegel 2008: 378). So, it is best to interpret Kriegel’s mereological anti-realism as being committed to the idea that our judgments, or the judgments of ideal intuiters, track the compositional facts *because* which compositional facts obtain is grounded in or otherwise explained by the actual or counterfactual occurrence of the relevant judgments.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The primary motivation for Kriegel’s version of mereological anti-realism is that it allows us to preserve our intuitive judgments regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs. According to Kriegel, there is a very strong presumption that our account of composition should adhere to our pre philosophical intuitions regarding the circumstances under which composition does and does not occur – that is, it should adhere to those of our intuitions which do not lie “downstream of philosophical theorizing” (Kriegel 2008: 363). This is because these sorts of pre-philosophical intuitions are the only data with which our theories of composition should be in accord (Kriegel 2008: 362-363).[[7]](#footnote-8) It is not difficult to understand how our mereological intuitions track the mereological facts if those mereological facts are in part made true by our mereological intuitions or judgments.

I’m now ready to present my objection to Kriegel’s variant of mereological anti-realism. Kriegel’s view faces a dilemma. For Kriegel, facts regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs either track *our* judgments concerning composition (or subjunctive conditionals regarding our judgments), or they track subjunctive conditionals regarding the judgments of (counterfactual) *ideal* intuiters.

First horn of the dilemma: if Kriegel’s thesis is that facts regarding composition track *our* judgments, or subjunctive conditionals regarding *our* judgments, then the thesis faces the “spookiness” objection which I presented to Pearce’s mereological idealism. It is very spooky to suppose that composite physical objects come into existence as a result of our judging that their parts compose something, or as a result of the fact that we *would* judge that those parts compose something. And this is so despite the fact that on one variant of Kriegel’s view composite objects will only come into existence as a result of our being inclined to make an “automatic and non-inferential” judgment that its proper parts compose something. The supposition that big heavy physical objects should come into existence as a result of our cognitive activities is not made less spooky by supposing that the cognitive activities in question are automatic or non-inferential. One might as well say that my having telekinetic abilities is made less spooky if those telekinetic abilities are only employed automatically or without deliberation.

As we saw earlier, according to one variant of Kriegel’s view, some parts compose a whole in response to their instantiation of those properties or relations which would serve as the *categorical basis* for the disposition, in normal intuiters, to form the judgment that those proper parts compose a whole. In this case we would not *directly* create composite objects with our judgments. So, is this variant of Kriegel’s mereological anti-realism less spooky than the alternative variant according to which objects compose a whole in response to our judgments that those objects compose a whole? No. As I argued above, if some parts compose a whole in response to their instantiation of those properties or relations which would serve as the *categorical basis* for the disposition, in normal intuiters, to form the intuition that those proper parts compose a whole, then the parts care about *those* properties and relations only because they are connected with our disposition to form the intuition that those parts compose a whole. In other words, our judgments or intuitions regarding composition still explain why the parts in question compose a whole. If they didn’t – if, that is, the parts in question compose a whole as a result of their instantiating the relevant properties or relations in question, and not in response to the fact that those properties and relations are connected with our judgments regarding composition – then Kriegel’s “mereological anti-realism” wouldn’t be a novel thesis, and wouldn’t really be a form of anti-realism.

Earlier I said that according to one variant of Kriegel’s view what matters are the (counterfactual) judgments of *ideal* intuiters. Now I need to say a bit more about what Kriegel means when he writes of “ideal” intuiters.[[8]](#footnote-9) Kriegel says that an ideal intuiter is “an otherwise normal human subject who (i) performs or undergoes all and only epistemically justified/warranted cognitive processes and (ii) knows all the non-decompositional facts regarding the world as a whole” (Kriegel 2012: 31). What does Kriegel mean by “otherwise normal human subject”? He means that the human subject in question “is set up like actual subjects, in particular in terms of the biological function of its reasoning faculties; namely, the function of promoting its prospects for survival and reproduction” (Kriegel 2012: 30).

I think it’s rather odd that Kriegel stipulates that ideal intuiters must be human, and must have the sort of cognitive architecture actual humans have (in any case with respect to its promotion of survival and reproduction). In fact, it seems objectionably spooky and anthropocentric to suppose that compositional facts would care specifically about *human* ideal intuiters. Human mentality is an eminently contingent, and recent, feature of the world, and human history is extremely short in comparison with the history of the Universe. So, why ideal *human* intuiters, rather than, say ideal *dog* intuiters, or ideal *martian* intuiters?

I suggest, then, that Kriegel drop the stipulation that ideal intuiters be human, and, for similar reasons, suggest that he drop the stipulation that ideal intuiters have cognitive architecture which is similar to human cognitive architecture with respect to its promotion of survival and reproduction. But now we come to the second horn of the dilemma: if facts regarding composition track the (counterfactual) judgments of ideal intuiters, then Kriegel’s version of mereological anti-realism is unmotivated. As we saw earlier, the primary motivation for Kriegel’s version of mereological anti realism is that it allows us to preserve our intuitive judgments regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs. Again, it is not difficult to understand how our mereological judgments track the mereological facts if those mereological facts are in part made true by our judgments. The problem now is that if facts regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs are tied to the judgments of non-actual *ideal* intuiters, then there is little reason to think that our pre-philosophical intuitions regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs are correct. Perhaps our intuitions will resemble, to *some* extent, the intuitions of ideal intuiters. But given the vast gulf between their epistemological credentials and our own, our intuitions regarding composition would presumably diverge significantly from the intuitions of ideal intuiters. The fact that we have the mereological intuitions that we have, and more generally the fact that we have mereological concepts at all, is likely an eminently contingent feature of our cognitive lives, a result of contingent forces in our evolutionary history, and contingent limitations on our cognitive resources, which would presumably not shape the intuitions of ideal intuiters. It seems plausible, for example, that our tendency to “chunk” objects together (such as our tendency to “chunk” birds together into a “flock” of birds) is a result of our brains making do with limited cognitive resources – it’s much easier for our visual representational systems to keep track of a big composite object (like a flock of birds), rather than a bunch of individual objects (like each of the individual birds in the purported flock) (cf. Gobet et al. 2001, Alvarez 2011, Osborne 2016: *§*3.4, Brenner 2018: 662). We fail to prereflexively “chunk” arbitrary parts together for presumably much the same reason, namely because it would impose a needless burden on our cognitive capacities.

It’s also important to remember that, given mereological anti-realism, we cannot suppose that the judgments of ideal intuiters would match *our* judgments because we are all predisposed to track the mereological facts. This is because, given mereological anti-realism, the mereological facts (and in particular the circumstances under which composition occurs) are made true by our judgments, or by the judgments of ideal intuiters. So, there are no pre-existing mereological facts which might constrain our (or ideal intuiters’) judgments. I reiterate, then, my conclusion that there is little reason to think that the mereological judgments of ideal intuiters would match our own mereological judgments.

So, to recap the dilemma: we either formulate Kriegel’s version of mereological anti-realism in terms of actual intuiters, and are left with an objectionably spooky view, or we switch to ideal intuiters, but lose our motivations for adopting Kriegel’s version of mereological anti-realism. Theistic mereological anti-realism faces neither of these problems. As I noted above, there is nothing “spooky” about the idea that composite objects owe their existence to God. What’s more, theistic mereological anti-realism has a number of motivations, which I discuss in *§*4 below.

As we’ve seen, extant non-theistic varieties of mereological anti-realism face severe difficulties, difficulties which theistic mereological anti-realism does not face. I turn now to a more detailed discussion of theistic mereological anti-realism.

3 Theistic Mereological Anti-Realism

Theistic mereological anti-realism comes in two varieties, one weak and one strong. The weaker thesis is that there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. The stronger thesis is that there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is some specific *y* which those *x*s compose.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The general idea is that, just as the divine command theorist thinks that moral facts are within God’s control, the theistic mereological anti-realist thinks that mereological facts are within God’s control, in two respects: 1. God decides when composition occurs (this is the weaker version of theistic mereological anti-realism); 2. God decides which composite objects are associated with which proper parts (this is a consequence of the stronger version of theistic mereological anti-realism).

The distinction between the weaker and stronger versions of theistic mereological anti-realism is not very important for much of what I write in this paper. So, I often write of “theistic mereological anti-realism,” without bothering to distinguish between the weaker and stronger versions of that thesis. Where the distinction between the two versions of the thesis *is* important, I will distinguish between them.

The sort of theism I have in mind in this paper is of the standard Western monotheistic variety. Below I will appeal to the notion that God is omnipotent, and I will assume that the problem of evil is something the theist will feel motivated to address. The latter assumption comports with a conception of theism according to which God is perfectly good, or at any rate so good that the existence of evils, or certain sorts of evils, is *prima facie* in tension with the existence of God. Other than that I don’t think I need to put much stress on one particular conception of God as opposed to another.

Now, admittedly, there is a sense in which, construed as an answer to the special composition question, theistic mereological anti-realism (in either variant) is not very informative. Even if composition occurs when and only when God wills that it occurs, we might still wonder when, in fact, God wills that composition occurs.[[10]](#footnote-11) More generally, we might think that theistic mereological anti-realism is uninformative because it is strictly compatible with all extant answers to the special composition question. All of those answers say that composition occurs under (and only under) such-and-such circumstances. There is nothing incoherent in supposing that composition happens in those circumstances because God wills that those are the circumstances under which composition occurs.

Even if theistic mereological anti-realism is relatively uninformative for these reasons, it might still be a thesis worth defending. First, it will at the very least give us an answer to a higher-order corollary of the special composition question, one which asks, of the correct answer to the special composition question, “why is this the correct answer to the special composition question?” The theistic mereological anti-realist answer to this question is informative and interesting, even if it tells us relatively little about the circumstances under which composition in fact occurs. But second, if we know that God decides the circumstances under which composition occurs, this will open up new potential lines of evidence regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs: 1. we may in principle have theological evidence regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs (e.g., from revelation); 2. we may have normative evidence regarding the circumstances under which composition occurs (e.g., we may have reasons to suppose that a good God would or would not allow composition to occur under certain circumstances).

To be honest, I’m not sure that theistic mereological anti-realism is correct. But, I think there’s a lot to be said for it, and so in the remainder of this paper I’ll motivate the thesis as best I can. If I’m successful, theistic mereological anti-realism will be taken seriously as a live option in debates over the metaphysics of composition, and debates over the special composition question in particular. Some of the motivations for theistic mereological anti-realism which I discuss will appeal only to theists, or only to particular sorts of theists (e.g., Christian theists). Some of the motivations, however, should appeal even to non-theists.

Before I turn to discuss motivations for theistic mereological anti-realism, I would like to note that, while theistic mereological anti-realism has, to my knowledge, only been discussed once before (Yang, Davis 2017), several other philosophers have suggested that God might have something to do with the circumstances under which composition occurs. For example, Jonathan Edwards is sometimes interpreted as endorsing a view according to which God can decide when diachronic composition occurs. God can decide, for example, whether stages at different times compose some temporally extended object.[[11]](#footnote-12) Alvin Plantinga (2011: 289-290) and Christopher Menzel (2018) defend the view that God brings about the existence of sets. Part of the motivation here is that sets are brought about by “collecting” objects together in some sense, but there are sets which could plausibly only result from the collecting activity of a divine being. On some views sets involve mereological relations (cf. Lewis 1991). The classical Indian philosopher Udayana defends an argument for theism from the existence of certain sorts of composite objects (for a discussion, see Kronen and Menssen 2013). The idea seems to be that only intelligent agents can create composite objects, but there are some composite objects whose existence cannot plausibly be attributed to any non-divine agent. By contrast, Edward Feser (2017: Ch.2), taking inspiration from Plotinus (*Ennead* V.4; see also Gerson 1994: Ch.1), argues that any sort of composition requires theism. The basic idea is that something must bring parts together and make them compose something, but the only thing which can do something like that must be absolutely simple (since otherwise it would be composite, and it would need something else to unite its parts). Feser identifies this absolutely simple thing with God. Aquinas also endorses the idea that God, being absolutely simple, unites parts in order to make them form composite objects (*Summa Theologica* I, Q3, A7), although Aquinas, unlike Feser, does not make this point as part of an argument for theism. Finally, Ross Inman and Alexander Pruss (2019) also argue that theism has an important connection with the circumstances under which composition occurs. They argue that Christian theists should not be mereological universalists.

4 Motivations For Theistic Mereological Anti Realism

One motivation for theistic mereological anti-realism stems from the fact that, as we’ve seen, extant non-theistic variants of mereological anti-realism are objectionable. To the extent that one thinks that we should endorse some version of mereological anti-realism, then, one should think that we should endorse *theistic* mereological anti-realism. I turn now to discuss some additional motivations for theistic mereological anti-realism.

4.1 Motivation 1: God is omnipotent.

If God is omnipotent, then if God wills that some objects compose a further object, then they will. Similarly, if God wills that some objects fail to compose a further object, then they will not. That doesn’t strictly get us all the way to theistic mereological anti-realism, since God might just be indifferent with respect to whether some *x*s compose a *y*, and so God might neither will that they do nor will that they don’t compose the *y*. (In other words, it may be the case that, for some objects, those objects either compose something or do not compose something, but whether or not they compose something is not something which God decides.)[[12]](#footnote-13) All of this does get us pretty close to (the weaker variety of) theistic mereological anti-realism, however: there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills *or allows* that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. Is this thesis correct? The main concern here is that philosophers often assume that it is necessarily true that composition occurs or doesn’t occur under any particular circumstances. Omnipotence is often restricted so that God cannot contravene necessary truths. So, the thought goes, whether or not composition occurs under any particular circumstances has nothing to do with what God wills: whether or not composition occurs under some particular circumstances is a necessary truth, and God doesn’t have the power to decide which necessary truths obtain.

This is an important objection, in part because it would undermine the “God is omnipotent” motivation for theistic mereological anti-realism, but also because it would directly undermine theistic mereological anti-realism itself. But there are a few responses which might be made to this objection.

First, it is open to debate whether truths regarding the circumstances under which composition does or does not occur are necessary, rather than contingent. Ross Cameron (2007) and Kristie Miller (2010) argue that composition is contingent. Similarly, Alexander Skiles (2015) argues that grounds need not necessitate that which they ground. If that’s true of some grounds, it seems to me to lend support to the idea that parts arranged in such-and such a manner need not necessitate their composing something (assuming, as seems plausible, that parts generally ground the existence of the thing(s) they compose). We can reach the same conclusion by way of concerns regarding necessary connections between distinct existences (cf. Bohn 2014). Assuming that composite objects are not simply identical with their proper parts, to suppose that those proper parts (or those proper parts configured in a particular manner – e.g., arranged in a particular manner) necessitate the existence of this *other* thing, the thing which they compose, strikes me as mysterious, and potentially objectionable for precisely the same reason that philosophers have thought many other necessary connections between distinct existences are objectionable. Here are *these* objects, and here is this *other* object, and why should the former objects *force* or *necessitate* the other object to exist?

Second, some theists have argued that God decides, of at least some necessary truths, whether or not they are true (cf. Leftow 2012).

Third, simply because some truth is necessary, and so could not have been otherwise, it does not follow that the necessary truth is *brute*. We might suppose that, even if God is not free to decide which necessary truths regarding composition obtain, God’s decrees nevertheless ground or otherwise explain why those necessary truths regarding composition obtain. In this case we might be forced to think that God makes the same such decrees in all possible worlds, since the compositional facts which those decrees ground obtain in all possible worlds. But that’s compatible with theistic mereological anti-realism.

Fourth, we might think that the motivations for theistic mereological anti-realism, if sufficiently compelling, give us some reason to endorse the disjunction of the previous three responses.

4.2 Motivation 2: Theistic mereological anti-realism potentially allows us to endorse a moderate answer to the special composition question.

Let’s say that an answer to the special composition question is “moderate” if it is neither mereological nihilism, according to which composition *never* occurs, nor mereological universalism, according to which composition *always* occurs (or, more carefully, according to which any two or more non-overlapping objects compose a further object). Many philosophers have wanted to endorse a moderate answer to the special composition question, but have felt compelled to instead endorse either nihilism or universalism. But theistic mereological anti-realism allows us to avoid one of the chief motivations which is generally offered in favor of nihilism and universalism, that moderate answers to the special composition question will require that we accept either objectionable ontic vagueness or a sharp, but arbitrary, boundary between circumstances in which composition occurs and circumstances in which composition does not occur.[[13]](#footnote-14)

The vagueness concern stems from the apparent fact that any plausible moderate answer to the special composition question will involve vague criteria. For example, van Inwagen’s moderate answer to the special composition question is organicism, according to which some objects compose something if and only if the activities of those objects constitute a life (van Inwagen 1990). But van Inwagen is very upfront about the fact that it is sometimes a vague matter whether or not the activities of some objects constitute a life. It follows then that, on van Inwagen’s view, it will sometimes be vague whether composition occurs, and so it will sometimes be vague whether a composite object exists. Most philosophers think this sort of ontic vagueness is unacceptable. By contrast, neither nihilism nor universalism will give us conditions in which composition occurs which could ever be vague: nihilism says that composition never happens, and universalism says that composition always happens, and neither of those criteria are vague. Here’s where theism comes into the picture. If God decides when composition does and does not occur, then God can ensure that it is never a vague matter whether the criteria for composition are met. In other words, God can ensure that those conditions which are such that composition occurs in, and only in, those conditions, are not vague. Now you might think that the criteria God sets for when composition occurs *could* be vague. But in that case you should, at any rate, accept that they *need* not be vague. But if ontic vagueness is objectionable because it is impossible, as its opponents generally argue, then God might ensure that it is never vague whether composition occurs because God *must* ensure that it is never vague whether composition occurs.

A similar point can be made about the concern regarding arbitrariness. The concern here is that we will have trouble finding a plausible moderate answer to the special composition question which distinguishes in a non arbitrary manner between cases where composition occurs and cases where composition does not occur. But as Yang and Davis (2017: 220) note, given theistic mereological anti-realism, there *is* a non-arbitrary distinction between cases where composition occurs and cases where composition does not occur: God wills that composition occurs in the former circumstances, but not in the latter circumstances. What’s more, some of God’s decisions regarding the circumstances in which composition occurs may themselves be non-arbitrary, insofar as they may be tied up with the distribution of goods and evils. For example, God might want to ensure that there are composite persons, but God might also want to ensure that there are not any composite persons experiencing gratuitous suffering. Whether there are composite persons, and whether there are composite persons who experience gratuitous suffering, will partially depend on where and when composition occurs.[[14]](#footnote-15)

I should mention at this point that there is some pressure toward thinking, not only that theistic mereological anti-realism gives us the resources to defuse otherwise powerful objections to moderate answers to the special composition question, but also that it may push us toward actually *endorsing* one of those moderate answers. Again, theistic mereological anti-realism is strictly compatible with any extant answer to the special composition question, as far as I can tell. But there are some considerations which might reasonably lead some proponents of theistic mereological anti-realism to reject both mereological nihilism and mereological universalism.

Start with mereological nihilism. Nihilism is often thought to require that we reject the existence of human persons, assuming that human persons are composite objects (cf. Dorr and Rosen 2002: 159-160, Sider 2013: 268-269). While theism is compatible with the nonexistence of human persons, some prominent theistic religious traditions arguably are not. For example, it is hard to make sense of Christian soteriological doctrines absent a belief in the existence of human persons. If, then, mereological nihilism requires that we reject the existence of human persons, then theistic mereological anti-realism, conceived in, say, Christian terms, will entail that mereological nihilism is false.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Why might theistic mereological anti-realism lead us to reject mereological universalism? My arguments here must be very tentative, since they rely on very controversial assumptions.

First, universalism may make the problem of evil more difficult for the theist to resolve. For anyone who experiences a severe evil (e.g., severe hardship or suffering), universalism gives us innumerable other individuals who we might not initially think about who also experience that evil – e.g., the object composed of that person and the Eiffel Tower, the object composed of that person and my cell phone, etc. You might doubt that such gerrymandered individuals would have any experiences. But assume that I am a composite object. In virtue of what do I have the conscious experiences that I have? Everyone is going to say that the answer to that question has something to do with the fact that some of my parts are in certain physical states – e.g., that my brain is in such-and-such a physical or functional state. It’s natural, then, to think that any composite object with those sorts of parts will also have those conscious experiences.[[16]](#footnote-17) Or, at any rate, this seems to me to be epistemically possible, which is enough for us to worry that the existence of the gerrymandered individuals in question might pose a difficulty for theism. The presence of so many more suffering individuals in the world will presumably strengthen the problem of evil for theism. And since it is universalism which leads us to posit the existence of all these strange gerrymandered individuals, and the existence of all those gerrymandered individuals would strengthen the problem of evil for theism, we should lower our credence in the conjunction of theism and universalism.[[17]](#footnote-18)

Earlier I wrote that Inman and Pruss (2019) argue that Christian theists should not be mereological universalists. Their arguments might provide a bit of additional support for the idea that theistic mereological anti-realism might lead us away from universalism (and it’s also worth noting that while their arguments specifically concern *Christian* theism, it seems to me that many other theists might also endorse their arguments). Here I will describe just one of their arguments. God is the most valuable being. But mereological universalism is committed to there being a composite object composed of God and some other object, and this object will plausibly be at least as valuable as God. More strongly, God is the most valuable *possible* being. But universalism is committed to there possibly being some composite object composed of God and some other object, a composite object which is at least as valuable as God.

4.3 Motivation 3: Theistic mereological anti-realism allows us to explain mereological pairing relations.

Recall that theistic mereological anti-realism comes in two varieties. According to the weaker variety, there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. According to the stronger variety, there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is some specific *y* which those *x*s compose. The weaker version of theistic mereological anti-realism tells us that God decides when composition occurs, but the stronger version of theistic mereological anti realism goes a step further and *also* tells us that God decides how the relata of mereological relations are paired. God decides not only that some *x*s will compose something or other, but God also decides that the *x*s will compose *this particular thing*, *y*. Why is this significant? Well, one objection to composition, which I have pressed elsewhere (Brenner 2015: 328-329, 2017: 471-474), is the “mereological pairing problem.” The mereological pairing problem is to some extent modeled after Jaegwon Kim’s pairing problem for substance dualism (see, e.g., Kim 2005: Ch.3).[[18]](#footnote-19) Kim thinks the substance dualist cannot tell a satisfactory story regarding the manner in which immaterial souls are paired with material bodies. For example, why is this soul paired with *this* body, rather than *that* one? Kim contends that the substance dualist cannot provide a satisfactory answer to this question. Similarly, I contend that those who believe in composition cannot tell a satisfactory story regarding the manner in which composite objects are paired with their proper parts. Why do these proper parts compose *this* composite object? Why is this composite object composed of *these* proper parts? I contend that those who believe in composition cannot provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Rather, the mereological pairing relations will be brute. This is problematic, I contend, because brute relations add to the complexity of our total theory.

But, as we’ve seen, the strong variant of theistic mereological anti-realism tells us that mereological pairing relations are not brute, but are rather decided by God. The strong variant of theistic mereological anti-realism therefore resolves the mereological pairing problem. This theistic resolution to the mereological pairing problem resembles Richard Swinburne’s (1986: 198-199) and John Foster’s (2001: 29) suggestion that God decides which souls are paired with which bodies.

There are several possible variants of this theistic response to the mereological pairing problem.[[19]](#footnote-20) Perhaps we need not endorse a particularly strong variant of theistic mereological anti-realism, according to which God can decree, for any things arranged, say, human-wise, that those things compose a different human every five seconds. Perhaps we need only endorse a variant of theistic mereological anti-realism according to which God decides, of some things arranged human-wise, which human will be associated with those parts over the course of an entire human lifetime.

The theistic response to the mereological pairing problem is preferable to many alternative responses we might think of. By way of illustration, consider one response to the pairing problem for dualism which Foster endorsed prior to his endorsement of the theistic response to the pairing problem. Foster suggests that a resolution to the pairing problem might be found in brute laws regarding the interaction of bodies and souls, where each law of this sort is such that it only governs the interaction of one particular body and one particular soul (Foster 1991: 167-169). This response to the pairing problem requires an immense number of brute laws: one law for each soul (or, perhaps, for each body). We should avoid postulating so many fundamental laws, since they complicate our total theory immensely. For the same reason we should also refrain from endorsing a similar solution to the mereological pairing problem, involving mereological laws each of which governs the pairing of a single composite object with its parts – or, even worse, since we will require more laws, mereological laws each of which governs the pairing of a single part with any composite objects it composes. It is much simpler to suppose that a single being, God, pairs composite objects with their parts, rather than be forced to posit an extremely large number of brute mereological laws governing the pairing of composite objects with their parts.

4.4 Motivation 4: Theistic mereological anti-realism provides novel resources for making sense of the general resurrection of the dead.

Many theists (especially many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theists) believe that many or all human beings will be resurrected, along with their physical bodies, at some point in the future. It is often supposed that this sort of resurrection will be particularly problematic if we are each identical with some composite physical object (e.g., we are each identical with an organism, or a brain, or whatever).[[20]](#footnote-21) After all, when we die the physical objects with which we are identical decay, and our proper parts are eventually scattered. If we do not cease to exist immediately at death, then at any rate many of us cease to exist relatively soon after our deaths, well before any general resurrection of the dead is supposed to occur. How can God bring us back if we are destroyed? Even dualists have often faced this sort of problem, since dualist theists who believe in a general resurrection of the dead have traditionally held to the thesis that our bodies will be resurrected as well. How can those bodies be resurrected if they have long since gone out of existence?

These problems have been addressed before.[[21]](#footnote-22) I don’t claim that proponents of the doctrine of the general resurrection of the dead *must* appeal to theistic mereological anti-realism in order to make sense of that doctrine. But it is still worth mentioning that theistic mereological anti-realism gives us an easy way to make sense of the general resurrection in a manner which has mostly been neglected. If we are physical objects, how are we resurrected? Well, if we are physical objects then we are presumably composite objects. As we saw above, the stronger variety of theistic mereological anti-realism ensures that God decides which composite objects are paired with which proper parts: God decides not only that some *x*s will compose something or other, but God also decides that the *x*s will compose *this particular thing*, *y*. When it’s time for the general resurrection to take place, God can simply will that some proper parts compose some specific person who has been dead for many years. God can make the same sort of move with our bodies, assuming that we are not identical with our bodies.

Theistic mereological anti-realism allows us to avoid an additional difficulty which traditionally plagues attempts to make sense of the general resurrection. It is often supposed that our bodies at the general resurrection must have some or all of the proper parts we had at the moment of our deaths (cf. Hershenov 2002). This requirement becomes particularly difficult to satisfy in scenarios involving cannibals, cannibals who eat only other cannibals, and so on. Theistic mereological anti-realism allows us to avoid all of these difficulties, since, given theistic mereological anti-realism, we need not accept any requirement to the effect that, at the general resurrection, one (or one’s body) must have some or all of the proper parts one had at one’s death.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Yang and Davis (2017: *§*11.3) also note that theistic mereological anti realism can help us make sense of the general resurrection of the dead, and much of what they say about this subject is similar to what I say about it. But they assume that the resurrected body must have “a sufficient number of particles that once composed the pre-mortem body” (Yang, Davis 2017: 223). As I note above, this requirement seems to me to be unnecessary. My theistic mereological anti-realist account of the general resurrection also resembles Lynne Baker’s contention that God can freely decide at the general resurrection which bodies constitute which people (Baker 2011: 56). But my account does not require that we accept a view in personal ontology similar to Baker’s, according to which people are constituted by, but not identical with, their bodies.[[23]](#footnote-24)

We can also note that theistic mereological anti-realism can help us make sense of reincarnation, under the assumption that we are physical objects. God can ensure that the composite object associated with some parts arranged embryo-wise, or fetus-wise (or whatever) is the same composite object as some deceased person.[[24]](#footnote-25)

4.5 Motivation 5: Theistic mereological anti-realism provides novel resources for responding to the problem of evil.

A large part of the problem of evil involves reconciling the existence of God with the existence of apparently gratuitous suffering. We have some idea of what sorts of physical brain states some phenomenal states are supervenient upon, and it is undeniable that the physical brain states associated with severe suffering are often instantiated. However, we cannot tell, on the basis of empirical observation, whether in these cases there are composite persons who correspond to the brain states in question. Perhaps, sometimes, when parts arranged brain-wise (or person-wise, or animal-wise, or whatever) are just about to bring about horrible phenomenal states, God ensures that those parts cease to compose anything, so that there is temporarily no composite object associated with those parts, and so no composite person[[25]](#footnote-26) to experience the horrible phenomenal state.[[26]](#footnote-27)

I recognize that this proposal will be rejected by many readers out of hand. It can initially seem ridiculous, or even offensive. I share this reaction, and perhaps it’s worth reminding the reader at this point that I don’t actually endorse the proposal, since I don’t endorse theistic mereological anti-realism. On reflection, however, the proposal is more defensible than it initially seems. This is surprising, but it is true nevertheless. So before you reject the proposal, you should see whether the objections you have stand up under closer scrutiny. Upon reflection, I’m not confident that they will, and so I think that the proposal is worth serious consideration.

So, why might the proposal seem to be so implausible? First, it can seem wildly ad hoc. But on reflection the proposal is not ad hoc. For, first, the proposal involves theistic mereological anti-realism, so that God has the ability to decide when composition does and does not occur. As we’ve seen, theistic mereological anti-realism is motivated on other grounds as well – we do not appeal to theistic mereological anti-realism here *merely* in order to help resolve the problem of evil.

A second reason the proposal is not ad hoc is that if phenomenal states are identical with micro-physical or functional states, then if God wants to prevent some instance of suffering, God may have no better option than to ensure that, for as long as the suffering would persist absent God’s intervention, the proper parts instantiating the micro-physical or functional state associated with that suffering fail to compose anything.[[27]](#footnote-28) God might, of course, simply ensure that the micro-physical or functional states fail to obtain. But this would presumably require that God intervene in the causal order, to curtail the causal antecedents of the micro-physical or functional states in question. It would probably require, then, that God suspend whatever physical laws govern the transition from those antecedent states to the micro-physical or functional states God wants to avoid. Either way, then, God must suspend some law of nature in order to prevent the suffering from occurring: either the physical laws governing the causal interaction between micro-physical or functional brain states and the causal antecedents of those states, or the mereological laws which ensure that, normally, those micro-physical or functional brain states are associated with a composite object which experiences intense suffering. I don’t see why God should obviously be more inclined to modify or suspend the former causal laws rather than the latter mereological laws. Non-theists who advance the problem of evil often contend that if God existed God would regularly suspend the causal laws (i.e., God would regularly bring about miracles) in order to ensure that various instances of gratuitous suffering do not occur. If such non-theists are so confident that God would regularly suspend the causal laws, why should they scoff at the suggestion that God might, for the same reason, sometimes suspend the mereological laws?

The problem of evil is often motivated by the empirically observable fact that causal laws are often not suspended: Fawns obviously do burn in fires, cancer cells obviously do spread, and so on.[[28]](#footnote-29) By contrast, the operation of the mereological laws which God might instead suspend cannot be observed, so that if on occasion God *does* suspend those laws, we wouldn’t be able to tell on the basis of observation.

To recap: Some instances of suffering seem to be particularly hard to reconcile with the existence of an all powerful and all good God. The critic of theism might reasonably contend that God should (or would be expected to) miraculously intervene to ensure that these cases of suffering do not occur. Given theistic mereological anti-realism, we have a new way of showing how God might very well intervene in these cases, without suspending the causal order, and in such a manner that God’s actually intervening to prevent the suffering in question is compatible with our empirical evidence. So, the suggestion that God does in fact occasionally suspend the mereological laws does not seem to me to be at all an ad hoc response to the problem of evil – in fact, it seems to be what we might reasonably expect to happen, if God can in fact decide when composition occurs.

An additional concern regarding the idea that God might occasionally prevent otherwise gratuitous suffering by temporarily preventing the parts of the suffering person from composing that person is that on this proposal God engages in massive or widespread deception. It is often assumed, in discussions of the problem of evil, that we should avoid proposed solutions to the problem which appeal to God’s engaging in massive deception (cf. Swinburne 1998: 139; van Inwagen 2006: 120-121). God might be engaged in massive deception in this case for at least two reasons. First, it will seem to be the case that people are suffering when they are not. Second, people will seem to remember painful experiences which they didn’t actually experience, since their parts failed to compose anything at those times at which they think that the suffering occurred.

I agree that there is a great deal of *prima facie* plausibility in the assumption that God would not engage in massive deception, at any rate, as Swinburne emphasizes, regarding important matters. But God need not engage in massive deception in order to prevent suffering by temporarily modifying or suspending the mereological laws. I never meant to suggest that God invariably suspends those laws when God might thereby prevent a great deal of suffering. I want to make the much more modest suggestion that God might sometimes take advantage of this possibility, just as God might occasionally suspend other sorts of laws of nature in order to prevent certain sorts of evils. It is acknowledged by many people that God (if God exists) might occasionally be expected to suspend laws of nature in order to prevent certain evils – for example, God might occasionally be expected to suspend whatever laws might otherwise result in the spread of a malignant cancer. Similarly, I claim, God might occasionally suspend mereological laws in order to avoid otherwise gratuitous cases of suffering. If we are deceived in some manner insofar as God occasionally suspends those laws, we are not at any rate *massively* deceived, if God’s suspension of the mereological laws is not too frequent. And to the extent that we *are* deceived, the badness of this deception might be overridden by the good which results from God’s temporary suspension of the mereological laws. I think we would say more or less the same thing regarding God’s occasional suspension of causal laws. Perhaps there is a sense in which God’s suspension of causal laws deceives us regarding the world’s causal order. But this is a mild sort of deception, the badness of which can presumably often be overridden by the good which results from God’s temporary suspension of the causal laws.

Importantly, if we thought that God *did* invariably intervene to prevent great suffering, then we might think that we are never morally obligated to act to prevent suffering, since we can expect God to unilaterally prevent that suffering. And it might be thought to be objectionable if theistic mereological anti-realism undermines our motivation to act to prevent suffering. This problem too is avoided, since my proposal is only that God might be expected to *occasionally* suspend composition in order to prevent cases of great suffering, just as God might be expected to occasionally intervene in other ways to prevent cases of great suffering.

A final concern for my proposal regarding the problem of evil is that, even if the composite person normally associated with some parts does not experience the severe suffering which they would normally experience, their parts *would* continue to (collectively) suffer. It’s great that the composite person would not suffer, but it’s also objectionable if their parts collectively suffer.[[29]](#footnote-30) My response to this concern requires that I take on a controversial assumption, namely that objects can only jointly instantiate phenomenal states (such as the phenomenal states associated with suffering) by composing something which instantiates those states.[[30]](#footnote-31) So, for example, an organism might suffer, but the proper parts of that organism do not also (collectively) suffer – or at any rate the only sense in which they *do* collectively suffer is insofar as they compose an organism which suffers. By contrast, if the organism weighs 100kg, its proper parts will also collectively weigh 100kg.[[31]](#footnote-32)

5 Conclusion

In this paper I’ve discussed mereological anti-realism, the idea, roughly, that the circumstances under which composition occurs have something to do with one or more (actual, or counterfactual) agent’s mental states. I described two non-theistic variants of mereological anti-realism, due to Kriegel and Pearce, and found that they both suffer from significant objections. I went on to describe and motivate a theistic version of mereological anti-realism, which itself came in weaker and stronger variants. The weaker variant: there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. The stronger variant: there is a *y* such that the *x*s compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is some specific *y* which those *x*s compose. At the end of the day I’m not sure whether theistic mereological anti-realism is true. Nevertheless, I think it has a lot to be said for it, and it does not fall prey to the objections which plague extant non-theistic versions of mereological anti-realism. Where this leaves us, I think, is with a distinctively theistic perspective on the metaphysics of composition, one which merits further scrutiny.[[32]](#footnote-33)

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1. Cowling (2014) defends a view which he calls “mereological anti-realism,” but his view is very different from the sort of view I discuss in this paper. According to Cowling’s “mereological anti-realism” the world lacks “mereological structure,” so that, for example, there are no composite objects, and there are no mereologically simple objects. By contrast, according to the sort of mereological anti-realism I discuss in this paper, the world has “mereological structure,” but in certain important respects that structure is determined by the cognitive activities of one or more agents. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In this respect the present paper is similar to Alvin Plantinga’s well known “How to be an Anti-Realist” (Plantinga 1982). In that paper Plantinga argues that proponents of a certain sort of global anti-realism should be theists. My paper’s thesis also resembles Berkeley’s contention that subjective idealism should be developed in theistic terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The epigraph at the beginning of this paper might give the impression that Plato, or at any rate a character in one of Plato’s dialogues, endorsed theistic mereological anti realism. But the epigraph is taken out of context, and in fact I doubt that Plato, or the character in *Timaeus* who spoke the words in the epigraph, intended to endorse theistic mereological anti-realism. My impression is that one can take these sorts of liberties with epigraphs. It *is* a pretty good epigraph, right? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. According to mereological universalism, any non-overlapping objects compose a further object. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Presumably, nobody before you has “unified” Mount Everest and whatever book is nearest to your left hand. (This is, in fact, why I used this example.) Earlier I suggested that mereological universalists might mentally “unify” every non-overlapping object. If that’s right, then the object composed of Mount Everest and whatever book is nearest to your left hand owes its existence to whoever first endorsed mereological universalism (or, perhaps, to the first person to endorse universalism after the book nearest to your left hand was printed). But it is just as implausible that that big physical object would owe its existence to the first universalist as it is that it would owe its existence to you. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Another option is that the facts regarding composition and the facts regarding our judgments regarding composition are reliably correlated because they have a common explanation (e.g., a common cause or ground). Kriegel just doesn’t seem to be endorsing a view of this sort. The theistic mereological anti-realist, however, might endorse a view of this sort: God’s decrees/intentions/whatever explain both why such-and-such *x*s compose something, and why we form the judgment that such-and-such *x*s compose something. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. This methodological constraint is in line with a broader methodological inclination: “On the conception I have in mind, a central – perhaps the central – function of philosophy is to vindicate (most of) our pre-philosophical worldview, by providing some sort of rational reconstruction of our everyday world-model” (Kriegel 2008: 364). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Kriegel also suggests that composition tracks the judgment of ideal intuiters in *ideal conditions*, and he gives an account of what it means for some condition to be “ideal.” Luckily, however, we can ignore this complication, since my objections to Kriegel don’t depend on this detail of his view. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Yang and Davis (2017) also defend theistic mereological anti-realism, and it’s worth stating how they understand the thesis: “The xs compose some y at t if and only if (i) the xs exist at t, (ii) God wills that there be a fusion of the xs at t” (Yang, Davis 2017: 220). This is basically equivalent to what I call the “weaker” form of theistic mereological anti-realism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. A similar point can be made regarding divine command theories. Divine command theories say that actions are right or wrong only insofar as they are commanded or forbidden by God. But divine command theory by itself doesn’t tell us which actions God commands or forbids. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. For this interpretation of Edwards, see Chisholm 1976: 139; Johnston 2010: 123. I don’t know much about Edwards, but this interpretation has come under what seems to me to be convincing criticism. See Rea 2007: *§*2; LoLordo 2014: *§*4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Or perhaps in cases where God is indifferent with respect to whether or not composition occurs it would be *indeterminate* whether composition occurs. If that’s right, then this sort of case may be compatible with theistic mereological anti-realism, construed as the thesis that there is (determinately) a *y* such that the *x*s (determinately) compose *y* if and only if God wills that there is a *y* which those *x*s compose. But indeterminate composition does not mesh well with the second motivation for theistic mereological anti realism, which I’ll discuss below. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Lewis 1986: 212-213; Horgan, Potrč 2008: Ch.2. For a response on behalf of moderate answers to the special composition question, see Korman 2015: Ch.8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. I discuss these points more below, especially in my discussions of motivations 4 and 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. This is assuming, of course, that mereological nihilism really does entail that there are no human persons. That’s debatable. If human persons are mereologically simple, for example, then mereological nihilism is compatible with the existence of human persons. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Johnston (2017: 626-628) makes a similar point regarding the very short-lived individuals normally posited by four-dimensionalists. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. In a similar vein, R. T. Mullins (2014: 130-131) argues that the conjunction of mereological universalism and four-dimensionalist accounts of persistence over time will make the problem of evil harder for the theist to resolve. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. The pairing problem is most often associated with Kim, but he says that the pairing problem originates with Foster 1968, 1991. In fact, while Foster does develop the pairing problem independently of earlier philosophers, the earliest discussion of the pairing problem which I am aware of occurs in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa(Vasubandhu 2009: 301). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See, for example, Eric Olson (1997: 71): “The Biological Approach ... bears on some religious doctrines. On that view, you are an animal, and an animal ceases to exist when it dies – when its vital functions cease and its tissues decay beyond the point where they can be reanimated. So existence after death seems to be ruled out. Once biological death has occurred, not even God can call you back into being, at least if I am right about what it takes for an animal to persist through time....” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Among analytic philosophers see, for example, van Inwagen 1978, Zimmerman 1999, Baker 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. This point is consonant with the Qur’an (36: 77-82), which emphasizes God’s ability to create people (either initially, or at the general resurrection of the dead) from whatever materials God wants. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. My account of the general resurrection superficially resembles the idea that, in reassembling some physical parts, God can ensure that they compose one past person rather than another by ensuring that the reassembly of parts is causally related to one of those people rather than the other one. This suggestion was made by Dean Zimmerman (2013: 138-139) in order to account for presumably extremely unlikely cases where two people who died at different times died with all of the same proper parts. God ensures that God’s reassembly of those proper parts is causally related to one of those people’s past lives rather than the other in order to break the tie between them, since otherwise they would have equal claim to being the person who results when God reassembles the proper parts. My suggestion is, by contrast, much more general: God can always decides which people are composed by which proper parts. God need not do this merely in order to “break ties.” What’s more, God does not decide who is composed of which proper parts merely indirectly, by ensuring that the reassembly of proper parts is appropriately causally related to some particular past person. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Western cultures rarely associate reincarnation with theism. But reincarnation is endorsed by some major theistic traditions, including some strands of Hinduism and Judaism (cf. Goldschmidt and Seacord 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. For simplicity I’ll write of “persons” in this context. But this account of how God might avoid the occurrence of otherwise gratuitous suffering could also be extended to non-person animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Where do the composite persons go? There are a few options here. Perhaps they briefly cease to exist. Or perhaps they briefly exist as simples. Or perhaps they are briefly composed of some parts other than the parts which normally compose them. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. By contrast, if some sort of dualism were true then perhaps God could simply suspend the psycho-physical laws, and ensure that the physical or functional states normally associated with some objectionable mental state fail to bring about that mental state. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Or, more carefully: things arranged fawn-wise obviously do burn in things arranged fire-wise, and things arranged cancer cell-wise obviously do spread among things arranged body-wise. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. This is a concern which a typical Buddhist proponent of the non-self doctrine might have. According to proponents of the non-self doctrine selves (including composite persons) do not ultimately exist. Nevertheless, Buddhist proponents of this doctrine typically still think that simples can collectively suffer, and we should work to eliminate this suffering, even if there are no *persons* or *selves* which suffer. See Siderits 2007: Ch.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. For some philosophers who think that this assumption is plausible, see van Inwagen 1990: *§*12; Olson 2007: 188-193; Bailey 2016; Dowland 2016. For philosophers who do not think that the assumption is plausible, see Rosen, Dorr 2002: 159-160; Sider 2013: 268-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Molto (forthcoming) argues that in cases where we have indirect evidence of animal suffering (e.g., we find an animal carcass), for all we know God may have intervened in order to ensure that the animal in question did not suffer. This thesis coheres very well with the point I’ve made in this section, although I suggest that God might intervene in order to prevent any sort of suffering, rather than unseen animal suffering in particular. DeRose (2020) also suggests that God might surreptitiously shield us from some otherwise gratuitous evils, in the sense that the evils do not occur, despite the fact that they seem to occur. This idea also coheres very nicely with what I’ve written in this section, and DeRose provides additional reasons to think that this response to the problem of evil is not as objectionable as we might initially think it is. DeRose does not, however, develop his proposal in term of the mereological mechanism I’ve described in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Thanks to Spencer Case, Rebecca Chan, Dustin Crummett, David Efird, Peter Finocchiaro, Jack Himelright, Michael Longenecker, Tim O’Connor, Timothy Perrine, Callie Phillips, Michael Rea, Dean Zimmerman, several referees for Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, and the audience at my presentation of this paper at Wuhan University. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)