

On substantial independence: a reply to Patrick Toner

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Abstract Patrick Toner has recently criticized accounts of substance provided by Kit Fine, E. J. Lowe, and the author, accounts which say (to a first approximation) that substances cannot depend on things other than their own parts. On Toner’s analysis, the inclusion of this “parts exception” results in a disjunctive definition of substance rather than a unified account. In this paper (speaking only for myself, but in a way that would, I believe, support the other authors that Toner discusses), I first make clear what Toner’s criticism is, and then I respond to it. Including the “parts exception” is not the adding of a second condition but instead the creation of a new single condition. Since it is not the adding of a condition, the result is not disjunctive. Therefore, the objection fails.

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In his “Independence Accounts of Substance and Substantial Parts” (Toner 2010), Patrick Toner criticizes accounts of substance given by Kit Fine, Jonathan Lowe, and me,¹ arguing that they include an ad hoc stipulation which renders them unsuccessful. In this reply, I defend my account against Toner’s charge; although of course I speak only for myself, I believe that my remarks support Fine and Lowe as well.

¹ Relevant publications, not all of which are cited by Toner, include Kit Fine (1995), Lowe (1994a, b, 1998, Chapters 6–7), and Michael Gorman (2006a, b). Toner focuses more on what I say in Gorman (2006a), where I propose a revision to Lowe’s theory, than on what I say in Gorman (2006b); there is no space here to discuss the precise relationship between these two papers, but since they agree on the points relevant to Toner’s paper, it does not matter for present purposes.

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The issue is independence. A necessary condition of an entity's being a substance, it seems, is that it be independent. But there are many types of independence, because there are many types of dependence, and not every type of dependence counts against being a substance: dogs, for example, are usually considered substances, despite the fact that they depend on food. In order to be a substance, then, an entity need not be independent in every possible way. So it would not be right merely to say that substances must be independent: it is necessary to specify the special kind of independence they must have.²

I hold that this special kind of independence allows for dependence on one's own parts. Saying so seems to help in getting the definition's extension right, but there is another reason as well: it responds to the intuition that the independence that substances have is a kind of *self-sufficiency*—not an utter lack of all reliance, but a lack of reliance on externals. Suppose, for example, that a certain water molecule is unable to exist without being composed of the particular hydrogen atoms and the particular oxygen atom that it is composed of; this dependence, which is, to be sure, a dependence on entities that are not identical to the molecule, does not count against the molecule's being a substance, because the dependence does not extend outside the molecule itself (cf. Simons 1998, pp. 236, 243–244).

Dependence on parts, then, is no obstacle to substantiality, and the independence requirement can therefore, to a first approximation, be put this way: It is a necessary condition of x 's being a substance that x depend on nothing *that is not one of its parts*. Call this last clause the “parts exception.”

Before considering Toner's worries, I would like to make a comment about the “approximation” just given. It's pretty approximate. To give just one example, Lowe and I both include a “universals exception”: rather than just saying that x depends on nothing that is not one of its parts, we say it depends on no *particular* that is not one of its parts. Even more such clauses, I believe, need to be included if we are to arrive at a fully adequate account of substantial independence. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am going to ignore everything except the parts exception. Discussing other issues would add clutter without clarification, and my defense of the parts exception can easily be extended to cover the others. So, to keep things simple, I will in what follows use the simple albeit merely approximate formulation just given: x is a substance only if it depends on nothing that is not one of its parts.

Toner does not approve of the parts exception:

Imagine that there are simple substances: souls, or physical simples, for example. These substances would not be dependent on their parts. They wouldn't call for any escape clause. We might be able to say of them that they depend on nothing else for their existence.... If there are substances that depend on nothing else, and other alleged substances that do depend on something else (namely, their parts), then why think that the independent things are the same *kind* of things as the dependent things? I take it that the answer to that is that we have a very strong intuition that we human beings are

² A further task would be the articulation of other necessary conditions, if there are any (I, for one, believe that there are), but such concerns will not be relevant here.

substances, and we want our account of substance to capture that intuition. But our account of substance shouldn't capture the intuition simply via an ad hoc maneuver that violates the spirit of the account! Such a move is unacceptable. (Toner 2010, p. 2).

Why accept that simple substances, which are self-sufficient in one way (a way that doesn't except dependence on their parts) are the same kind of things as "substances" that are self-sufficient in a very different kind of way (a way that does except dependence on their parts)? (Toner 2010, p. 4)

Once we consider the possibility of simple substances, it becomes clear, he thinks, that the parts exception is an ad hoc maneuver that renders valueless any definition that uses it. By using the parts exception, such a definition brings together, under one heading, entities of two distinct kinds, whereas of course a definition ought to bring together entities of just one kind.

Now Toner might appear to have two versions of this complaint, each represented by one of the two block quotations above. On the first version, the difference between simple and composite substances would be very stark: the former would be utterly independent ("they depend on nothing else"), while the latter would be not utterly independent and thus dependent. On the second version, the difference would be more subtle: both would be dependent and both would be independent, but in different ways. However, early in his paper (Toner 2010, pp. 1–2), Toner acknowledges that a theory of substance shouldn't require a substance to be utterly independent, which rules out the first version as a correct interpretation of his intentions. Henceforth, then, I treat his objection as consisting in what I have called the second version. Toner acknowledges that an independence view of substance may well have to allow that substances are dependent in some ways and independent in others; his objection is not to this but to something else, namely, to what he perceives as ad hoc maneuvering.

With that clarification in hand, it is time to consider Toner's objection. I am happy to make a distinction between the following two conditions: (a) being independent of everything,³ and (b) being independent of everything outside oneself. I am also happy to grant that simple substances are independent in sense (a), whereas composite substances are not. But from the fact that simples are independent in a way that composites are not, it does not follow that my theory is in trouble.

If I were proceeding disjunctively, by saying that substantial independence consisted in meeting either condition (a) or condition (b), and therefore that simple substances had substantial independence because they met condition (a), while composites had substantial independence because they met condition (b), then there would indeed be a problem of the sort that Toner is worried about. But this isn't what I am saying. I'm saying instead that what's necessary for having substantial independence is being independent in sense (b). Composites meet this condition, but simples do as well. Both simples and composites are substances, because both are independent of everything outside of themselves (i.e., are self-sufficient in the

³ Again, this is an approximation: perhaps we should say, for example, "of every particular."

relevant sense). True enough, there's some *other* condition, condition (a), that simples meet and that water molecules do not, but this is irrelevant to substantial independence as I have described it. Condition (a) is not actually part of my theory at all, so it does not matter that some, but not all, of the things that meet condition (b) meet condition (a) as well.

It's easy to go astray here, because the "other condition," condition (a), is itself a kind of independence. It is quite true what Toner says, viz., that simple substances are independent in a way in which composite substances are not. But since, as noted earlier, there are many kinds of independence, we should not be surprised to find that there are forms of independence that some substances have while others do not. (Indeed, it would be surprising if there weren't some condition that was met by only some of the things that meet condition (b); things that all meet a given condition *typically* differ from one another in respect of other conditions.) The point is that there needs to be some specific kind of independence that all substances have, and this kind is expressed by condition (b). Some of the entities that meet (b) may meet conditions that define other types of independence, but that doesn't matter as far as substantiality is concerned.

The issue can be approached in another way. If you start out by considering whether condition (a) is the right one for defining substance, you will find that it is not, because it requires you to count entities like water molecules as non-substances. If you then try to solve this problem by adding some entirely new and independent condition (e.g., "except for compounds involving hydrogen"), someone would be right to complain that your procedure was ad hoc. At one point, in fact, this is how Toner formulates his objection:

If we come up with a supposed account of substance, and we find that it rules compound objects aren't substances, we have two choices. One, tack on a clause that just allows compound objects to count by fiat, or two, try to think of a better account of substance. The former seems clearly ad hoc, the latter not so. (Toner 2010, p. 4)

But I do not do the former—I do the latter. By adding the parts exception, I do add an additional phrase, but I do not thereby add a further condition of substantiality (ad hoc or not); instead, I *weaken* condition (a), thereby replacing it with a new condition, namely, condition (b). This new condition gives us the "better account" that Toner rightly asks for. In that light, perhaps we should say that it isn't entirely helpful to speak of an "exception," because this suggests that condition (a) carves nature at the joints, whereas the excluding of parts is a later cut made by a clumsy butcher. No: condition (b) also indicates a natural dividing-line, the line between the self-sufficient and the non-self-sufficient, and this is the one that is relevant for defining substance.

I want to conclude by considering a certain analogy that Toner draws. He says, as a comment on parts-excepting theories:

It strikes me as talking about the class of all flying things, and allowing that things that can fly, plus things that can be carried through the air by something else, count as instances of flying things. Well, maybe, but not in a way that

provides us with a unified and sensible category of flying things. (Toner 2010, p. 4)

I think Toner's point is something like this. We want to define the class of flying things, i.e., things that can go through the air—for example, planes and passengers. But it is improper procedure to say that X is a flying thing only if it is either (i) something that can go through the air under its own power, or (ii) something that goes through the air under something else's power. Yes, airplanes are included by condition (i), and passengers are included by condition (ii), but we lack a unified category. And the point of the analogy would be that souls or physical simples are like airplanes, while water molecules are like passengers: each is included by its own condition, but the procedure is ad hoc.

For reasons that should be apparent by now, however, Toner's analogy is not a good one. My theory does not state two conditions and then yoke them together; it states *one* condition, a condition which is such that some of the things that meet it also meet some other, stronger condition (a condition that is not a part of the definition at all). If Toner's analogy were to be brought into line with what my theory is really saying, it would run more or less along these lines: "A flying thing is something that can, at some time, be on the ground, and, at another time, be on the ground, and, for all times in between those two times, be in the air." This is a condition that is met both by airplanes and by passengers. Yes, it's true that airplanes can do this under their own power, while passengers cannot, but that's irrelevant to the definition. So, to the extent that Toner's analogy illustrates an error in definition, it is not analogous to my theory, and to the extent that it can be modified to be analogous to my theory, it does not embody an error in definition.

I conclude, therefore, that theories like mine are not ad hoc in the way that Toner has argued.

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