

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Counterparts and Compositional Nihilism: A Reply to A. J. Cotnoir

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1 A brief summary of Cotnoir's view

One of the primary burdens of the mereological nihilist is accounting for our ordinary intuitions about material objects. It certainly *seems* as if I am typing on a keyboard, which has particular keys and buttons as parts. But such intuitions are mistaken if mereological nihilism is right, leading to widespread error. So nihilists often propose paraphrases of our everyday utterances as compensation. Cotnoir aims to deliver a new paraphrase strategy on behalf of the nihilist: one that interprets *parthood* and *composition* modally, and interprets (spatial) parts as (modal) counterparts. On Cotnoir's proposal, the nihilist must accept that there can be heterogeneous extended simples. Moreover, she must accept some way of avoiding violations of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. Cotnoir mentions five acceptable ways of doing this, but prefers the Ehring and McDaniel approach, which appeals to unextended, instantaneous localized tropes. One advantage of his proposal, Cotnoir explains, is that it is compatible with classical mereology, without additional ontological costs. It can also handle gunk and emergent properties, which is traditionally a problem for nihilist paraphrase views. Finally, Cotnoir claims that his view can honor our everyday claims about ordinary objects, such as: I am typing on a keyboard, which has key and buttons as parts.

2 The bit-theoretic view

Before getting into (some of) the details of Cotnoir's view, it may be helpful to discuss what his view is *not*. Cotnoir advertises his view as the material (spatial?) analog of Sider's stage-theoretic view. But this isn't quite right—nor (I argue below) should it be.

According to Sider's stage-theoretic view, ordinary objects are temporal stages that have other temporal stages as counterparts.¹ That is, a stage theorist grants that there are many temporal stages but denies that we, ourselves—or any ordinary objects—are identical to the sum of these stages. Rather, at any given moment, we are identical to a single temporal stage. This stage has other temporal stages as counterparts, which make

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certain tensed claims about us true. It is the temporal analog of Lewis's modal view. According to Lewis, *possibly Humphrey wins the election* iff Humphrey has a counterpart in some possible world who wins the election. World counterparts make certain *de re* modal claims true. Likewise, temporal counterparts (on Sider's view) make certain temporal claims true. *Humphrey was a child* iff Humphrey (the temporal stage) has a temporal counterpart that is a child.

The spatial analog to the above views would be something like the following: individuals are region-bound spatial *bits*. Nonetheless, certain spatial claims about these objects may be true if the relevant spatial bits have the appropriate spatial counterparts. *The table is flat* iff the table (a spatial bit) has a spatial counterpart that is flat. So spatial counterparts make certain spatial claims true. Call this spatial analog the *bit-theoretic view*.²

The analogy is far from perfect, since unlike tensed and modal claims, spatial claims seem unlikely to involve some kind of spatial operator (akin to a tensed or modal operator). There are also far more spatial predicates than (arguably) there are temporal or modal predicates. Moreover, unlike time, space doesn't seem to have a direction (neither does modality, but at least our choices are narrowed between the possible, the necessary, and the impossible). The differences continue. Nonetheless, one can see how the bit-theoretic view might go, and why it is that this view is the spatial analog to the stage-theoretic and modal counterpart view.

Cotnoir's view is not the bit-theoretic view. Moreover, it cannot be.

This may not be surprising, for the bit-theoretic view is anti-nihilist. One reason is because spatial bits (like temporal stages) may be extended. That is, spatial bits could be as small as an extension-less simple, but may be as big as a table. Suppose I want to say, for example, *this table is five feet long*. According to the bit-theory, *this table is five feet long* iff this table (a spatial bit) has a spatial counterpart that is five feet long. But if so, then (intuitively) the extended spatial counterpart (that is five feet long) is composite.³ This leads to the second reason why bit-theory is anti-nihilist: bit-theory, like stage theory, assumes a composite ontology. For comparison, stage theory is just as committed to temporal parts as the worm theorist is; they just disagree as to what ordinary objects are. Likewise, bit theory is just as committed to spatial parts as the individual who believes in spatially extended wholes; they just disagree as to what ordinary objects are. Even Lewis, who embraces modal counterparts, countenances trans-world mereological sums—i.e., modal parts and trans-world composites; he just doesn't think that they are metaphysically relevant.⁴

To put this second point more strongly, stage theory is a *way* of being a realist about persistence and temporal parts, not a way to deny them. Similarly, modal counterpart theory is a way of being a realist about possible worlds and modal parts, not a way to deny them. And so, too, bit theory is a way of being a realist about spatial extension and spatial parts; it is not a way to deny them. Because of this, the bit-theoretic view is anti-nihilist.⁵

This is why Cotnoir's view cannot be the strict spatial analog of the stage-theoretic view. But it is nonetheless helpful to have the bit-theoretic view in mind in the sections that follow, to use it as a foil for highlighting certain aspects of Cotnoir's proposal.

In fact, we shall see that the very ways in which Cotnoir's view differs from the bit-theoretic view are ways in which his view undermines some purported advantages of nihilism.

3 Mereology versus ontology, and an appeal to parsimony

Cotnoir claims that his theory "... does away with the need for *material* parts ontology, by employing counterpart relations between objects at different worlds." (231) There are two relevant details in this description: (i) Cotnoir is seemingly only interested in *material parts* and (ii) his proposal to account for material parts is to appeal to counterpart relations between objects in possible worlds.

I mention (i) because it is often assumed that nihilists are only interested in being nihilists about ordinary (material) objects. But this is a mistake, for it obfuscates the distinction between mereology and ontology. Suppose someone believed that there were only material simples, yet she believed in (at least some) immaterial composites—to borrow some of Lewis's examples, she may grant that trigonometry is part of mathematics, or omniscience is part of god, etc.⁶ Such an individual would not be a strict mereological nihilist, since she grants that there are some composites, albeit *immaterial* composites.

In other words, I assume that Lewis (1991) is right, and that our mereological notions are ontologically neutral. Idealists, for example, may genuinely disagree about how best to answer van Inwagen's Special Composition Question.⁷ Whether bricks and houses are material or immaterial is independent from the issue of whether some bricks compose a house. We can imagine a mereological nihilist idealist and a mereological universalist idealist—both of whom agree that all that there is are minds and ideas, but disagree about whether there are (immaterial) *composite* tables and chairs. So our mereological concepts are separable from the metaphysical make-up of the (alleged) composers. So the nihilist that Cotnoir is imagining will likely want to do away with all parts, not just the material ones. This isn't a problem for Cotnoir's view, just a point of clarification.

As for (ii), Cotnoir is aiming to account for material composite objects by appealing to possible worlds, objects in these worlds, and counterpart relations between these objects. This is where our discussion of the bit-theoretic view, and its temporal and modal analogs, will be helpful. To modify phrasing from Cotnoir: the bit-theoretic view wants to do away with the (purported) relevance of certain spatial composites by appealing to spatial counterparts. Likewise, the stage-theorist wants to do away with the (purported) relevance of certain temporal composites by appealing to temporal counterparts, just as the modal counterpart theorist wants to do away with the (purported) relevance of certain trans-world composites by appealing to modal counterparts.⁸ But, importantly, none of these views require us to make commitments that we didn't already have going into them. Stage theory, for example, does not require us to commit to spaces or possible worlds, or spatial or modal counterparts; bit theory does not require us to commit to times or possible worlds, or temporal or modal counterparts; and modal counterpart theory (as such) does not require us to commit to spaces or time, or spatial or temporal counterparts. You could be a modal realist presentist, for example, or a stage theorist

modal primitivist.⁹ So (a) none of these theories dispense (or ‘does away’) with the relevant composites or parts (a point I made in the previous section) and (b) none of these theories bring in extra ontological commitments outside of the domain of enquiry.

In contrast, Cotnoir aims to genuinely dispense with material (spatial?) parts by bringing in additional commitments to possible worlds, objects in these worlds, and counterpart relations between these objects. Generally, one is drawn towards nihilism because of considerations of parsimony—or, because it is less ontologically onerous than universalism, or not prone to vagueness worries like the moderate compositional views. But whatever one’s reasons for getting into nihilism, parsimony is certainly one of its main advantages once we’re there. Yet if we accept Cotnoir’s proposed nihilist paraphrase, we are now committed to a vast array of *possibilia*, and counterpart relations between them. Even if the worlds are abstract and not concrete, this is still more of an ontological commitment than one would have expected when the topic is whether composition occurs, not whether possible worlds exist. Surely this undermines nihilism’s boasts of ontological thriftiness. And it is strange, too, that a nihilist skittish about committing to tables and chairs can be so cavalier about committing to possible worlds!

4 Heterogeneous extended mereological simples

In addition to committing to possible worlds, Cotnoir claims that a nihilist who adopts his paraphrase must also accept the possibility of heterogeneous extended simples. The point of this stipulation is (at least) twofold: (i) it (along with some other assumptions) guarantees that all of the objects in all of the worlds are nihilistically acceptable, making nihilism necessary, and (ii) it helps to create an ersatz ‘composition’ or ‘parthood’ relation.

Heterogeneous extended simples are odd. But even odder is the fact that admitting them into one’s ontology leads to a view that is nearly indiscernible from anti-nihilism. Suppose that I accept that there can be extended simples. Let us even suppose that I accept that there can be heterogeneous simples, and that at least one (if not all) of the five suggested views for answering worries concerning the Indiscernibility of Identicals are plausible. Once we have accepted this much, then it should be an easy matter to accept *scattered* heterogeneous extended simples. Just take your preferred strategy for avoiding violations of the Indiscernibility of Identicals, and appeal to this strategy to account for scattered heterogeneous simples—clouds, solar systems, a scattered deck of cards—none of which have parts. But at this point, there seems to be very little difference between the nihilist and the compositional realist. I am not usually sympathetic to anti-metaphysical charges that debates in ontology are trivial or insubstantial, but I have to admit that comparing a nihilist who accepts scattered heterogeneous simples with a realist about composition yields a distinction with so little difference that an anti-metaphysical stance (in this case) is an appealing alternative. Moreover, I fail to see how this nihilist theory maintains any of nihilism’s original advantages.

Let's put the point another way. Suppose you have a choice of two views, each of which aims to explain the fact that it seems to us that there are (at least) three objects in the room. On the common sense view, the reason it seems to you that there are (at least) three objects in the room is because there are (at least) three objects in the room: the table, the chair, and the computer. On inspection, these three things have parts, so there are in fact more than three objects in the room, but we needn't worry about these details for now. On the mereological nihilist scattered heterogeneous extended simples view (whew!), there is just one object, which has certain non-extended, localized instantaneous tropes that go some way to explain why you may think that there are (at least) three objects in the room (really, though, there's only one!). At this point, the nihilist's desire for parsimony has gone too far. The nihilist view was counterintuitive enough when she denied the existence of tables and chairs, even given various arrangements of simples as compensation. Now we get that there can be heterogeneous extended simples. Yet a natural extension of admitting heterogeneous extended simples is to claim that they can also be scattered. But what exactly are we saving by going to such extremes? To give the point a Moorean spin: I am more certain that there are (at least) three things in the room than I am of any mereological intuitions to the contrary.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, we have two counterpart views under consideration: the bit theoretic view and Cotnoir's theory. The bit theoretic view is the spatial analog to the stage theoretic view and to modal counterpart theory. But because it is the spatial analog to these views, it is anti-nihilist. So the bit-theoretic view cannot provide an acceptable nihilist paraphrase. Yet the ways in which Cotnoir's view is distinct from the bit-theoretic view, are the ways in which it undermines purported advantages of nihilism. One would be giving up mereological composites for the price of possible worlds, objects in these worlds, counterpart relations between these worlds, and the possibility of heterogeneous simples. At such a cost, why don't we just go back to being a compositional realist?

Notes

- 1 This is a four-dimensionalist alternative to the temporal parts view, where ordinary objects are identical to four-dimensional worms, or mereological sums of temporal parts. See Sider (1996), etc.
- 2 To be clear: I am just exploring this view, not endorsing it.
- 3 However, Cotnoir assumes that there can be extended simples—and, importantly, heterogeneous extended simples. So there may be room for a view where the extended spatial counterparts are extended mereological simples. This would be a (pretty bizarre but logically possible) nihilist-friendly version of the bit-theoretic view. Unfortunately, discussion of this option will have to wait for another time.
- 4 Lewis (1986, pp. 210–20)
- 5 Thanks to Jason Bowers for discussion here.
- 6 Lewis (1991).

- 7 Special Composition Question: When do some objects compose something?
- 8 Cotnoir: “Sider’s . . . stage-theoretic approach to the problem of persistence does away with the need for a temporal parts ontology by employing counterpart relations between stages at different times. By analogy, this approach does away with the need for material parts ontology by employing counterpart relations between objects at different worlds.” (231) The modified phrasing above (i) is consistent with the fact that the bit-theorist (like the stage-theorist) *accepts* a spatial (temporal) parts ontology, not “does away” with it, and (ii) makes it clear that a bit-theorist is the spatial analog of the stage view.
- 9 See Weatherson’s “Stages, Worms, Slices and Lumps” for other possible views.
<http://brian.weatherson.org/swsl.pdf>

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