What do we want to know when we ask the Simple Question?

David Mark Kovacs

Abstract: The Simple Question (SQ) asks: "What are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions any x must satisfy in order for it to be true that x is a simple?" The main motivation for asking SQ stems from the hope that it could teach us important lessons for material-object ontology. It is universally accepted that a proper answer to it has to be finite, complete and devoid of mereological expressions. This paper argues that we should stop treating SQ as the central question to be asked about simples; there are a plethora of questions about simples that may even be addressed without answering the original question. The paper closes with some tentative remarks on how this lesson could be extended to van Inwagen's Special Composition Question.

1. Introduction

A few years ago, Ned Markosian raised the following question:

> **The Simple Question (SQ)**: What are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions any x must satisfy in order for it to be true that x is a simple? [1]

---

[1] N. Markosian, 'Simples,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 76 (1998): pp. 213–28, at p. 214.

SQ doesn't ask for a conceptual analysis of simplicity. That is easy and uncontroversial: an object x is a simple = $_{def}$ x has no proper parts. Rather, SQ asks for informative criteria of an object being a simple (by 'object' I mean *material* object – this qualification will be left implicit in the sequel). There is universal agreement in the literature that a *proper* answer to this question has to be finite, complete and free from mereological expressions; if we lifted the second requirement, we could just use the standard definition of simplicity to answer SQ. What philosophers interested in SQ want to know is just when it is the case that an object has no proper parts.

Why care about SQ? The widespread hope is that by answering it we may gain insight into several other issues in material-object ontology. Among other things, it might help us answer another question, asked by Peter van Inwagen:

> **The Special Composition Question (SCQ)**: For any given xs, under what necessary and jointly sufficient conditions is it the case that qy (the xs compose y)?[2]

Just like SQ, SCQ requests a proper (finite, complete and non-mereological) answer that settles, for each xs, whether those xs compose something. The relevance of SQ to SCQ hardly requires argument. For example Nihilism, the view that no xs ever compose a material object, and Organicism, according to which they compose one iff they give rise to a

---

[2] P. van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Cornell UP, 1990), p. 30–31. His formulation is slightly different from the one used here.

life, require that there *be* simples.[3] The conditions of simplicity may also have bearing on the possibility of gunk (objects all whose parts have proper parts) and further issues in material-object ontology, which I will mention in due course.

Rather than offering an answer to SQ, this paper attempts to take a step back and re-evaluate the question's motivation and significance. In Section 2, I identify a recurring theme in the debate, the prevalence of modal arguments: it is a common objection to each answer to SQ that it rules out what seems to be a genuine metaphysical possibility. Since the debate is dominated by such arguments, it is worth asking whether we could use other areas of inquiry that are not so dominated to bear on our answer to SQ. In Section 3, I consider a group of possible answers that are entailed by certain theses about composition and thus don't have to face any new objections, modal or otherwise. However, they suffer from a different problem: despite satisfying the formal criteria of properness, they are unhelpful in the sense that they cannot improve our understanding of the issues that originally motivated the question. In Section 4, I return to the role of modal arguments and suggest that their prevalence may be the chief reason the SQ debate came to a deadlock. Then, in Section 5, I point out that certain existing answers to SQ that are both formally proper and helpful seem to be mutually compatible, since they turn on orthogonal questions. These joint considerations shed new light on the whole debate: the moral I draw in Section 6 is that when we

---

[3] See C. Dorr and G. Rosen, 'Composition as a Fiction,' in R. M. Gale (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) for Nihilism and van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, Ch. 9 for Organicism.

ask the Simple Question, what we are really interested in are several more specific questions, and our theorizing about simples would be more fruitful if we focused on these questions rather than SQ itself. Finally, I tentatively suggest that similar considerations should also make us rethink the significance of SCQ.

2. Standard answers and the standard objections to them

An answer to SQ has to provide a finite set of non-mereological conditions that are necessary and jointly sufficient for an object to be a simple. The most widely discussed answer is probably MaxCon, the view that an object is a simple iff it is maximally continuous. According to Markosian, the first and leading proponent of MaxCon, this amounts to the following:

> x **is a maximally continuous object** $=_{\mathrm{def}}$ x is a spatially continuous object and there is no continuous region of space, R, such that (i) the region occupied by x is a proper subset of R, and (ii) every point in R falls within some object or other.[4]

The most well-known alternative to MaxCon is the Pointy View, according to which an object is a simple iff it is spatially unextended.[5] Kris McDaniel presents a host of further options: Instance (an object is a simple

---

[4] Markosian, *Simples*, p. 221; see also his 'Soc it to Me?,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82 (2004), pp. 332–40 and 'Simples, Stuff and Simple People,' *The Monist*, 87 (2004), pp. 405–428.

iff it instantiates a fundamental property), Independence (an object is a simple iff it is metaphysically possible that it is the only object that exists), versions of the thesis that an object is a simple just in case it is indivisible, and, finally, his own Brutal View, according to which no finite, complete and non-mereological set of conditions is necessary and sufficient for something to be a simple.[6]

One odd phenomenon about the literature is that of this relatively large number of answers only a few have been endorsed, and even those who chose to defend a view rarely attracted followers. The main (and largely unacknowledged) reason for this is that the SQ literature is dominated by a certain style of modal objection. The standard form of the objection is fairly straightforward: "Answer A to SQ rules out p. But p seems to be a genuine metaphysical possibility; so A is false." For example, it has been argued that MaxCon rules out gunk[7] and material objects in perfect contact[8], that the Pointy View rules out extended

[5] An influential argument for gunk by D. W. Zimmerman, ('Could Extended Objects Be Made Out of Simple Parts? An Argument for "Atomless Gunk", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 56 (1996), pp. 1–29) assumes that simples are pointy, though Zimmerman doesn't put this forth as an answer to SQ. For a close cousin of the Pointy View, see N. Tognazzini, 'Simples and the Possibility of Discrete Space,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, (2006), pp. 117–28.

[6] K. McDaniel, 'Brutal Simples,' in D. W. Zimmerman (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, volume 3 (Oxford UP, 2007).

[7] H. Hudson, *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person* (Cornell UP, 2001), pp. 84–88; G. Fowler, 'A Gunk-Friendly Maxcon,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (2008), pp. 611–27

simples[9], that both MaxCon and the Pointy View rule out co-located point-sized simples[10] and discrete space[11], that Independence cannot make sense of simples that could have been complex[12], that Instance is incompatible with mereologically complex objects instantiating fundamental properties[13]… and so on and so forth. It is no exaggeration to say that almost the entire literature on SQ revolves around arguments purporting to show that a particular answer is committed to denying what seems to be a genuine metaphysical possibility and is therefore untenable.

Most of these modal objections are based on conceivability intuitions: we are asked to conceive of simple people shaking hands, pointy simples coming closer and closer to each other until they coincide, mereologically complex things instantiating fundamental properties, etc.[14] Since we are able to conceive of such things, the arguments go, and conceivability is

[8] K. McDaniel, 'Against MaxCon Simples,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 86 (2003), pp. 265–75, at p. 269; Markosian, 'Simples, Stuff…'.

[9] Markosian, 'Simples', pp. 218–9, 227; Hudson, *A Materialist…*, pp. 86.

[10] McDaniel, 'Brutal Simples,' pp. 239–240.

[11] Tognazzini, 'Simples…'.

[12] McDaniel, 'Brutal Simples,' pp. 252–253.

[13] McDaniel, 'Brutal Simples,' pp. 248–52.

[14] As always, there are exceptions. Tognazzini argues that space is possibly discrete (and so MaxCon and the Pointy View are false) because according to a serious scientific theory, Loop Quantum Gravity, it is *actually* discrete ('Simples and the Possibility…' pp. 118). McDaniel offers similar, science-based considerations for the possibility of emergent properties ('Brutal Simples,' pp. 250) to argue against Instance. I suspect, however (though cannot argue here) that in an indirect way these arguments too trade on conceivability considerations. For some not essentially modal arguments, see McDaniel, 'Against MaxCon Simples'.

good (if defeasible) evidence for possibility, we have good reasons to believe that they are also possible. If objections of this kind are to be taken seriously, they make SQ extremely hard to answer: a substantive answer will need to say something about simples, but if SQ is a noncontingent matter (as is widely believed to be) any answer will have some modal import. Given that there seems to be a modal objection to any substantive answer, it is hardly surprising that by now the debate over SQ has come to a stalemate.

Is there any way out of this situation? In the next section, I will review a few possible answers to SQ that appear to dodge the aforementioned worry. Unfortunately, these answers are also completely unhelpful.

3. Proper but unhelpful answers

While the SQ debate has been dominated by modal arguments, the same is hardly true of the SCQ debate, in which modal arguments have played at best a very limited role. To some, this might provide motivation to consider whether SCQ could be used to yield answers to SQ that are more resistant to modal objections than the familiar answers. Even more importantly, though, it is beneficial to consider such answers because, as we will see, they allow us to draw important morals regarding the structure of SQ. I should stress that these morals are completely independent of what we think about the merits of modal arguments.

For a start, suppose that you are nihilist about composition. In that case, you can pick an answer to SQ that follows from your preferred answer to SCQ:

(Alwaysism): For any *x*, *x* is a simple if and only if *x*=*x*.[15]

Alwaysism is a structural analogue of Universalism about composition, the view that any arbitrary *x*s compose something. It is also a trivial consequence of Nihilism: if no *x*s compose anything, then everything is a simple. If you are a nihilist, then Alwaysism has a significant advantage for you. Since presumably you are confident that you can defend Nihilism from objections, you no longer have to *also* worry about defending your answer to SQ: it has already been taken care of by whatever you can cite in defence of your favored answer to SCQ. To be sure, you would still have to address the argument from the possibility of gunk[16], but that would not be a *new* problem: being a nihilist you would have to answer it anyway. So it seems that you can kill two birds with one stone by becoming an alwaysist: you have an answer to SCQ, which also gives you a short and sweet answer to SQ.

There is something deeply unsatisfying about Alwaysism, but it is not entirely clear what. After all, a proper answer to SQ has to be finite, complete, and cannot employ non-mereological terms, and Alwaysism

---

[15] Though she doesn't use the moniker, Katherine Hawley mentions this view as a possible extreme answer to SQ in her 'Borderline Simple or Extremely Simple,' *The Monist*, 87 (2004), pp. 385–404, and notes that this answer is "strange" (p. 386). As we will shortly see, this is an understatement: Alwaysism is not just strange but also completely unhelpful. I should also note that due to reasons to be explained in Section 5, the "extreme" views may be perfectly consistent with the "moderate" ones.

[16] T. Sider, 'Van Inwagen and the Possibility of Gunk,' *Analysis*, 53 (1993), pp. 285–9.

meets all these requirements: it states a proper (if very liberal) criterion of simplicity. Moreover, since Alwaysism is structurally analogous to Universalism, which (as everyone agrees) is a proper answer to SCQ, one can legitimately wonder what *could* be wrong with Alwaysism. Markosian's brief remark on the view is that it "is uninformative because it does not give any information about what simples would have to be like. Similar remarks apply to [any answer to SQ] entailed by other answers to the Special Composition Question".[17]

I agree with Markosian that Alwaysism is not an informative answer to SQ. But it would be strange if the reason for this were that it didn't tell us what simples "would have to be like," if by this Markosian means that the answer doesn't say anything about the intrinsic nature of simples. After all, Universalism also doesn't say anything about what composition, or composite objects, would have to be like: it doesn't reveal the feature that all and only composite objects need to instantiate. Yet it is considered a perfectly proper (if controversial) answer to SCQ. The point can be buttressed by noting that there are other intuitively unsatisfying answers to SQ that *do* say something about what simples would have to be like. Consider

> **(Inorganicism)**: An object is a simple iff either (1) it is not
> an organism, or (2) it is an organism and there is exactly
> one *x* whose activity gives rise to the process that is the
> organism's life.

---

[17] 'Simples', p. 214 f11.

Inorganicism can be derived from two theses central to van Inwagen's thinking about composition. One is his own Organicist answer to SCQ: some xs compose an object iff they give rise to a life.[18] The other is his analysis of what it takes for a life to be a life *of* some particular thing:

> (**Life-to-composition**): Life L is y's life iff there are xs such that the activity of the xs gives rise to L and the xs compose y. (p. 91)

Van Inwagen proposes what I call Life-to-composition as an *analysis* of a life being the life of some particular object, but even if we reject it as an analysis, the biconditional seems overwhelmingly plausible, to the extent that without it we are in danger of losing grip of what it means for a life to be the life of some particular organism.

Organicism and Life-to-composition jointly entail Inorganicism. Clearly enough, Inorganicism says something substantive about what simples would have to be like. But it still seems to be an uninformative answer to the Simple Question. If not because it is silent on what the intrinsic nature of simples, then why?

---

[18] In van Inwagen's original formulation the xs compose iff they *constitute* a life (p. 82). I changed the terminology to avoid any mereological connotations. One might still worry that the locution 'gives rise to' conceals a disguised mereological expression. I don't think it does, but even if it did, that would threaten van Inwagen's proposal, not my claim that *if* Organicism is an adequate answer to SCQ *then* Inorganicism also satisfies the official requirements of SQ.

In each case, the real problem has little to do with whether the answer says something about the intrinsic nature of simples. As far as I can see, what makes them uninformative is *precisely* that they are entailed by certain theses about composition that have already been on the scene for some time. At this point we should remind ourselves why we asked SQ in the first place: by getting clearer on which things are simples we hoped to get new insight into various issues surrounding composition. Obviously, Alwaysism and Inorganicism give us no such insight; they don't add anything to our understanding of material-object ontology.

The standard answers to SQ say something about fundamentality, location, the nature of spacetime, and other important issues in metaphysics that the familiar theses about composition discussed above tend to be silent on. In other words, they carve up logical space in novel ways, which inevitably means that they eliminate certain options we might have thought to be open. By contrast, Inorganicism and Alwaysism carve up logical space exactly as it has already been carved up by the familiar theses about composition. For this reason, these answers are completely unhelpful: the considerations in favour of or against them are the very same considerations relevant to those theses. More generally, we can say that an answer to SQ has no value if it doesn't give rise to any novel consideration that could help us settle questions concerning material-object ontology.

A good answer to SQ is more than just formally proper; it also has to be *helpful*. Helpfulness in the present context has an admittedly interest-relative element (or so I say in this temporary diagnosis; for a more radical

11

one, see the end of Section 6): Alwaysism and Inorganicism are unhelpful because, though they properly answer SQ, they don't give us new information concerning any of the issues we wanted to know more about when we asked the question. They have no potential to move forward any of the existing debates in material-object ontology, let alone generate new ones. Things *might* look different if the literature on these issues had taken a different turn. If, for example, nobody had ever attempted to give a purely quantificational answer to SCQ (i.e., that composition never happens, or that it always does), Alwaysism would strike us as considerably more informative. In that case, the thesis that everything is a simple *would* carve logical space in new ways, but since Nihilism about composition is standard fare it doesn't.

So far as Alwaysism and Inorganicism are concerned, the point about helpfulness is quite obvious; nobody would seriously propose either as an answer to SQ. However, the foregoing discussion indicates that at least one existing answer to SQ should also be considered unhelpful. In a recent paper, Joshua Spencer argues that we can answer SQ if we accept

> **Strong Composition as Identity (SCAI)**: Necessarily, for any xs and any y, those xs compose y iff those xs are identical to y.[19]

---

[19] J. Spencer, 'Composition as Identity and Simplicity,' *Erkenntnis*, 78 (2013), pp. 1177–84.

SCAI provides a finite and non-mereological answer to GCQ. What is more interesting for the present discussion is that it also entails an answer to SQ, namely:

> **The Identity Account of Simplicity (IAS)**: Necessarily (px) (x is a simple iff (pys) [if those ys are identical to x, then (pz) (if z is among those ys, then z is identical to x)] (p. 1181)

Informally speaking, IAS says that an object is a simple iff it is identical to exactly one single object, rather than a (non-degenerate) plurality of objects taken together. SCAI logically entails IAS, and Spencer cites as a significant advantage of the view that it answers "one of the most difficult and intractable questions of mereology" (p. 1178).

IAS is a proper answer to the Simple Question. But it is unhelpful, precisely because it is logically entailed by SCAI. Now, this time the entailment doesn't go the other way round; it is seems strange but not incoherent to say that an object is composed by a plurality but is identical to *another* plurality. But the answer is still unhelpful. IAS says that an object is composite iff it is many-one identical to a non-degenerate plurality, and it's hard to think of any reason to believe this that is not an equally good reason to believe SCAI. The most repugnant feature of SCAI is its commitment to many-one identity, a commitment it shares with IAS; the most attractive feature of SCAI is that it settles the so-called General Composition Question (see Section 4), which IAS doesn't. So why would

anyone accept IAS who doesn't also accept SCAI? The one without the other would be so unmotivated that we can safely consider it an immediate non-starter.

If this is right, the problem that besets Alwaysism and Inorganicism also applies to Spencer's proposal. IAS doesn't carve up logical space in novel ways; it yields the same partitions SCAI already provided. We asked SQ because we wanted to learn something about composition, or at least something that indirectly bears on issues surrounding composition. But whatever we could possibly learn from IAS we have already learned from SCAI; the arguments we could raise for or against IAS will be just the familiar arguments for and against SCAI. In that case, what would be *gained* by having an answer like this? There is no intrinsic value in having *a* proper answer to the Simple Question; we wanted our answer to recarve logical space and inform the pursuit of ontology in novel ways, but IAS amounts to little more than wheel spinning. It is an important question what we should think of SCAI, but we have no reason to be independently interested in the Identity Account of Simplicity.

4. Modal arguments and SQ

In Section 2 I noted that the modal approach is the dominant one in the SQ debate, and also that this debate came to a halt. I also noted that somehow this problem doesn't seem to beset the SCQ debate, where this style of objection is far less common. At this point, you might start suspecting that the real culprit is the modal approach itself and that this finding should

restore our faith in finding a proper and helpful answer to SQ. You might think that the fate of SQ has been similar in this regard to that of

> **The General Composition Question (GCQ)**: For any given xs and y, what are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that the xs and y need to satisfy for it to be the case that the xs compose y?[20]

GCQ asks not what has to be true of a collection of objects in order that they to compose *some object or other*; instead, it asks what has to be true of a collection and an object if the collection is to compose *that* object. Van Inwagen considers GCQ unanswerable because he thinks that it is falls prey to "open question arguments": conceivable cases in which the proposed answer to GCQ and the holding of the composition relation between a plurality and a composite object come apart. But, as Hawley notes, it is not entirely clear why van Inwagen demands an answer that cannot be conceived to be false.[21] SCQ and GCQ have different logical forms, but a mere difference in logical form doesn't justify raising the standards for answers to the latter question. And while most philosophers expect SCQ to have a necessary answer, nobody thinks that the answer's falsehood has to be *inconceivable*.

---

[20] Van Inwagen was the first to raise this question (p. 39), but I'm borrowing Joshua Spencer's formulation (p. 1077).

[21] K. Hawley, 'Principles of Composition and Criteria of Identity,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (2006), pp. 481–93.

Similar considerations apply to the Simple Question: if the modal arguments are primarily fueled by conceivability intuitions and are to be taken seriously, the prospects of finding a satisfactory answer are not very good.[22] Of course, the analogy between GCQ and SQ is not perfect, since the participants never officially accepted that a proper answer to SQ has to express a truth that we cannot conceive to be false. Still, the result seems to be similar: if the conceivable falsehood of an answer provides strong evidence that it is not necessarily true and we have little at our disposal besides conceivability-based arguments, it is just to be expected that any substantive account will fall victim to one modal objection or another.

Many will be tempted at this point to think that the real problem is with the modal approach itself: we shouldn't attribute as much significance to conceivability considerations as we did in the past. I have some sympathy with this verdict. But even if we accept it, it would be wrong to conclude that all we need to do is just go back to SQ and approach it with a more sceptical view of modal arguments. For we have seen in the previous section that some formally proper answers to SQ ultimately fail to speak to the issues that made us ask the question in the first place. What this indicates is that even if some of the old answers to SQ survive the modal arguments and remain interesting, they are not interesting *because* they answer SQ. They are interesting because they tell us something about mereology that we haven't thought of before entering the debate. In the next section, we will see further reasons to draw this moral.

---

[22] In passing, McDaniel also notes this analogy between SQ and GCQ in 'Structure-Making,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 87 (2009), pp. 251–74, at p. 264 f39.

5. Answers to SQ and the many aspects of simplicity

So far I have mostly been concerned with how SQ is related to the possible answers that can be given to it. Now I also want to make a remark about how these answers relate to one another. According to McDaniel's useful tripartite division in 'Brutal Simples', answers to SQ can be classified as *Spatial*, *Fundamentality* and *Indivisibility* accounts (these categories may not be exhaustive). As the labels suggest, these answers attempt to specify necessary and sufficient conditions of simplicity by exploring how it is related to various other features: Spatial Accounts seek to find a relation between simplicity and spatiotemporal location, Fundamentality Accounts draw a connection between simplicity and the properties a simple can instantiate, while Indivisibility Accounts characterize simples, with some variation in modal force, in terms of a feature (divisibility) that simples supposedly lack.

Now, the fact that these three broad families of answers describe simples in so different terms indicates that answers which don't belong to the same family may very well be compatible with each another. There is, for example, no reason why MaxCon and Instance couldn't *both* be true. They are concerned with entirely different aspects of simplicity, and on the face of it, their truth depends on orthogonal questions. Just to mention another example, the same goes for the Pointy View and Metaphysical Indivisibility. Maybe one of these is true; maybe none; or maybe both. There is nothing in either view that rules out the other.

The pairwise compatibility of several answers to SQ shows something important, namely that there is something misleading in standard discussions of the Simple Question. From the literature we can easily get the impression that – unless McDaniel's Brutal View is correct – there must be such a thing as "the" true answer to SQ waiting to be discovered, and once we find this answer we can lean back with satisfaction and cross the question out on our List of Unsolved Metaphysical Puzzles. I think this is a mistaken way of thinking about SQ. Even if one day someone came up with the ultimate knock-down argument for MaxCon, the question whether, say, all and only simples can instantiate fundamental properties would not thereby become any less interesting.

It could be thought that even if the *letter* of SQ allowed for multiple distinct answers, such answers would still somehow clash with the spirit of the question because a good answer would ideally tell us *in virtue of what* something is a simple.[23] My response is twofold. First, even if being a simple has non-trivial necessary and sufficient conditions, the feature in virtue of which something is a simple may differ from world to world. For example, it might turn out that simples are necessarily MaxCon objects, but in some possible worlds they are simples in virtue of being pointy while in others in virtue of occupying a continuous region of space. Generally, since "in virtue of" relations are arguably compatible with multiple realizability[24], there is no guarantee that the same feature could serve as an explanation of simplicity in every possible world. While this

---

[23] I am grateful to Elanor Taylor and an anonymous referee of this journal, who raised this concern independently.

[24] See Louis deRosset, 'Grounding Explanations,' *Philosophers' Imprint*, 13 (2013), p. 6.

doesn't render the 'in virtue of' question uninteresting, it makes it a poor candidate to amend SQ.

Second, even bracketing this concern, the 'in virtue of' question is only one of the several interesting questions surrounding simples. That is, we cannot channel everything we care about into a version of SQ amended with an 'in virtue of' requirement. To see this, consider the following case. Perhaps as a matter of necessity there is nothing in virtue of which an object is a simple; mereological simplicity is a fundamental property. This claim is still compatible with all manner of informative property identities: it leaves open the question whether the property of being a simple is identical to the property of being a MaxCon object, or the property of being a pointy object, or the property of being a possibly lonely object, or none of the above. The view that simplicity is a fundamental property doesn't distinguish among these positions, which shows that even if the question 'What it is in virtue of which some x is a simple?' is important, it is only one out of several important questions. It cannot be used to amend or replace SQ as the central question to be asked about simples, since it could easily happen that we have an answer to the 'in virtue of' question (or SQ amended with an 'in virtue of' requirement) but are still clueless about most of the issues that made us ask the question.

6. What do we want to know when we ask SQ (and SCQ)?

Where does this leave us? I suggested that the debate over SQ reached something like a stalemate because the familiar answers were thought to

be vulnerable to modal objections, while the unfamiliar ones seem completely unhelpful. Depending on one's stance on the merit of such modal arguments, one might be tempted either to draw the negative conclusion that the debate over simples is part of a degenerating research program or to try to find some other (non-modal) approach to answering SQ. But I think that both reactions would be mistaken. What the foregoing considerations show is that to the extent that some of the answers are interesting, they are not interesting *because* they answer SQ. We have seen that a finite, complete and non-mereological answer to SQ doesn't necessarily tell us everything we wanted to know about composition, location, fundamentality (etc.) when we asked the question; first, because a formally proper answer may still be unhelpful, and second, because even a proper *and* helpful answer may give us insight into some of these issues but not into others. But once we remind ourselves that it is not one single factor that made us ask SQ in the first place, we can see that we don't even *need* a formally proper answer to learn about the aforementioned issues. Even if McDaniel's Brutal View turned out to be correct, learning of merely necessary or merely sufficient features of simples would still enhance our understanding more than would many of the formally proper answers. We could in principle know enough about simples for all purposes that matter without being able to answer SQ itself.

I therefore propose that the philosophically most significant question about simples is not the Simple Question. There are a *plethora* of interesting questions worth asking about simples, many of which have

been treated as instrumentally important in settling SQ. Can simples be extended? Does their structure supervene on the structure of space they occupy? What sorts of properties can they instantiate? Are they indivisible in virtue of being simple, simple in virtue of being indivisible, or these are just different ways of saying the same thing? And so on and so forth. We don't have to answer SQ to answer these questions; also, we artificially narrow down the range of relevant questions if we try to reduce them to a single one. Providing necessary and sufficient conditions for simplicity is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning whatever we wanted to learn when we asked the Simple Question.

Let me close with some tentative remarks on composition.[25] Above I argued that focusing too much on SQ when theorizing about simples is a mistake, but I didn't question the distinguished place of SCQ in material-object ontology. Perhaps it is time do so. In my earlier, official diagnosis I said that the unhelpfulness of Alwaysism had a practical aspect to it: this answer to SQ is trivially entailed by Nihilism, and Nihilism has already been on the scene for some time. Given that Nihilism too is entailed by Alwaysism, this might strike some as odd: it seems as if what counts as a good answer to SCQ and SQ depended on the order in which we asked these questions. We can avoid this apparent oddity by generalizing the conclusions drawn in the previous paragraph: SQ and SCQ are *both* indirect (and not the most helpful) ways of getting at the interesting subject matter of the nature of material objects.[26] This more radical

---

[25] I wish to thank another anonymous referee of this journal for encouraging me to discuss the possible broader moral for SCQ.

[26] And so is GCQ, by a similar line of reasoning.

conclusion is not something I can hope to conclusively establish here, but there are considerations speaking in its favour. One is the symmetry just mentioned between SQ and SCQ. Another one is based on a point recently made by Jonathan Schaffer: existence monism (the view that there is only one material object) makes *every* answer to SCQ come out vacuously true.[27] This too indicates that when we ask SCQ we are not merely interested in getting a formally proper answer; and indeed, many informal glosses on the familiar answers build in some extra information not required by the letter of the answer. (For example, informal characterizations of Nihilism usually imply that there are *many smallish* objects that fail to compose.)

To be clear, I don't dispute that SCQ has proven to be a *fruitful* question: more than 20 years after van Inwagen asked it, we know a great deal more about composition's relation to vagueness, modality, causation and space-time than we did before. But I think it is worth asking whether SCQ is the holy grail of mereology that some metaphysicians have taken it to be. It seems to me that we may do better by focusing directly on the plethora of more specific questions that are often discussed in the context of SCQ. Are there any composite objects? If so, what are they like? Do they have irreducible features that cannot be explained by their proper parts?[28] Should the predicate *part of* figure in our fundamental ideology?[29] Is

[27] In his 'From Nihilism to Monism,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (2007), pp. 175–191, at p. 178: f11. Schaffer credits Ted Sider with this insight.

[28] T. Merricks, 'Composition and Vagueness,' *Mind*, 114 (2005), pp. 615–37.

[29] Dorr, 'What we Disagree…'; T. Sider, 'Against Parthood,' in K. Bennett & D.W. Zimmerman (eds), *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, volume 8 (Oxford UP: forthcoming).

composition guided by laws, and if so, are these laws necessary?[30] Do the compositional facts globally or locally supervene on the non-compositional ones?[31] Could these facts be indeterminate?[32] And so on. Answers to SCQ often indicate how one goes about approaching these issues. But nothing in the form of the question forces an answer that speaks to them, and answering these more specific questions doesn't necessarily require an answer to SCQ.

If these (admittedly tentative) speculations about composition are on the right track, then the philosophically most significant questions about composition reach beyond SCQ. And in that case, we might be warranted in drawing a broader and more surprising conclusion than the one I defended in detail: perhaps providing necessary and sufficient conditions for composition are neither necessary nor sufficient for learning what we *really* wanted to learn when we asked the Special Composition Question.[33]

Cornell University, NY

[30] J.R.G. Williams, 'Illusions of Gunk,' *Philosophical Perspectives*, 20 (2006), pp. 493–513; R.P. Cameron, 'The Contingency of Composition,' *Philosophical Studies*, 136 (2007), pp. 99–121.

[31] N. Markosian, 'Brutal Composition,' *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998), pp. 211–249.

[32] D. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 212–213, Merricks, 'Composition and Vagueness', and many others.