

SAVING THE SHIP*

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ABSTRACT

In defending the startling claim that there are no artifacts, indeed, no inanimate material objects of the familiar sort, Peter van Inwagen has argued that truths about such putative objects can be paraphrased as truths that do not make essential reference to them and that we should endorse only the ontological commitments of the paraphrase. In this note I argue that the paraphrases van Inwagen recommends cannot meet his condition. Read one way, they lose us some truths. Read another, they entail the existence of the very objects they are supposed to rid us of. However, we need not share van Inwagen's distaste for the latter: to say that they exist is not to say that anything exists in addition to the simples composing them.

Keywords: *van Inwagen, paraphrase, composites, simples*

As part of his argument that there are no composite objects, van Inwagen claims that statements appearing to assert or imply their existence, while allowable as true "in the ordinary business of life," are not *strictly* true, by which he means that they are not to be taken at face value when we are doing serious metaphysics. What are strictly true are paraphrases of such statements that do not make reference to anything other than the simples of which these putative are supposed to be composed.¹ If this is so, one welcome - at least to van Inwagen - consequence is that hoary old

¹ van Inwagen stresses that by 'paraphrase' he does not mean 'translation,' if the latter is understood as preserving the meaning of, or expressing the same proposition as is expressed by, the original sentence (1990, 112-3). All that is required is that they describe all the facts without essential reference to composites (1990, 113 *et pass*). The problems with his proposal to be canvassed in this note arise even if we understand paraphrase as he does.

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puzzles about their identity cannot as much as arise. For example, we can re-tell the Theseus story in terms of planks ("honorary simples," that is, simples relative to the putative ship they are thought to compose) "arranged ship-wise," without mentioning ships. Even though in the re-told story there are no ships, nothing philosophically important is left out (1990, 128-9). Furthermore, we do not have to deny that the ordinary, non-philosophical, description of the facts is true. Even though there are no ships, sentences ordinarily taken to be true about them can be allowed to be literally, if not strictly, true, albeit "perhaps...in some sense...misleading" (1990, 101).

In this paper I challenge van Inwagen's claim that his paraphrases "preserve *everything*" that is true of the thing, event or state of affairs described in the original, everyday, statement (1990, 129, van Inwagen's emphasis). I argue that the locution on which the paraphrases rely – 'simples arranged *x*-wise' – cannot be understood as referring either to the simples taken severally on pain of losing some truths or to their arrangement on pain of readmitting *xs* into our ontology.

In van Inwagen's metaphysically serious version of the story, what we have before the first plank is replaced is what he calls the First Planks. After one of these is replaced, we have the Second Planks, after one of *those* – one that had been one of the First Planks as well as one of the Second Planks – is replaced, we have the Third Planks, and so on. When each plank that had been one of the First Planks has been replaced, the First Planks are re-arranged in exactly the same way they were at the beginning of the story. The First Planks and the Last Planks are clearly not identical, since there is a plank that is one of the Second Planks and not one of the First Planks – and, again, so on. Since there is no mention of any ship, "there is no such question as 'Which of the two ships existing at the end of the story is the ship with which the story began?'" (1990, 129). In general, "If there are no artifacts, then there are no philosophical problems about artifacts" such as those that have exercised philosophers for millennia.

The viability of eliminating apparent reference to artifacts by paraphrase has not gone unquestioned. Rosenberg, for example, suggests that "...the notion of simples 'being arranged chairwise' is one that we can and do understand *only* to the extent that we understand references to ships *per se*" (702). Elder voices a similar misgiving: "...allowing that dogwise arrangement obtains at all is allowing that there are dogs" (132).

One may also wonder how 'This is a ship' can be literally true in any, even in a "loose", everyday, sense if it is not true in the strict sense. van Inwagen asks us to imagine Copernicus saying "According to my theory, the sun does not move. Nevertheless, sentences like 'It was cooler in the garden after the sun had moved behind the elms' can, when uttered in the course of the ordinary business of life, express truths" (1993, 684-685).

If we take Copernicus to be saying that, strictly speaking, the sun does not move, it is not clear what we are to take him to be saying when he says that the *quotidian* sentence expresses a truth. Hirsch makes the related complaint that he does not understand what van Inwagen means when he says that there are, strictly speaking, no apples (690-691). In saying this, is *he* speaking strictly or not? Is Copernicus?

Here I offer a different objection: contrary to what van Inwagen says, his proposed paraphrases do not preserve all the everyday truths we – and he – accept about artifacts such as ships.

What can we take 'the First Planks' etc. to refer to? Suppose we take the plural noun in the expression at face value and treat the expression as having plural reference to the planks that are arranged ship-wise. These are van Inwagen's "honorary simples" that stand to the putative ship as do the true simples, whatever they are, to the planks themselves (and as would the relevant simples to any other putative composite material object). If we understand the expression in this way, the claim that everything true in the standard version of the story remains true in the re-telling becomes hard to maintain. The ship is bigger than the planks – even when these are arranged ship-wise – but the planks, even when so arranged, are not bigger than the planks not so arranged. (More on this below.)

Suppose, instead, that we take the capitals seriously and treat 'the First Planks' as a proper name, ignoring the plural. What can it be thought to name? The only thing in the offing is the ship-wise arrangement of planks we have. Trouble again: the planks of the ship, as we ordinarily say, are nailed to each other but the ship-wise arrangement of planks is not nailed to anything. In any case, *arrangements* of planks are just what van Inwagen is in the business of eschewing. It is essential to his strategy that whatever truths there are be truths about planks, not about arrangements of them. Once we let arrangements in, we may as well call them ships.²

van Inwagen's own understanding of the expression 'the First Planks' is as "a rigid plural designator, like 'the British Empiricists'" (1990, 128). The idea is that the latter does not refer to the individual philosophers so grouped, nor to an additional entity, the group they form; in the same way, 'the First Planks' should not be taken to refer either to the individual planks that are arranged ship-wise or to an additional entity, the ship they

² As Uzquiano observes, "...if propositions expressed by ordinary statements apparently concerned with ordinary material objects like bricks and tables and chairs turn out to be propositions concerned with sets of simples under certain arrangements, then one should consider *identifying* objects like bricks and tables and chairs with sets of simples under certain arrangements" (446, my emphasis). Goldwater advocates precisely this. However, doing this is not open to van Inwagen. He cannot be seen as saying what ordinary objects are, given that he thinks there are none. It is one thing to be a reductionist, quite another to be an eliminativist. (See also fn. 6 below.)

compose. If this is right, the properties of individual planks, including the property of – as we say – being nailed to other planks. are irrelevant, and thereby so is the fact that the First Planks lack(s?) that property.

It is not clear that the expression 'the British Empiricists' behaves in the way van Inwagen claims. What exactly does 'the British Empiricists' refer to? Do I, when I use it, really leave behind the properties of the individuals? Not if I say that the British Empiricists were English, Irish, and Scottish, respectively: the property of being English or Irish or Scottish is a property of the individuals Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. In a similar way, if I say 'the First Planks came from trees in Norway,' I must be taken to be referring to the individual planks. This is especially clear if we add that they came at different times, some in one shipment, some in another. Note that I could have said 'were cut from trees in Norway,' instead of 'came from Norway.' The plural 'were' would have made it clear (as 'came' does not) that the property in question – having been cut from a tree in Norway – is being attributed to the planks individually. Of course, since that is what is in question here, we should not put things in a way that begs the question. The point can be made, however, even if we use the number-neutral 'came.' The property of having come from Norway is as much a property of the individual planks as is the property of having been cut from a tree in Norway. So, too, is the property of being nailed to other planks.

It may seem that the property of having come from Norway is a property of the planks, as much as of each plank. So, then, is the property of having been cut from trees in Norway, one that the planks, as well as individual planks possess. But it is not clear what sort of property that could be. How does one cut a number of planks from a number of trees, except by cutting individual planks (one or more) from individual trees?³

The capital 'E' in the third word in 'the British Empiricists' signals that the expression refers to a particular group of philosophers, namely, the group comprising Locke, Berkeley and Hume.⁴ Without it, the expression would be naturally taken to refer to whatever philosophers are British and share a certain outlook – Mill certainly included. But a group is a single thing, a composite, and as such is no more acceptable to van Inwagen than is an arrangement.

van Inwagen's 'rigid plural designator' hovers uneasily between the plural and the singular. It is worth noting that he himself insists that *tertium non*

³ If Smith, Brown and Jones are students in the class, each one has the property of being a student in the class. Who has the property of being students in the class? Not Smith, not Brown, not Jones, only the trio – which is, again, one thing.

⁴ As in the title of Johnathan Bennett's book.

datur. He criticizes those who think that the thesis that the whole is the sum of its parts can be expressed by 'A whole *is* its parts' precisely for that reason. He says: "This sentence seems to me to be syntactically radically defective. There is the predicate 'is identical with', which yields a sentence when flanked by singular terms or singular variables. There is the predicate 'are identical with', which yields a sentence when flanked by plural referring expressions or plural variables. I do not see how there could be any sort of "identity" predicate that yielded a sentence by being put between a singular term (or variable) and a plural referring expression (or variable)" (1990, 287)⁵

What, then, are we to make of van Inwagen's claim that we can paraphrase 'Some chairs are heavier than some tables' as "There are *x*s that are arranged chairwise and there are *y*s that are arranged tablewise and the *x*s are heavier than the *y*s" (1990, 109)? If the *x*s and the *y*s are all simples, albeit arranged differently, it cannot be that some of them are heavier than others. Presumably, all simples weigh the same. For this not to be so, some of them would have to have some property such as being of a different size, or of different density, than others, properties only composites can have. I can see no other way of understanding the last clause of the proffered paraphrase than as short for '(some of) the *x*-wise arrangements are heavier than (some of) the *y*-wise arrangements.'

But, as already noted, a chairwise arrangement of simples, being a composite as much as a chair is, is not something van Inwagen can allow. Such an arrangement is, in fact, nothing other than a chair.⁶

What gives van Inwagen's proposed paraphrase (and with it, his rejection of inanimate composites) plausibility is that 'the planks arranged shipwise' un-hyphenated is easily taken to refer to something that, while it has all the properties of a ship, is nevertheless not a single thing, hence not a ship. But we cannot have it both ways. The referent is either one thing – a planks-arranged-ship-wise – or many things – the planks, even if, as it happens, arranged ship-wise. If the former, we still have ships. If the latter, we lose some truths.

⁵ Uzquiano argues that the paraphrase strategy cannot handle "apparent plural quantification over composites": "...singular quantification over composites can be paraphrased as plural quantification over simples, but plural quantification over composite cannot be...". For another interesting discussion of plural reference and plural quantification see Yi (2014).

⁶ van Inwagen offers, as an alternative: "There is an *x* such that *x* is a set and the members of *x* are arranged chairwise and there is a *y* such that *y* is a set and the members of *y* are arranged tablewise and the members of *x* are heavier than the members of *y*" (110). But a set of simples arranged chairwise is, surely, a composite, composed of its members, and as such should be off limits for van Inwagen. And, again, it is presumably the sets that differ in weight, not their respective members. Thus the property of being heavier than is a property of some of the sets of *x*s arranged chairwise – of some of the chairs, as we can surely say.

Consider a simple case where we have only three simples, A,B, and C. They may be arranged in six different ways: ABC-wise or ACB-wise, and so on. But the property of being arranged in one or the other of these ways does not distribute: it does not belong to A, or to B, or to C, any more than does the property of being large to the individuals who make up a large crowd. Contrast the property of being silent if the crowd is silent: each person in the crowd had better be, if 'the crowd is silent' is to be true. So with 'the planks are here,' 'the planks are too short' etc. distribute: each plank had better be here or be too short. However 'the planks are arranged ship-wise' does not distribute. While a hundred planks may be arranged ship-wise, no single plank can be so arranged. Nor, for van Inwagen, can being arranged ship-wise be a property of an aggregate or collection of planks: once we let these in, we can hardly avoid thinking of these as being composed of planks in the way van Inwagen does not allow putative composites such as ships to be. Furthermore, such an aggregate is as much a single thing as is a single plank (or a ship), so *it* cannot be arranged any more than a plank can.

Suppose that as we proceed with our repairs, each wooden plank is replaced by a metal one. Metal planks do not float. To say that they do when they are arranged ship-wise is to commit a double mistake. The first is to suggest that being arranged distributes, so that each metal plank has the property of being arranged ship-wise. The second – even if a single plank could have the property of being arranged ship-wise – is to think that that property would be sufficient to make it such that *it* can float. Conversely, the planks are a hundred in number, but the ship (a-hundred-planks-arranged-shipwise) is not. It was the Titanic that was thought to be unsinkable; no-one thought that any of the sheets of metal which when riveted together made it up were.

I said earlier that the property of being arranged does not distribute and thus cannot be a property of the planks taken severally. Nor, as already noted, can it be a property of the set or aggregate of the planks, since it makes no sense to say of a single thing, even if that thing is a set or aggregate, that it is arranged in a certain way. Only a plurality of things can have the property of being arranged.

It may be suggested that being arranged ship-wise can be a property of the planks in something like the way as being arranged in a circle may be said to be a property of the chairs in the room. It may seem that here we are attributing the property neither to the individual chairs nor to a single thing, their collection or set: we are saying neither that any single chair is arranged in a circle nor that there is a circular thing the chairs compose that is. Indeed, there is no single concrete thing the chairs compose. However, not every way simples (or honorary simples) may be arranged yields an object of a familiar sort. If the chairs are, in addition to being arranged in a circle, attached to each other — as is not uncommon with

rows of chairs in an auditorium – the fact that we have no ready label for what we then have does not mean that what we have is not a single thing.⁷ And it is not difficult to make up stories about how we could find it useful to recognize it as such and coin a name for it.

Not only that: when we say that the planks are arranged ship-wise, there seems to be no way to express the property we supposedly have without mentioning ships.⁸ With our chairs, we have serviceable grammatical paraphrases: we can say that they make a circle – an abstract object – even if they compose no recognized circular material object. But no such paraphrase is available with our planks: if, being arranged shipwise, they make a ship-shape, we have not an abstract object but a ship.

There are any number of locutions we understand perfectly well that resist the kind of paraphrase van Inwagen recommends. We speak of the ship's planks, of the ship and its planks, of the ship and the planks that compose it, all perfectly fine. By contrast, 'the planks arranged ship-wise's planks,' 'the planks arranged ship-wise and their (?) planks,' and 'the planks arranged ship-wise and the planks that compose them (?)' resist parsing. Put in the hyphens, and all is well. But now we have our ships back.

Things are equally clear in van Inwagen's leading example of the fort (as we say) built of sand by legionnaires. If it is true that the fort is twenty feet high and can withstand an attack, it must be true that the grains of sand arranged fort-wise are (?) and can. None of the grains of sand (our honorary simples here) are or can. So, 'the grains of sand arranged fort-wise' must be understood as referring to a fort-wise arrangement of grains of sand. That thing *is* twenty feet tall and *can* withstand an attack. But that thing is a fort, even if calling it grains of sand arranged fort-wise instead of a grains-of-sand-arranged-fort-wise (or a fort-wise arrangement of grains of sand) obscures this. The first four hyphens in the latter, and the indefinite (or definite) article they licence, make all the difference.⁹

⁷ Even if they are not attached to each other, we may have a single thing if we think of them as, so arranged, constituting an object of interest to us, one, perhaps, with a religious significance. Some think that we would then have a scattered object, as in the familiar example of a watch disassembled for repair or a pipe for cleaning (e.g., Cartwright (1975) and Smart (1973)). For resistance on this, see Biro (2017a).

⁸ Recall Rosenberg's and Elder's complaints.

⁹ The point is a general one: arrangements have properties that the things arranged lack, and vice versa. This is so even if, unlike in the case of the ship and its planks, it is the same property that is in question. At the county fair, your roses may fail to win first prize, yet your arrangement of them may do so, or the other way around. The property of being the most beautiful at the show may attach to the arrangement or to the things arranged (or, of course, to both.)

Van Inwagen insists that in building (so to speak) a fort or a ship we do not bring anything into existence. Just so, if by that is meant that we did not add to the world's stock of simples. But when one says that we have brought a fort or a ship into existence one is, obviously, not saying *that*. One is saying that we have made certain propositions true, for example, that the world now contains a fort or a ship, something it did not do before. It does so because the appropriate (honorary) simples have been arranged in the appropriate way, in the shape of a fort or a ship. So arranged, they *are* ship or fort, and there are now truths about forts or ships when there were none before. When van Inwagen says that we have merely "rearranged the furniture of the earth without adding to" (van Inwagen 1990, 124) he is using 'furniture' to refer to the simples. Once again, we cannot take him to be talking about individual simples, since these cannot be *rearranged*, since they were not – and could not be – arranged in any particular way before. A certain number of them must have been arranged X-wise if we are to talk of something's being *rearranged* so that that something is now arranged Y-wise. And if all we have to start with are the simples, to arrange a number of them Y-wise is to make something, namely, a Y.

It sometimes happens that the host is one bed short for the guest who sensibly prefers not to drive home after the party. Never mind – we can push two capacious armchairs together. We have rearranged the furniture – this, time literally. Have we made a bed? What matters is not what we call what we have made but that there is now something there was not before, something for our guest to spend a tolerably comfortable night in. Neither of the armchairs (our honorary simples here) was like that before the two were pushed together. To say that there is now a bed is just to say that there is now something that has a certain property, can serve a certain function. For that to be the case, we need not have *added* to the furniture. *Of course*, we did not do *that*. There are just as many (honorary) simples as there were before, and there is nothing in addition to them. It is they that are now a bed.

According to van Inwagen, what I have claimed are truths about ships, forts, beds and mountains are merely apparent truths, truths really about simples.¹⁰ But if we accept the paraphrasability-without-loss criterion, we have to conclude that this cannot be so. If there are even loose-talk truths about something that are not reducible to loose-talk truths about anything else, that thing exists.¹¹ But to say that it does is not to say that the thing is something in addition to the (honorary) simples that compose it; thus to

¹⁰ There are, he allows, genuine truths about living things and abstract objects, neither under discussion here.

¹¹ This is not to say that the thing is real as opposed to being fictional. The principle holds within fiction, too.

say that there are composites is not to say that these exist in addition to whatever ultimate simples there are. Since there are truths about ships distinct from any truths about the planks that compose them, truths about composites in general in addition to whatever truths there may be about simples, composites, natural or artifactual, exist, and they do so strictly speaking. Van Inwagen seems to assume that to hold this is to hold that there are such objects in addition to simples. But in arguing that this is not so, he is tilting at windmills.

It may be objected that I have overlooked the fact that, as van Inwagen insists, all he needs his paraphrases to capture is what is strictly true, and since some of the things we ordinarily say about ships – those that imply their existence – are not strictly true, they do not need to be saved. If we can say something that *is* strictly true that captures all the facts without saying what we ordinarily say, the "truths" of the latter need not be captured by our translation. This may seem plausible with respect to the Copernicus example. We know that it is not true, strictly speaking, that the sun moved behind the elms. Of course, in everyday discourse we continue speaking as before. But we can say what *is* strictly true by replacing the everyday description with one that does not carry the same commitments: we can say that the rotation of the earth has brought the elms to be between us and the sun. However, no such paraphrase is available for ordinary utterances about ships and the like, and no scientific discovery can make one available in the way that Copernicus' did for what we said about the garden. It is not that we lack some knowledge about what ships really are such that if we had it, we would no longer need to speak of them. We know that they are composed of planks or the like; knowing this, we still have to speak as we ordinarily do to say what we want to say of *The Queen Mary* when we say that it weighs 81237 tons. Thus there is an important disanalogy between what we are imagining Copernicus as saying and what van Inwagen says about ships. With the former, we are told that we were mistaken about the facts. The latter merely proposes a new way to describe them. We are, post-Copernicus, willing to say that the sun did not move, but we are not, post-van Inwagen, willing to say that the ship has not sailed.¹²

While we have reason to say of what we said in the garden that it was not strictly true, we have no reason to say this of what we say about *The Queen Mary's* tonnage. So, to say that our paraphrase need not capture it, since it is true only in a loose sense is to beg the question. There has to be an independent reason for thinking that it is not strictly true, beyond the fact that it eludes our favoured paraphrase.

One reason van Inwagen offers is that if we accepted that the legionnaires built a fort by pushing the grains of sand around, we would have to accept that whenever we alter the shape of some collection of simples, we

¹² Korman (2009) makes a similar point.

create a new object. His example is kneading a lump of soft clay absent-mindedly into "some complicated and arbitrary shape. Call anything essentially of that shape a gollyswoggle... [i]f you can make a gollyswoggle by accident by kneading clay, then you must, as you idly work the clay in your fingers, be causing the generation and corruption of the members of a compact series of objects of infinitesimal duration. That is what seems to me to be incredible" (van Inwagen 1990, 126). But is it? At time t we have an object with shape g , at t_1 , an object with shape h (call it a hollyswoggle), and so on. We have, of course, no interest in such objects – though we might have, if, say, we suddenly noticed one and found it particularly beautiful or in some other way remarkable. But even if this does not happen, there will be a true proposition 'there is a gollyswoggle,' at time t , a true proposition 'there is a hollyswoggle' at t_1 , another – 'there is a jollyswoggle' – at t_2 , and so on. I see nothing puzzling in this.¹³

van Inwagen also thinks that the only way to avoid the – to him as unwelcome as to me – consequence that two things, a statue and a piece of clay, can be in the same place, is to say that statues exist no more than do gollyswoggles. After all, the shape of the lump of clay that the sculptor formed into the statue changes every instant, if only ever so slightly and even if not by the sculptor's action but the weather's. So, as time passes, we have a succession of statues (let us suppose, to piggy-back on Gibbard's (1975) well-known example, Goliath at time t , Holiath at t_1 , and so on – perhaps, eventually, no statue). If that means that at every instant we have two things, one of the statues and the lump of clay, Lump_l (since the latter does not go out of existence with every change of shape, as each successive Goliath_n is thought to do), we do have a puzzle. But that is a different puzzle from the one that puzzles van Inwagen.¹⁴

¹³ While one can stipulate, as van Inwagen does here that every change in the shape of a piece of clay yields a different object, that is not the way we usually think of pieces of clay. Arguments for co-incident entities typically turn on the opposite assumption, namely, that the piece of clay can survive being deformed, while the statue cannot. Even statues are not essentially of the shape they are, as they can survive changes of shape such as losing an arm.

¹⁴ True, the effects of the weather on the statue – erosion or encrustation – change its, and thus Lump_l's, size, as well as shape, so that if we apply Gibbard's mereological essentialist definition of a piece (no loss or addition of part) strictly, the piece of clay, Lump_l, is as ephemeral as is Goliath. But it is obvious that pieces of clay can tolerate small changes, as in fact Gibbard himself allows. (For a different way of shunning coincident entities, see Biro 2016 and Biro 2017b.) And, of course, we do not think about statues in that way, so that Holiath etc. need not be distinct from Goliath, not even, perhaps, when what we have no longer resembles the subject it represents. (Think of the many examples of abstract, non-figurative painting or sculpture intended and seen to represent without resembling.)

Denying that composite material objects exist is typically motivated by a desire for a sparse ontology and a reluctance to multiply entities beyond necessity.¹⁵ But such Ockhamite goals do not require the eschewing of composites altogether. All one needs to deny is that they exist in addition to whatever simples (ultimate or honorary) compose them. When some planks are put together in a certain way, they make a ship. There is, indeed, nothing where the ship is other than those planks so put together. But to insist on this one need not deny that when they *are* put together in that way, there is a ship, even while agreeing that it is nothing over and above the planks.¹⁶ When they are put together in some other way, there may be something else – a house, perhaps, or a pile of planks, which, too, are single things. If they are scattered, there is no single material thing (though each plank is one). We can hold that ships are not something in addition to their planks without agreeing with van Inwagen that there are no ships. More generally, we can hold that there are composites, even if these are not things in addition to the things that compose them.

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¹⁵ For an example, see Merricks (2001).

¹⁶ This is to endorse the strong version of the so-called composition-as-identity thesis, on which composition *is* identity (Lewis 1991 and Cotnoir 2013).

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