A World Without Persons

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Departmental Honors Thesis
Submitted April 22, 2009
There are no tables, chairs, statues, or even persons! In fact, there are no composite macrophysical particulars. There are only atoms arranged table-wise, chair-wise, statue-wise, and person-wise. While this view, known as eliminativism, may appear to be radical and contradictory, I plan to present several lines of reasoning that support the theory. In discussing composition, I first offer the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects that concludes that all composite macrophysical particulars are epiphenomenal and as such should be eliminated from our ontology. This eliminativistic view is held up against competing theories of composition, including unrestricted composition, restricted composition, vague composition, and brute composition. Rejecting these opposing conceptions of composition leaves only the eliminativistic principle: $x$ compose $y$ if and only if $y$ is not epiphenomenal. This principle of composition endangers human persons as well as all other composite macrophysical particulars. The discussion of the ontology of persons within this eliminativistic framework is focused on refuting arguments aimed at maintaining persons within the ontology. Specifically, I will discuss the work of Trenton Merricks, who claims that persons, in virtue of their being conscious, can survive elimination by their capability of causal activity above and beyond that of their constituent simples. Merricks’s thesis implies the denial of consciousness as supervenient upon the microphysical. I argue to the contrary: consciousness is both supervening and intrinsic. Against Theodore Sider, who argues that consciousness is a property that is maximal and extrinsic, I propose that the proper way to look at consciousness is as minimal and intrinsic. Consciousness is a minimal property inasmuch as it is an attribute of the smallest proper part of a human person from where consciousness arises.¹ My argument that consciousness is a minimal property provides a response to Merricks’s *reductio* of microphysical supervenience, establishing

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¹ This is speaking loosely. Speaking strictly, this proper part does not exist. I will later (in §7) characterize minimality in a more rigorous fashion.
humans as epiphenomenal and candidates for elimination from our ontology. I conclude with a
discussion of how it is possible for there to be consciousness in a world devoid of persons.

§1: Motivating Eliminativism

Several authors have written specifically on the subject of eliminativism: including Peter
Unger, Peter van Inwagen, Jim Stone, and Trenton Merricks. Peter Unger has written that no
material objects exist as composite objects, including persons. Peter van Inwagen has written
several papers on the topic and his book, Material Beings, outlines a solution to material
composition that hinges upon life. He proposes that parts compose a whole (composite material
objects) if and only if the collective activity of those parts constitutes a life. Jim Stone also has
written on eliminativism; he proposes an ontology lacking persons, then considers objections to
his view, especially objections concerning the place of morals in eliminativistic ontology.
Trenton Merricks, while eliminating all other composite particulars, argues for the reality of
persons on the basis of the causal powers of consciousness being able to cause above and beyond
the causal powers of their constituent simples. The eliminativistic theory that I am espousing
removes even persons from the ontology. My ontology is limited to the microphysical alone.
This microphysical ontology searches for the most fundamental causal particulars. (I will use the
term “atoms”, in the classical sense, to refer to these fundamental causal particulars, i.e.
simples). In order to make the move to eliminate persons, persons must be shown to be
epiphenomenal. The goal of this paper is just that – to show persons to be epiphenomenal and

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Cornell University Press. 235-251.
5 This view presupposes that there are fundamental particulars, denying views that see matter as
infinitely divisible or made up of a homogeneous “gunk.”
thus eliminable. I will argue that the defense of persons presented by Trenton Merricks fails and he cannot show that we, in virtue of being conscious, have causal powers that are above and beyond our atomic constituents acting in concert. Before getting into the ontology of persons, an argument for eliminativism is called for.

Trenton Merricks, in *Objects and Persons*, presents an argument for eliminativism in the form of a causal argument he deems the “Overdetermination Argument.” Adapting his argument we can formulate the following *Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects*.

Let O be an arbitrary composite macrophysical particular. Let E be an arbitrarily selected effect of some of the proper parts of O acting in concert.

1. O is not a partial cause of E.
2. O is not an intermediary cause between the proper parts of O and E.
3. O does not cause the proper parts of O to cause E.
4. O is not one of its own proper parts.

Therefore (5) O is not causally relevant to its proper parts, acting in concert, causing E.

6. O is not an overdetermining cause of E.

Therefore (7) O is causally irrelevant to E.

Generalizing, (8) for any composite macrophysical particular O and any effect E of the proper parts of O, acting in concert, O is causally irrelevant to E.

9. If a composite macrophysical particular has any effects, then those effects are effects of its proper parts, acting in concert.

Therefore (10) no composite macrophysical particular has any causal effects.

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Therefore (11) any composite macrophysical particular is epiphenomenal.

(12) There are no epiphenomenal objects.

Therefore (13) there are no composite macrophysical particulars.

In examining (1) – (5) of the above argument consider the case used by Merricks of a gang vandalizing a park while you are walking by. This analogy allows us to see the causal principles that underlie the first five steps of this argument. Firstly, you are not yourself one of the gang members. Also, you do not cause the vandalism alongside the gang members (as a partial cause); you are not an intermediate between the gang and the vandalism. Lastly, you do not cause the gang to vandalize the park. When the gang vandalizes the park, you, not being part of the gang and not being involved in the vandalizing, are causally irrelevant to the vandalism. For a particular to be causally irrelevant requires that it meet these four criteria. First, the object is not itself one of its proper parts. Second, the object is not a partial cause of the effect of its proper part, acting in concert, alongside the proper parts. Third, the object is not an intermediary between its proper parts and the effect (the proper parts do not cause the macrophysical object to cause the effect). Finally, the object does not cause the proper parts to cause the effect. When all four of these criteria are met an object can be understood to be causally irrelevant. Focusing on macrophysical objects, the very nature of composite macrophysical particulars is such that they fulfill these criteria and are causally irrelevant.

Consider a variation of the vandal analogy above, where the macrophysical object O is taken to be the gang itself, rather than you. In this revised analogy the same causal principles arise. Firstly, the gang is not a proper part of itself nor is it a member of itself. Secondly, the gang is not a partial cause of the vandalism, which results solely from the activity of the gang members. The *gang*, taken as a macrophysical composite, is not the type of entity able to pick
up spray cans and graffiti a wall. Those actions belong to the members of the group. The gang is also not an intermediary cause between the members and the vandalism. It is not the case that the members cause their group to spray-paint graffiti; again, it is the members that perform such actions, not the group itself. Lastly, the gang does not cause its members to cause the vandalism. One may argue that being in a gang promotes people to act in ways that create opportunities for vandalism and without the gang’s existence the vandalism would not have occurred. This may be the case, but this is not the same as the gang’s causing the members to cause the vandalism. In this revised vandal analogy the gang, *qua* macrophysical composite, is causally irrelevant to whether its members, acting in concert, cause any vandalism.

This brings us to (6) – (9). Considering that the gang is not an overdetermining cause of the vandalism, (6), we must conclude that the gang is not only causally irrelevant to its members causing the vandalism, it is also itself causally irrelevant to the vandalism, (7). But, it is not just that the gang is causally irrelevant to the vandalism. When we discuss “gangs” as causes we are not referring to real concrete particulars. Rather talk of “gangs” as a cause of activity of its members is to be understood as shorthand for the complex relationships between the individual gang members and their causal effects. Any activity of the gang’s members, individually or acting in concert, cannot in addition be an activity of the collective gang, because the gang is irrelevant to the effects of its members, (8). The gang, by its nature, cannot have activities other than those of its members, individually or acting in concert, (9). Because the gang cannot have any activities beyond those of its members, and any activity of the gang’s members is not an activity of the gang, the gang has no effects, (10). Just as it is with “gangs”, so it is with any composite macrophysical particulars. Such “objects” are nothing more than atoms arranged object-wise, standing in causal and spatiotemporal relations. Just as the effects of the gang are
actually the effects of its proper parts, its members, acting in concert, so to the effects of composite macrophysical particulars are effects of their proper parts, acting in concert, (9). This is a “bottom-up” view of causation wherein the spatiotemporal and causal relations of the atomic parts of an object hold all explanatory and causal power for that object. The argument shows that if there are any composite macrophysical particulars then they are epiphenomenal as all that can be ascribed to an alleged object can be explained by the intrinsic properties of, and spatiotemporal and causal interrelations among, that object’s constituent atomic parts. In proposing this eliminativistic viewpoint I am favoring a sparse ontology and relying on what I call the Anti-Epiphenomena Principle (used in (12) of the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects).

*Anti-Epiphenomena Principle:* There are no epiphenomenal concrete particulars.

The Anti-Epiphenomena Principle arises from a naturalist view of the world. According to this view the world is understood as a spatiotemporal manifold with objects located in the manifold and related to each other through a complex causal nexus. Objects situated in the manifold are located in space and time and, as such, they have causal effects on other objects around them, even if only by virtue of their placement preventing other objects from occupying the same space at the same time. Through the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects, I hold that any composite macrophysical particulars would have to be epiphenomenal and therefore should be eliminated from our ontology. Some of the primary objections to eliminativism arise from differing concepts of composition. I will begin by rejecting some common views of composition, beginning with unrestricted composition then the variants of restricted composition.
§2: Rejection of Unrestricted Composition

A reader may agree with my argument that no simple is epiphenomenal, he may even agree that composite objects, if they exist, are epiphenomenal, but this is not enough to counter those that view composition as a mereological concept. This is the school of thought that endorses unrestricted material composition. Ned Markosian describes the view:

Unrestricted Composition: Necessarily, for any non-overlapping $x$s, there is a $y$ such that $y$ is composed of the $x$s.\(^7\)

If we believe in unrestricted composition we are forced to allow the existence of some very bizarre objects. Consider two objects, the Eiffel Tower and my dog, Jack. Those who agree with unrestricted composition would say that there exists a third object, a composite whole made up of the Eiffel Tower and Jack, lets call it Eiffel-Jack. This third object, Eiffel-Jack is what is objectionable to our intuitions. It gets even stranger; consider the composite of a hydrogen atom in the sun and the piece of paper called the Declaration of Independence. When metaphysically disparate objects are combined the resulting objects are even more counterintuitive. The more profligate the ontology the stranger the objects of unrestricted composition can become; imagine, if you can, the composite of a rock, a color trope, and a sound, say middle C.

Putting aside the weirdness of the objects mentioned above, unrestricted composition has some other interesting consequences. The most interesting consequence for this paper comes from an essay by Peter Unger entitled “I Do Not Exist.”\(^8\) Unger agrees with unrestricted composition yet comes to the conclusion that persons do not exist, the same conclusion that I am arguing for. Paraphrasing his argument, consider a single person, alone in a room. That person is made up of a large but finite number of atomic simples. It is ridiculous for all of those simples


\(^8\) Unger, 235-251.
to be essential to the person as persons regularly take up, alter, and emit matter in the form of air, food, and the processes of life. Since it cannot be the case that all of our simples are essential, some of those simples must be negligible (individually) to the existence of the person; we can cut our hair and clip our nails without having to worry about our existence. If we are composed of simples, but those simples are not essential to our being, then we can remove or add a few atoms without changing our personhood. Which of many minutely differing compositions of simples compose the man alone in the room? Unrestricted composition will have us believe that there are countless objects in the room. Each of these objects lays similar if not identical claim to being the man in question. It is arbitrary to choose which one does so; either all are men or none are. The first is an absurd conclusion; there are not a multitude of persons, each differing by only a few simples, in a room with only one man in it. Unger uses the absurdity of the multitude of persons to conclude that none of the myriad composite objects compose men. This conclusion is also absurd but not because humans do not exist; it is because none of the compound objects arranged human-wise are human. Given unrestricted composition, the absurdities in the composition of persons arise whether or not the many man-shaped composites actually compose men. For this reason I treat Unger’s argument as a reductio of unrestricted composition itself.

Endorsing unrestricted composition not only commits us to radical and bizarre objects, it also commits us to some interesting consequences regarding composite objects. Due to the counterintuitive ontology and absurdities in the composition of persons, unrestricted composition can be dismissed. Rejecting unrestricted composition leaves us with four options, eliminativism (rejecting composition) and three types of restricted composition: principled determinate restricted composition, principled vague restricted composition, and unprincipled but restricted composition.

See Markosian 343-346 for a discussion of unrestricted composition and its entailment of four dimensionalism and unrestricted diachronic identity.
brute composition. For ease of reference I will refer to these three types of restricted composition as restricted composition, vague composition, and brute composition, respectively.

§3: Rejection of Principled Restricted Composition

The rejection of unrestricted composition and the bizarre objects it commits us to leads to views of restricted composition (ignoring the eliminativistic answer for the time being). Restricted composition claims that some composites exist while others do not. The means for determining whether composition takes place is usually some principle of composition (except in the case of brute composition\textsuperscript{10}). That principle is usually a principle of relation between simples. A common principle is that of contiguity or connectedness; non-overlapping \(x\)s compose \(y\) if and only if they are in contact. This rules out the bizarre sums of unrestricted composition like Eiffel-Jack but how satisfactory is the principle? Given this principle of contact every time I pick up a book a new object is created composed of the book and me. Consider a simple handshake, when two people clasp hands are they composing a third object composed of the two people?\textsuperscript{11} The principle of contact for composition leads to some strange objects, like my book and me or the composite of the two hand shakers.

Another principle, one that more closely mirrors the commonsense view of the matter, is that composition occurs when parts are cohered and move together as a unit (dynamical interconnectedness\textsuperscript{12}). Markosian uses the term “fastenation” for this principle.\textsuperscript{13} This principle also deals with the more bizarre objects of unrestricted composition, such as Eiffel-Jack since when Jack moves the Eiffel Tower surely does not. But consider the case of a house built of

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\textsuperscript{10} Brute composition, see §4, is unprincipled composition. Brute compositionalists (Markosian) hold that composition is determined only by brute facts.

\textsuperscript{11} Van Inwagen, 57.


\textsuperscript{13} Markosian, 349.
many bricks. Surely when we move the house (considering that we can) we move all the bricks at the same time. But the converse is not true; bricks can be removed and placed elsewhere in the structure without the house moving at all. Markosian uses the example of two men who clasp hands in a handshake then are permanently stuck that way. These two men are “fastened” together and, by the principle of “fastenation,” they compose an object. Clearly these two men do not compose an object. This principle, while closer to common sense, still admits bizarre objects into our ontology.

Beyond the mere weirdness of the principles of contact and cohesion ("fastenation"), there is also a deeper worry, one that is present for any moderate answer to the question of composition (one that isn’t unrestricted or eliminativistic). The problem is that the moderate principles rely upon relationships that hold only to a matter of degree. These moderate relationships of composition are subject to being metaphysically vague and arbitrary. Consider a model airplane. When you buy the plane in the model store it is in a box in different pieces. When you take those pieces out and organize them on your workspace they are separate and not cohered. Slowly you begin to put together your airplane and you end up with a finished object made of parts that are both in contact and cohesive. When in the process of building the plane did it come into being? A restricted compositionalist will have to say that at some point the airplane started to exist as a composite being as when construction begun it did not and when finished it did. The answers to the question of when and why the plane became a plane instead of just being disparate parts are either arbitrary or vague.

§4: Rejection of Vague and Brute Composition

The rejection of unrestricted composition has led to views of restricted composition that depend upon principles of relationship between the parts of composites. These principles are
based in degrees. There are examples of fastenation that lead to indeterminacies. Consider the difference between ice frozen to my car and a new paint job on the same car. Both the ice and the new paint are fastened to my car. Yet, while we are willing to include the new paint in the composite object “my car”, we are not willing to admit that the ice and my car form a new composite object. These moderate principles are subject to charges of indeterminacy and metaphysical vagueness as seen in the prior section. There are two theories that accepted these consequences of restricted composition and propose alternate answers.

Peter van Inwagen argues that composition is dependent upon life; $x$s compose $y$ if and only if $y$ is a living organism. This principle of composition grants us living objects but still strips the ontology of all inanimate composite objects. The use of life as the criteria for composition is itself difficult as even biology has a hard time determining what is and what is not alive. Look at viruses for the most obvious example. Beyond the difficulty of defining what constitutes a living organism, the admission of living objects into our ontology requires metaphysical vagueness. Living objects are homeostatic and constantly in flux, there is a constant intake and expulsion of matter. When we eat, breathe, digest, metabolize, grow, and go through our daily lives we are constantly exchanging simples with the world around us and constantly changing the simples that make us up. This is a similar problem to the one motivating Peter Unger’s argument against human composition. Unger, as an unrestricted compositionalist, sees compositional vagueness as creating a multiplication of persons. Responding to Unger, van Inwagen chooses to restrict composition and admits that living things are vague because of this nature of life. This metaphysical vagueness is likened to the conceptual vagueness found in concepts like tallness or baldness. Yet, metaphysical vagueness, unlike conceptual vagueness is suspect. There is a well-known passage by David Lewis on vagueness in the world:
The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason it’s vague where the outback begins is not that there’s this thing, the outback, with imprecise boundaries; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word ‘outback’. Vagueness is semantic indecision. But not all of language is vague. … The question of whether composition takes place in a given case, whether a given class does or does not have a mereological sum, can be stated in a part of language where nothing is vague. Therefore, it cannot have a vague answer.¹⁴

Not only is metaphysical vagueness unattractive on the grounds used by Lewis, metaphysical vagueness of composition also leads us to an indeterminate number of objects in the universe. This cannot be. A fact about the number of real particulars populating the world cannot have indeterminacy. Metaphysical vagueness is not a satisfactory answer to the question of composition.

The other view accepts that principles of restricted composition based in relations are vague and therefore denies that there needs to be any principle at all. This theory, called “brute composition” by Ned Markosian claims that restricted composition is just a matter of brute facts that some simples compose objects and some do not.¹⁵ This view is in line with our commonsense views of what objects compose the world but is in conflict with our reasoning for those views. The main objection to this form of composition is its very “brutishness” and lack of principles. Brute composition, lacking a principle of composition, has no general guide for determining composition. If one group of simples composes an object while another group does not, then it seems there should be a reason why not just brute facts as the basis for explanation. It is implausible to say that compositional facts are brutish. The very “brutishness” of brute composition is objectionable and hard to swallow. Facts about what composites exist are not brute and are not metaphysically vague. Rejecting unrestricted composition, restricted

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¹⁵ Markosian, 352.
composition, Markosian’s brute composition and van Inwagen’s vague composition, the best solution to the problem of composition is the eliminativistic one presented in §1; all composite macrophysical particulars are epiphenomenal and any \( xs \) compose a \( y \) if and only if \( y \) is not epiphenomenal.

§5: Merricks’s Defense of Persons – Composition as Dependent upon Consciousness

The argument against composite macrophysical particulars has such strength that Merricks must spend the majority of his book defending human persons from elimination. Merricks argues that consciousness is an intrinsic property that does not supervene upon the microphysical. He argues that consciousness is the property that allows humans to cause effects above and beyond the causality of their constituent atoms, hence be non-epiphenomenal. This is a direct rejection of (9) in the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects:

(9) If a composite macrophysical particular has any effects, then those effects are effects of its proper parts, acting in concert.

Merricks argues that in virtue of being conscious human beings have causal effects beyond their proper parts, acting in concert, and having those causal powers are not epiphenomenal. Merricks bases his argument around the rejection of the claim \((C)\):

\[\textbf{Consciousness (C):} \text{ Necessarily, if some atoms } A_1\ldots A_n \text{ compose a conscious object, then any atoms intrinsically like } A_1\ldots A_n, \text{ interrelated by all the same spatiotemporal and causal interrelations as } A_1\ldots A_n, \text{ compose a conscious object.}\]

The claim \((C)\) can be broken down into two components, a principle of microphysical supervenience and a Lewisian principle of intrinsicality.\[\text{\[16\text{ Ibid, 94.}\]
\[17\text{ The principle is based upon the analysis of intrinsicality provided by Lewis in } On \text{ the Plurality of Worlds } (\text{Cited by Sider}). \text{ Lewis defines intrinsic properties as properties that can never be different between a pair of “duplicate objects.” Duplicates are defined as objects that have the same perfectly natural properties and the same perfectly natural relations. This can be rephrased}\]}

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**Principle of microphysical supervenience:** Any atom-for-atom duplicate of \(x\) is a duplicate of \(x\).

**Principle of intrinsicality:** Any duplicate of \(x\) has all the intrinsic properties of \(x\).

Here is a reworking of the *reductio* Merricks uses to show that (C) is false.\(^{18}\) First, suppose (C) and the intuition that consciousness is intrinsic. Now, suppose a person Pete\(_1\), at time \(t_1\), exists and is a healthy conscious human being. Now suppose that at time \(t_2\) Pete accidentally cuts off his left index finger. Suppose also that the atoms that compose the fingerless Pete\(_2\) at the instant \(t_2\) that the finger is removed, stand in the same spatiotemporal and causal relations to each other as they did immediately before the finger is amputated. Post-amputation, those atoms compose the conscious object Pete\(_2\), however, prior to the amputation those atoms compose, if they compose anything, only a proper part of Pete\(_1\). Suppose now, for *reductio*, that the atoms composing Pete\(_2\) (post-amputation) did compose another object prior to the amputation, let’s call that object Pete-minus\(_1\) (the proper part of Pete\(_1\) minus his left index finger). Consider the following graphic:

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\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{t}_1 & \text{Pete}_1 & \text{Pete-minus}_1 \\
\hline
\text{Amputation} \\
\text{t}_2 & \text{Pete}_2
\end{array}
\]

Suppose the finger amputation does not terminate the consciousness of any conscious thing. Our consciousness surely does not lie in our fingers; persons, if they exist, can survive not only the

loss of a finger, but even of multiple limbs. Pete_{1} is a conscious human being and since finger amputations are not consciousness-ending events, Pete_{2} is conscious as well. Pete-minus_{1} is atom-for-atom intrinsically identical to Pete_{2}. Given (C) and the supposition that consciousness is intrinsic, Pete-minus_{1} is conscious as it is an atom-for-atom duplicate of Pete_{2} and hence a duplicate of Pete_{2}. But Pete-minus_{1} is a proper part of Pete_{1} so both Pete_{1} and a proper part of Pete_{1} are conscious. This is absurd!

Let us now reconsider (C) with this argument in mind. Since Pete-minus_{1} is an atom-for-atom duplicate of Pete_{2} and only Pete_{2} is conscious, something is wrong with either (C) or the supposition that consciousness is intrinsic. (C) has been broken down into two components, the principles of microphysical supervenience and intrinsicality. Merricks uses his argument as a *reductio* of the microphysical supervenience principle, maintaining the principle of intrinsicality and the supposition that consciousness is intrinsic. Under Merricks’s view, Pete-minus_{1} is not a duplicate of Pete_{2} but rather just an atom-for-atom duplicate of Pete_{2}. The simples are duplicated, but not the composites. Pete-minus_{1} is not conscious because it is not a duplicate composite, only a duplicate of simples; duplicating the parts does not duplicate the composites. When two objects share the same simples but have differing properties, the differing properties do not supervene upon the microphysical. This is the conclusion that Merricks draws, the denial of the supervenience of consciousness upon the microphysical, (C). By denying (C) Merricks is able to reject (9) from the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects and save humans from elimination by showing us to be non-epiphenomenal. As we have seen, Merricks, when faced with the absurdity above, chose to deny the microphysical supervenience of consciousness and maintain its intrinsicality. However, it is possible to deny the intrinsicality and keep the microphysical supervenience and this is what Theodore Sider has done.
Theodore Sider, in his paper “Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience,” argues against Merricks directly, making the objection that consciousness, or at least, *being a conscious being*, is a maximal extrinsic property. Sider agrees with Merricks’s *reductio*, but sees a problem with the rejection of the principle of microphysical causation. Rather, Sider chooses to maintain both components of (C) and reject the supposition that consciousness is intrinsic. Note that Sider is not rejecting all intrinsic properties, just the idea that consciousness is an intrinsic property. Sider makes several arguments for consciousness being a maximal extrinsic property, all of which put doubt on Merricks’s claims. If consciousness is extrinsic it does not fit the bill for Merricks’s arguments and does not allow for our exemption from elimination.

For the following argumentation let me present a similar case to that of Pete and his missing index finger. Consider two regular persons, Bill and Bob, who are identical in all respects except that Bill has recently lost his left index finger and Bob has not. Bob has a part of him that consists of his entire body save for his left index finger, let us call this part Bob-minus. (Bob-minus is identical in respect to the properties of and spatiotemporal and causal interrelations of its atomic constituents to Bill.) If regular people are conscious, then Bill is a conscious being and so is Bob, but we would not say that Bob-minus is a conscious being, as it is a proper part of Bob. Bob-minus, however, is an atom-for-atom duplicate of Bill, so by the principle of microphysical supervenience, the principle of intrinsicality, and the supposition that consciousness is intrinsic, if Bill is conscious then so is Bob-minus. The problem lies in allowing Bob to be conscious without Bob-minus also having to be conscious. Sider argues for an alternate response to this problem, one that does not require the denial of microphysical

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supervenience. This response is that consciousness is not an intrinsic property; it is an extrinsic maximal property.

Sider presents us with an analysis of consciousness (being a conscious being) as being a maximal extrinsic property. The maximal property being a conscious being is a property such it is only instanced when larger parts of the conscious being are not themselves conscious beings. Maximality then is a “kind of border-sensitivity: whether something counts as a house or cat depends upon on what is going on around its borders.” Sider asks us to consider all the parts of a cat excepting its undetached tail; let us call this object cat-minus. Cat-minus is not a cat as it has attached to it a tail, which is normally part of a cat. What we consider to be the whole being that is the cat includes its tail, given that it has one. Since cat-minus has an undetached tail, it is not the cat, only part of it. If the cat containing cat-minus were to lose its tail, then cat-minus would become a cat. Sider claims the same is true of conscious beings. What we consider to be a conscious person is the totality of undetached parts making up that person, not just a smaller part of him or her. When we think of someone, we think of the whole of him or her not just of their brain or some other proper part. If a person has amputations those lost parts are no longer part of the undetached whole and are no longer relevant to that person. Because the holding of a maximal property depends upon other objects in the near vicinity of the object in question this kind of property is necessarily extrinsic. Whether cat-minus has the property being a cat depends entirely upon whether the cat containing cat-minus has a tail or not. In our case,

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20 Maximal properties are typically instanced by sortal predicates, so the sortal property being a conscious being is maximal while the non-sortal property being conscious is not. This can lead to two lines of argumentation against Merricks but as the lines are similar I will only discuss maximal sortal properties.
21 Sider, 1. The use of house and cat are from the examples Sider uses to motivate the idea of maximal properties. “A large part of a house – all of the house save a window, say – does not itself count as a house” because the window is present and existent.
22 Ibid.
whether Bob-minus has the property *being a conscious being* depends upon whether Bob-minus attached to a finger. Bob-minus is not conscious, as it is not maximal; it has an undetached finger outside of it that is part of the larger being, Bob. Bill is not attached to his left index finger (it was amputated) and therefore is conscious; he is not a proper part of a larger conscious being (as Bob-minus is a proper part of larger conscious being Bob). The Lewisian conception of intrinsicality and Sider’s view on the maximality of consciousness allow him to show that consciousness is not an intrinsic property.

Unlike Merricks and Sider, I claim that consciousness can be both intrinsic and supervenient upon the microphysical (lacking novel causal powers). My naturalistic viewpoint forms the basis for maintaining that consciousness, if it exists, is microphysically supervenient and should be the type of property considered intrinsic under the Lewisian conception. By arguing that consciousness is intrinsic, I am dismissing the arguments made by Sider, and by arguing that it is supervenient, I am going against the arguments made by Merricks. Remember that Bob-minus is the part of Bob (who has a full set of fingers) that is all of Bob except for his undetached left index finger. Recall also that Bill is identical in every microphysical way to Bob-minus, excepting that Bill is not part of a larger entity; Bill has had his left index finger amputated. Merricks claims that he views consciousness as intrinsic, but to Merricks what makes Bob conscious, and not Bob-minus, appears to be a relation to the left index finger of Bob. In his view, the presence of a finger is enough to make Bob-minus not conscious and the lack of a finger is enough to make Bill conscious. The fact that Bob-minus is attached to a finger (outside of itself) is crucial to it not being conscious. But, intrinsic properties rely solely upon the object instantiating them. Things outside of Bob-minus (like Bob’s finger) do not alter the intrinsic properties of Bob-minus. Merricks may call his consciousness intrinsic, but given the
Lewisian analysis of intrinsicality he appears to be relying on extrinsic factors, namely the presence or absence of an undetached finger. If consciousness is intrinsic and supervenes upon the microphysical, then either both Bill and Bob-minus are conscious or neither are. I argue that whatever is conscious, if anything is, is intrinsically conscious and that consciousness is supervenient on the microphysical.

§7: The Minimality of Consciousness – Supervenience and Intrinsicality

I assert that the following propositions can be made concerning consciousness.

(i) Consciousness is intrinsic.

(ii) Consciousness supervenes on microphysical simples.

(iii) No proper part of a conscious particular is conscious.

Given intrinsicality, (i),

(iv) Whether or not Bob-minus is conscious cannot depend entirely upon whether or not Bob is conscious, as the undetached finger of Bob is extrinsic to Bob-minus.

Bob-minus and Bill are atom-for-atom duplicates. Given supervenience, (ii), it follows that Bob-minus and Bill are duplicates. Given intrinsicality, (i), it follows that

(v) Whether or not Bob-minus is conscious depends entirely upon whether or not Bill is conscious.

Proposition (iii) is the non-controversial intuition that there are not multiple conscious entities all presently sitting in my chair, typing this text, and thinking about these problems. However, if Bob and Bill are both conscious then (i) – (v) are contradictory, because Bob-minus must be conscious from (iv), but both Bob-minus and Bob cannot both be conscious, by (iii). Merricks
makes the claim here that consciousness does not supervene upon microphysical composition, rejecting (ii) and thus (v). Sider holds that proposition (i) is false thereby making the arguments for (iv) and (v) unsound. Let me propose an alternative. Propositions (i) – (v) are not contradictory because only a proper part of Bill (and a proper part of Bob) is conscious. Neither Bill nor Bob are conscious, rather Bill is only nominally conscious (in virtue of his having a conscious proper part), and from (v), we can say that Bob-minus must be only nominally conscious as well. Since neither Bob nor Bob-minus are strictly conscious, proposition (iii) is not contradicted. “Nominal consciousness” is to be understood not as a type of consciousness, but in the loose and popular use of the word ‘consciousness’ not in the strict and philosophical use.\(^{23}\) Any being with a conscious proper part can be loosely considered conscious. In the strict, philosophical, sense, a being with a conscious proper part is not itself conscious, but only nominally so. In strict and philosophical terms, Bill, Bob, and Bob-minus are not really conscious, only a proper part of them is. With the supposition that consciousness is held by a proper part of Bill (and Bob), (i) – (v) hold, consciousness can be both intrinsic and supervene upon the microphysical simples of a conscious particular.

The supposition that consciousness is held by a proper part of a “conscious” object requires explanation. Consider the idea of maximality that Sider proposes. A maximal property is such that only the “largest” object in the vicinity can hold that property. In terms of consciousness, this shows that Bob is conscious while Bob-minus is not for the reason that Bob is the largest “conscious object” in the vicinity (larger than Bob-minus by his undetached left index finger). On Sider’s account, Bill is also conscious, since he is no longer connected to his amputated finger. Bill is the largest “conscious object” in his vicinity. Now, to arrive at the

\(^{23}\) “Loose and popular” and “strict and philosophical” are taken in Butler’s sense as cited by Chisholm, Roderick. 1976. *Person and Object*. La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 92.
supposition that consciousness belongs to a proper part of a conscious object, Sider must be turned around. Instead of presenting the maximality of consciousness, I propose the “minimality” of consciousness.

It is intuitive not to like the idea that consciousness depends upon presence or absence of a finger (or even an atom of that finger), as Merricks would have us believe. My fingers surely do not play a role in my consciousness; neither do my toes or even my arms and legs. Persons, if they exist, can survive the loss of all four limbs and still remain conscious. As opposed to looking to the largest object as Sider does, we should look for the minimal proper part that is conscious. Let me call those simples that constitute a consciousness the Minimal Requirement for Consciousness (MRC). I hold that a MRC is constituted by those simples that, functioning together, constitute our being conscious. The MRC allows for the above argumentation to be valid; consciousness can be both intrinsic and supervene upon the microphysical components of a conscious object. The five propositions above remain the same, with the first two changed to:

(i*) Consciousness is intrinsic to the simples constituting a MRC.

(ii*) Consciousness supervenes on the microphysical simples constituting a MRC.

Using the idea of the MRC we can take another look at the thought experiment concerning Bill and Bob. Bill is “conscious” (nominally) in virtue of having the MRC as a proper part; therefore Bob-minus is “conscious” as he has the MRC as a proper part of him, as per supervenience and intrinsicality. However, Bob is also “conscious” as he also has the MRC as a proper part. One will quickly note that this appears to go against proposition (iii), the non-plurality of conscious beings. Bob, containing Bob-minus’s MRC as a proper part cannot be conscious from (iii), above. I concede that Bob is not conscious, only the MRC is conscious. Bob’s “consciousness” arises in virtue of having a proper part that is conscious, the MRC. While
the MRC is the only holder of the property of consciousness, any person, if they exist, with the MRC as a proper part gains a nominal form of “consciousness” from the MRC. The restraint on consciousness regarding the multiplicity of persons, proposition (iii), presents no problems in this case. All five propositions together are true under the conception of the minimality of consciousness.

Remember that Merricks’s main argument to try and save persons from elimination hinges upon his thought experiment concerning Pete and his reductio of (C). When considered in light of the MRC this thought experiment yields the conclusion that both Pete₁ and Pete-minus₁ are nominally conscious in virtue of sharing the MRC as a proper part. This conclusion does not lead to the absurd multiplicity of conscious beings, just multiple beings sharing in the same MRC. Without the absurdity the reductio fails, rendering Merricks’s claims regarding the falsehood of (C) meritless.

While Merricks will have us drop the microphysical supervenience of consciousness and Sider will have remove the intrinsicality of consciousness, the MRC that I propose allows consciousness to be an intrinsic property held by any duplicate MRC and also supervenient upon the microphysical. This is shown through the validity of propositions (i-v) under the concept of the MRC. It is important to reiterate the claims against composite macrophysical particulars made earlier in this paper. The MRC is not a composite macrophysical particular, but rather the minimum number of simples that, acting in concert, constitute being conscious. I am not arguing that while persons do not exist while there exists this lump of flesh “in our heads” that is conscious. Instead, I am arguing that being conscious is a property that is exemplified minimally – that is not by atoms arranged person-wise or even brain-wise but rather by atoms arranged MRC-wise!
§8: A World Without Persons

We have seen that the theories of composition resting on unrestricted composition, restricted composition, vagueness, and brute facts are suspect. From the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects (§1), we get the principle of Microphysical Causation.

*Microphysical Causation Principle:* Composite objects are causally irrelevant to whether their microphysical parts, acting in concert, cause effects and composite objects do not overdetermine effects caused by their microphysical parts acting in concert.

This principle combined with the Anti-Epiphenomena Principle yields the conclusion of the Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects, that there are no composite macrophysical particulars. If a composite whole, O, is causally irrelevant to whether its parts, acting in concert, cause E, and if O does not overdetermine any effect of its parts, acting in concert, then O has no effects. If to be is to cause (Anti-Epiphenomena Principle) and O has no causal powers then O does not exist. The above line of argument is aimed at showing that consciousness, as minimal, can be both intrinsic and supervene on the microphysical structure of atoms arranged conscious being-wise. With these two criteria met, conscious composites not only become causally irrelevant but also epiphenomenal. With conscious composites being epiphenomenal human persons lose any causal powers and become epiphenomenal themselves. From the argument in §1, human persons do not exist.

If no composite macrophysical particulars exist, including human persons, then it appears that consciousness is either unexemplified or exemplified by a simple microphysical particular. Disregarding Leibniz’s monad theory, it is objectionable to say that a simple particular can be conscious, since I maintain that all simples are microphysical particulars. If there are no
composite particulars, and no microphysical particulars can be conscious, then it appears being conscious is an unexemplified property. I acknowledge that there are no real particulars that are conscious; I am arguing that there are no persons. Nonetheless, the property being a conscious being should be viewed in the same way as the property being a table, chair, or any other alleged composite macrophysical particular that has only nominal existence. In describing an object, say a table, what we talk about when we use the word “table” is not the composite macrophysical particular, as it does not exist, but rather “table” is a form of shorthand for the atoms making up the table, arranged table-wise, and their intrinsic properties and causal and spatiotemporal interrelations. I am using “arranged table-wise” to denote a distributive reference to the atoms occupying the space of the “table” and which would, given composition, normally be considered to compose the table. I am not referring to an aggregate of atoms arranged like a table, as this is as much a composite macrophysical particular as the table is. When we talk about the properties held by the “table,” such discussion should be understood in a similar manner. These properties, be they hardness, color, texture, are all held by some or all of the atoms arranged table-wise, not the non-existent table. Likewise, “persons” can also be treated as having nominal existence with properties held to atoms arranged person-wise. When we use the word ‘person’ we are not talking about a composite macrophysical particular but rather about atoms arranged person-wise. Like atoms arranged table-wise, atoms arranged person-wise are the atoms that, given composition, would normally compose a person. The properties of persons are also to be attributed to some or all of the atoms arranged person-wise, acting in concert. Specifically, the property of consciousness, under the concept of minimality, belongs to the atoms arranged MRC-wise.

The Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects identifies many everyday “objects” as epiphenomenal and henceforth calls for their elimination. The most controversial of these alleged objects are persons. My discussion of the ontology of persons focuses on consciousness and the causal powers associated with being a conscious object (if there are such particulars). Trenton Merricks will have us view consciousness as an intrinsic non-supervening property that allows humans to have causal powers above and beyond their atomic constituents. Theodore Sider views consciousness as an extrinsic maximality. I have argued that consciousness should rather be described as a minimal property, and both intrinsic and microphysically supervenient. Consciousness, when viewed as a property of atoms arranged conscious being-wise does not provide human persons with causal powers above and beyond their constituent simples. The Argument Against Epiphenomenal Objects correctly identifies persons as epiphenomenal and therefore eliminable along with all other composite macrophysical particulars. We attribute a nominal existence to everyday objects around us, substituting “table” for “atoms arranged table-wise.” A world without persons may be strange, but such is the result of the goal of achieving an austere naturalistic ontology devoid of epiphenomenal objects.