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An Exploration & Defence of Non-Eliminative Mereological Nihilism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

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March 2024

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Presentations

Holistic Support & Cohen's Problem of Easy Knowledge. (2021, April). 24th Annual Phi Sigma Tau Student Philosophy Symposium, Texas State University, USA.

Implicit Bias and Mere Moral Failure. (2020, May). Research Workshop, Cal Poly, USA.

Hold On to Your Cat: Sameness, Identity, and Non-Eliminative Nihilism. (2019, February). ASU Graduate Conference, Tempe, Arizona, USA.

Questioning the Depths of Incommensurability. (2016, May). The Cultural Mind Graduate Conference, Dublin, Ireland.

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Abstract

An Exploration & Defence of Non-Eliminative Mereological Nihilism

Seán Pierce

This dissertation explores and defends non-eliminative mereological nihilism ('NEN'). NEN is not a single view: many views can be non-eliminative and nihilist. An eliminative view is one that denies the existence of many kinds of ordinary objects: things like planets, cats, and chairs. A non-eliminative view is one that accepts the existence of all ordinary objects. Mereological nihilism is the view that composition never occurs, that composites (objects with proper parts) do not exist. NEN views are, therefore, those that accept all ordinary objects exist but deny any composites exist. NEN is an often overlooked—and so, underexplored—kind of view. Hence my intention to explore and defend it in this dissertation, which consists of consists of four, self-standing chapters.

In chapter 1, I argue a particular NEN view does not conflict with Mooreanism. Mooreanism, very roughly, is a methodological approach espousing the intuitive and commonsensical in the face of philosophical arguments to the contrary. The main claim of the chapter is that, in accepting ordinary objects exist and (in some sense) have parts, NEN can avoid conflict with Mooreanism. NEN avoiding this conflict would be a significant theoretical virtue in the eyes of many Mooreans. Likewise, it gives (Moorean-inclined) nihilists reason to prefer NEN over eliminative forms of nihilism—assuming eliminativism conflicts with Mooreanism, which, prima facie, seems highly plausible.

In chapter 2, I defend two NEN views against a "reference trivialisation" objection. Briefly, the objection is that the things to which those NEN views claim our ordinary object terms refer—their 'reference-candidates' for ordinary object terms—are objectionably dissimilar to what we take them to refer to. Put another way, the NEN reference-candidates fail to sufficiently satisfy the 'psychological associated descriptions' (PADs) for our ordinary object terms. And so, those NEN views "trivialise reference". In response, I argue the NEN views do not trivialise reference; reason being, their reference-candidates *can* sufficiently satisfy the relevant PADs for our ordinary object terms.

In chapter 3, I discuss a kind of question of significance for some NEN views. Said views appeal to the notion of *simples arranged F-wise*—simples being partless objects, 'F' standing for ordinary object sortals, e.g., *cat*, *dog*, *tree*. The questions of significance are Special Arrangement Questions (SAQs), which ask: under what conditions are simples arranged F-wise? It has been argued nihilists cannot provide decent SAQ answers. While I agree previous answers have not been decent, I think the issue lies with SAQs, not nihilism. First, I offer examples of previous SAQ answers. I argue they are *incomplete* (omit details) and *circuitous* (point to details in a roundabout way), then offer an explanation as to why; I conclude that SAQs are typically too demanding: specifying the relevant conditions is (typically) practically impossible. I conclude by arguing that, nevertheless, NEN offers us reason for thinking that, although we cannot typically *answer* SAQs, we can offer decent *responses* to them. Ultimately, then, the goal of this chapter is to offer some possible responses NENists can give when confronted with SAQs.

Finally, in chapter 4, I appeal to NEN to dispute a commonly held claim in Buddhist metaphysics: that ordinary objects exist *conventionally*, but not *ultimately*. The chapter has

three aims: (A1) to show Buddhist nihilism does not entail ordinary objects do not ultimately exist; (A2) to show Buddhists should accept the 'NEN Proposal': all ordinary objects *do* ultimately exist; and, lastly, (A3) to show Buddhists will have difficulty rejecting the NEN Proposal. First, in support of A1, I demonstrate the role nihilism is alleged to play, and *actually* plays, in classifying ordinary objects as conventional, but not ultimate, existents. I then argue for the NEN Proposal; in short, the argument is that if ordinary objects are as NENists claim, Buddhist ontology *already* countenances them as ultimate existents. I then respond to several objections against that argument. Lastly, I argue the NEN Proposal is consistent with the *soteriological purposes* of Buddhism (Buddhist goals for our salvation).

Contents

Introduction

Ordinary object metaphysics is a surprising thing. Those unfamiliar with the literature have probably never considered that the likes of tables and cats could be the source of much perplexity or controversy. Yet subjecting our ideas about ordinary objects to the perversely strict scrutiny of philosophy unearths a range of puzzles.

One prominent view in ordinary object metaphysics is (mereological) nihilism. Nihilism is the view that composition never occurs. Put differently, nihilism is the view that *composites*—objects with proper parts—do not exist.

Nihilism has been argued as a possible solution to many puzzles and problems relating to ordinary objects, including: coincidence puzzles, arbitrariness puzzles, overdetermination problems, vagueness problems, the problem of the many, the ship of Theseus, and the Sorties Paradox.[1]

Additionally, many arguments have been put forward in favour of nihilism on the grounds that nihilism has some (or many) theoretical virtues, in particular: ontological parsimony and ideological parsimony.[2] I will briefly explain each.

Ontological parsimony, roughly put, concerns the number of things a view posits. It comes in two forms: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative parsimony concerns the number of *kinds* of things a view posits. Nihilism has been said to have qualitative ontological parsimony as a virtue because, unlike other views, it does not posit the kind *composite object*.[3]

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[1] I take this list from Rettler (2018). Rettler's paper argues these puzzles do *not* motivate nihilism. However, in so arguing, Rettler presents the puzzles, explains how nihilism is taken to solve the puzzles, and provides citations of work wherein others claim these puzzles *do* motivate nihilism.
[2] For examples of defences of nihilism, see Dorr (2002), Sider (2013), and the list from Korman (2020, fn. 3).
[3] See, e.g., Brenner (2017, 468) for some brief discussion.

Quantitative ontological parsimony concerns the *total number* of things a view posits. Nihilism has also been defended on the grounds that it is more quantitatively ontologically parsimonious than other views.[4] That said, nihilism is compatible with several possibilities regarding how many (physical) objects exist.

Some nihilists posit *no* objects at all—a hard number to beat.[5] Some nihilists posit only *one*, massive, all-compassing object.[6] These first two views are nihilist by "default": they posit too few objects for composition to be possible. Admittedly, some (microphysical) nihilists posit *innumerable*, microscopic, partless objects—usually called 'atoms' or 'simples'. This does not sound particularly parsimonious.[7] However, even this kind of nihilism may be more qualitatively and quantitatively ontologically parsimonious compared with similar, non-nihilist views: it merely posits simples where other views posit simples *and* composites.[8]

In addition to ontological parsimony, there is ideological parsimony.[9] Contention exists regarding how to define a view's ideology;[10] one characterisation is "the undefined notions it employs".[11] These "notions" include things like predicates, logical connectives, and quantifiers. Like ontological parsimony, ideological parsimony is argued to come in qualitative and quantitative form.[12] The former concerns the *kinds* of undefined notions a view employs. The latter concerns the number of undefined notions a view employs. Given nihilism does not make use of the (proper) parthood relation, it has been argued that nihilism is more

[4] See, e.g., Horgan & Potrč (2008).
[5] This is a reference to 'extreme nihilism'. For discussion, see, e.g., Le Bihan (2013, 2015, 2016).
[6] For more, see, e.g., Horgan & Potrč (2000, 2008, 2012).
[7] The term 'microphysical nihilism' comes from Effingham (2009, 296). See, e.g., Contessa (2014) and Caves (2018) for defences of microphysical nihilist views.
[8] See Bennett (2009) for an argument against nihilism's quantitative ontological parsimony. See Thunder (2017) for a reply in defence of nihilism.
[9] Quine (1951) famously made this distinction, although I am unsure if he was the first to do so.
[10] For discussion, see Finocchiaro (2021, §1).
[11] This characterisation comes from Sider (2013, §1).
[12] According to Brenner (2017, fn. 4), Cowling (2013) was the first to discuss *qualitative* ideological parsimony.

quantitatively and qualitatively parsimonious in its ideology compared with other views (that employ the notions of composition and proper parthood).[13]

Because of these and other theoretical virtues, nihilism is certainly a view worth taking seriously. However, despite these many potential theoretical benefits, nihilism is often taken to come with a significant theoretical cost: eliminativism.

Eliminative views are those that "deny the existence of some wide range of ordinary objects."[14] To many, a view being eliminativist seems like a significant theoretical cost, because denying many kinds of ordinary objects exists seems tantamount to denying something seemingly obvious—seemingly obvious even to many who do ordinary object metaphysics!

Importantly, however, not all nihilists are eliminativists (nor are all eliminativists nihilists).[15] Although nihilism is often paired with eliminativism, nihilism alone does not entail eliminativism. Nihilism entails eliminativism only when combined with the assumption that most kinds of ordinary objects are (or would be) composites. Accordingly, although nihilism is often paired with eliminativism, non-eliminative nihilism (hereafter, 'NEN') is also possible.

NEN is my preferred form of nihilism, the form of nihilism explored in this dissertation. To be clear, any view on which all ordinary objects exist, and no composites exist, is an NEN view. To those familiar with the literature, this conjunction of claims may seem strange, or even self-contradictory. However, several possible characterisations of ordinary objects are consistent with nihilism. For example, one could hold the view that, for all ordinary object kinds (e.g., *cat*, *dog*, *table*, etc.), an instance of that kind (e.g., a particular cat) is a macroscopic,

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[13] See, e.g., Sider (2013) and Brenner (2017) for defence and discussion.
[14] Korman (2020, §1.2)
[15] For example, in denying the existence of most kinds of ordinary objects, the views of both van Inwagen (1990) and Merricks (2001) are often considered eliminativist; yet, on both views, composition sometimes occurs, meaning neither view is a nihilist one.

extended simple.[16] In conjunction with positing such extended simples, and rejecting composition ever occurs, this would be an NEN view.

My preference, however, is for microphysical NEN. Recall, microphysical nihilist views posit microscopic *simples* (partless objects). How can ordinary objects exist according to such views? After all, it seems clear enough that most ordinary objects are not microscopic simples. Although the only objects that exist according to these kinds of views are simples, these simples are taken to be *arranged* in various ways, i.e., possessing different properties and bearing different relations to each other. Accordingly, the microphysical NENist can say ordinary objects of different kinds exist because many (*many*) simples come to be arranged in different kinds of ways, e.g., a cat exists when simples are "arranged cat-wise"; a chair exists when simples are arranged chair-wise, etc.

While this is the basic picture microphysical NENists will paint, there are different means of colouring in the details. That is, when considering some ordinary object, O, different microphysical NENists can identify O with different things. Here are three examples. First, an NENist could argue O is a *plurality of simples* (arranged O-wise).[17] On this NEN view, O is not a single object, but a plurality of objects, i.e., some simples. Second, an NENist could argue O is an *arrangement*.[18] On this NEN view, O is a *relation* between simples, rather than simples themselves. Lastly, an NENist could argue O is a *process*. This view is like the previous one; however, it emphasises that such relations between simples ("arrangements") are an ongoing, dynamic occurrence, rather than something static.

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[16] For discussion of extended simples, see Braddon-Mitchell & Miller (2006) and McDaniel, K. (2007b, 2009).
[17] See, e.g., Contessa (2014).
[18] See, e.g., Goldwater (2015).

NEN views are underexplored but, I think, far more attractive than eliminative nihilist views. If some version(s) of NEN is defensible, NEN could allow nihilists to reap the theoretical benefits of nihilism without incurring what many likely see as its biggest theoretical cost—a way to have one's simples arranged cake-wise and eat them, too. So, this dissertation aims to explore and defend NEN.

In chapter 1, I argue a particular NEN view does not conflict with Mooreanism. Mooreanism, very roughly, is a methodological approach espousing the intuitive and commonsensical in the face of philosophical arguments to the contrary. The main claim of the chapter is that, in accepting ordinary objects exist and (in some sense) have parts, NEN can avoid conflict with Mooreanism. NEN avoiding this conflict would be a significant theoretical virtue in the eyes of many Mooreans. Likewise, it gives (Moorean-inclined) nihilists reason to prefer NEN over eliminative forms of nihilism—assuming eliminativism conflicts with Mooreanism, which, prima facie, seems highly plausible.

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standing for ordinary object sortals, e.g., *cat*, *dog*, *tree*. The questions of significance are Special Arrangement Questions (SAQs), which ask: under what conditions are simples arranged F-wise? It has been argued nihilists cannot provide decent SAQ answers. While I agree previous answers have not been decent, I think the issue lies with SAQs, not nihilism. First, I offer examples of previous SAQ answers. I argue they are *incomplete* (omit details) and *circuitous* (point to details in a roundabout way), then offer an explanation as to why; I conclude that SAQs are typically too demanding: specifying the relevant conditions is (typically) practically impossible. I conclude by arguing that, nevertheless, NEN offers us reason for thinking that, although we cannot typically *answer* SAQs, we can offer decent *responses* to them. Ultimately, then, the goal of this chapter is to offer some possible responses NENists can give when confronted with SAQs.

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Chapter 1

Non-Eliminative Nihilism Does Not Conflict with Mooreanism

Looking around the room, I seem to see a variety of ordinary objects—a desk, a cat, a computer, etc. Yet, some metaphysicians argue I could not be seeing any of these things, because they do not exist. A view according to which no ordinary objects exist will be called 'eliminative'.[19]

Mereological nihilism is often taken to be eliminative.[20] Nihilism is the view that composition never occurs, that objects with proper parts (i.e., *composites*) do not exist. However, nihilism alone does not entail eliminativism. Nihilism entails eliminativism only if combined with the following assumption:

COMPOSITES*:* All ordinary objects are composites.

Or, putting COMPOSITES another way: *if* ordinary objects existed, they *would be* composites.

Denying all ordinary objects exist seems tantamount to denying something obvious, intuitive, commonsensical. Accordingly, eliminative views seem to conflict with *Mooreanism*—very roughly put, a methodological approach or attitude espousing the obvious, intuitive, commonsensical in the face of philosophical arguments to the contrary. Since nihilism is often taken to be eliminative, it has been argued nihilism conflicts with

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[19] One might think a view on which *many* kinds of ordinary objects don't exist should also count as eliminative. For example, van Inwagen's (1990) organicism view—in denying the existence of non-living ordinary objects— might suffice as eliminative, despite its acceptance of *some* kinds of ordinary objects (i.e., organisms).
[20] A clear example from Wasserman (2009, §4): "Nihilism is the view that there are there are no composite objects (i.e., there are no objects with proper parts—only atoms exist). On this view, there are no statues, animals or any other macroscopic object made up out of smaller parts."

Mooreanism.[21] I agree *eliminative* nihilism (hereafter, 'EN') conflicts with Mooreanism. However, nihilists needn't be ENists: *non*-eliminative nihilism (NEN) is also possible.

An NEN view is any view on which nihilism is true *and* all ordinary objects exist.[22] Some may find this an objectionable or self-contradictory sounding combination: countenancing ordinary objects in conjunction with nihilism seemingly requires rejecting COMPOSITES—an assumption so pervasive it is rarely stated explicitly when moving from nihilism to EN.[23] However, NEN is a consistent view, and, I think, a *superior* one to EN.

EN needlessly puts nihilism in conflict with Mooreanism. The conflict is needless so long as one version of NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism. In this chapter I argue a version of NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism, motivating NEN. The argument I defend is as follows:

P1: A view conflicts with Mooreanism only if it conflicts with Moorean claims.

P2: NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims.

P3: So, NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism.

Here is the idea behind this argument, P2 especially. There *are* Moorean claims about ordinary objects relevant to NEN: in particular, the claims that ordinary objects exist and that ordinary objects have parts. These claims have some ontological and metaphysical import. So, roughly put, there is some "Moorean metaphysics" concerning ordinary objects. However, NEN can affirm these claims. And "Moorean metaphysics" is not substantial enough to either agree or disagree with how NEN does so. Put differently, although it's common sense, strongly

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[21] Two examples: "Mooreanism gives us an argument against nihilism" Sider (2013, 10); "Nihilism is in conflict with 'Moorean truths'" Cameron (2010, 9).

[22] Examples of NEN views, as defined here, include Contessa (2014) and Goldwater (2015).

[23] E.g., Emery (*forthcoming*, 30) writes: "Consider nihilism about composite objects—the view that there are no objects that have proper parts. According to the nihilist, there are no tables or school buses or sidewalks."

justified, *Moorean*, that ordinary objects exist and have parts, there is no common sense, strongly justified, or Moorean metaphysics *underpinning* those claims. So, NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism—not because NEN is itself Moorean, but because of the limited scope of Moorean claims regarding ordinary objects.

In §1, I introduce the specific NEN view. I then offer some prima facie motive for preferring that NEN view over a similar, EN view. In §2, I discuss Mooreanism in more detail, but particularly in relation to, and in defence of, P1. In §3, I argue for P2.

§1 Nihilism: eliminative and non-eliminative

The NEN view I argue does not conflict with Mooreanism is a *microphysical* nihilist view; it posits the existence of *simples*: microscopic, partless objects.[24] Hereafter, let 'NEN' be the view that for any ordinary object F, F is a plurality (i.e., large number) of simples arranged F-wise.[25] This view is non-eliminativist because it accepts the existence of pluralities of simples arranged in various ways, claiming some of them are ordinary objects—meaning ordinary objects exist on this view. For example, a cat exists when some simples are arranged cat-wise; a mat exists when some simples are arranged mat-wise, etc.[26] The view is nihilistic because, on it, neither those pluralities of simples, nor anything else, compose further objects.

To best isolate and promote the *non-eliminative* aspect of this view, I will contrast it with an *also* microphysical, but *eliminative*, nihilist view. For ease of expression, I will now call *that* latter view 'EN'. Like NEN, EN accepts the existence of simples arranged in various ways. The crucial difference is that NEN identifies ordinary objects as simples arranged in various ways, whereas EN identifies ordinary objects as *composites*, which they then deny

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[24] I take the term 'microphysical nihilism' from Effingham (2009, 296).
[25] This version of NEN is based on Contessa (2014).
[26] I discuss my view of what simples being arranged F-wise amounts to in more detail in chapter 3.

exist. This identification of ordinary objects with composites is where I find fault with EN. I will motivate NEN over EN briefly, in a couple of ways.

First, given NEN and EN accept the existence of non-composite pluralities of simples arranged in various ways, both should presumably agree that our ordinary object beliefs and concepts typically form in *response to* encounters with instances of such (non-composite) pluralities. If so, this gives us some motivation for thinking ordinary objects *are* those non-composite pluralities. For example, if we believe in and talk about cats owing primarily to encounters with simples arranged cat-wise, doesn't that give us some reason to think cats *are* simples arranged cat-wise?

Second, unlike NEN, EN seems to run afoul of the following META-ONTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE OF EXISTENTIAL CHARITY*:*

> When choosing between rival identification-candidates for entities whose existence is considered trivial (or indubitable) in non-philosophical contexts, and all else is (roughly) equal, the metaphysician ought to pick an identification-candidate that vindicates, rather than overturns, the presumption of existence. Goldwater (2015, 369)

The "entities" at issue here are ordinary objects. The "identification-candidates" are, roughly, simples arranged in various ways (the NEN candidate) and composites allegedly composed of said simples (the EN candidate). I take the triviality of ordinary object existence in non-philosophical contexts to itself be indubitable. Lastly, given NEN and EN are stipulated as sharing almost all the same metaphysical commitments, all else *is* roughly equal. So, again, EN seems to violate this principle, whereas NEN—by vindicating the existence of ordinary objects—does not.

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Lastly, the *triviality* of the existence of ordinary objects in non-philosophical contexts, as mentioned above, is reason to think EN also conflicts with *Mooreanism.*

Here, one might be sceptical that NEN does any better than EN: one might argue COMPOSITES, which NEN rejects, is just as trivial, commonsensical, or *Moorean* as the existence of ordinary objects. This issue sets up the rest of the chapter well. For now, notice that *if* COMPOSITES *is* a Moorean claim (is 'Moorean', for short), nihilists are seemingly left with no choice but to reject a Moorean claim either way: that ordinary objects exist, or that ordinary objects are composites. This would be bad for any nihilist looking to avoid conflict with Mooreanism.

However, I do not think COMPOSITES is trivial, commonsensical, or Moorean at all. Rather, COMPOSITES makes a claim that is *conflated* with a genuinely Moorean claim: ordinary objects have *parts*. These are not the same claim, as I argue later. Surprisingly, perhaps, I will argue NEN can accept ordinary objects have parts (a Moorean claim) while rejecting COMPOSITES (a non-Moorean claim).

If my arguments in the chapter's remainder are successful, Mooreanism gives nihilists one more reason to prefer NEN to EN—unless the non-existence of ordinary objects can be convincingly reconciled with Mooreanism, which I highly doubt.

For the above reasons, I believe nihilists ought to reject EN. Or, at the very least, as a nihilist, NEN should be the prima facie preference—rejected only if all versions of NEN are deemed untenable.[27] However, much more needs saying; I turn to defence of P1.

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[27] Goldwater (2015, 369-70) echoes something like this sentiment, though in very general terms: "in lieu of a demonstration that one's identification-candidate is the best (or only) candidate, identifying ordinary objects with a candidate that one proceeds to eliminate seems highly unmotivated."

§2 Defending P1

Defending P1 requires some discussion of Mooreanism. As mentioned in the introduction, Mooreanism is, very roughly put, a methodological approach or attitude. The precise content of this approach is contentious. Thankfully, getting precise on the nature of Mooreanism is not necessary to defend P1. Recall, P1 reads:

> P1: A view conflicts with Mooreanism only if it conflicts with Moorean claims.

The intuitive idea behind P1 is perhaps better expressed using something like its contrapositive: if a view neither states nor entails anything contradicting or contrary to Moorean claims, it's unclear how that view could conflict with an attitude of espousing such claims. (Note: I use 'view' here broadly to mean: a position (e.g., nihilism), an argument for a position, implications or features of a position, etc.)

To motivate P1 more thoroughly, I first argue—as has been argued elsewhere—that Moorean arguments share similarities such that they can be schematised.[28] I then use said argumentative schema as evidence for P1.

To begin, let's more carefully distinguish *Mooreanism*—the methodological approach or attitude—from *Moorean arguments* and *Moorean claims*. Here is the relationship between them: Mooreanism prompts its proponents to target certain views using Moorean arguments; and those arguments leverage Moorean claims against the targeted view. For example, Moore himself leveraged the Moorean claim 'I know I have hands' against external world scepticism with an argument roughly as follows:

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[28] See Scarfone (*forthcoming*).

M1: If external world scepticism is true, I don't know I have hands.

M2: I know I have hands.

M3: So, external world scepticism is false.

For my purposes, the crucial premise is M1. External world scepticism is taken to *conflict* with a Moorean claim (by entailing the falsity of 'I know I have hands'). That *conflict* is what's used to challenge the sceptical view. M1 establishes the conflict.

Though more commonly discussed in epistemology, Moorean objections can and have also been applied in metaphysics debates, including against nihilism. For example, Sider (2013, 10) writes: "Mooreanism gives us an argument against nihilism, since the existence of tables, chairs, and other composites is as commonsensical as it gets." (Notice the move straight from nihilism to eliminativism.) That argument can be reconstructed as follows:

M1: If (eliminative) nihilism is true, there are no tables, chairs, etc.

M2: There are tables, chairs, etc.

M3: So, eliminative nihilism is false.

The similarities between the two Moorean arguments so far should be apparent. Again, it has been argued *all* Moorean arguments share certain similarities such that they can be schematised. Hopefully the arguments just given suffice in making this seem plausible. Here, then, is a possible Moorean argument schema; let 'MC' stand for some Moorean claim and 'TV' stand for some targeted view (or some entailment of it):

M1: If TV, then not MC

M2: MC

M3: So, not TV

In M1, a target view (TV) is taken to entail some Moorean claim is false (not MC)—that it *conflicts* with some Moorean claim. In M2, the Moorean asserts that Moorean claim (MC) in opposition to the targeted view, leading to the conclusion that something must be wrong with the target view (not TV).

If something like the above schema is accurate, this supports P1; if a Moorean argument against a view requires something like M1, then Mooreans can only apply these kinds of arguments to views which conflict in some way with some Moorean claim(s).

Given the contention I mentioned regarding what Mooreanism amounts to, one might worry the schema cannot be representative of Moorean arguments generally, undermining support for P1. So, to bolster support for P1, I now argue that common variations in Moorean attitudes do not impact the need for something like M1. Put differently, I argue M1 still represents a necessary premise in Moorean arguments, despite variations within Moorean attitudes.

What are these variations? Moorean attitudes mostly varying regarding answers to a couple of questions. The first:

SOURCE: What is the source of justification for Moorean claims?

Some typical answers include: common sense, intuition, how things appear, and their being nearly universally believed.[29] The second:

STRENGTH: How important are Moorean considerations in determining theory choice?

For some, Mooreanism is merely one factor among many to be considered; for others it is quite decisive.[30]

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[29] See Hirsch (2002a, 104) for an example of Mooreanism being linked to common sense. See Emery (*forthcoming,* 3) for Mooreanism being linked to intuition and how things appear. See van Inwagen (1990, 103) for a linking of "an argument in the style of Moore" with universal belief.
[30] See Sider (2013, 10 and fn. 23).

Mooreans' answers to SOURCE and STRENGTH impact the content of M2, and possibly the conclusion of our Moorean argument schema. But they do not alter the need for something like M1. To demonstrate, consider these expressions of Moorean attitudes:

MOOREAN 1: "Nihilism is in conflict with 'Moorean truths.' 'Here is a hand,' said Moore (1959); and the truth of this was meant to be in such good standing that we'd do better to reject any premise of a philosophical argument whose conclusion ruled this out than to reject it itself. The nihilist says there isn't a hand, so we should reject the argument that took us to nihilism." Cameron (2010, 9)

MOOREAN 2: "The extent to which a metaphysical theory coheres with some type of common sense is at least some reason to think that theory is true. And the extent to which a metaphysical theory departs from common sense is at least some reason to think that theory is false." Emery (*forthcoming*, 5)

I take it for granted that both quotes express a Moorean attitude. Yet, the attitudes are distinct. For example, they are clearly distinct regarding STRENGTH: MOOREAN 1 suggests that conflict with Moorean claims is sufficient reason for rejecting a target view. For MOOREAN 2, Mooreanism is much weaker in this respect, suggesting conflict is merely "at least some reason" to think the target view is false. Yet, despite this difference in attitude, one can faithfully construct Moorean arguments for both attitudes as follows:

MOOREAN 1

M1: If TV, then not MC

M2: MC is in such good standing that we ought to reject any premise whose conclusion rules it out. (If M1, then not TV)

M3: So, we ought to reject TV. (Not TV)

MOOREAN 2

M1: TV departs from common sense. (If TV, then not MC)

M2: If M1, then we have at least some reason to think TV is false.

M3: So, we have at least some reason to think that TV is false

As these reconstructions show, despite the difference in attitude between MOOREAN 1 and 2, something like M1 is still part of both arguments. Again, M1 is what alludes to the target view's conflict with Moorean claims, suggesting conflict with some Moorean claim(s) is required for a view to conflict with Mooreanism. Again, this need for M1 in the Moorean argument schema lends support for P1: a view conflicts with Mooreanism only if it conflicts with Moorean claims.

§3 Defending P2

Having defended P1 above, I will now defend P2. Recall, P2 reads: NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims. I believe a defence of P2 requires saying less about Moorean claims than one might expect. I defend P2 with an argument, NO CONFLICT. What follows are some preliminaries for that argument.

First, specifying precisely what it means for a view to avoid conflict with Moorean claims is tricky. One might think, for example, if a claim is *true* according to some view, the view does not conflict with that claim. But as will be made clear, this is not sufficient for conflict avoidance: two views could agree on the truth of some claim C but disagree substantially on what makes C true, or what C being true amounts to, meaning conflict may still exist. I will be mindful of this in making my argument.

Second, I will not produce an exhaustive list of Moorean claims and argue NEN avoids conflict with all of them—a likely impossible task. Instead, my defence of P2 focuses on just three claims.

EXISTENCE: All ordinary objects exist.

PARTS: All ordinary objects have parts.

COMPOSITES: All ordinary objects are composites.

I take the EXISTENCE and PARTS to be uncontroversially Moorean claims. (Distinguishing the Moorean status of PARTS and COMPOSITES will be important later.) I focus on EXISTENCE and PARTS for two reasons. First, I suspect they are among the first my reader calls to mind when thinking of the conflict between Mooreanism and nihilism. Second, many other Moorean claims one might think conflict with nihilism presuppose EXISTENCE or PARTS, e.g., 'Here is a hand', 'There are tables', 'The tail is part of the cat', etc. Once it's made clear that COMPOSITES is neither Moorean, nor equivalent to PARTS, demonstrating NEN does not conflict with EXISTENCE and PARTS will suffice to show NEN does not conflict with many other relevant Moorean claims.

Third, I will not argue about the source of, or justification for, Moorean claims. These points on Moorean claims are somewhat irrelevant to whether they conflict with NEN. However, I will state my agreement with the following:

Merely being widely known is not what makes a proposition a Moorean fact. First, some Moorean facts might not be widely known; second, not all of our knowledge is on the same epistemic level. Moorean facts are those we have an especially strong justification for. Fuqua (2021, 2023)

As it happens, EXISTENCE and PARTS *are* widely known, but I agree this is not what makes them Moorean (claims/facts). Likewise, I think Moorean claims can acquire their strong justification from a *variety* or *combination* of factors—like being intuitive, being how things appear, or being commonsensical.

Finally, although I am sympathetic to it, my argument does not depend on, or argue for, the correctness of Mooreanism. It is one thing to argue a view does not conflict with a given attitude; it's quite another to argue that the attitude is correct.

Having covered some preliminaries, here is the NO CONFLICT argument. After giving the argument, I offer a defence of each premise, eventually arriving at a defence of P2.

> NC1: EXISTENCE and PARTS are Moorean claims, but there is no underlying "Moorean metaphysics" substantiating them.
>
> NC2: If NC1, then NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict.
>
> NC3: So, NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict.
>
> NC4: If NC3, then (P2) NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims.
>
> P2: So, NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims.

§3.1 Defending NC1

I begin my defence of NC1 by fleshing out and clarifying what it amounts to. First, by "Moorean metaphysics" I mean a metaphysical claim or view that counts as Moorean. Given the rough criteria discussed in the preliminaries, a *Moorean* metaphysical claim would have to be intuitive, commonsensical, or something of the sort, such that it's strongly justified. I think EXISTENCE and PARTS are two such claims: it really is commonsense, intuitive, etc. that ordinary objects exist and have parts; we have strong justification for thinking so. Accordingly,

a metaphysical view denying ordinary objects exist and have parts is, in my view, conflicting with these claims, and thus conflicting with Mooreanism.

Second, in claiming EXISTENCE and PARTS have no underlying "Moorean metaphysics" substantiating them, I mean that there's no commonsense, intuitive, *Moorean* metaphysical view or claims from which we derive, or that accounts for, EXISTENCE and PARTS. An analogy may help.

Suppose it's a Moorean claim that (F) 'Fire is hot'—whether it is or not does not matter much for the analogy. We could agree F is Moorean while also agreeing there's no Moorean claim *substantiating* F, i.e., no Moorean explanation for F. Putting the point slightly differently: even if F is Moorean, there's no Moorean claim "behind" F or responsible for F. There's no Moorean claim which says: 'Fire is hot *because* ____'. Why think there's no such claim? Whatever explanation (E) physics, neuroscience, etc gives us for F, E will seemingly amount to, or require, specialist knowledge: knowledge that is not intuitive, or commonsensical in any way—something beyond the scope of Moorean claims.

Similarly, according to NC1, EXISTENCE and PARTS are Moorean claims; but there's no Moorean metaphysics substantiating them. A metaphysical explanation of why EXISTENCE and PARTS are true—a metaphysical account of what EXISTENCE and PARTS *amount to*—are outside the scope of Moorean claims. Why think so?

Several metaphysical views on which EXISTENCE and PARTS are true are possible. But the average person has never considered these views, nor the difference between them. So, why think there's a Moorean view of what it means for ordinary objects to exist, or to have

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parts?[31] Echoing a line from van Inwagen (1990, 106), it seems highly plausible that the only thing an ordinary person means by 'Ordinary objects exist and have parts' is that ordinary objects exist and have parts; their metaphysical commitments go no "deeper" than that.[32] (Note, here I took how the average person thinks (or *doesn't* think) of these issues as a good gauge for what can be rightly considered Moorean, but the same point could be made in other ways.)

In saying there is no substantial Moorean metaphysics underpinning PARTS, I do *not* deny that there are commonsense guiding principles for attributing parthood.[33] These two claims are consistent—there can be very intuitive (even if unarticulated) rules about when things are parts of other things without there being an underlying intuitive metaphysical explanation of *why* things count as parts of other things, or, more importantly here, what parthood *is*.

I now want to raise and address two objections to my defence of NC1; both relate to COMPOSITES.

First, one might object that COMPOSITES and PARTS amount to the same claim. If so, then since PARTS is Moorean (as I readily admit), then so is COMPOSITES. If COMPOSITES is Moorean, it could well serve as a bit of underlying "Moorean metaphysics" substantiating EXISTENCE and PARTS, making NC1 false. More straightforwardly, it would mean some Moorean claim clearly conflicts with NEN.

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[31] Something like this point has been acknowledged in the literature. For example, on judging whether some ordinary object or merely simples arranged ordinary object-wise exist, Sider (2013, 10) notes common sense has neither considered the latter possibility nor the difference between the two options. (NENist will deny any difference). Rosen & Dorr (2002, 158) make a similar remark.

[32] van Inwagen's (1990, 106) line reads: "The only thing I have to say about what the ordinary man really means by 'There are two valuable chairs in the next room' is that he really means that there are two valuable chairs in the next room."

[33] For discussions of the content of folk mereology, see, Rose & Schaffer (2017). See Korman and Carmichael (2017) for criticism and an alternative account of Rose & Schaffer's findings.

Here is the second objection: even if COMPOSITES and PARTS are distinct claims, we have *ample* evidence that COMPOSITES is Moorean—particularly given I accept PARTS is Moorean. Put differently, if it's common sense, intuitive, etc. that ordinary objects have parts, isn't it common sense, intuitive, etc. that ordinary objects are composites? Again, we risk coming to the conclusion that some Moorean claim conflicts with NEN.

In response to the first objection, I'll first point out that COMPOSITES seems like a much more substantial and specific metaphysical claim compared with PARTS. Reason being, unlike PARTS, COMPOSITES requires ordinary objects to be a certain way and entails a particular relation between ordinary objects and their parts; COMPOSITES can thus be true under fewer conditions compared with PARTS. That alone should give us reason to see some daylight between the two. Second, in defending NC2 below, I argue NEN can accept PARTS without accepting COMPOSITES, also demonstrating the two claims are distinct. So, I will address this objection further later. For now, let's suppose PARTS and COMPOSITES are distinct and focus on the second objection.

In response to the second objection, I argue that PARTS being Moorean does not give us *evidence* that COMPOSITES is Moorean. My argument makes use of an analogy: LIGHTBULB.

LIGHTBULB

Two philosophers are debating the beliefs of some subject, S, who is looking up at a lightbulb. Both philosophers agree: S believes (1) there's a lightbulb, (2) the light is on, and (3) electricity is responsible for the light being on. They are debating whether S believes: (AC): Alternating Current is running through the lightbulb, or (DC): Direct Current is running through the lightbulb. Here are their disagreeing hypotheses. Philosopher 1 endorses H1: S believes AC is running through the lightbulb. Philosopher

2 endorses H2: S has *no view* on whether AC or DC is responsible for the light being on; S knows about electricity but cannot differentiate between AC and DC.

Suppose philosopher 1 endorse H1 on grounds 1-3. Meanwhile, philosopher 2 endorse H2 because they are confident S has never thought about, or been educated in, the difference between AC and DC. I think philosopher 1 is mistaken in taking 1-3 as evidence for H1 over H2. 1-3 are *consistent* with H1. But, given philosopher 2's considerations for H2, S believing 1-3 is certainly not evidence for S believing AC *specifically*.

Returning to the objection, my thought is that someone arguing COMPOSITES is Moorean on the grounds that PARTS is Moorean is mistaken in a similar way to philosopher 1 above. Why?

In the interest of space, I won't flesh out every point of analogy with LIGHTBULB. The upshot is this: we shouldn't move from the conclusion that S believes the light is on to the conclusion that S believes the light is on *in this particular way* or *for this particular reason* (i.e., owing to AC)—especially if S has never considered the difference between AC and DC. Analogously, we shouldn't move from the conclusion that PARTS is Moorean to the conclusion that COMPOSITES is Moorean—especially if common sense, ordinary people's intuitions, the realm of the *Moorean*, has never considered the difference between different metaphysics of parthood. Put differently, we shouldn't move from the conclusion that ordinary objects having parts is Moorean to the conclusion that ordinary objects having parts *owing to this particular metaphysical explanation* (i.e., COMPOSITES) is Moorean.

§3.2 Defending NC2

I now move to a defence of NC2. Recall, NC2 reads: If EXISTENCE and PARTS are Moorean claims, but there's no underlying "Moorean metaphysics" substantiating them, then NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict.

Here is the rough idea behind NC2. If "Moorean metaphysics" is as sparse as I have argued above, then many options exist for filling in the relevant "underlying metaphysical blanks". Why? Because the underlying metaphysics *is* "blank". How, then, can NEN fill in these blanks? That is, how can NEN substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS?

NEN substantiates EXISTENCE rather straightforwardly. NEN takes ordinary objects to exist. So, NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE. This is *not* to say NEN's characterisation of ordinary objects is Moorean. Again, the argument is rather that there are no Moorean claims fleshing out the metaphysics of what ordinary objects are; so, NENists can flesh out that metaphysics without conflicting with any such claims.

How can NEN substantiates PARTS? In short, NENists can appeal a notion of parthood known as 'amongness' or the 'are among' relation. Amongness should be understood as follows: "the xs are among the ys if every one of the xs is one of the ys but not vice versa."[34]

On first hearing it, amongness may not sound like a parthood-type relation at all. To help pump some intuitions, and get clearer on the relation, consider a crowd. 'A crowd' is grammatically singular, sure. But, in keeping with NEN thinking, and for the sake of this example, suppose a crowd is not a *single* object (composed of people), but just many people gathered together in the right kind of way. Even on this understanding, it seems perfectly

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[34] I take this definition, and the inspiration for this strategy from Liggins (2008, 190).

sensible to say I can be part of a crowd. Of course, I will have to meet certain conditions to count as among, and thus part of, a crowd; but I can be part of a crowd all the same. This doesn't require a crowd be some single object of which I am a *proper* part. I am part of the crowd so long as I am one of the many people gathered together.

Applying this understanding to the case of an ordinary object, suppose we have some ordinary object F; according to NENists, F is *a plurality of simples* (call them 'the ys') arranged F-wise. Given F is a plurality of simples, we can identify some of the ys (call these simples 'the xs') as being *part of* that plurality (i.e., part of the F) so long as the xs *are among* the ys. None of this implies the xs or the ys compose some further object. Making use of this relation in conjunction with NEN's view of ordinary objects, a claim like 'cats have tails as parts' is made true by simples arranged tail-wise being *among* the simples arranged cat-wise. This, of course, is consistent with nihilism.

As with NEN's claims about ordinary objects substantiating EXISTENCE, I am not arguing that amongness is what people have in mind when making parthood claims relating to ordinary objects. Amongness is not part of some Moorean metaphysics underpinning PARTS. Again, my claim is that there is *no* Moorean metaphysics underpinning PARTS. That is, there are no further Moorean claims we can appeal to extrapolate on or clarify what is meant by the Moorean claim that ordinary objects have parts.

Here is an objection to NC2, particularly related to amongness: merely substantiating the truth some claim is not always sufficient for avoiding conflict with it. As mentioned in the preliminaries to NO CONFLICT, two views could agree on the truth of some claim C but disagree substantially on what makes C true, or what C being true amounts to, meaning conflict may still exist. Take this analogy.

BIGFOOT

Suppose two friends believe Bigfoot exists. One friend believes 'Bigfoot' refers to a man in a gorilla costume; the other believes 'Bigfoot' refers to a non-human, ape-like creature. Both believe Bigfoot exists. But their beliefs conflict, nevertheless.

The NC2 objection, then, is that something analogous to what's happening in BIGFOOT is happening between NEN and PARTS: contrary to my claims above, parthood understood as amongness still conflicts with the Moorean understanding of parthood captured by PARTS.

This is a legitimate concern. However, I suspect the main motivation for it has already been somewhat addressed via my various comments on why COMPOSITES is not a Moorean claim. Still, one might motivate the objection without appealing to COMPOSITES being Moorean.

The objection may just be that amongness does not properly *match up with* or *capture* the way the average person conceives of parthood. (How the average person conceives of parthood again seems here like a good gauge for what PARTS, qua Moorean claim, is meant to capture). More specifically, one might object that *amongness* does not capture the cohesion between x and y connoted by '*x is a part of y'*. If NEN cannot capture the cohesive quality of ordinary objects and their parts, NC2 is false.

In response, it's first worth pointing out that the meaning of 'part' in English is not uncontentious.[35] So, it's not clear what exactly PARTS captures.

Second, I suspect the motivation behind this version of the objection is a thought that amongness is too "loose" a relation to do the work required of it. Here is an example illustrating

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[35] See, e.g., Kearns (2011, 90) for (inter alia) discussion of difficulties in determining what relation the English word 'part' expresses. See Brenner (2020a, 13) for a discussion of the claim that the parthood relation of ordinary English is not the proper parthood relation.

what I mean by too "loose"; suppose a hiker is walking in a forest, surrounded by trees. Intuitively, the hiker is among the trees, but is *not* part of the forest. If the hiker is among the trees, then, if we use the amongness relation as our parthood relation, doesn't the hiker count as part of the forest?

The problem with the objection is that it offers a strawman of amongness. For an x to be among the ys, the x must be *one of* the ys. Supposing (for simplicity) the forest was just the trees, a hiker could not be part of the forest, since the hiker is not a tree (and so, cannot be *one of* the trees). This reply shows that bearing the amongness relation will typically require more than spatial proximity (or "being among" things, in this sense of the phrase.) When it's said of some simples that they are arranged F-wise, this is because the simples possess certain properties and relations. So, for some simples (xs) to count as *among* the simples arranged F-wise (the ys), the xs will need to possess certain properties, i.e., some of the properties in virtue of which the ys (which include the xs) are arranged F-wise.

The relevant properties required for amongness will differ from ordinary object to ordinary object, of course. But the properties necessary and sufficient for amongness in each case will be the very same properties ordinary people would appeal to (implicitly or explicitly) in identifying things as parts of other things. So, I see no reason to think amongness would fail to match up with, or capture, all the parthood claims we think of as Moorean. If so, NEN can utilise amongness to substantiate PARTS, without conflict.

Having defended NC1 and NC2, we arrive at the sub-conclusion NC3: NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict. All that is left is to relate this sub-conclusion back to the original argument regarding the relationship between NEN and Mooreanism.

§3.3 Defending NC4

Recall, NC4 reads: if NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict, then (P2) NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims. The idea behind NC4, mentioned in the NO CONFLICT preliminaries, is that any Moorean claims *seemingly* conflicting with NEN presuppose EXISTENCE or PARTS. So, if NEN can substantiate EXISTENCE and PARTS without conflict, NEN will have shown itself capable of substantiating any further, relevant Moorean claims, without conflict with Mooreanism.

The broader contention behind NC4 is that ordinary objects existing and having parts is about the extent of what can be counted as common sense, intuitive, highly justified (i.e., *Moorean*) claims in relation to ordinary objects which could conflict with NEN. Beyond these claims lies a plethora of possible, substantial metaphysical pictures; but the nitty-gritty details constituting those metaphysical pictures are beyond the scope of Moorean considerations. To be clear, we (*metaphysicians*) likely have justification for accepting and rejecting nitty-gritty metaphysical details all the time, but our justification for rejecting such scrupulous metaphysical claims won't be Moorean in nature. Nor, I suspect, will it often be as strong as our justification for Moorean claims.

Conclusion

From NC3 and NC4, we arrive at P2, completing my defence of NO CONFLICT. Having defended P2, I have defended both premises of the argument with which I began the chapter:

P1: A view conflicts with Mooreanism only if it conflicts with Moorean claims.

P2: NEN does not conflict with Moorean claims.

P3: So, NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism

For those metaphysicians who take conflict with Mooreanism as a serious objection to a metaphysical view, NEN's avoidance of conflict with Mooreanism is a big benefit.

No doubt, that NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism is a surprising conclusion. After all, the claim that ordinary objects are simples arranged in various ways does not sound particularly Moorean. Indeed, it is *not* Moorean. But, as I've argued, any claim this scrupulous about the metaphysics of ordinary objects will not be a Moorean claim, *neither will its negation.* NEN substantiates the existence of ordinary objects and their parts; but the metaphysical details filled in by NEN in doing so are simply outside the scope of Moorean concerns. So, in conclusion, NEN does not conflict with Mooreanism.

Chapter 2

Non-Eliminative Nihilism & Reference Trivialisation

The following chapter offers a response to an argument made against non-eliminative mereological nihilism (hereafter 'NEN'). I call it TRIVIALISATION:

> T1: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false.
>
> T2: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.
>
> T3: Therefore, NEN is false.[36]

§1 introduces two versions of NEN to be discussed in the chapter. §2 clarifies and motivates T1. §3 clarifies and motivates T2. §4 defends NEN against TRIVIALISATION by offering arguments against T2.

§1 Two versions of NEN

Any view on which all ordinary objects exist, and no composites exist, is an NEN view. By 'ordinary objects' I mean things like bagels, bridges, cats, etc. Since nihilism is the view that composition never occurs, for NEN to be true, ordinary objects cannot be composites.[37] However, many characterisations of ordinary objects are compatible with nihilism. Accordingly, multiple versions of NEN are possible. I focus on two versions of NEN, each offering a different characterisation of ordinary objects.

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[36] The inspiration for this argument, and the term 'reference trivialisation', come from Long (2019).
[37] Whether nihilism is committed to denying *temporally* composite objects in addition to *spatially* composite objects is discussed briefly in §4.

According to the first version of NEN, an ordinary object is a plurality (i.e., large number) of objects arranged in some particular way.[38] The only physical objects posited by this view are microscopic *simples*, i.e., objects lacking spatial parts. So, I call this view NEN*Simples* (hereafter 'NEN$_S$').

According to the second version of NEN, an ordinary object is the *arrangement of*, or, arrang*ing* of, pluralities of simples. Call this view 'NEN$_{Arrangement}$' (hereafter 'NEN$_A$'). Multiple analyses of simples being arranged are possible.[39] To avoid proliferating the number of NEN$_A$ views considered here, I restrict the discussion to one such view. On this view, the arrangement of simples is an ongoing *process*.[40] So, according to the NEN$_A$ view adopted here, ordinary objects are more properly considered things that *occur* rather than *exist;* ordinary object are the *arranging* of pluralities of simples in various ways. I say more about processes in §4.

For now, the main takeaway of the section is that, according to NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$, 'ordinary object' is a convenient, rather than accurate, label. Neither a plurality of simples nor an "arrangement" (process) is a single object.

§2 Motivating T1

The purpose of this section is to clarify and motivate T1. Understanding T1 requires understanding trivialising reference, and why a theory that trivialises reference is problematic.

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[38] I take this version of NEN from Contessa (2014).

[39] Though not quite the same discussion, multiple analyses of the locution *arranged x-wise* already exist. Whether an analysis of arrangements is extractable from explanations of this locution is unclear.

[40] See Galton (2006) for discussion of variation in use of the term 'process'. How I am using the term will be made clear through discussion in §4.

Recall, T1 states: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false.

On seeing why trivialising reference is problematic, it will be clear why a view that requires a reference-trivialising theory is in trouble. I start with some brief comments on reference more generally.

We sometimes speak meaningfully and truthfully by referring to things in the world. To do so, we use referential terms. For example, having spotted my cat, Tibbles, on a mat, I might assertively utter the sentence

1: Tibbles is on that mat.

In 1, both 'Tibbles' and 'that mat' are referring terms. 'Tibbles' is a proper name, here used to refer to Tibbles (my cat); 'that mat' is a demonstrative, here used to refer to a particular mat. Different theories of reference provide different explanations of what establishes the connection between referring terms and the things to which they refer (their referents). However, I am going to suppose that any plausible theory of reference will have the following feature:

> If a theory of reference implies that a term T has a referent R, then R will sufficiently satisfy descriptions psychologically associated with T.

The phrase "sufficiently satisfy" is intentionally vague. Our intuitions about when something sufficiently satisfies a term's *psychologically associated descriptions* (hereafter, 'PADs') are hard to pin down. For example, some cases may exist where a term refers successfully despite the referent failing to satisfy its one and only PAD. Nevertheless, if a theory of reference is to align with our intuitions, its criteria for successful reference cannot be too restrictive or too

permissive. I now illustrate these points about restrictive and permissive reference criteria using some examples (which will also make the notion of PADs clearer).

If a theory of reference has criteria that are too restrictive, then the theory can end up implying that a term T fails to refer when, intuitively, T refers successfully. To illustrate, consider this example.

WHALE

Whales were once thought to be fish. Accordingly, the term 'whale' was once associated with the description 'fish', making 'fish' one of the PADs for 'whale'. Yet, upon discovering that whales are not fish, we did not conclude that the term 'whale' had been failing to refer or was not referring to what we now call 'whales'. (Here I am concerned only with the term 'whale' when used as part of an appropriate referring expression. I am not considering references to the kind *whale*.)

Suppose a theory of reference stated that successful reference required *all* (original) PADs for a term be satisfied. Such a theory would imply that the term 'whale' could not have referred to whales, since whales fail(ed) to satisfy the PAD 'fish'. That implication seems false, and therefore, problematic. It is problematic because, intuitively, we think the term 'whale' did successfully refer, even while the term had the false description associated with it. Since the things referred to as 'whales', the things we also call 'whales', came *near enough* to satisfying PADs for the term, we take it that the term did (and still does) refer to whales. So, again, criteria for successful reference cannot be too restrictive.

For our purposes, cases where a theory of reference is too permissive in its criteria for successful reference are more important: it is a theory of reference being too permissive that can lead to the theory trivialising reference.

Basically, a theory of reference trivialises reference when its criteria for reference make successful reference too easy—or, alternatively, makes failure of reference too difficult—

leading to problematic implications for the view. More specifically, I will define a theory as trivialising reference when its permissive criteria for reference results in that theory implying that some intuitively non-referring expressions successfully refer. To see why this is a problematic entailment, consider the following theory of reference as a toy example:

> "CTR: For any kind term t and kind k, t refers to k *iff* paradigmatic members of k causally regulate the use of t".[41]

CTR trivialises reference, meaning it has the problematic implication mentioned above. To illustrate, consider this example.

> MERMAID
>
> Belief in the existence of mermaids was once widespread. Later, it was revealed that manatees were the source of apparent mermaid sightings. The revelation, then, was that (in contexts relevant to this discussion) people had been using the term 'mermaid' to refer to manatees. Accordingly, paradigmatic members of the kind *manatee* had been causally regulating the use of the term 'mermaid'.
>
> If the details of MERMAID are correct, CTR implies that the term 'mermaid' successfully

refers to manatees.[42] We should reject this conclusion. We should reject this conclusion because manatees do not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term 'mermaid'—descriptions like 'is a half-human, half-fish creature'. Put another way, manatees and mermaids are too dissimilar for the term 'mermaid' to refer to manatees. Yet CTR, being too permissive, says otherwise; it has trivialised reference. MERMAID shows both why criteria for successful reference cannot be too permissive and why reference trivialisation is problematic.

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[41] CTR is quoted from Long (2019, 465), who based his formulation loosely on Boyd (1980, 1988).
[42] Note: this is not equivalent to claiming CTR implies a *speaker* could (not) use 'mermaid' to refer to a manatee.

Having looked at reference trivialisation and why it is problematic, return now to T1. Recall, T1 states: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false. I will now motivate T1.

Recall, NEN is a view in ordinary object metaphysics. NEN views offers an account of what ordinary objects are. But part of the NEN views considered here is that ordinary object terms refer successfully to what NEN takes ordinary objects to be. Accordingly, NEN is offering a theory of the *referents* for ordinary object terms by offering a theory of ordinary objects. Again, two versions of NEN are being considered here: NEN_S and NEN_A. Each view offers a different account of ordinary objects. So, the alleged referents for ordinary object terms will differ for each view. Call these alleged referents 'referent-candidates'.

Here is the rough idea behind T1. When some concern about successful reference arises, the fault can lie either with one's theory of reference or one's theory of the (alleged) referent-candidates (here, NEN). So, supposing plausible theories of reference exist, if a reference problem occurs, the fault must lie with one's theory of referent-candidate. Here is a more explicit line of reasoning for T1 based on this rough idea.

> T1a: If NEN's account of the nature of ordinary objects is true, then NEN can use some plausible theory of reference (to account for the connection between ordinary objects and referential ordinary object terms).

Suppressing the parenthetical, for ease of expression, the contrapositive of T1a is

> T1b: If it's not the case that NEN can use some plausible theory of reference, then it's not the case that NEN's account of the nature of ordinary objects is true.

Next, assume NEN *must* account for reference (somehow). Though more possibilities likely exist, suppose NEN's only options are to either use a plausible theory or a theory that

trivialises reference. If so, we can treat the claim 'it's not the case that NEN can use a plausible theory' as interchangeable with 'NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference'. Again, if NEN must use one kind of theory, and NEN cannot use a plausible theory, then NEN must use a reference-trivialising theory. Making this substitution within T1b gets us

> T1c: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then it's not the case that NEN's account of the nature of ordinary objects is true.

Lastly, if it's not the case that NEN's account of the nature of ordinary objects is true (consequent of T1c), then NEN is false. Substituting 'NEN is false' for the consequent of T1c gets us T1: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false.

<h3 style="text-align:center">§3 Motivating T2</h3>

The purpose of this section is to clarify and motivate T2 of TRIVIALISATION. Recall T2 states: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference. An initial point of clarification is that T2 is elliptical. It can be unpacked. Written out more fully, T2 states:

> NEN requires some theory of reference *to substantiate the claim that certain referential terms for ordinary objects refer to ordinary objects, and any such theory would trivialise reference.*

> The number of referential terms for ordinary objects is vast. An exemplar will suffice for motivating T2. So, I motivate T2 using one putative ordinary object and corresponding ordinary object term: my cat, Tibbles, and the term 'Tibbles'. The point made using this exemplar can then be generalised to other examples, in support of T2.

> NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$ offer distinct referent-candidates for 'Tibbles'. According to NEN$_S$, Tibbles is a plurality of simples and according to NEN$_A$, Tibbles is the arranging of simples

<div style="text-align:center">35</div>

cat-wise (a process). Despite their distinct referent-candidates, the same argument for T2 can be applied. So, I do not distinguish between NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$ in this argument.

> T2a: The referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' according to NEN does not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term.
>
> T2b: If T2a, then any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference.
>
> T2c: So, any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference.
>
> T2d: NEN requires a theory of reference.
>
> T2e: If T2d and T2c, then NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.
>
> So, T2: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.

This argument contains a sub-conclusion, T2c. I accept the argument from T2c to T2. So, the argument *for* T2c will be the focus. T2a is particularly important; it is the premise I will challenge in §4.

To begin seeing the idea behind T2a, consider PADs for 'Tibbles', i.e., descriptions one would psychologically associate with Tibbles (when aware Tibbles is a cat). One would expect Tibbles to meet descriptions like 'has cats for parents', 'has cat DNA'. One would also expect Tibbles to be correctly described as being of a certain size, weight, and shape; to (probably) have four legs, two eyes, a tail; and to be capable of purring, eating, shedding, etc.

These descriptions are not exhaustive. Likewise, failing to satisfy some of these PADs will more readily lead to reference trivialisation than others (a point returned to later). But the relative importance of failing to satisfy various PADs will not matter much here: the failure to sufficiently satisfy (allegedly) owes to *how few* PADs the referent-candidates can satisfy. Roughly, the idea behind T2a is that referring to a plurality of simples (NEN$_S$) or the arranging

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of simples (NEN$_A$) as 'Tibbles' is much like calling a manatee 'a mermaid'. These reference-candidates do not sufficiently satisfying PADs for 'Tibbles'.

There are several ways in which NEN's referent-candidates may fail to satisfy PADs for 'Tibbles'. For convenience, I group and label them.

OBJECTHOOD. One might naturally describe Tibbles as a *single, material object* (and, thus, 'Tibbles' as a *singular* term). But if Tibbles is a plurality of objects, or a process, then Tibbles is not a single, material object. So, these referent-candidates for 'Tibbles' seemingly fails to satisfy this PAD.

PARTHOOD. One might naturally describe Tibbles as *having parts*: a tail, ears, paws, etc. According to NEN, Tibbles exists, and nihilism is true. So, Tibbles cannot be a composite object. If Tibbles is not a composite object, the NENist seems committed to saying Tibbles does not have parts. So, any NEN referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' will seemingly fail to satisfy these PARTHOOD PADs, e.g., 'Tibbles has a tail as a part'.

DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES. One might naturally describe Tibbles as *bearing many diachronic properties*: e.g., 'Tibbles can purr, eat, drink, play, shed hair, gain/lose weight'. Likewise, we tend to think cats can live 12-18 years. So, it seems that Tibbles can persist over time. Given the referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' differs between NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$, two different explanations are required for why NEN's referent-candidates seemingly cannot satisfy these kinds of descriptions.

Recall, for NEN$_S$, Tibbles is a plurality of simples (arranged cat-wise) and for NEN$_A$, Tibbles is a process, the arranging of simples (cat-wise). The basic claim behind why both these referent-candidates seemingly cannot be described as purring, drinking, etc. is because a

particular plurality of simples typically cannot remain arranged cat-wise for long enough to do so—thus failing to satisfy the corresponding descriptions. Here is an argument for that claim.

As a cat, Tibbles is an organism. Organisms typically require homeostasis to persist (at least, to persist *as* organisms). 'Homeostasis' refers to a state of internal stability and to the process by which that stability is maintained: a balancing of physiological forces to maintain an internal equilibrium.[43] Homeostasis is maintained via near constant chemical reactions occurring within cells. These chemical reactions require releasing energy. Only via this release of energy can organisms avoid collapsing into a state of equilibrium with the external environment. The result of this near-constant releasing of energy is that pluralities of simples which are arranged cat-wise will be frequently and rapidly changing, new simples typically coming and going every few milliseconds. This seems to have unwanted consequences for both versions of NEN.

If Tibbles *just is* a plurality of simples (arranged cat-wise), then at least some of the things to which 'Tibbles' refers will become scattered in the process of purring, sipping, etc. That plurality of simples will persist through these processes (assuming no simple is destroyed); however, by becoming scattered, the simples plausibly cease to count as a cat, because those simples are no longer arranged cat-wise. If so, the NEN$_S$ referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' seemingly cannot persist long enough to satisfy DIACHRONIC PADs: the simples won't be a cat for long enough.

The homeostasis point above can also be used against NEN$_A$. One might argue, for example, that the relevant "arrangement" (the arranging of simples Tibble-wise) will cease to occur when simples become scattered, or that it will cease to be an arrangement properly

[43] See Reece, J. B., & Campbell, N. A. (2011, 861) for the basics of homeostasis from a biological perspective.

identifiable with a cat (and therefore, with Tibbles). Likewise, one might think that the constantly changing nature of cats (and other organism, ordinary objects) means that cats persist via similar, but numerically distinct, processes occurring one after the other. If one of these conjectures is accurate, the NEN$_A$ referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' seemingly cannot persist long enough to satisfy PADs involving diachronic properties.

If NEN's referent-candidates fails to satisfy PADs related to OBJECTHOOD, PARTHOOD, and DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES, then T2a seems correct: the referent-candidates for 'Tibbles' according to NEN do not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term. Having motivated T2a, I move to motivate T2b.

Some of the explanation for T2b came in §2 when explaining why, if NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, NEN is false. Recall, T2b reads:

> T2b: If the referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' according to NEN does not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term, then any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference.

Recall, a reference-trivialising theory is one where—because the theory's criteria for reference are too permissive—intuitively non-referring terms successfully refer. The MERMAID example (§2) showed why one's view allowing such terms to successfully refer is problematic: the reference-trivialising view (CTR, in that case) implied that 'mermaid' successfully refers to manatees, despite our intuitively thinking that manatees are too dissimilar from mermaids to serve as the referents for that term when used as part of appropriate referring expressions.

In the current case, NEN is taking for granted that 'Tibbles' refers, both versions offering a referent-candidate. If those referent-candidates fail to sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term 'Tibbles' (i.e., if T2a is true), then NEN must require a theory of reference with criteria for reference which are too permissive. Put differently, if what Tibbles *is* according to NEN is

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really dissimilar from how we would describe Tibbles, then a theory of reference usable by NEN—one that can account for 'Tibbles' referring successfully—must be one that would trivialise reference.

From T2a and T2b, we get the result that (T2c) any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference. We can now move to the latter half of the argument.

I take T2d and T2e to be straightforward and so not in need of much defence. Recall, they read:

T2d: NEN requires a theory of reference.

T2e: If NEN requires a theory of reference and any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference, then NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.

Perhaps it is not immediately obvious why NEN, put forward here primarily as a metaphysical theory of ordinary objects, requires a theory of reference. Recall that, on the NEN views entertained here, cats, mats, and other ordinary objects exist *and* referential ordinary object terms (like 'Tibbles') do in fact refer. These conjuncts could be separated. However, an NEN view on which ordinary objects exist but cannot be referred to is likely not an NEN view we ought to endorse. So, any *plausible* NEN view is one on which ordinary objects exist *and* (at least some) ordinary object terms refer. I take that as sufficient motivation for T2d.

If NEN requires a theory of reference and NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then we get T2: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference. Combining T2 with T1 (if NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false), we get the conclusion of TRIVIALISATION, i.e., that (T3) NEN is false.

§4 Against T2

My goal is now to argue against TRIVIALISATION on behalf of NEN by rejecting T2. To do so, I argue against T2a: the referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' according to NEN does not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term. I argue against T2a by arguing the referent-candidates for both versions of NEN *can* satisfy a sufficient number of PADs for 'Tibbles'.

Recall, I divided PADs for 'Tibbles' into three groups: OBJECTHOOD, PARTHOOD, and DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES. I will concede that both NEN_S and NEN_A's reference-candidates fail to satisfy OBJECTHOOD PADs but then argue this alone is insufficient to establish T2a. I then argue both NEN_S and NEN_A's reference-candidates *can* satisfy PARTHOOD and DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES PADs, and that this suffices to disprove T2a. The falsity of T2a undermines support for T2c, i.e., the claim that 'any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference'. And without T2c, the claim that (T2) 'NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference' can be rejected along with the conclusion that NEN is false.

As in the previous section, PADs involving diachronic properties will make up most of the discussion. But I begin with discussion of PADs relating to objecthood.

OBJECTHOOD.

The thought that Tibbles could readily be described as 'a single material object' is hard to resist. So hard that I will not try to resist it. Nor will I try to argue that the referent-candidates both versions of NEN offer can satisfy this description. However, we have good reason to think that this concession is insufficient to establish that NEN requires a reference-trivialising theory. A theory of reference implying that a term refers successfully to a referent that does not satisfy *every* PAD for that term does not entail that the theory's criteria for reference are too permissive. Here is a reason, along with two examples, supporting that claim.

The reason: not all PADs are created equal. That is, some PADs are more important to satisfy than others, and some deviation between referent and PADs is sometimes acceptable. We saw this with (first example) WHALES in §2. Even though people initially associated whales with the description 'fish', we still intuitively think that the term 'whale' had been (and continues) successfully referring to non-fish (when used as part of an appropriate referring expression). Despite whales not satisfying every (original) PAD for the term, we would not consider them as failing to sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term 'whale'; they *are* whales.

A second example: the term 'atom'. 'Atom' was original intended to refer to something indivisible, i.e., lacking in internal structure, singular. Yet we use the term today to refer to something(s) which, it turns out, have a different structure. This example is particularly pertinent to the Tibbles case: it shows we can successfully refer to Tibbles (and other "ordinary objects") even when unaware of their mereological structure or metaphysical nature. More pointedly, if a theory of reference can account for 'atom' referring successfully without trivialising reference in the process, the same could surely be said of some theory NEN uses for Tibbles and 'Tibbles'.

Of course, that NEN's reference-candidates need not satisfy every PAD for 'Tibbles' for the term to unproblematically refer successfully will likely be a satisfactory reply only if these candidates satisfy a substantial number of *other* PADs: if, e.g., whales had turned out to be *very* different from how we originally described them, then our intuitions in this case would likely (and rightly) differ. So, I now move to address whether NEN's reference-candidates satisfy other PADs for 'Tibbles', beginning with PARTHOOD PADs.

PARTHOOD

Unlike the PAD 'single, material object', the referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' (according to both versions of NEN) *can* satisfy parthood PADs. That is, Tibbles, as understood by both versions of NEN, can be truthfully described as having parts, e.g., a tail, legs, fur, etc. Since nihilism is typically described as the view that nothing has proper parts, and NEN is a nihilist view, this may sound contradictory. However, Tibbles having parts according to an NEN view needn't be contradictory. NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$ require separate explanations for how Tibbles can be truthfully described as having parts. I begin with NEN$_S$.

PARTHOOD PADs and NEN$_S$

According to NEN$_S$, Tibbles is a plurality of simples (arranged cat-wise). A plurality is merely a large number of things, not a composite entity, distinct from the simples. How can Tibbles, understood this way, truthfully be described as having parts? Many senses of 'part' exist; not all are inconsistent with nihilism.[44] So, one can account for the truth of certain descriptions involving parts without conflict with nihilism.

My suggestion is this: the NEN$_S$ proponent should argue that 'part' be understood as picking out the *are among* relation ('*amongness*')—where the xs are among the ys if every one of the xs is one of the ys but not vice versa.[45] Here is how this will be of help.

Consider the statement 'Tibbles has a tail as a part'—something conveying a likely PAD for 'Tibbles'. For an NEN$_S$ proponent, if Tibbles (an entire cat) is a plurality of simples, then Tibbles' tail will merely be some of that plurality, i.e., some simples arranged tail-wise among the simples arranged cat-wise. So, if there are some simples arranged tail-wise among

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[44] See, e.g., Winston, Chaffin, & Herrmann (1987).
[45] I take this definition, and the inspiration for this strategy, from Liggins (2008, 190).

the simples arranged Tibbles-wise (there are), and if 'has a tail as a part' can be understood in terms of amongness (it can), then the statement 'Tibbles has a tail as a part' can come out true. Accordingly, the NENs referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' can satisfy PARTHOOD PADs.

In suggesting NENists can appeal to amongness in this way, I am not suggesting that we typically think of the relation between Tibbles and his tail as one of amongness.[46] However, that we don't think of parthood this way does not seem problematic—at least not problematic for our current purpose (showing a referent-candidate can satisfy certain PADs). We have seen already that sometimes a term can unproblematically refer even when the referent surprisingly fails to satisfy certain descriptions. Here, the referent-candidate *does* satisfy the description, albeit (perhaps) in a surprising way. In the case of Tibbles, the descriptions of interest (ones involving parthood) will be very commonsensical: Tibbles has a tail, ears, whiskers, etc. Some potentially surprising metaphysics behind these descriptions does not detract from their truth.

In sum, NEN$_S$ proponents can argue that their referent-candidate satisfies PARTHOOD PADs for the term 'Tibbles' using the amongness relation. If so, this will go some of the way to showing that NEN$_S$ does not require a reference-trivialising theory of reference. I now move to NEN$_A$.

PARTHOOD PADs and NEN$_A$

Recall, according to NEN$_A$, Tibbles is the arranging of simples cat-wise, with this being understood as a *process*. One NEN$_A$ option for accounting for Tibbles having parts is similar to the amongness suggestion for NEN$_S$ above. The options are similar in that the referent-candidate will satisfy the relevant description, albeit in a potentially surprising way. The

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[46] I discuss a very similar point in chapter 1, albeit for different reasons.

surprise in this case is that, as with Tibbles himself, Tibbles' parts (i.e., tail, ears, etc.) are processes.

Thus far, I have spoken of NEN$_A$ identifying Tibbles with a process. The arranging of simples cat-wise is an extremely complex process, involving may sub-processes. Here is what I mean by a 'sub-process': if an "entire" process is an occurrence, then a sub-process is merely some of that occurrence. Here is an example: two cars racing is a process. Since those cars are involved in that process, the motion of each car individually can be counted as a sub-process of the racing process. This example can be used to illustrate two other important points about sub-processes, as I am understanding them here.

First: a sub-process is not a temporal part of a process. Whether a process can have temporal parts at all is a complex issue.[47] One might think a process is something that occurs fully from moment to moment (or, at least, within a certain temporal window) and is therefore not temporally extended and does not have temporal parts.

However, that multiple processes can contribute to a single, greater process is far less controversial. Supposing a temporal part of a process is just some minimal duration over which a process occurs (a temporal window), this will still be distinct from a sub-process. For example, picking out the movement of one of the racing cars over some duration t_1-t_2 (a sub-process) is distinct from picking out the racing process from t_1-t_2. One difference between them is that the latter picks out the movement of the other car, the former does not.

Second: a sub-process, as I am understanding it here, can be picked out in a somewhat arbitrary way. For example, I previously picked out one car moving as a sub-process of racing;

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[47] See, e.g., Steward (2013) for discussion of the distinction between processes and events on which the former lack temporal parts. See Galton & Mizoguchi (2009) for a view on which processes have temporal parts, of a sort.

I could also have picked out the moving of one wheel, one turning of the steering wheel, one firing of a piston, etc. This point about arbitrariness is especially relevant when considering parts of Tibbles as sub-processes.

Tibbles is a process involving a plurality of simples. If Tibbles is a process, then (e.g.) Tibbles' tail is also a process—involving *some* of the processes undergone by *some* of the simples among that plurality. The simples and processes involved in the occurrence of Tibbles' tail will "cut-across" many other processes involved in the arranging of simples Tibbles-wise; accordingly, separating the biophysical processes responsible for the continued occurrence of Tibbles' tail on the one hand and the rest of Tibbles on the other would be extremely difficult. Nevertheless, Tibbles' tail remains a sub-process of Tibbles and, as such, can be referred to and analysed as a part of Tibbles.

If the above is correct, NEN$_A$ has a means of explaining how a process, Tibbles, can satisfy PARTHOOD PADs for 'Tibbles'. However, as with the amongness relation suggestion for NEN$_S$, the claim made here is not that we conceive of the parthood relation between Tibbles and Tibbles' tail as a relation between processes. Still, if some of the process of arranging simples cat-wise is the arranging of simples tail-wise, then Tibbles can satisfy descriptions like 'has a tail as a part'. What's more, claiming this kind of parthood applies to processes will not conflict with nihilism, since processes are occurrences in which objects participate and not themselves physical objects. So, there is no risk of positing a composite object in positing processes and sub-processes as an analysis for PARTHOOD PADs.

Arguing the reference-candidates for NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$ can satisfy PARTHOOD PADs is a big step towards showing they *sufficiently* satisfy PADs for 'Tibbles'. But it is not yet enough.

Fully rejecting T2a requires explaining how NEN's reference-candidates can satisfying DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES PADs. I now turn to this final task.

DIACHRONIC PROPERTIES

In §3, I gave two closely related arguments for why the NEN$_{S/A}$ referent-candidates for 'Tibbles' seemingly cannot satisfy DIACHRONIC PADs (e.g., 'sips milk', 'purrs', etc.). If these arguments are successful, then Tibbles as understood by NEN$_{S/A}$ cannot truthfully be described as doing almost anything we normally think of cats as doing. If so, then T2 seems highly plausible, because what 'Tibbles' refers to according to NEN would be very dissimilar to cats as we normally think of them. And if *that* is true, then any theory of reference usable by NEN (i.e., on which 'Tibbles' *does* successfully refer) must surely have criteria for reference which are too permissive and will thus trivialise reference.

Recall, I am pushing back against T2 via rejecting T2a. I am arguing NEN's reference-candidates *can* sufficiently satisfy PADs for 'Tibbles' by showing that Tibbles can truthfully be described as doing a sufficient number of the things we associate with cats. Here, the focus is on DIACHRONIC PADs. One way of showing DIACHRONIC PADs can be satisfied is by offering an account of how Tibbles can *persist* (in a way consistent with NEN). If we can show how Tibbles can persist, we can explain how he can purr, sip, meow, etc. Persistence will therefore be a key topic for the remainder of the chapter. As before, different accounts are required for NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$. I begin with NEN$_A$.

DIACHRONIC PADS and NEN$_A$

If Tibbles is, ultimately, a process, then accounting for the persistence of Tibbles may seem straightforward. Granted, whether processes *perdure* or *endure* (or some further option) is

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often debated.[48] But still, all options typically take for granted that processes can persist (in some way or other).

Even if processes can persist, more needs to be said: even granting processes *in general* persist, it could be that the kind of process relevant here—i.e., the arranging of simples *cat-wise*—does not persists very long, precluding processes of that sort from satisfying PADs for reasons looked at in §3. For example, one might argue the *arranging cat-wise* process ends (but is replaced by a very similar process) when one of the simples participating in the process is scattered owing to homeostasis. If that were so, such processes would not persist long enough to satisfy descriptions involving diachronic properties. However, although the persistence conditions for processes will varying depending on the process under consideration, such a weak persistence condition for the *arranging cat-wise* process seems highly implausible.

How might one try to justify these extremely restrictive persistence conditions? I see the following as the two most probable options. One might think that persistence necessitates change but argue that (1) processes are incapable of change or that (2) a change in objects participating in a process entails a change of process. However, neither of these reasons are very compelling, at least when applied to arranging of simples cat-wise. I address these suggestions in turn.

One might think a process is incapable of change because one think's a process *is* a change. Put differently, one might think a process is temporally extended over the entire duration it occurs, such that it has temporal parts. And, in the same way, e.g., a flag having different coloured parts does not amount to the flag changing colour, distinct temporal parts of a process having different properties does not amount to it changing, either.

[48] See, e.g., Galton (2006), Galton & Mizogouchi (2009), and Stout (2016).

The problem with this line of reasoning is that processes need not be understood as having temporal parts extending over the entire duration that they are occurring. To think so may be conflating a *process* with an *event*. Here is an example illustrating the relationship between events and processes as understood here: by the very fact of my *running* (a process) from 10-11am, there exists an event (call it *My Run*) which occurs during that time.[49] Running occurs at *every* moment over the hour-long duration. *My Run* does not. Instead, *My Run* occupies the entire duration. So, although *My Run* is temporally extended, and so perhaps incapable of change, this is not so for the *running* process.

Distinguishing processes and events helps in making another point against (1). Whereas *My Run* cannot slow down or speed up, my *running* can slow down or speed up. A process can have properties which are subject to change. As another example, consider acceleration.[50] Acceleration is a rate of change in velocity and velocity is moving (a process) in a direction. So, not only can a process (here, motion) have a property that can change (the speed of my running); such properties can also have properties that can change (here, the rate of change in the speed of my running). In sum, processes are capable of changing. So, an inability to change is not an applicable reason for ruling out the persistence of processes.

Moving to (2), the idea that a change in objects participating in a process entails a change of process is not entirely implausible, at least in some instances. For example, consider the racing cars case from above. If one of the cars was replaced, perhaps a *new* racing process would then be underway. After all, many of the objects participating in the process have been replaced.

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[49] Here I am taking my understanding of events and processes (and the relation between the two) from Galton & Mizoguchi (2009).

[50] I take this example from Galton & Mizoguchi (2009, 8).

However, a change in objects often does not suggest a change, or ceasing, of a process. To illustrate, consider a chemical chain reaction, like combustion. The process of something burning (an instance of combustion) requires the constant release of particles from fuel and the combination of those particles with oxygen from the surrounding air. At every point during the burning process, particles are being drawn into (and released as a result of) this process; the objects involved are constantly changing. Still, the process persists.

Like with a burning process, a similar story is true of the arranging of simples cat-wise. This process is extremely complex. It is *inherent to the very nature of the process*—one and the same, persisting, process—that its occurrence leads to frequent changes in which objects participate. To deny this is to fail to understand the kind of process being considered.

In sum, we have no good reason to suppose that ordinary objects understood as processes, cannot persist through frequent changes in simples (e.g., owing to homeostasis). Some examples above illustrated that processes can change, that some of their properties can also change, and that processes can persist through changes in participating objects.

Relating all this back to NEN$_A$, Tibbles can purr, meow, run etc., in that Tibbles is a process which can persist through the changes of simples involved in purring, meowing, etc. Likewise, Tibbles' purring can get gentler; his meowing can get louder, and his running can get faster. Accordingly, the NEN$_A$ referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' can satisfy diachronic PADs for this term.

DIACHRONIC PADs and NEN$_S$

Compared with NEN$_A$, accounting for the persistence of Tibbles on the NEN$_S$ picture is more complex. Recall, on this version of NEN, Tibbles is a plurality of simples (arranged cat-wise).

Recall also that the objection I am responding to, in sum, says that the NEN$_S$ reference-candidate for 'Tibbles' cannot satisfy DIACHRONIC PADs because a plurality of simples cannot persist (as a cat) for long enough to do so. In response, I offer one way an NEN$_S$ proponent can account for Tibbles' persistence: namely, using the stage theory of persistence.

On the stage theory, an ordinary object, like a cat, is an *instantaneous* object (or 'stage'), i.e., something existing only for an instant. But ordinary objects nevertheless persist. How does this work? On the stage theory, an object persists if, roughly, we can say truthfully of it that it was around at some past time or will be around at some future time. This in mind, consider the following sentence:

'Tibbles was once a kitten'.

If persistence is a matter of existing at a past or future time, then the truth of this sentence suffices for the persistence of Tibbles. To capture the truth of this sentence, stage theory offers an analysis of temporal predication. On that analysis, this sentence attributes the temporal property *was once a kitten* to the referent of 'Tibbles' in the above sentence (i.e., a currently existing stage). The sentence is true because Tibbles, the currently existing stage, has a past temporal counterpart (a previously existing stage) that is a kitten. Since the sentence is true, Tibbles can be said to have persisted (all the way back to kittenhood!).

Since Tibbles and his counterparts exist only for an instant, Tibbles' persistence clearly does not depend on numerical identity. Hence the appeal for the NEN$_S$ proponent; if numerical identity is not required for persistence, then the grounds for claiming that the NEN$_S$ referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' cannot satisfy DIACHRONIC PADs seems to disappear: yes, a particular plurality of simples typically cannot remain arranged cat-wise for very long, but non-identical counterparts of this plurality can be used explain persistence.

What's more, the stage theory analysis can be used to truthfully predicate DIACHRONIC PADs to a current plurality. For example, consider the sentence:

'Tibbles is purring'.

Even though 'Tibbles' refers to an instantaneous stage, and purring requires longer than an instant, the sentence can still come out true. Given Tibbles persists via having counterparts, Tibbles having the property *purring* merely depends on properties of previously existing counterparts. The property is, then, relational; but still a property had by Tibbles.[51]

If the above analysis can be employed successfully, then the NEN$_S$ proponent has a means of explaining how their referent-candidate can satisfy DIACHRONIC PADs for 'Tibbles'. If so, NEN$_S$ would no longer seem at risk of trivialising reference. However, some objections must first be dealt with.

A first objection begins by acknowledging the following complication. According to NEN$_s$, Tibbles is not a single object, but a plurality of simples. Combining NEN$_S$ with the stage theory, we seem to get the conclusion that Tibbles is a plurality of instantaneous simple-stages (arranged cat-wise). But this would seem to imply that the only stages on this picture are simple-stages. If that is so, then it seems only simples, and not Tibbles, can have counterparts. And if Tibbles cannot have counterparts, then stage theory cannot be used to account for Tibbles' persistence.

For this objection to work, it would have to be that multiple objects cannot be involved in a single stage. However, this seems false. The stage theory is typically used to account for the persistence of objects understood to be composites (i.e., to have proper, spatial parts). Given a composite object has other objects as parts, this already seems to cast doubt on the

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[51] See Sider (1996, 448) for similar line of reasoning.

thought that multiple objects cannot be involved in a single stage, and that multiple objects cannot be counterparts of multiple, numerically distinct objects at other times.

Building on this line of reasoning, suppose one opted for a composition as identity view—a view according to which a whole *just is* (strictly and literally) its proper parts considered collectively.[52] On this view, if Tibbles was a taken to be a composite object, Tibbles (the whole) would be identical with the things that compose it.[53] As such, a Tibbles-stage would be identical to a plurality of simple-stages (taken to compose the Tibbles-stage). I don't think we would deny that Tibbles (understood this way) cannot have a counterpart. If so, this offers support for NEN$_S$ conceiving of Tibbles as a single stage for the following reason: that the relation between the simples which are Tibbles is *composition* (in the composition as identity case) or *arranged cat-wise* (in the NEN$_S$ case) ought to make no difference to whether we can posit a Tibbles stage.

Here is second objection. Call it the 'counting objection'.[54] Recall that, on the stage theory, an ordinary object is identified with a single, instantaneous stage. If that is so, then an ordinary object is going out of existence and being replaced at every instant, when, intuitively, only one ordinary object is there the whole time. Perhaps this is not, in and of itself, an obviously problematic implication. But suppose someone asked me how many cats I have had as a pet. Provided Tibbles is my only cat, the intuitive answer is 'one'. However, if Tibbles, a cat, is identified with an instantaneous stage (consisting of a plurality of simple-stages), then,

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[52] This definition comes from Calosi (2016), which argues for the equivalence of composition as identity and mereological nihilism.

[53] For recent discussion of composition as identity, see Yi, Bu (2021). See, also Cotnoir & Baxter (2014), Spencer (2013), and Wallace (2011).

[54] This objection is used against NEN specifically in Long (2019, 470).

for every instant I have had Tibbles as a pet, I have had a distinct cat. If so, I have owned *countless* cats, not one. So, stage theory seems to commit me to giving the wrong count.

In response to the counting objection, stage theorists typically have a backup option for counting. Stage theory is normally understood as sharing a four dimensionalist metaphysical view with what I will call 'worm theorists'. Four-dimensionalism is, roughly, the view that "temporally extended things divide into temporal parts".[55] The worm theorist identifies ordinary objects (like cats) not with a single instantaneous stage, but with an entire, spatiotemporally extended spacetime worm (or segment thereof)—of which stages are temporal slices. An ordinary object, like a cat, persists on a worm view by being temporally extended through time as a spacetime worm. Identifying Tibbles with an entire spacetime worm solves the counting problem: I have only owned one "cat-worm", hence only one cat.

The problem for the NENist is that opting to "count by worm" does not seem to be an available backup option. Reason being, spacetime worms are typically understood as being composed of temporal parts (these parts being the instantaneous stages that the stage theorist identifies ordinary objects with). But if spacetime worms are composites, their existence seems ruled out by nihilism. If NENists cannot appeal to spacetime worms, then it seems NEN$_S$ proponents cannot easily avoid the counting objection.

There are many possible responses the NENist might give to this objection. However, the first thing to point out is it is not clear that the existence of spacetime worms is incompatible with nihilism. In fact, an extant view, *Nihilist Perdurantism*, accepts both nihilism and spacetime worms. The view is defined as follows:

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[55] Sider (1996, 433)

Nihilist Perdurantism =df objects are extended through spacetime and are temporally composite, but spatially simple.[56]

Nihilist perdurantism is nihilistic because it denies the existence of *spatially* composite objects. The only objects that exist on this view are spatially simple, but nevertheless temporally extended (thus having temporal parts.)

While nihilist perdurantism pushes back against the claim that nihilism is incompatible with the existence of spacetime worms, invoking nihilist perdurantism will not be helpful in solving the counting problem. Even if NEN$_S$ accepts the existence of temporally extended but spatially simple objects, an ordinary object (at any given time) will be a *plurality* of worm stages or segments. And which worm stages are arranged (e.g.,) cat-wise will vary frequently. So, NEN will be unable to count only one worm or plurality of worms as Tibbles—precisely what is needed to solve the counting problem. However, I think more can be said in response to the counting problem. I offer a couple of further responses before then concluding the chapter.

One possible NEN$_S$ response is maintaining that cats are instantaneous objects but arguing we do not count them by identity. Arguments for the conclusion that we do not count ordinary objects by identity already exist.[57] If this conclusion is correct, then the non-identical cats coming into existence at every instant will not necessarily be counted when I tally the number of cats I have owned. This opens the possibility that, via some other means of counting, NEN can secure the desired, intuitive result: that I have only had one cat.

Another possible NEN$_S$ response is to bite the bullet. One could accept NEN$_S$ will get the wrong count, but then argue this is not particularly troubling (for our current purposes); as

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[56] Carlson (2017, 153)
[57] See Liebesman (2015) for a pair of arguments for this conclusion.

was already shown with WHALES, failure to satisfy *some* PADs, even seemingly quite important ones, does not necessarily end up with a view trivialising reference.

Lastly, a somewhat similar point to the above: NEN$_S$ getting some counts wrong using stage theory will not prevent cats from persisting. Nor, more importantly, will it prevent the NEN$_S$' referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' from satisfying DIACHRONIC PADs by so persisting. So, while getting these kinds of counts wrong will put a blemish on NEN$_S$, the objection will not interfere with the refutation of TRIVIALISATION—the argument of central interest in this chapter, which we will now loop back to.

Conclusion

All of the previous section was ultimately in service of providing an argument against T2 of TRIVIALISATION. Specifically, I argued against T2a, a premise in the argument for T2. Recall, that argument for T2 was as follows:

> T2a: The referent-candidate for 'Tibbles' according to NEN does not sufficiently satisfy PADs for the term.
> T2b: If T2a, then any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference.
>
> T2c: So, any theory of reference usable by NEN will trivialise reference.
>
> T2d: NEN requires a theory of reference.
>
> T2e: If T2d and T2c, then NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.
> So, T2: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.

In the previous section, I argued that the NEN$_S$ and NEN$_A$ reference-candidates for 'Tibbles' can satisfy PARTHOOD AND DIACHRONIC PADs for this term. I take this as sufficient for showing these reference-candidates can in fact satisfy a substantial number of PADs for

'Tibbles' and that this is sufficient for refuting T2a. The falsity of T2a means we need not accept T2c; and without T2c, NEN requiring a theory of reference—i.e., T2d, a premise I accept—does not lead to T2. Recall, the overall argument against NEN, TRIVIALISATION, was as follows:

> T1: If NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference, then NEN is false.
>
> T2: NEN requires a theory of reference that would trivialise reference.
>
> T3: Therefore, NEN is false.

Without T2, TRIVIALISATION fails. Any plausible version of NEN will be a view on which ordinary objects exist *and* can be referred to. This chapter has shown that, on at least two versions of NEN, a reference-trivialising theory is not required to explain this. So, TRIVIALISATION does not establish the falsity of NEN.

Chapter 3

Special Arrangement Questions & Non-Eliminative Nihilism

Mereological nihilism is the view that composition never occurs. As such, nihilism provides a very straightforward answer to the Special Composition Question: Under what conditions does composition occur?[58] According to nihilism, there are no conditions under which composition occurs: no composite objects exist (save things "composing" themselves).

On the assumption that ordinary objects would be composites, nihilism is often paired with ordinary object eliminativism: the view that no ordinary objects exist. Eliminativism is counterintuitive. To sweeten the pill, some nihilists say that where they deny some ordinary object (of sortal F) exists, they accept simples (microscopic, partless objects) are *arranged F-wise*.[59] Hereafter, let 'F' be a stand in for ordinary object terms, unless otherwise stated.

Appealing to simples arranged F-wise invites a question somewhat analogous to the Special Composition Question: the Special *Arrangement* Question (SAQ).

SAQ: Under what conditions are simples arranged F-wise?[60]

To be clear, I understand this phrasing as a schema: for each F, a different SAQ exists, e.g., under what conditions are simples arranged *cat*-wise, *dog*-wise, etc. Various kinds of SAQ answers have been offered; many are themselves schematic or formulaic in nature. That is, they are written so that one need only replace 'F' with some other term to produce an answer

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[58] For more on this question, see van Inwagen (1990, 39).
[59] The 'arranged F-wise' locution was introduced by van Inwagen (1990, 109).
[60] The name 'SAQ' comes from Tallant (2014, 1513) who credits Bennett (2009, 66). The phrasing is mine.

to the corresponding SAQ. Here is one SAQ answer formula example adapted from Tallant (2014, 1514) who takes it from Rosen and Dorr (2002, 157–158). Call it 'BEHAVIOUR'.

> BEHAVIOUR: Simples are arranged F-wise *iff* there are simples, the xs, such that: the xs (collectively) behave in the way that they would were they to compose an F.

This answer is formulaic because, e.g., 'F' can be replaced with 'cat' to answer the SAQ "under what conditions are simples arranged *cat*-wise?".

Formulaic answers like the above may seem like a satisfactory way of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for simples being arranged F-wise in response to SAQs. Nevertheless, it has been argued that BEHAVIOUR and answers like it are objectionable, and that no decent nihilist SAQ answers are available.[61]

In this chapter, I also find fault with these kinds of SAQ answers. In short, I find them unsatisfactory because they are uninformative—though this may not be enough to call them 'objectionable'. However, my primary issue is not with the *answers*, but with SAQs themselves.

In §1, I offer four nihilist-friendly SAQ answer formula examples. I argue three features are common to the answers those formulas produce: they are *incomplete*, *circuitous*, and *appeal to our notions of Fs in some way*. The SAQ answers are *incomplete* in that they omit details, and *circuitous* in that they allude to details in a roundabout way, i.e., by appealing to our notions of Fs.

In §2, by appealing to some of my own view of what it is for simples to be arranged F-wise, I offer a possible explanation for why SAQ answers will almost inevitably be incomplete

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[61] Bennett (2009, 66) says nihilists have "no straightforward answer" to SAQ. Tallant (2014) argues no *decent* response is available. Elder (2011) and Unger (2014) also argue nihilists cannot answer SAQsth. See, e.g., Brenner (2015a) and Kantin (2020) for nihilist responses.

and circuitous. I suggest SAQ answers will be incomplete because there are too many conditions to specify (necessitating the omitting of details) and will be circuitous because circuitously appealing to Fs is plausibly the *only* way for an SAQ answer to capture all and only the plethora of conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise.

In §3, I explain why the circuitousness of SAQ answers makes them uninformative and thus unsatisfying. §1-3 culminate in the conclusion that, in answering SAQs relating to simples arranged F-wise, one's answers will likely be either: *circuitous* (and thus uninformative) or *direct* (and thus incomplete)—a dilemma, of sorts. This, I think, says more about how demanding SAQs are and less about SAQ answers, or nihilism. Providing necessary and sufficient conditions for simples being arranged F-wise (in an informative way) is often too tall an order.

Yet, despite the content of §1-3, I believe nihilists who appeal to simples arranged F-wise must offer *some* response to SAQs. I also believe nihilists *can* offer informative—and thus, *decent*—SAQ responses. My thought that nihilists can provide decent SAQ responses is motivated by non-eliminative nihilism (hereafter, 'NEN').

An NEN view is any view on which nihilism is true *and* all ordinary objects exist.[62] Many NEN views posit a close relationship between ordinary objects and simples arranged F-wise. So, if such views are to seem defensible, such NENists ought to be capable of saying something decent in response to SAQs. In §4, I first argue NEN offers motivation for thinking we are somewhat familiar with the conditions under which simples are arranged in various ways, and that we can therefore offer at least a *somewhat* informative response to SAQs. I then

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[62] See, e.g., Contessa (2014) for one such NEN view.

provide some criteria for informative SAQ responses. Lastly, I provide a toy example of an answer satisfying these criteria, using this answer to demonstrate that incomplete SAQ responses can nevertheless be informative. Ultimately, then, the goal of this chapter is to offer some possible responses NENists can give when confronted with SAQs.

§1 Previous SAQ answers

Recall SAQs asks: 'under what conditions are simples arranged F-wise?'. Here are four examples of nihilist-friendly SAQ answer formulas. As stated in the introduction, my claim is that these answer formulas produce answers that share three features: they are *incomplete*, they are *circuitous*, and they all *appeal to (our notions of) Fs, in some way*. I explain how each answer appeals to Fs immediately after introducing them, before then explaining their incompleteness and circuitousness. The first example answer formula was already introduced above. Recall, BEHAVIOUR reads:

> BEHAVIOUR: Simples are arranged F-wise *iff* there are simples, the xs, such that: the xs
> (collectively) behave in the way that they would were they to compose an F.

BEHAVIOUR appeals to Fs via appealing to how simples *would* behave *were* they to compose *an F*. Depending on one's modal views regarding composition, BEHAVIOUR employs a counterfactual or a counterpossible, but that detail won't concern us.

The second example SAQ answer formula owes to Merricks (2001, 4). It appeals to supervenience. So, call it 'SUP'.

> SUP: Simples are arranged F-wise *iff* they both have the properties and also stand in the
> relations to microscopica upon which, *if Fs existed*, those simples' composing an F
> would non-trivially supervene.

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Note, again, the appeal to Fs. Roughly put, our notions of Fs are what establish the relevant properties and relations, with non-trivial supervenience being a mechanism for encapsulating those properties and relations in the answer formula.

The third example answer formula owes to van Inwagen (1990, 109). This answer appeals to F-receptacles. So, call it 'RECEPTACLE'.

> RECEPTACLE: Simples are arranged F-wise *iff* they fill an F-receptacle and satisfy certain other conditions.

RECEPTACLE does not use a counterfactual or counterpossible involving Fs; nor does it appeal to the existence of Fs. Nevertheless, RECEPTACLE still appeals to our notions of Fs. F-receptacles are regions of space that, according to those who believe in Fs, are occupied by Fs. So, the notion of an F is required to make sense of an F-receptacle, meaning notions of Fs are (albeit indirectly) appealed to in RECEPTACLE.[63]

Here is a final, nihilist-friendly SAQ answer formula example.[64] It is a *fictionalist* answer, so call it 'FICTION'.

> FICTION: Simples are arranged F-wise *iff* they are arranged in way *W* and, according to the fiction that there are composites, being arranged in way *W* suffices for composing an F.

FICTION is not claiming simples are arranged F-wise *because* people believe they are; that's not *why* simples are arranged that way. Also, FICTION is committed merely to the existence of a fiction according to which Fs exist (as composites). Nevertheless, I think it fair to say that, *broadly speaking,* FICTION still appeals to our *notions* of Fs via appealing to said fiction.[65]

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[63] Tallant (2014) objects to BEHAVIOUR, SUP, and RECEPTACLE on the grounds that they appeal to Fs even though proponents of those answers are eliminativists about Fs. See Brenner (2015a) for one response.
[64] This kind of answer is suggested in both Brenner (2015a, 1304) and Kantin (2020, 4325).
[65] Kantin (2020) argues this answer gets around Tallant's (2014) objection. See footnote 63 for more details.

Despite the diversity in these answer formulas, all appeal to (our notions of) Fs. I now argue that they (and their resulting, specific SAQ answers) also share two other features: *incompleteness* and *circuitousness*. These features are not intended to be precisely defined. But the following should give a good idea of what I mean.

In calling the answers *incomplete*, I mean the answers omit details concerning the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. To show the answers are incomplete in this way, notice each answer prompts a further question.

> BEHAVIOUR: Simples collectively behave in the way they would were they to compose an F *iff what*?

> SUP: Simples both have the properties and also stand in the relations to microscopica upon which, *if Fs existed*, those simples' composing an F would non-trivially supervene *iff* what?

> RECEPTACLE: What are the other conditions simples must satisfy to be arranged F-wise?

> FICTION: Simples are arranged in way W (which suffices for composing a F within the composition fiction) *iff what*?

The answers these formulas produce are *incomplete* in the sense that they do not spell out the details these further questions are asking for.

What about their *circuitousness*? The answers are circuitous because, loosely put, they "point to" details which aren't included in the answers (hence incompleteness) but do so in a roundabout way. The nature of their circuity differs from answer to answer, but all are circuitous by, in some way or other, appealing to our notions of Fs in accounting for the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. I will use BEHAVIOUR as an illustrative example.

BEHAVIOUR points to the collective behaviour of simples, i.e., how simples would behave were they to compose an F. According to nihilists, simples never compose an F.

However, whenever nihilist proponents of BEHAVIOUR accept that there are simples arranged F-wise, they accept that simples *are* behaving in a certain way, i.e., the way they would *were* they to compose an F. In such cases, the behaviour being "pointed to" is *actual* behaviour. But instead of *directly* describing this actual behaviour—more precisely, instead of directly describing the necessary and sufficient conditions for simples to count as behaving in this way—it is indirectly described as 'the behaviour simples would exhibit were they to compose an F.' In that way, the SAQ answers BEHAVIOUR generates are circuitous. The reader will find the same is true of the other answer formulas above.

Having argued for SAQ answers having these features, I now want to offer a possible explanation for why they have them.

§2 A possible explanation for incompleteness and circuitousness

Explaining *why* previous answers have the features mentioned above is helpful in discussing the demands of SAQs. In offering this explanation, I divulge some details of my own thoughts regarding what *simples being arranged F-wise* amounts to. However, I am not defending my view here. Rather, I offer these thoughts so they can serve as part of a possible explanation for the incompleteness and circuitousness of previous SAQ answers. Here, then, are some relevant points of my view on simples being arranged F-wise.

§2.1 Some details of my view

First, the number of simples that must exist for any ordinary object to exist will typically be extremely large: numbers far greater than trillions or quadrillions—let's just say "zillions". So, any plurality of simples properly called 'arranged F-wise'—where 'F' stands for an ordinary object sortal— will number in the zillions.

Second, what it is for simples to be arranged F-wise can be aptly described in terms of *the physical properties* of simples*,* or in terms of simples undergoing *a process.* By a process, I mean something that's occurring, e.g., moving, spinning, flowing.

As an illustrative example of how something can be described in property terms or process terms, suppose a ball is in motion, going from point A to B. I can describe this in terms of the properties of the ball, e.g., properties describing the ball being located in certain places at certain times. Or I can describe it in process terms, e.g., the ball is in the process of *rolling* from A to B.

In property terms, *arranged F-wise* could be characterised as a *complex property* collectively had by simples—a complex property being a property with other properties as "parts" or "constituents", including relational properties.[66] More plainly, if a property is a *way something is*, then zillions of somethings (simples) must themselves be certain ways (have certain properties) before they can collectively count as *arranged F-wise*. In process terms, one might say *being arranged* (F-wise) is a *complex process* in which simples participate: 'complex' indicating that the process involves various sub-processes (and *being* indicating that it is something ongoing).

One can also describe simples (being) arranged F-wise in "mixed" terminology. For example, one could say 'simples undergoing the process of being arranged cat-wise is caused by them having certain physical properties' or 'simples collectively have the property *arranged cat-wise* in virtue of undergoing certain processes'.

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[66] To avoid conflict with nihilism, "constituents" (or "parts") of complex properties may need to be understood in non-mereological terms. See, e.g., Fisher (2018, §5) for examples of non-mereological accounts of structural universals (which are complex properties). Others may argue that talk of complex properties "having parts" or "constituents" is merely metaphoric—see, e.g., Swayer (1998, §1.2). In any case, I am not intending to commit to any view of properties in suggesting this.

These two ways of describing simples being arranged F-wise are reflected in the example SAQ answers. SUP most straightforwardly aligns with the former means of description, mentioning properties and relations; the "other conditions" mentioned in RECEPTACLE do so, too.[67] BEHAVIOUR better aligns with the second means of description: *behaving* in a certain way seems process-like; a phrase like '*behaving* F-wise' may better fit what's being described. (FICTION, admittedly, is neutral between the two). Going forward, I will use whichever terminology allows for most ease of expression, be that in property, process, or mixed, terms.

Those made uneasy by process-talk may take some comfort in thinking process-talk is dispensable: again, I can describe a ball rolling in terms of its properties at different times without ever actually mentioning *rolling*.[68] However, for what it's worth, the process-based description of simples being arranged F-wise seems more apt to me.

Simples *being* arranged is something ongoing and dynamic. It is not a static state, though it may appear as such to us. Typically, the simples involved are all in motion, with different simples constantly becoming and ceasing to be among those arranged F-wise, as a matter of nomological necessity.[69] Another motivation for preferring process-talk is this: which simples are being arranged F-wise is constantly changing; so, it is more apt to think of the "thing" we are tracking when tracking some simples arranged F-wise over time as an ongoing process in which various simples are participating, rather than simples themselves.

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[67] See van Inwagen (1990, 109) for details.

[68] Bennett (2002, 62) makes a similar point about events: "Anything useful we can say with the event concept we can say without it; it is everywhere dispensable. Truths about events supervene both logically, and in a simple way, on truths about things and their properties." I suspect events and processes are distinct, but the same point applies. See Galton (2006) for discussion of variation in use of the term 'process'. For discussion of a possible relationship between events and processes, see, e.g., Stout (2003).

[69] This near constant changing of simples was a motivator for the trivialisation objection to NEN in chapter 2.

Some final points on being arranged, fleshed out in process terms. Many *particular* processes—i.e., processes involving different pluralities of simples, occurring in different places and times—can count as (e.g.) simples being arranged cat-wise. One might therefore say being arranged cat-wise is a *type* of process. All the separate pluralities of simples currently arranged cat-wise are *tokens* or *instances* of that type of process.

Additionally, since individual cats can substantially qualitatively differ, many qualitatively different processes must count as instances of the process *being arranged cat-wise*. So, being arranged cat-wise is a *multi-realisable* process. Lastly, looping back to my first point, only zillions of simples can *collectively* undergo the process of being arranged F-wise.

From the points above, I arrive at the following, further conjecture: capturing the conditions under which some simples are arranged F-wise requires considering a plethora of— often substantially qualitatively different—processes, each involving zillions of simples. These few points made regarding being arranged F-wise can serve as part of a possible explanation for the incompleteness and circuitousness in previous SAQ answers.

§2.2 Incompleteness, circuitousness, and appealing to Fs

First, recall that for an SAQ answer to be *incomplete* here means that it omits details when specifying the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. For example, BEHAVIOUR claims simples are arranged cat-wise *iff* there are simples, the xs, such that: the xs (collectively) *behave in the way that they would were they to compose a cat*; but BEHAVIOUR doesn't specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for simples behaving in the way they would were they to compose a cat. Therefore, BEHAVIOUR omits details and is incomplete.

What would a complete SAQ answer look like? Presumably, it would have to refrain from omitting any of the relevant details. But what are these details?

For illustration, consider BEHAVIOUR. A *more* complete version of a BEHAVIOUR type answer would require specifying the conditions under which simples behave in the way they would were they to compose an F; this answer would be more complete in that it would include more of the relevant conditions. What would specify those conditions look like? Specifying those (logical) conditions would seemingly require specifying *physical* conditions, i.e., the physical conditions needed and sufficient for simples to behave in the relevant way(s).

This need, to specify *physical* conditions of simples, will be common to all SAQ answers, not just BEHAVIOUR. Why think so? Because they all try to characterise the conditions under which (on my view) some physical process occurs. Suppose one is asked to specify the conditions under which something is *burning*—a physical process, like simple being arranged F-wise (according to my view). Presumably, one's answer will mention fuel, oxygen, heat— physical stuff. So, we have reason to think specifying the conditions under which some physical process occurs requires specifying physical conditions.

If SAQ answers require specifying physical conditions, then avoiding incompleteness in SAQ answers seemingly requires specifying *all* the physical conditions simples *must* (necessary conditions) and *could* (sufficient conditions) be under to count as (being) arranged F-wise. But given (e.g.) *arranged cat-wise* is a property that can only be had collectively by *zillions* of simples, fully specifying those conditions seems practically impossible. The same will be true for all other ordinary object kinds.

One might wonder whether considering *all* those physical conditions is really necessary for giving (all) the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. After all, to describe

some things as 'arranged F-wise' seemingly abstracts away from many details. So, can't the conditions specifying when simples are arranged F-wise also abstract away from many details?

I don't think so. SAQs are asking about what conditions *simples* must satisfy to be arranged F-wise. The fact that SAQs are sometimes asking about zillions of simples at once is incidental. For *any number* of simples to be arranged in certain way, there are conditions *all* the simples involved must satisfy to be so arranged. So, *completely* describing the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise does seemingly require describing the conditions needed and sufficient for *individual* simples to collectively behave in the relevant ways—even when zillions of simples are involved. So, again, incompleteness in SAQ answers may often be inevitable, especially when considering ordinary object related SAQs.

Moving on from incompleteness, how does my view of simples (being) arranged F-wise make sense of the circuitousness of previous SAQ answers? Multi-realisability is important here. Circuitously appealing Fs is plausibly the *only* way for an SAQ answer to capture *all and only* the plethora of conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. There are too many ways simples can be arranged (e.g.) cat-wise to state them all directly. In short, the multi-realisability of being arranged F-wise seems to necessitate appealing to Fs, making the answers circuitous.

As an illustrative example of the previous points regarding incompleteness and circuitousness, suppose I am asked:

Under what conditions is x *dancing*?

Put differently: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions something must satisfy to be dancing? I take these questions as being like an SAQ. As with specifying necessary and sufficient conditions under which simples are arranged, specifying the conditions under which

someone is dancing seemingly requires describing *physical conditions* of something—physical conditions needed and sufficient for dancing to be occurring (or physical properties needed and sufficient for something to have the property *dancing*). Likewise, as with being arranged F-wise, dancing is multi-realisable: there are many ways to dance. Accordingly, directly listing all the things something must and could be doing to be dancing will be practically impossible.

Given this practical impossibility, it makes sense to circuitously appeal back to the notion of *dancing* in some way or other, so that one's answer can encapsulate all and only the relevant conditions. An answer like the following illustrates what I mean (I am not suggesting this is either a good answer or the only possible answer):

DANCING: x is dancing *iff* x is performing dance moves.

DANCING is circuitous. It does not directly describe the relevant conditions for dancing, instead appealing to *dance moves*. DANCING is also incomplete, omitting details in a similar way to previous SAQ answers. We can see it omits details because DANCING does not tell us the necessary and sufficient conditions for something *performing dance moves*. Again, describing *those* conditions would require describing *lots* of ways something can move (assuming dancing requires movement). And so, we can see the rationale for instead circuitously appealing to back to *dance* (moves) in giving this answer, much like an SAQ answer appealing to Fs in some way to account for things being arranged F-wise.

In sum: SAQ answers will typically be incomplete because there are simply too many conditions to describe—both because of the number of simples involved and because of the multi-realisability of the process (or property) being specified. Details must be omitted. SAQ answers are circuitous because they appeal to our notions of Fs in some way; they do so

because directly specifying the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise is practically impossible (at least, for many Fs).

<center>§3 Why the circuitousness of SAQ answers is unsatisfactory</center>

Having looked at a possible explanation for the incompleteness and circuitousness of previous SAQ answers, I now explain why I find these answers unsatisfactory. I use the term 'unsatisfactory' because I am arguing the answers fail to meet an expectation *I* am imposing on them, which may not suffice to make them objectionable.

In short, I find the answers unsatisfactory because, owing to their circuitousness, they are incomplete in a way that is *uninformative*. I give some criteria for informativeness of SAQ answers in §4. Here, I will use some analogies merely to try evoking the intuition that previous SAQ answers are *un*informative. For the sake of space, I cover only three of the four SAQ answer examples.

First, BEHAVIOUR. Here is an analogy illustrating its uninformativeness. Suppose someone asks for directions from points A to B. Compare these two responses.

D1: Follow Street X. Then take the first right turn. B will be on your left.

D2: Follow the path you would follow were you to arrive at B by following it.

We can suppose both D1 and D2 are true. Likewise, both are *incomplete,* leaving out some details. For example, D1 leaves out the name of the street one turns right onto from Street X. However, D2 is incomplete because it is *circuitous*—it merely "points to" the kind of information D1 provides, doing so in a roundabout way. This circuitousness makes D2 uninformative. Importantly, D2 is uninformative in a similar way to BEHAVIOUR: I require prior

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knowledge of which path to follow to use D2 as directions from A to B; likewise, I require prior knowledge of Fs to know how simples would behave were they to compose an F.

Second, RECEPTACLE. Here is an analogy illustrating its uninformativeness. Suppose someone asks for the shape and size of a sculpture. Compare these two responses.

R1: The sculpture is roughly cubic in shape and is A x B x C in size.

R2: The sculpture fits perfectly into a sculpture-box I have.

We can suppose both R1 and R2 are true. Likewise, both are *incomplete,* leaving out some details. For example, R1 doesn't mention a small dent on the sculpture's surface. However, R2 is incomplete because it is *circuitous*—it merely "points to" the kind of information R1 provides, doing so in a roundabout way. This circuitousness makes R2 uninformative. Importantly, R2 is uninformative in a similar way to RECEPTACLE: I require prior knowledge of the box dimensions for R2 to tell me about the size and shape of the sculpture; likewise, I require prior knowledge of Fs to know the shape of an F-receptacle and the other conditions simples must possess to be arranged F-wise.

Finally, FICTION. Here is an analogy illustrating its uninformativeness. Suppose someone asks for a list of ingredients for a dish. Compare these two responses.

L1) You will need x amount of A, y amount of B, and z amount of C.

L2) A fiction book exists where a character lists the ingredients for that dish on page x.

We can suppose both L1 and L2 are true. Likewise, both are *incomplete,* leaving out some details. For example, L1 mentions ingredient A, but perhaps that ingredient itself contains further (unlisted) ingredients. However, L2 is incomplete because it is *circuitous*—it merely "points to" the kind of information L1 provides, doing so in a roundabout way. This circuitousness makes L2 uninformative. Importantly, L2 is uninformative in a similar way to

FICTION. Without prior knowledge of the contents of page x, L2 is no help. Likewise, I already need to know about Fs to know what way W is (where simples being arranged in way W is supposed to suffice for composing an F, according to the fiction).

I hope these analogies give an intuitive sense of the uninformativeness of previous SAQ answers. Again, this uninformativeness may not be objectionable; it depends on what SAQ answers are intended for. And, minimally, the goal of SAQ answers is to correctly answer SAQs, not necessarily to be informative. Even so, we can now see the dilemma of sorts facing SAQ answers, mentioned in the introduction.

In §2, I argued for one possible explanation as to why SAQ answers are incomplete and circuitous. To reiterate, the sheer number of conditions encapsulated in calling simples 'arranged F-wise' means that providing a direct (D1, R1, L1 type) answer is practically impossible, and, furthermore, seems to necessitate appeals to Fs (D2, R2 and L2 type answers). We have just seen that the circuity of these previous answers makes them uninformative. This all adds up the following: SAQ answers seem destined to be either direct and so incomplete (though potentially still extremely complicated) or circuitous and so unsatisfyingly uninformative. This gives us reason to conclude SAQs ask too much of us.

§4 Further reflections on SAQ responses

In my introduction I mentioned that although I argue SAQs are often overly demanding, certain nihilists—those utilising the notion of simples being arranged F-wise—nevertheless ought to be capable of offering *some* decent responses to them. My thought that nihilists *can* offer decent SAQ responses is motivated by NEN. I begin this final section by explaining that motivation.

The close relationship many NEN views posit between simples arranged F-wise and ordinary objects is what gives me reason for believing some decent SAQ response must be available. After all, we successfully identify and differentiate between kinds of ordinary objects all the time. And, on many NEN views, identifying and differentiating between kinds of ordinary objects *is tantamount to* identify and differentiating between simples arranged in various ways. So, the thinking goes, we must be at least *somewhat* aware of the conditions under which simples are arranged and thus must be capable of providing *some* decent response to SAQs. Again, my claim is that if an SAQ response is informative, then it is a decent response.

I now want to say a bit about what an informative SAQ response may look like. Strictly speaking, the kind of responses I suggest will not count as SAQ *answers*: they do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for simples being arranged F-wise. Nevertheless, they will be more informative than previous SAQ answers and so should count as decent SAQ *responses*; I will use 'response' and 'answer' to mark this distinction.

Here are some criteria for an SAQ response being *informative*. As with incompleteness and circuitousness, these criteria are not intended to be very precise. However, the list of criteria—in conjunction with a toy example exemplifying them (to follow)—should give a clear enough picture. The criteria reference a *listener* and *responder*: someone asking an SAQ and someone responding to an SAQ. Here are the criteria.

An SAQ response is informative if:

(A) The details of the response are such that only a responder with prior familiarity with Fs would be plausibly capable of getting them right.

(B) The response would (ceteris paribus) enable a listener previously unfamiliar with Fs to identify Fs in many circumstances, e.g., when shown an F.

(C) The response would (ceteris paribus) enable a listener previously unfamiliar with Fs to successfully differentiate between Fs and non-Fs in many cases.

(D) A listener does not require prior familiarity with Fs to understand the response.

Again, my claim is that an SAQ response satisfying A-D would be informative and thus *decent*. To demonstrate that an answer satisfying A-D would be a decent SAQ response, I will leverage a toy example. This toy example will also serve to illustrate other points regarding incompleteness and circuitousness.

§4.1 The Wave

Consider *the Wave* (aka 'the Mexican Wave'), which should be familiar to sports fans. I chose this example for a few reasons: just as many simples are needed for them be arranged ordinary objects-wise, many people are needed to perform the Wave; just as simples arranged F-wise are describable in terms of simples and their properties or as a process involving simples, the Wave is describable in terms of people and their properties, or as a process, involving people; as with simples being arranged, I think it more apt to describe the Wave as a type (or token) of a process—something occurring when people are performing certain actions; lastly, as with ordinary objects, I know (roughly, anyway) what the Wave is. So, I know *roughly* the conditions under which a performance of the Wave is occurring.

Suppose I am asked to specify those conditions. Being asked to specify the conditions under which the Wave is occurring is much like being asked an SAQ. Consider this response.

THE WAVE: The Wave is occurring when many people are standing up, raising their arms then sitting back down again, collectively creating a ripple-like pattern through a crowd.

This response does not provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for the Wave occurring. But that's okay (and part of the point). It is an informative answer nevertheless: (A)

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it is an answer I could only plausibly give if I was already familiar with the Wave; hearing it (B) would allow someone previous unfamiliar with the Wave to now identify the Wave and (C) differentiate the Wave from many other kinds of things the crowd could be collective doing e.g., cleaning the stadium; and, lastly, (D) understanding the response doesn't require the listener have prior familiarity with the Wave. Because it is informative in these ways, it is a decent response to the question asked.

THE WAVE satisfies A-D largely because it is *uncircuitous*: it describes the relevant crowd behaviour *directly*. However, although uncircuitous, THE WAVE is still an *incomplete* answer. Recall, to be *incomplete* is to omit details, which THE WAVE does. It does so by not specify all the relevant conditions for something being the Wave, e.g., it does not specify how many people are needed to perform the Wave.

That THE WAVE is a decent SAQ response despite its incompleteness is reason to think SAQ responses can also be decent despite incompleteness. So, I want to dwell on this incompleteness point a bit longer by distinguishing "higher-level" and "lower-level" descriptions.

THE WAVE is a relatively high-level description of (some of) the conditions under which the Wave occurs. It is a high-level description because it describes things in a way that abstracts away from many details one *could* include when describing those conditions.

A lower-level, less abstracted, description of those *same* conditions is also possible. For example, one could forgo talk of *people standing and raising their arms*, etc. for talk of *joints moving, muscles contracting*, *electrical impulses firing,* etc. A still lower-level description would specify the conditions under which *those* (sub)processes occur, without mentioning

people, muscles, etc. But descriptions at levels "lower" than that of persons, limbs, etc. would likely cease to recognisable as describing the conditions under which the Wave occurs.

Continuing to work our way "down", what would the lowest-level description of the conditions described in THE WAVE look like? It would (attempt to) offer the conditions *simples* must satisfy in order for *many people to be standing up, raising their arms then sitting back down again to collectively create a ripple-like pattern through a crowd*. Again, a very tall order. This would be the lowest-level description because the conditions being described would involve no abstracting away from, or consolidating of, any details. Notice, however, that even specifying all *those* conditions wouldn't yet be enough to have answered an SAQ, since the conditions just italicised do not constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for the Wave occurring.

That THE WAVE is a decent answer despite providing a higher-level description of the relevant conditions shows the same can be true of SAQ responses. A decent SAQ response of the kind I have in mind won't require (e.g.) directly describing the properties of individual simples. Since incompleteness is a virtual guarantee in SAQ answers anyway, if one wants to say something informative about (e.g.) the conditions under which simples are arranged cat-wise, one *ought to* appeal to higher-level, more abstract, descriptions of the relevant conditions e.g., *mammal.* Again, such responses likely won't suffice as SAQ answers, but they would certainly demonstrate familiarity with simples arranged cat-wise.

Conclusion

Here are some final thoughts based on the content of this chapter. In particular, some thoughts on what NENists ought to say in response to SAQs.

One thing NENists could say is something along the lines of: "Well, it's far too complicated to give a complete and informative SAQ answer. But we can certainly give plenty of high-level descriptions regarding the typical conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise; we tend to know simples arranged F-wise when we see them."

An NENist might also (tongue somewhat in cheek) give the following response: "Simples are arranged F-wise when they, collectively, *are an F*. So, if you would like the necessary and sufficient conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise, you should first specify the conditions under which an F exists."

If it should turn out that nobody is able to fully specify those conditions—as I suspect will often happen when considering ordinary object kinds—the NENist may rightly think they are, *in principle*, incapable of answering the SAQ; that is, incapable of specifying the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. Put another way: if nobody can specify the conditions under which there are Fs, how can nihilists be expected to specify the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise? This thought may itself be a condensed version of the argument that SAQs are typically asking too much of us.

In sum, what it is to be arranged F-wise is extremely complex. But NEN gives us reason to think we are somewhat familiar with the conditions under which ordinary objects exists (at least at certain levels of description) and so, are somewhat familiar with the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise. In turn, we have reason to think we can say *something* decent about the conditions under which simples are arranged F-wise in response to SAQs. I have argued that SAQ answers are typically bound to be incomplete. But if a SAQ response is *uncircuitous* and thus *informative*, surely it has the potential to be a decent response.

Chapter 4

Buddhism & Non-Eliminative Nihilism

An NENist argument for the ultimate existence of ordinary objects

In Abhidharma (basically, Buddhist metaphysics), a distinction is drawn between ultimate existents and conventional existents. Buddhists claim ordinary objects are conventional existents (or conventionally real) but not ultimate existents (or ultimately real). The claim that ordinary objects are not ultimate existents is supposedly grounded in (mereological) nihilism. I disagree: nihilism is not grounding the Buddhist's conclusion that ordinary objects are not ultimate existents.

Appealing to the NEN thinking argued for over the last three chapters, this final chapter has three aims: showing that

A1: Buddhist nihilism does not entail ordinary objects do not ultimately exist.

A2: Buddhists should accept what I call the 'NEN Proposal': all ordinary objects *do* ultimately exist.

A3: Buddhists will have difficulty rejecting the NEN Proposal.

To be clear, my intention is not to contrast a Buddhist and NEN view of ordinary objects and argue for NEN's superiority. The overall, modest, aim is showing that Buddhists have more work to do if they want to convincingly argue for their stance on ordinary objects.

§1 gives some relevant background. §2 presents a reconstructed Buddhist argument against the ultimate existence of ordinary objects; I show the role nihilism is supposed to play—and actually plays—in that argument, satisfying A1. §3 argues for the NEN Proposal via what I call 'THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT'. Here is the idea behind the argument:

if ordinary objects are as NENists claim, Buddhist ontology already countenances them as ultimately real. Arguing Buddhists should accept THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT supports A2. §4 presents several arguments Buddhists might raise against the NEN Proposal. I respond to these arguments, supporting A3. Lastly, §5 argues the NEN Proposal is consistent with the *soteriological purposes* of Buddhism (Buddhist goals for our salvation). This supports A2 and A3.

§1 Some background

Before getting into the central arguments of this chapter, some background will be useful. Above, I mentioned the conventional/ultimate existence distinction. This distinction comes from *the doctrine of two truths*. Contrary to what the English translation of the name suggests, the doctrine makes *two* distinctions: a semantic distinction between conventional/ultimate truth, and the ontological distinction just mentioned (conventional/ultimate existence).[70]

What these distinctions amount to and how they relate is debated; many conflicting interpretations exist. For example, some think existing conventionally means existing merely according to some useful fiction, i.e., not really existing at all.[71] Others think both conventional and ultimate existence are kinds of existence but different *modes* of existence.[72] My aims do not necessitate saying much about these debates. The NEN Proposal is controversy enough for one chapter: to my knowledge, that ordinary objects exist conventionally but not ultimately (*contra* my proposal) is *universally* agreed by Buddhist.

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[70] Siderits (2022, 36) claims the word translated as 'truth' (*satya*) can also be translated as "existence"; Gethin (1998, 60) claims '*satya*' can be translated as "that which is in accord with reality" or "reality".
[71] See, e.g., Ganeri (2011,188) and Giles (1993, 185, 187, 197).
[72] See McDaniel (2019).

Further background: for many Buddhists, the only ultimate existents are *dharmas*.[73] '*Dharma*' has many meanings in Buddhism. Here '*dharmas*' will refer to things characterised as *constituents of reality*, *factors of existence*, or *phenomena*.[74] Given Buddhists are nihilists, dharmas are *simple*, i.e., partless. Although sometimes tempting, *dharmas* should not be thought of as the Buddhist version of subatomic particles. *Dharmas* are often characterised in secondary literature as *tropes* or *trope occurrences*—momentary events.[75] Some *dharmas* are material (*rūpa*) and others are *mental* (*citta*).[76]

Two features common to every Buddhist metaphysics, which shed further light on the qualities of *dharmas*, are also worth mentioning here: call these 'momentariness' and 'anti-substance'.[77]

Momentariness is the view that everything ultimately exists for only a moment, or instant. Whether moments have any temporal thickness is debated among Buddhists, but this detail won't concern us. Momentariness implies that all *dharmas* exist for only a moment. Accordingly, *dharmas* cannot undergo qualitative change.

For simplicity, think of the Buddhist notion of substance as something which persists and bears properties. Their anti-substance metaphysics is one on which nothing persists or bears properties. As with ordinary objects, substances are seen by Buddhists as merely conventionally real. The anti-substance doctrine implies that *dharmas* do not bear properties;

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[73] In Tibetan Buddhism, Abhidharma texts accepting *dharmas* as ultimate existents are designated 'Lower Abhidharma' (as opposed to Higher Abhidharma).

[74] For an introduction to the dharmas of interest here, see Ronkin (2022, §1.2).

[75] Ronkin (2005, 58)

[76] Chadha (2022, 132)

[77] That these features are ubiquitous in Buddhist metaphysics is a point I take from Siderits (2022, 13).

instead, a *dharma* is itself the occurrence of that *dharma's* particular quality, or intrinsic nature.[78] I discuss *dharmas* further in §3. For now, more background.

We can learn more about the Buddhist view of ordinary objects by seeing what they make of ordinary object *terms*. Ordinary object terms are considered *convenient designators*. The following story, partly explaining convenient designators, is uncontentious among Buddhists: owing to our interests and cognitive limitations, people (typically) don't think about the world in terms of what ultimately exists. Instead, most adopt conventions in thinking and speech that include countenancing ordinary objects as existing, and using ordinary object terms. These conventions are extremely useful: they help in doing and getting what we want, and successfully navigate the world—hence the *convenience* of convenient designators. Beyond this story, how one characterises convenient designators largely depends on further (debated) interpretations.

One *debated* semantics for convenient designators is worth mentioning here: convenient designators as enumerative terms.[79] Enumerative terms specify number or order, e.g., 'dozen' and 'third'. Why might convenient designators, including ordinary object terms, be enumerative?

Consider this favourite Buddhist example: 'chariot'.[80] Mark Siderits (2022, 30), seemingly opting for the enumerative interpretation, writes "to call 'chariot' an enumerative term is to say that it is also a convenient *way of referring to a certain number of parts when assembled in a certain way* [my emphasis]." Some NENists say almost the same thing: a

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[78] Ronkin (2022, §4): Visuddhimagga proclaims that "dhamma means but intrinsic nature" (Vism VIII 246), and the sub-commentary to the Dhammasaṅgaṇi indicates that "there is no other thing called dhamma apart from the intrinsic nature borne by it" (Dhs-mṭ 28 & 94).

[79] McDaniel (2019), inter alia, considers three semantic interpretations for convenient designators.

[80] Perhaps the most famous instance of Buddhist use of chariot examples is the text *The Questions of King Milinda,* where the King's chariot is used to illuminate Buddhist thinking (about ordinary objects but also, persons).

chariot is simples arranged chariot-wise; accordingly, referring expressions like 'the chariot' are grammatically singular, but *referentially plural*. Importantly, neither Buddhist nor NENists are necessarily arguing we are *aware* these terms are enumerative; those opting for the enumerative interpretation typically say ordinary object terms are *opaquely* enumerative.[81] I revisit the enumerative interpretation in §3.

For now, a final (uncontentious) bit of background: the success afforded by ordinary object conventions is what, for Buddhists, distinguishes the likes of chariots and chairs from unicorns and mermaids. The former, but not the latter, have *at least* conventional reality—whatever that amounts to—because conventions countenancing the former, but not the latter, typically lead to success. For example, "the cognitive economies that result from the ability to see a collection of entities as a chariot confer benefits to beings with a need for a mode of transportation";[82] whereas, seeing collections of entities as unicorns is unlikely to confer many benefits. Noting this difference is part of the Buddhist strategy for avoiding error-theory type objections when denying the ultimate existence of ordinary objects: it is a way of distinguishing totally *false* conventions from the *useful and so "true in a popular sense"* conventions that give chariots *at least* conventional reality.

§2 The role of nihilism

Having given some background, I turn to the role nihilism (allegedly) plays in denying the ultimate existence of ordinary objects. Below is a reconstructed Buddhist argument for the conventional existence, and against the ultimate existence, of chariots. The argument comes from Chapter 1 Book II of *Questions of King Milinda.* The argument is attributed to Buddhist

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[81] Siderits (2022, 30) is one example. For an NENist take on similar material, see chapter 1.
[82] Siderits (2022, 45)

monk Nāgasena; his argument considers and rejects possible referents for the term 'chariot'—

call these 'candidate referents'. The reconstruction is (*verbatim*) from Jones (2023, 125).

> 1. The term "chariot" refers to something that admits disassembly into axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.

> 2. The term "chariot" refers to neither the axle, nor the wheels, nor the chassis, nor the ropes, nor the yoke, nor the wheel spokes, nor the goad.

> 3. The term "chariot" does not refer to the collection of axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.

> 4. The term "chariot" does not refer to something that is separate from the axle, wheels, chassis, ropes, yoke, wheel spokes, and goad.

> 5. Therefore, the term "chariot" refers to something that is a reality of convention but not real in its own right.

As is, the argument is not valid. But the reasoning used for filling the gaps is tangential to my

purposes, so I leave it aside.[83] I will, however, elaborate briefly on each premise.

Premise 1 establishes that 'chariot' refers to *something*—helping set up the conclusion

that the chariot has at least conventional reality. That a (concrete) chariot can be disassembled

into an axle, wheels, etc. seems straightforward enough. One might worry 'chariot' refers (if

at all) to the kind, *chariot*. Nāgasena is clearly discussing a particular chariot; the expression

'the (King's) chariot' would be more apt. Going forward, I use 'the chariot'.

Premise 2 is simply stating 'the chariot' does not refer to any *one* part of the chariot.

This is true of the wheels, axle, etc. Though not mentioned, it is also true of any *dharma* taken

to be part of the (putative) chariot.[84]

What kind of candidate referent premise 4 rejects may be unclear. Siderits (2022, 30)

characterises the rejected referent as "some transcendent entity distinct from the parts",

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[83] See Jones (2023, 125) for more.
[84] Siderits' (2022, 49) reconstructed Buddhist argument for nihilism concludes "only the parts are ultimately real"; the *parts* being affirmed are *dharmas*. So, plausibly, *dharmas* are sometimes considered parts.

claiming "we take chariots to be things one can see and touch" as justification given for this premise.

Premise 3, for us, is of primary concern. The candidate referent considered here is "the collection of" the chariot parts; in the dialogue, the option is presented via the question "Pray, your majesty, are pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad unitedly the chariot?".[85] The phrasings "collection of" and "unitedly" suggest a *plural* referent (of chariot parts) is being considered—the *correct* referent for 'the chariot', according to some NENists.

What is the Buddhist justification for premise 3? Jones (2023, 126) writes that Nāgasena "does not justify the novel premise (third claim)". A similar remark is made by Siderits (2022, 30), who then also introduces nihilism into the discussion:

> …when it is said that ['the chariot'] does not refer to the parts when assembled in the right way [the NEN option], we may fail to see why. And *no argument is given*. No doubt the reader will have guessed that what is at work here is mereological nihilism: ['the chariot'] cannot refer to chariots because *these would be composite entities*, and there are, strictly speaking, no such things as composite entities [my emphasis].

There is a crucial, often overlooked, gap in reasoning here. Unsurprisingly, nihilism is appealed to for rejecting the (ultimate) existence of composite entities—unproblematic, for NENist.[86] However, nihilism *only* has a bearing on the ultimate existence of chariots if chariots would (ultimately) be composites. And, if Siderits is correct, Buddhists *just assume* chariots would

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[85] Milindapañha II.I.1, quoted in Radhakrishnan & Moore (1957, 283-284).
[86] See Siderits (2022, 49) for a reconstructed Buddhist argument for nihilism itself.

be composites; no argument is given for *that* claim.[87] Yet, that chariots (and other ordinary objects) are composite is precisely what NENists deny.

In sum, the option that 'the chariot' refers to chariot parts suitably arranged—that a chariot is a plurality—is supposedly rejected by Buddhists on nihilist grounds. However, what really does the work is the *unargued* assumption that chariots are composites. Having shown this, I have completed aim 1 of the chapter: I have shown Buddhist nihilism does not entail ordinary objects do not ultimately exist. NENists and Buddhists *agree* on nihilism yet disagree on the implication nihilism has for the ultimate existence of ordinary objects.

§3 THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT

In this section, I argue for the ultimate existence of all ordinary objects via THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT. To see the motivation for this argument, first recall some §1 background. For many Buddhists, *dharmas* are the only ultimate existents. For all Buddhists, 'the chariot' is a convenient designator. Lastly, the enumerative interpretation is a possible convenient designator semantics. Combining these, one might think: if convenient designators designate, and are enumerative (meaning they refer to many things at once), shouldn't convenient designators refer to *dharmas*?

As shown (§2), for Buddhists, expressions like 'the chariot' refer, but even if they referred to *dharmas*, they cannot refer to (assumed to be composite) ordinary objects. Again, NENist reject this assumption. Here, we can assume the specific NEN view that a chariot is simples arranged chariot-wise—many things, not a composite. From here, the NENist thought

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[87] Jones (2023, 126) confirms that chariots being composites is also assumed in *contemporary* defences of premise 3; he writes: "[s]ome contemporary commentators speculate that [premise 3] follows from the indiscernibility of identicals and the fact that *wholes are one in number* while their parts are many in number [my emphasis]".

goes: well, *dharmas* are simples; 'the chariot' could refer (plurally) to *dharmas*—the chariot could *be* a plurality of *dharmas.* And, if chariots are *dharmas*, and *dharmas* ultimately exist, wouldn't *chariots*, therefore, *ultimately* exist?[88]

Note, this is not to say the enumerative interpretation is correct or historically accurate (though THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT doesn't depend on that). The above reasoning simply highlights that Buddhist ontology, for NENists, seems to *already* contain ordinary objects—with an *unargued* assumption (that NENists reject) being all that's blocking this conclusion.

THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT captures the above NENist thinking. Recall, this is an argument for the NEN Proposal: that *all* ordinary objects ultimately exist. To simplify matters, the argument focuses on chariots. But the reasoning is applicable to all ordinary objects. I am considering a situation where NENists would claim a chariot exists and Buddhists would claim a chariot conventionally, but not ultimately, exists.

THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT

U1: Dharmas ultimately exist.

U2: The chariot is simples (*dharmas*) arranged chariot-wise.

U3: If U2, then: if dharmas ultimately exist, the chariot ultimately exists.

U4: So, the chariot ultimately exists.

Recall, aim 2 of this chapter is (A2) showing Buddhists should accept the NEN Proposal: all ordinary objects do ultimately exist. A2 requires showing Buddhists—not just NENists—

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[88] McDaniel (2019, 447) was right on top of this kind of conclusion when considering possible semantics for convenient designators; he writes: "according to [the enumerative interpretation of convenient designators], there are not two different kinds of entities or ways of existence. Rather, there is only one kind of entity—partless dharmas—and two ways of referring to its members: singularly or plurally."

should accept THE ULTIMATE EXISTENCE ARGUMENT. So, I defend the argument with this in mind: not just defending U1-U3, but arguing Buddhists should accept them, too. Buddhists accepting U1 is already established;[89] but showing Buddhists should accept U2 and U3 is a substantial task. So, I give U2 and U3 their own subsections.

§3.1. Defending U2

U2 is an NENist claim. Again, a chariot is not a single, composite, thing; it is many things when arranged the right way. As §2 showed, nihilism alone does not rule out U2; Buddhists are in need of an argument against it. Again, NENists will grant U2, but I am arguing Buddhists should accept it.

I argue Buddhists should accept U2 partly because their ontology already countenances things worthy of the description 'simples arranged chariot-wise'. Again, those Buddhist who countenance *dharmas* also accept they are simple. Much, much more can be said on *dharmas*. Much of it, controversial. But this suffices for my purposes. Again, insofar as calling something a 'simple' just means it is partless, Buddhists countenance simples. So far, Buddhists have no reason for rejecting U2.

Can *dharmas* be said to be arranged? For what it's worth, phrasing in some secondary literature takes arrangement of *dharmas* for granted.[90] However, whether Buddhist ontology truly countenances this depends on what being arranged amounts to. I won't explore options here.[91] Instead, I offer one plausible account of how *dharmas* can be considered arranged within Buddhist ontology.

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[89] Given I won't argue for *dharmas* existing, I am leaving some Buddhists behind here, i.e., those who do not accept the existence of dharmas.

[90] For example, Chadha (2022) mentions "configuration of dharmas in space-time"; and Siderits (2022, 76) writes: "for the Buddhist there […] are only [dharmas] *arranged* either lump-wise or pot-wise [my emphasis]".

[91] See chapter 3 for much more discussion of simples being arranged.

First, multiple *dharmas* can exist simultaneously—a good start. Given our focus on chariots, the *dharmas* of interest are material, not mental. Material dharmas occur in space and time. So, multiple *dharmas* can exist simultaneously and be in greater or lesser spatiotemporal proximity—also good. That said, mere spatiotemporal proximity seems insufficient to capture interactions between *dharmas* (possibly needed for them to count as arranged). What further relations might we appeal to? Our best bet, I think, is causation.

That causal relations apply to *dharmas* is uncontroversial; "all *dharmas* are plugged into the causal order: each one has causes, and is, in appropriate circumstances, capable of producing effects" (Goodman 2004, 391). According to some Buddhists, causation is divided into four conditions: a primary condition (the cause) along with three ancillary conditions (objective support, proximate condition, and dominant condition). The details of these conditions won't concern us. What will concern us is the following.

First, the combination of these conditions is called an 'assemblage' (*samāgri*). The assemblage of conditions is used to explain how, for example, a seed can sprout when placed in warm, moist soil. Second, since *dharmas* are the only ultimate existents, all conditions for causation must owe to *dharmas*; so, for example, roughly put: a "sprout-dharmas" must be, in some way, caused by previously existing "warmth", "water", and "soil-*dharmas*". ("Sprout-*dharmas*" etc. are a big simplification: for one, a sprout will consist of many *dharmas*).

Some disagreement exists among Buddhists regarding how an effect arises owing to an assemblage. On one view, the assemblage *as a whole* is the cause which directly produces the effect; for example, the occurrence of a sprout-*dharma* would be said to be caused by an assemblage. On another view, it is *dharmas*, not the assemblage, that produce effects; for example, seed-*dharmas* would be said to cause sprout-*dharmas*, with the seed-*dharmas'* causal

power being induced by the assemblage. (By 'induced' I mean that seed-*dharmas* occurring in the presence of warmth, soil, etc. is what causes the seed-*dharmas* to cause the sprout-*dharmas*.)[92]

Crucially, however, according to either option, the location and intrinsic nature of pluralities of *dharmas* causally impacts future *dharmas*. Put differently, in cessation, a *dharma* causes the origination of a successor, and "the nature of that successor is determined by prevailing conditions in its neighborhood". Talk of prevailing conditions in the neighbourhood sounds like another way of describing how *dharmas* are arranged. Furthermore, composition is not required for making sense of such causal relationships. So, it seems causal relationships between pluralities of *dharmas* can be used to account for them being arranged. If so, that Buddhist ontology countenances simples being arranged is plausible.

So far, this sub-section has argued Buddhist ontology plausibly posits simples arranged in various ways. This is a positive step for the NEN Proposal, but insufficient for concluding Buddhists should accept U2. After all, nihilists can accept simples are arranged chariot-wise while denying chariots exist. The crux of the issue is, again, how chariots should be characterised. In §4, I consider arguments Buddhists might make against U2. Showing the problems with their arguments will help further my claim that Buddhists should accept U2. For now, I defend U3.

<center>§3.2 Defending U3</center>

Recall, U3 states: If the chariot is simples (*dharmas*) arranged chariot-wise, then: if *dharmas* ultimately exist, the chariot ultimately exists. The basic idea behind U3 is: if something(s)

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[92] See Siderits (2022, 75) for more on assemblages.

identical to the chariot ultimately exists, the chariot ultimately exists. Everything there is to the chariot, according to some NENists, is simples arranged chariot-wise. For those NENists, the entailment from ultimately existing *dharmas* to ultimately existing chariot is straightforward. Again, the true crux of the issue is U2, which I further advocate for in §4. Here I focus on U3, arguing Buddhists have no grounds for rejecting it and so, should accept it.

How might Buddhists try rejecting U3? Buddhists might argue that even if the chariot is *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise, and *dharmas* are ultimately real, there is more to chariots than *dharmas*; *dharmas* must be arranged, and arrangements (*dharmas being arranged*) are merely a matter of convention: something reflective of our interests, not our ultimate ontology. If so, then even if the chariot is (in some sense) just ultimately existent *dharmas*, it does not follow that chariots ultimately exist.

In response, I appeal to what I'll call the 'CAUSAL EFFICACY PRINCIPLE'. To be clear, I'm just naming a principle already endorsed by Buddhists. The idea behind the principle is that "causal efficacy is the hallmark of the real".[93] Here is the principle, put more precisely:

> CAUSAL EFFICACY PRINCIPLE: For anything x, x ultimately exists *iff* x is causally efficacious.

Given this principle, the ultimate existence test is causal efficacy: if something lacks causally efficacy, it does not ultimately exist.

Are arrangements causally efficacious? The question may be faulty. As I understand them, arrangements are not entities which can have or lack causal efficacy. In defending U2, I argued one could account for *dharmas* being arranged in terms of causal relations, assemblages. An assemblage, recall, is a totality of causal conditions, and those causal

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[93] Siderits (2022, 13)

conditions are (determined by) *dharmas*. So, it seems right to say a particular "arrangement" *just is* a particular causal interrelation between *dharmas*. Hence why the question may seem faulty; it is tantamount to asking whether *a causal relationship between dharmas* is causally efficacious.

If the question is not faulty, NENists certainly have grounds for saying *dharmas* being arranged is causally efficacious. Take *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise. We already saw (§1) that Buddhists characterise chariots as conventionally real partly because of the utility afforded by our ordinary object conventions. But thinking and talking this way is useful precisely because certain "arrangements" are useful, and arrangements are useful because of how being so arranged causes *dharmas* to behave. For example, *dharmas* being arranged chariot-wise causes them to move smoothly when pulled by a horse along the road (pretending *dharmas* persisted long enough to do so).

To this, Buddhists might reply that it is only *dharmas* themselves doing the causal work, and arrangements still lack causal efficacy. But this cannot be right. For example, if we took the axle, wheels, etc. and spread them around a field, they would behave differently if pulled by a horse; how the *dharmas* are arranged has a collective causal impact beyond the causal efficacy of individual *dharmas*.

Phrasing things a very NEN way: *being a chariot* means *dharmas* can cause things they otherwise couldn't. Buddhists cannot get around this by saying the chariot is not a single thing, since NENists claim the chariot is many things arranged in a certain way. Likewise, it's worth mentioning that how *dharmas* are arranged has a causal impact on future *dharmas* regardless of whether anyone ever takes an interest; arrangements are not merely reflections of cognitive limitations and interests. So, Buddhists seemingly have few options left for denying U3.

Having defended U3, here is the picture we are left with. On the NEN Proposal, *dharmas* ultimately exist. *Dharmas* are causally interrelated such that they can be called 'arranged'. Sometimes *dharmas* are causally interrelated so as to be arranged chariot-wise. If the NEN Proposal is correct, the chariot is *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise, and everything there is to the chariot ultimately exists. So, (U4) the chariot ultimately exists. Similar reasoning can be applied to all other ordinary objects. So, although more needs to be said regarding why Buddhists should accept U2, much of the work for aim 2 of this chapter is now done: I have argued Buddhists should accept the NEN Proposal.

§4 Buddhist objections to the NEN Proposal

Aim 3 of this chapter is showing Buddhists will have difficulty rejecting the NEN Proposal. Furthering A3, in this section, I provide arguments Buddhists might raise against the NEN Proposal—particularly, against U2. Showing these arguments fail also gives Buddhists more reason to accept the NEN Proposal, furthering both A2 and A3.

Consider the following quote, which articulates some reasoning on behalf of the Buddhist on the matter of chariots.

> [A chariot] can't even be identical to all of [its] parts suitably arranged or put together. If it were, then if we changed one of those parts, or changed their arrangement, we would have a different chariot. But that can't be right. We could replace a wheel or an axle, and we would still have the same chariot, saying truly, "I have owned this chariot for years; all I need to do is to replace the wheels every so often," or, "hey! I just got a new seat for my chariot. Come check it out." Garfield (2020, 68)

The above is not an argument for nihilism, nor an argument against the existence of chariots. In fact, the argument appeals to properties of chariots—or, at least, to things we can truthfully

say about chariots. Still, I take the quote as capturing *some* argumentation against the NEN Proposal, because the first line is interpretable as rejecting the NEN take on ordinary objects. Accordingly, the quote can be used as basis for *multiple* arguments against the NEN Proposal.

Here is one argument: the MISMATCH objection. As the quote mentions, if a chariot is identical to its "parts" suitably arranged, a change in "parts" means a new chariot. (The scare quotes are a reminder: for NENists, the "parts" are not *proper* parts of a whole.) However, we don't tend to think chariots come into, or out of, existence in those circumstances. If so, then an objectionable mismatch exists between our conventional understanding of (the persistence of) chariots and what NENists say about them. So, the NEN proposal should be rejected.

A similar argument, building somewhat on MISMATCH, is the TRUTHS objection: if chariots are as the NEN Proposal claims, then we cannot capture certain truths about them, e.g., that one can own a chariot for years. Therefore, the NEN Proposal should be rejected.

Because MISMATCH and TRUTHS are somewhat interrelated, I respond to them simultaneously.

NENists should grant Buddhists that we do *think* of chariots as capable of surviving a wheel replacement, as things ownable for years, etc. This is part of what we might call the 'conventional understanding' of chariots, but not the 'ultimate (NEN) understanding' of them. So, a mismatch does exist. However, the mismatch would have to be very substantial for the objection to be a real problem for the NEN Proposal. And NENists can argue the mismatch is not very substantial by showing a close connection exists between conventional understanding and ultimate reality. [94] This strategy can also be used to deal with TRUTHS.

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[94] This objection and response somewhat mirror parts of the reference trivialisation objection in chapter 2.

A suggestion for such a connection arose in §1: understanding convenient designators as enumerative. An advantage of the enumerative interpretation is that it partly explains how our use of ordinary object terms leads to successful world navigation by connecting the conventional with the ultimate. Similar reasoning is applicable here. Where it's conventionally understood that a chariot is a single thing, ultimately, it's many things (properly causally related). And where, conventionally, someone owned a chariot for years, ultimately, they owned many chariots over the years (which were causally connected in a certain way).

With this strategy, not only is the mismatch between the conventional and ultimate pictures of chariots minimised, but any (presumably conventional) truths about chariots accounted for by Buddhists can also be accounted for on the NEN Proposal. Consider this conventional truth.

CT: One can own a chariot for years.

Even on the NEN Proposal, CT is not ultimately true. A chariot is *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise, and *dharmas* are momentary existents. So, all chariots exist only momentarily. Accordingly, chariots (ultimately) cannot be owned for years. Nevertheless, CT can be conventionally true, grounded in the ultimate truth that *dharmas*, arranged chariot-wise at later and earlier times, are causally connected in appropriate ways.

More may need to be said, but this is the basic story. Indeed, it's *almost* the same story Buddhists tell. On both views, ultimate reality grounds conventional truths and ultimate reality contains only *dharmas* in causal relationships determined by their intrinsic natures. On the NEN Proposal, the conventional truth diverges slightly less from the ultimate truth: chariots really do exist, we're just mistaken about what chariots are, ultimately, like. As said in the

introduction, I don't intend this as an argument for preferring the NEN view to the Buddhist's. But I think it's enough to consider MISMATCH and TRUTHS dealt with.

The ultimate picture of chariots sketched above can also deal with another kind of mismatch objection: Leibnitz's Law type arguments against identifying the chariot with *dharmas*. Fully responding to all Leibnitz's Law type concerns is beyond the scope of the chapter. But I will give, then respond to, one such argument and then mention two points useful to NENists in blocking other Leibnitz's Law type arguments.

Here is the argument: the chariot is *one*, whereas the parts (i.e., *dharmas*) are *many*; if so, the chariot and its parts have distinct properties; so, the chariot cannot be identical to *dharmas*. Jones (2023, 126) mentions this argument as a (contemporary) defence of premise 3 of Nāgasena's argument (§2) against the ultimate reality of chariots.

This argument needn't worry NENists: it assumes the chariot is a (composite) whole, that it's *one*. For NENists, there is no whole to be cross-checked for indiscernibility with the parts—the chariot/*dharmas* are many, not one. And, as discussed in §2, Buddhists lack an argument against this NEN take on chariots.

What about all the other possible Leibnitz Law arguments? Here are two points NENist can use to try blocking them. First, momentariness is impactful here: *dharmas*/chariots exist momentarily and so cannot survive change—seemingly meaning no diachronic property worries to contend with. Second, given the dependent origination of *dharmas* for the determination of their intrinsic natures, any change in *dharmas* requires a change in the causal order, which would also, plausibly, mean a change in chariots. Put another way: different causal history of origination of *dharmas*/different causal history of origination of chariots;

different *dharmas*/different chariot, etc. Again, I believe a combination of the above can disarm many possible Leibnitz's Law argument, but I now leave this kind of objection aside.

Here is another objection extracted from the quote at the beginning of §4: the CONVENTIONAL PROPERTIES objection. One might argue: chariots are taken as having certain properties and this is reason for thinking chariots exist merely conventionally. As an illustrative example, here is a similar line of reasoning.

> In 2022, the average U.S family had 1.9 children. And we can truthfully say, e.g., 'In recent years, the number of children in the average U.S family has decreased from 2.5 to 1.9'. But a real family cannot have 1.9 (or 2.5) children. So, the average U.S family must be merely the product of some convention, not something ultimately real.

Helping discuss the objection, let's momentarily assume conventional existence means existing only according to a useful fiction. The average family is a nice example for illustrating this interpretation of conventional existence: the average family "exists" according to a (statistically) useful fiction; though no such family *really* (ultimately) exists, the average family "exists" (in a sense) because real families exist—the properties of the former impacted by properties of the latter. (Here, real families are analogous to ultimate existents grounding conventional existents. But, for Buddhists, a "real" family would also be merely conventional).

Here is one problem with the CONVENTIONAL PROPERTIES objection. There is a difference between saying "x has a property it can *only have* if it is a conventional existent (e.g., a useful fiction)" and "according to a useful fiction, x has a property". The average family having 1.9 children is an example of the former; and is convincing. But to NENists, the Buddhist take on chariots is more like the latter: "a convention exists according to which chariots are…". Just because chariots have certain properties according to our conventions

does not mean chariots themselves are merely conventional existents. Useful fictions (or conventions) can be applied to ultimate existents, which is what NENists would say is happening here.

Another problem for CONVENTIONAL PROPERTIES—and, possibly, also the previous objections—is that it may run afoul of one of the Buddhist's own principles. Buddhists maintains that *ontology should not be dictated by our cognitive limitations and our interests*.[95] But the current objection is against the NEN Proposal, an ontological proposal; and much of our thinking about the features of chariots owes to our cognitive limitations and interests. So, pointing to conventionally accepted features of chariots to refute the NEN Proposal seems like an instance of ontology being dictated by cognitive limitations and interests. Putting the problem differently, in the context of ontological debate, Buddhists do not put much stock in common sense intuitions, beliefs, and assertions; yet this argument appeals to those very things to refute an ontological claim.

Given the context of this chapter, this problem is significant: it places a substantial restriction on what Buddhists can appeal to in arguing against the NEN Proposal (U2, in particular). Any arguments Buddhists offer for concluding chariots must be understood in a certain way—as composite, persisting, merely conventionally existent, etc.—cannot appeal to common sense about chariots without risking running afoul of their own principle. One might even accuse Buddhists of having allowed their ontology to be dictated by cognitive limitations and interests by, without argument, taking ordinary objects to be composites in the first place.[96] Given these problems, I think CONVENTIONAL PROPERTIES does not threaten the NEN Proposal.

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[95] Siderits (2007, 55)

[96] Although, as I argued in chapter 1, that ordinary objects are composites is not Moorean/part of common sense.

However, the methodological principle that ontology should not be dictated by our cognitive limitations and interests is a double-edged sword—one that can also be wielded *against* the NEN Proposal.

As setup for such an objection, recall: in arguing for the NEN Proposal, I did not dispute the Buddhist claim that only *dharmas* ultimately exist; in that way, the NEN Proposal leaves the Buddhist's ultimate ontology untouched; also, that Buddhists agree *dharmas* are sometimes arranged chariot-wise was relatively uncontentious. The crux of the issue was U2: whether *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise are a chariot.

Here is the objection: Buddhists might argue that the only reasons for countenancing U2—i.e., for thinking chariots exist when simples are arranged chariot-wise—owe to our cognitive limitations and interests. So, (now leveraging the principle just used against them) *we should not let those intuitions dictate our ontology*: we should reject the NEN Proposal.

Prima facie, this objection is strong. A full, satisfactory response might require an answer constituting a metametaphysical treatise. However, for the sake of space, I keep my response brief.

First, that *chariots exist* is certainly a common-sense intuition; and, agreeing with the Buddhist's methodological principle, it should not dictate our ontology. But *dharmas arranged chariot-wise are a chariot* is certainly not a common-sense intuition: this issue is outside the purview of common sense. So, that U2 is even subject to the Buddhist's methodological principle is questionable.

Second, NENists can argue the "intuition" motivating U2 is not really an intuition at all. Rather, it is the *conclusion* of an ontological investigation. And that investigation looks the

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same regardless of whether we had any prior intuitions pertaining to it. To show this, I briefly detail what, to my mind, this investigation roughly looks like.

Consider an example where (I'm confident) you have no preconceived intuitions: I ask you if *wucks* exist. You have never heard of them. So, I tell you all about what wucks are (allegedly) like. Suppose, upon doing some metaphysical investigating, you find some things (xs) that are very like how wucks were described: the xs look, swim, and quack like wucks. In such a case, concluding xs are wucks, and so wucks exist, seems very sensible. If, additionally, it turns out xs have been referred to as 'wucks' for a long time, the conclusion seems even *more* sensible.

An analogous process was used to arrive at U2. Having examined Buddhist ontology, the NENist finds some things that fit the bill of ordinary objects. So, the NENist concludes that those things *are* ordinary objects, that ordinary objects exist within that ontology.

One disanalogy between the above and the NEN case is that, unlike wucks, we *do* have prior intuitions regarding chariots, e.g., that chariots exist. *That* genuinely common-sense intuition might *motivate* our investigation. But investigating the Buddhist's ultimate ontology of (exclusively) *dharmas*, finding some very chariot-like things, and then concluding they are chariots is not having one's ontology—one's ontological *conclusions*—dictated by one's interests. So, for me, this objection is not enough to reject the NEN Proposal.

Here is a final objection I'll consider against U2 and the NEN Proposal. This objection appeals to another Buddhist principle: the principle of *Lightness*—basically, the Buddhist equivalent of Occam's Razor. The principle can be characterised as:

Lightness: given two competing theories, each of which is equally good at explaining and predicting the relevant phenomena, choose […] the theory that postulates the least number of unobserved entities.[97]

One might attempt to leverage *Lightness* against the NEN Proposal as follows: on the Buddhist's theory, only *dharmas* ultimately exist; if the NEN Proposal is true, *dharmas* ultimately exist *and* chariots ultimately exist. So, even if both theories are equally good at explaining and predicting relevant phenomena, we ought not accept the NEN Proposal.

This objection fails for two reasons. First, *Lightness* concerns positing *unobserved* entities. Chariots are observable. So, it's unclear that *Lightness* even applies. Second, even if *Lightness* applies, the total tally of entities will be the same for both theories. Suppose some chariot exists according to NEN at t_1. If one counted all the *dharmas* existing at t_1, the total would include the *dharmas* arranged chariot-wise (the chariot); so, if one were to then *also* count the chariot, one would have double-counted some *dharmas*. So, despite initial appearances, this final objection needn't trouble the NEN Proposal.[98]

§5 Buddhism's soteriological purposes & the NEN Proposal

Having defended it from various objections, I now argue for a broad point in favour of the NEN Proposal: its consistency with the *soteriological purposes* of Buddhism, i.e., Buddhist goals for our salvation. Showing this will further aims 2 and 3 of the chapter: it's one more reason to accept, and one fewer reason to reject, the NEN Proposal.

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[97] (Siderits 2007, 44)
[98] This dismissal of the objection might lead one to worry the dispute at issue is *merely verbal*. I think there is more to it, but there are only so many concerns one can address per chapter. So, I move on. For related discussion, see Hirsch (2005).

Buddhism primarily tasks itself with identifying the sources of suffering/dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) and offering means of overcoming that suffering; salvation is one of Buddhism's central aims. Their philosophical efforts are meant to assist this salvation effort. Before showing the NEN Proposal is consistent with it, it's worth saying more about the soteriological purposes of Buddhist philosophising ("Abhidharmic analysis") concerning objects.

> Abhidharmic analysis has a twofold soteriological purpose. Insofar as our desires to acquire objects are not desires to acquire the *dharmas* constituting those objects, analysis helps to forestall craving those objects. Since those objects arise as confluences of fleeting activities, analysis also helps to reinforce the impossibility of preserving the objects that help to satisfy our desires. This forestalls attachment to those objects.[99]

The two soteriological purposes identified are (SP1) forestalling craving and (SP2) forestalling attachment. Craving and attachment are closely related, but not synonymous. 'Attachment' is a translation of '*upādāna*', literally meaning something like *fuel*.[100] Craving (*taṇhā*) is said to be the spark that "ignites" the fuel (attachment), with both craving and attachment being among the primary causes of suffering—hence the soteriological purpose of forestalling them.[101] I now show the NEN Proposal will hinder neither SP1 nor SP2.

Beginning with SP1, according to the passage above, philosophical analysis forestalls craving for objects because analysis reveals objects are constituted by *dharmas* and "our desires to acquire objects are not desires to acquire *dharmas*". In a sense, according to the NEN Proposal, one's desires for (ordinary) objects *are* desires for *dharmas*. But this is unproblematic. The underlying rationale might be rephrased: we won't crave objects when we

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[99] Jones (2018)
[100] Davids & Stede (1993, 149)
[101] For more on this, see Harvey (2013, 74-5).

learn they are just *dharmas*—the most plausible reason for this being that *dharmas* exist only momentarily.

Despite disagreeing with Buddhists about ordinary objects, the NEN Proposal still only posits *dharmas*. So, if forestalling craving owes to a lack of craving for *dharmas*, then if Buddhist analysis forestalls craving, so should "NEN-Buddhist analysis" (Buddhist analysis that accepts the NEN Proposal): acquiring, e.g., a chariot still just amounts to acquiring *dharmas*. So, the NEN Proposal is compatible with SP1.

Moving to SP2 (forestalling attachment), the impossibility of preserving ordinary objects is just as apparent on NEN-Buddhist analysis as on Buddhist analysis. *Dharmas* are just as impossible to preserve regardless of whether their being arranged chariot-wise suffices for the ultimate existence of chariots. Likewise, on the NEN proposal, chariots and other ordinary objects only persist as a matter of convention. On Buddhist analysis, no chariots ultimately exist to persist in the first place; on NEN-Buddhist analysis, numerically distinct chariots (typically) give rise to qualitatively identical chariots from moment to moment—leading to the conventional understanding that one and same chariot persists. But, having done one's NEN-Buddhist analysis, one will learn all chariots are momentary, forestalling attachment. So, SP2 is compatible with the NEN Proposal.

Before concluding, a final point of consistency between the NEN Proposal and the soteriological purposes of Buddhism is noteworthy. A central tenet of Buddhism is the *doctrine of non-self* (*anattā*).[102] According to this doctrine, the self—*understood in a certain way*—is an illusion. Consistency with this doctrine is crucial for consistency with Buddhism's

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[102] For a recent review of argument for non-self in Buddhism and the role of non-self in Buddhist soteriological purposes, see Struhl (2020).

soteriological purposes because Buddhists take the illusion of self to be "the ultimate cause of *dukkha* [suffering]".[103] What notion of self does this doctrine consider illusionary? Here is a summary from Struhl (2020 115):

> …what is being denied by Buddhism is the existence of a substantial, unchanging, independent and unitary entity with an essential core which is both the subject and possessor of my experiences and body, while yet distinct from them, which separates what is me from what is not me, and which is also the agent that controls my actions, desires, and thoughts.

If, on the NEN Proposal, the self was not illusory, but instead ultimately real, the NEN Proposal would conflict with much of what Buddhism says regarding suffering and salvation, undermining its soteriological purposes. Thankfully, the NEN Proposal is at no risk of positing such selves as ultimately real.

If a self existed on the NEN Proposal, it would have to be a *dharma* or combination of *dharmas*. But *dharmas* are too fleeting and ever-changing to be (individually or collectively) an unchanging subject of experience, essential core of a person, etc. So, the NEN Proposal does not contradict the Buddhist doctrine of non-self, giving it another point of consistency with the soteriological purposes of Buddhism.

One might worry about this response. Harking back to my response to MISMATCH and TRUTHS, shouldn't NENists (for consistency) be forced to say that selves are identical to some *dharmas* but we're just wrong about certain aspects of what selves are like? Something like this suggestion might be correct, but it's perfectly in keeping with the doctrine of non-self.

For one, "[t]he Buddha never said that there is no self, only that the self is a mistaken interpretation of experience" (Olendzki 2016, 41). This is why I specified that Buddhists deny

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[103] Struhl (2020, 128)

the existence of selves *understood in a certain way*. Some notion of self is perfectly acceptable to Buddhists. Here is another illuminating quote:

> Gotama [the Buddha] no more rejected the existence of the self than Copernicus rejected the existence of the Earth. Instead, rather than regarding it as a fixed, non-contingent point around which everything turned, he recognized that each self was a fluid, contingent process just like everything else. Batchelor (2011, 133)

Unlike the self qua unchanging entity, the NEN proposal *can* account for the self qua contingent process—via causal interactions of psychophysical *dharmas*. So, in sum, no conflict exists between the NEN Proposal and the Buddhist doctrine of non-self.

Conclusion

I have now (hopefully) achieved the three aims set out in the introduction. I have shown: Buddhist nihilism does not entail ordinary objects do not ultimately exist, Buddhists should accept the NEN Proposal, and Buddhists will have difficulty rejecting the NEN Proposal. Again, in doing so, my overall aim was to show that Buddhists have more work to do if they want to convincingly argue for their stance on ordinary objects.

Of course, if Buddhists should fail to overcome the NEN Proposal, or simply opt to accept it, then all the better. Acknowledging that ordinary objects ultimately exist would not undermine Buddhism as a soteriological project or philosophical enterprise. Buddhism would still be poised to help us overcome the suffering created by craving, attachment, and our ignorance of the ultimate nature of ordinary objects and ourselves.

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