

# Common Sense in Favor of Mereological Nihilism?

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**Abstract:**

Mereological nihilism, a theory in compositional metaphysics, has long suffered the objection that in virtue of its sheer anti-intuitive nature, it ought not to be believed. This essay seeks to address this objection. To this end this essay will provide a brief account of the nihilist position, an example of the objection that is prototypical, and an original attempt to meet this objection by providing a reasonable example of “common sense” that contains intuitions directed at mereological nihilism.

In contemporary metaphysics it is believed that common sense, or “folk” intuitions, speak unilaterally against the position of mereological nihilism, and equipped with this belief the critics of mereological nihilism have argued the point that in virtue of this supposed overwhelming anti-intuitive charge, the nihilist position of composition ought not to be taken seriously. In this essay I seek to erode the charge that “folk” belief speaks unilaterally against nihilism. To that end I will provide a brief summary of mereological nihilism, a typical example of the too anti-intuitive objection, and an original, reasonable, example of common sense lending itself to the nihilist position.

To understand the nihilist position I find that the following example is most instructive. Consider a statue made of clay; how many objects would you say are present? There is of course the statue, but is there not also the quantity of clay which existed prior to being molded and would continue to exist if some vandal were to smash the statue? It seems like in the case of the statue there are two objects sharing the same space. Furthermore, are there not also the atoms that take part in making up the clay? Is it not the case that there are various subatomic particles that make up those atoms? It now seems within the space of the statue we now have a whole lot of objects, objects of course with different survival conditions. The statue only survives if it maintains its shape, the clay only survives if participating atoms continue to stand in the right relations, and the atoms maintain their identity only so long as the rules governing particle physics obtain. With this in mind, here is the mereological nihilist position: rather than saying that we have all these coinciding objects occupying the same space and time, the nihilist simply claims that there are no objects other than the most fundamental objects, those who do not owe their existence to a collection of more fundamental objects. That is to say the nihilist claims that the only real objects are the truly simple, often called mereological simples. The most common

definition for mereological simple would be an object which has no proper parts, where proper parts are defined as  $X$  is a part of  $Y$  and  $X$  does not equal  $Y$ . For the nihilist all talk of supposed macro objects, for examples desks, is explainable in terms of mereological simples arranged “desk wise”, much in the same way that science tells us all of the “things” we see on a day to day basis are really just arrangements of atoms. It is important to note that the nihilist is quite distinct from any other reductionist account. The typical reductionists’ account, of which there are many, of constitution holds that there are yet macroscopic objects, for example desks. However, they are nothing but their participating simples. This of course is quite different from the nihilist position which argues that there is no further entity; there is merely an arrangement of the truly simples. This is not a petty distinction as some would hold, under the reductionist account when we consider the desk there are  $n+1$  objects present where  $n$  is the number of mereological simples participating in the desk’s constitution. For the nihilist when we consider the desk there is merely  $n$  objects where  $n$  is the number of mereological simples which happen to be arranged in a desk-like shape. This of course is what the critic finds so objectionable, an objection that I will first explain, then respond to.<sup>1</sup>

The typical objection to mereological nihilism runs along the lines of, “when the average person looks out into the world they believe they see a world populated with proper macro objects, desks, chairs and the like. This belief is one of the many beliefs that inform the “folk’s” intuitions about the world. These intuitions, qua common sense, are generally a pretty good guide to the world and any theory that is too out of sync with these intuitions ought to be suspect. The theory of mereological nihilism is allegedly so far beyond the pale of what is considered

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<sup>1</sup> Classic examples of the nihilist position may be found in Merricks, T. *Objects and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. and Van Inwagen, P. 1990. *Material Beings*. New York: Cornell University Press. Both of whom make exceptions in their reductionist accounts for persons.

common sense that it is safe to assume that it does not accurately describe the world. After all, a theory that purports that when a statue is shattered there is no object that could be said to have been destroyed is clearly so far removed from what is considered to be good sense as to be taken seriously.”

It is important to note that no philosophical work has been done to test the assumption that all of the “folk” all of the time would reject nihilist propositions; their compliance in this matter has been assumed. To respond to this example I have prepared a narrative story that details the musings of a young woman. These musings do not over reach what could reasonably be expected of a member of the “folk” to think at a given time, nor are the notions explored in my argument so case specific as to render my example normatively uninteresting. Simply put the following example details a line of thought that contains themes that speak to nihilist folk intuitions. While these themes may not be operant in the majority of “folk” thought, I argue that is plausible that enough of these intuitions are held enough of the times as to weaken significantly the claim that “folk” intuition speaks unilaterally against mereological nihilism.

Joan Jones arrived at the beach. Joan climbed out of her old automobile and made her way down onto the beach and along the coast until she arrived at her favorite location, a little spot right at the base of a dune which was sparsely decorated with pebbles and the remnants of a drift wood fire. As Joan stretched out on her beach towel and applied her sun screen her thoughts turned again to her newfound freedom at the completion of her high school career. As time wore on the combination of a long exposure to the sun’s rays and reminiscing on days gone by served to dull Joan’s sense of elation and instead instill in her a sense of melancholy and reflection. Joan then turned and considered the sand she had been idly running through her fingers as she sat and thought. Once again she gathered it into her hand and let it slowly sift through the hole in the

bottom of her fist, not unlike a single chambered sand dial (Joan thought that poetically). Joan then regarded the pile of sand left after her little exercise and noticed for the first time how some grains were a darker shade of brown and the others a light tan and how as she slowly brushed the bits of sand that yet clung to her hands the pile grew ever so slightly as each granule fell upon the pile. Joan then reflected, in her ever so slightly morose state, that which was considered a pile of sand was really just a whole bunch of grains of sand stacked on top of and next to each other. Joan then looked down the coast from where she sat, noticing the beach for what felt like the very first time. It seemed to Joan that instead of one big thing called the beach, what she was really looking at was, just like in the case of the pile of sand, just a bunch of grains of sand that had all happened to lie next to each other in way that made people call it a beach.

Joan felt a little put out after this revelation and decided to make her way back to her car. As she worked her way along the sand, the setting sun blazing orange against the waves, she passed by a sand castle abandoned by the folks that had made it. As she stared at the sand castle her revelation from earlier came back to her and yet again as she thought of how, before someone had gathered up the grains of sand from the beach, they had been lying there, nothing to distinguish them from any other bits of sand. She also thought about how silly it was to think that since when all the grains of sand around her were lying flat they were called a beach but if you rearranged them they were a pile, or a castle. It seemed to Joan like all there was were grains of sand on the beach that people were carving up into different chunks depending on how they looked at things.

As Joan watched the castle a wind picked up and blew a couple of grains of sand off of a turret. Joan thought “There goes some sand, but no one is going to stop calling it a castle, the same castle. But what about when the tide comes in and the whole thing gets dissolved? Nobody

will call all that sand a castle then, but the sand never goes away. It's like the sand is the only thing that was really there all along." As Joan turned away she was inclined to think of the sand castle not in terms of castle made of sand but rather as a bunch of grains of sand that someone had pushed into a castle shape. As Joan walked along, thinking of sandcastles that were really just sand shaped into castles and the high school she had left behind forever, a memory flashed before her mind's eye of a chemistry class she had taken her junior year in which she had learned that all things were made of matter and that matter was comprised of atoms. By now Joan had arrived back at the parking lot where she had left her vehicle. As she slipped the key into the lock she was thinking of the car as being made of atoms. She thought how atoms made up everything, much like the grains of sand that had made up the pile or that had made up the castle. Looking out from behind the driver's wheel Joan did not see happy beach goers racing to get to their cars as the last of the sun's light faded, but rather a bunch of atoms. As Joan turned the ignition she knew that the atoms didn't start at her windshield, they just kept on encroaching past the clear glass down the driving wheel, and, if Joan was going to be honest with herself, she knew that she was just like the sand castle; a bunch of atoms that had been molded into a Joan shape.

I now ask you to consider the example I provided. Certainly it is not the case that everyone thinks as Jones did all the time. This however is not my position. My position is that it is reasonable to assume that a not insignificant portion of the population of the non-philosophically trained, those whom are the fount of common sense, considers a position not dissimilar in sentiment to Jones's from time to time. What is meant by this is clear; it is my position that significant portions of the non-philosophically trained may at one time or another undergo thought processes that motivate nihilist positions all by themselves. The case of Joan is essential for this proposition because it details a line of thought that is not only clearly nihilist in

nature but also is a line of reasoning that easily could be held by one of the “folk.” It is the ease with which an individual may have this, or a similar, line of thought that is important, because it illustrates how with the exercise of a little reflective thought the nihilist position may be adopted by the individuals whose intuitions philosophers call common sense.

What then may be concluded from this essay? The position of mereological nihilism, a position which rejects the existence of all objects except for the truly simple, has been explained. Then, the typical objection to mereological nihilism, the objection that it is an untenable position in virtue of its complete divorce from common sense, has been offered. Finally, in an effort to address this objection an example of possible “folk” reasoning directed at nihilist intuitions has been provided. What are we to make of this? It is the opinion of the author that in virtue of the reasonableness of the example provided, the charge that nihilism dwells firmly outside the realm of common sense must be reevaluated. For, while it is surely the case that the nihilist position never enjoys a majority, it is reasonable to assume that it is considered frequently enough that the summary exclusion of the nihilist position must now be drawn into question.

## Bibliography

Merricks, T. 2001. *Objects and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Van Inwagen, P. 1990. *Material Beings*. New York: Cornell University Press.