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VAGUE OBJECTS AND PHENOMENAL WHOLE

We consider the so-called problem of the many, formulated by Peter Unger. It arises because ordinary material things do not have precise boundaries: it is always possible to find borderline parts of which it is not true to say either that they are parts or that they are not. Unger's conclusion is that there are no ordinary things at all. We describe the solutions of Peter van Inwagen and David Lewis, and make some critical comments upon them. After that we present our own suggestion which is based on ideas developed by Leibniz in connection with problems of unity and plurality. We suggest that what the problem of the many teaches us is that in order to understand what ordinary things are, we have to take seriously the Leibnizian-Kantian distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves.

Keywords: vagueness, ontology, composition, Leibniz, Kant

1. Introduction

“The appearance of a substance is not the substance itself, and what is valid for it is not valid for the latter.” Immanuel Kant (*Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 827).

This paper defends the claim that vagueness has important metaphysical implications. We will consider how vagueness is connected to the questions about the existence and the ontological status of such ordinary things as cats, tables and clouds. We take as our point of departure an argument, formulated by Peter Unger (1980) and called “the problem of the many”, which makes the existence of ordinary things problematic.¹ The basic assumption of Unger's argument is that ordinary things are, in a certain sense, characterized by vagueness. Unger's idea is that if ordinary objects of perception are

¹ Unger (1980).

thought to be constituted by sets of microphysical particles, then different sets of those particles should constitute one and the same ordinary thing. However, Unger argues that different sets cannot constitute one and the same thing, and because of this impossibility, Unger rejects the existence of ordinary things but leaves the microphysical world intact.²

This paper has the following structure. We will first present Unger's problem of the many in some detail (section 2.). After that we will consider Peter van Inwagen's and David Lewis's solutions to the problem of the many (section 3.). It seems to us that these solutions have some shortcomings which justify the search for a new solution. In the concluding section, we suggest that Unger's problem can be solved in a metaphysical framework that derives from Leibniz and Kant. This metaphysics involves a distinction between the real mind-independent world and the phenomenal mind-dependent world. What Unger's argument shows, we claim, is not that we have to deny the existence of ordinary things. Instead, the lesson is that we have to change our views about the ontological status, or the way of being, of these vague compositional entities.

2. Vague objects and the problem of the many

Unger presents the problem of the many using a cloud as his first example. The micro-level description of the part of physical reality which seems to us to include a cloud can be given, roughly, as follows: millions of water droplets first (relatively) densely together, then little by little farther apart from each other³. That reality is like this, we know from physics. In this micro-level description there is no mention of clouds, but this is what we should have expected because the cloud, after all, is a compositional macroscopic thing, consisting of many tiny parts. But if the cloud is something real, we should be able, at least in principle, to see how its existence is based upon the simple elements which constitute the basic level of reality. Somehow we should be able to understand the existence of the

² If we interpret quantum mechanics realistically, then we might have reasons to think there is some kind of vagueness in the micro-level. In this paper, it is assumed that the atoms are "classical" having definite boundaries. This assumption does not affect the argument of this paper.

³ It is assumed that the water droplets themselves can be considered as atoms, in the sense of simple things without parts, so that the problems of vagueness and composition are not relevant to them.

macroscopic object on the basis of the micro-level description. Thus we could ask, what, in this situation, would be a good candidate for being our cloud? We do have the water droplets, but what is the cloud? It would be natural to answer that it is a complex entity composed by some set of water droplets. In Unger's words:

Of course, the only likely candidates will be concrete complexes composed, at least in the main, not merely of some water droplets but of a great many droplets that are "suitably grouped together." If none of these things is a cloud, then, I am afraid, our situation will, in fact, contain or involve no cloud at all.⁴

Intuitively it sounds plausible to say that the water droplets, which are close together, form the cloud, and that the cloud is identical with this collection, or concrete complex, as Unger says. The droplets come close together and, *eo ipso*, a new concrete entity, the cloud, is formed or constituted. In a sense, nothing really new is created: the constituted thing is ontologically dependent upon the droplets of which it is composed.

However, even though the assumption that the cloud is identical with some set of water droplets, or in the end atoms, sounds intuitively plausible, it involves problems. It seems that it should be - in principle - possible to give an answer to the following simple question: which water droplets compose the cloud? But, it seems that there are many possible ways to select these droplets. Let us use the name CLOUD to refer to a particular cloud. And let us call DROP the set of droplets that is suggested to constitute CLOUD. Consider now a droplet *x*, which is in the immediate vicinity of some of the elements of DROP, and call DROP+1 the set of droplets which differs from DROP only in having *x* as its element. Does DROP+1 form a cloud? It seems that it does. *x* is a *borderline* droplet and it seems that no matter how the set which is supposed to constitute CLOUD is selected, there will always be several *borderline* droplets which can be added or left out. But this means that there cannot be just one set that constitutes a cloud in this situation. As Lewis says: "many surfaces are equally good candidates to be the boundary of the cloud."⁵ Unger concludes that if one set of droplets is allowed to constitute a cloud, then there are millions of equally good concrete complex entities present in the situation which would equally well fulfill the role of being that cloud. Unger writes:

4 Unger (1980, 415).

5 Lewis, 23.

If something is a typical cloud, then any situation involving it contains, in addition to itself, millions of other complex concrete entities, each of which differs from it, in any respects relevant to being a cloud, at most quite minutely.⁶

Let us suppose that Unger is right in his view that in any situation in which a cloud is assumed to exist, there are millions of sets of droplets which are equally suitable to constitute a cloud, i.e. which differ from each other quite

minutely in respects relevant to constituting a cloud. From this assumption it seems to follow that each of these sets either constitutes a cloud of its own or that they all constitute the same cloud. According to Unger, both these alternatives are absurd. The former would threaten the very concept of an ordinary thing by leading to a radical change in the individuation of ordinary things. The latter alternative cannot hold because the clouds constituted by different sets of droplets have different properties. If two distinct sets constitute clouds A and B, then there is a droplet *x* so that the property of having *x* as its part is exemplified by A but is not exemplified by B. But Leibniz's law tells us that if A and B have different properties, then they are not identical.

But if this is correct, there is no way in which a collection of droplets can constitute a cloud and Unger concludes from this that there are no clouds. He does not consider the possibility that the clouds might be dependent on the droplets in some other way than by having the droplets as constituents.

Unger's argument seems to be readily generalizable to all other ordinary things. What physics tells us is that ordinary things, such as tables and chairs, are constituted by atoms and their status in the real world is identical to that of clouds. As Lewis says, all things are only swarms of particles.⁷ If Unger is right, then ordinary things are not even that: his conclusion is that there are no such things at all, ordinary things do not exist. That is his nihilistic solution to the problem of the many.

What would solve the problem of the many is a selection principle which would single out from among the many complex entities which - so Unger seems to think - undoubtedly are present in the situation, that which answers to our common sense notion of a table or a chair or whatever.⁸ But it is, we agree with Unger here, quite plausible to claim that it is difficult to see

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lewis (1993), 23.

⁸ Unger (1980, 449).

how there can be a selection principle which could do this. If we accept that we have those millions of complex entities which closely resemble each other and that we have to single out one of them as the cloud, then we have no way to escape from the difficulties detected by Unger: “But what actual feature can there be, in the baffling morass of separated items, which can select just one complex as uniquely filling the bill?”⁹

3. Two proposed solutions

3.1. van Inwagen’s solution

Just like Unger, van Inwagen (1990) presents a theory of composition in which it is denied that there are tables or clouds or other *non-living* compositional things. However, van Inwagen grants the existence of living things. Now, van Inwagen has to face Unger’s problem of the many, because these objects, which have life, organisms, are clearly compositional objects which are vague in the sense that they have borderline parts.

van Inwagen’s solution to the problem of the many does not involve any denial of the vagueness of ordinary objects. When Unger challenges anyone who believes in the existence of ordinary things to give an exact list of the parts which some compositional ordinary thing has at some moment of time, van Inwagen says that there is no such list. In this way he defuses Unger’s questions. The part-whole relation itself is vague, and that is why compositional things can be composed of parts without being composed of just some parts and definitely not any others. van Inwagen says that

no set is the set that contains just the simples that compose me or the set that contains just the simples that compose anything having proper parts. This is because parthood and composition are vague notions. ... I therefore cannot legitimately be asked to produce a selection principle that picks out the set of simples whose members compose me, for no set of simples has this feature.¹⁰

Consider the situation. According to Unger, there are many different wholes which are composed mostly of the same parts but not quite. The challenge is

⁹ Unger (1980, 453).

¹⁰ Van Inwagen, 217.

to select one set of parts such that it could be identified with the ordinary thing, let us say an organism. However, van Inwagen points out, isn't it obvious that none of the many candidates, even assuming that there are such candidates, is identical with any ordinary thing? They lack just that feature which one should from the outset ascribe to ordinary things, i.e. vagueness. So the natural thing is to select a whole, or a set of parts, which is vague: i.e. a fuzzy set to which the parts do not either definitely belong or not, but to which they can belong with different degrees between one and zero. This is, then, van Inwagen's solution to the selection problem.

However, there seems to be a natural objection to van Inwagen's solution. Let us say that the fuzzy set of simples which compose some compositional object is such that some simple thing x belongs to the set to the degree 0.99. We would get another fuzzy set from this by taking x as a definite element and leaving the status of all the other simples the same. This fuzzy set would be very much like the first, and it could be claimed that it would be equally good as the candidate for being the set whose elements compose the compositional thing in question.

Do we have some ground for preferring one vague candidate for the others? van Inwagen seems to think that we have. We have to start from the fact that there is somewhere in our universe an event of life. It is an objective fact that some simple things take part in that life to a definite degree. These simples which take part in that life constitute a (vague) compositional thing, an organism. Any given simple thing is a part of that organism to the degree that it takes part of the event of life in question. In the situation where there really exists some compositional thing, it is thus determined to what extent any given simple thing can be said to be part of it. Certain kinds of events are used here as anchors by which to individuate the compositional objects there are. But it may certainly be asked, does this not require too much of these events? It is difficult to understand how events of life could themselves be determined enough to enable the determination of the degree to which some simple thing takes part in them. It seems to us that van Inwagen wants to avoid the problem of the selection principle with the help of the notion of life. That fuzzy set of simples which take part in my life process is what composes me. But why do not other fuzzy sets which differ minimally from the fuzzy set that compose me, constitute lives as well? It seems, then, that there is a priority problem here: does my life determine the fuzzy set that composes me, or does the fuzzy set determine my life? If the latter alternative is accepted, it

seems difficult to avoid the problem of the many because different fuzzy sets could then determine different lives and so constitute different things.

This seems to be the same worry as the one considered by van Inwagen himself. He formulates this objection as follows:

You have said that there is only one human life that any of the simples that are parts of you to any degree are caught up in. Your whole case, really, rests on your assertion that there is only one such life. If we grant you this unique life, then you can use its uniqueness to show that a certain f-set of simples is unique in being the one f-set such that every simple is a member of that f-set to just the degree to which it is caught up in that unique life; and that f-set, you contend, is the f-set whose members compose you. But why should the friends of the many grant you this unique life?¹¹

However, van Inwagen describes this as “a desperate move”.¹² He seems to think that life is an event and that the problem of the many does not evolve in connection with events. He takes a riot as an example of an event which is constituted by a fuzzy set of people and which, therefore, seems to offer an opportunity to construe the problem of the many for events. He writes as follows:

Consider, for example, Alice, who stood about on the outskirts of the mob and who shouted a few slogans and made a few inflammatory remarks and left as soon as she heard sirens. Consider the people other than Alice who took part (to whatever degree) in the riot. Had they a special riot of their own, one that differed from the “larger” riot in this respect alone: that Alice was not even a borderline participant in it? It seems to me that we should require some very good reason to believe that there was any event of that description. I think that we have no such reason.¹³

There seems to be something wrong in van Inwagen’s view here. Why can’t there be a problem of the many for events, too? The example van Inwagen considers is not good. Events, we believe, are exemplifyings of properties by individual things. Now, if d and e are exemplifyings of the same property by different things, then d and e are not identical.¹⁴ Suppose now that d is an event that is an exemplifying of a property by an individual thing that

¹¹ Ibid., 226.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 226f.

¹⁴ We adopt here Jaegwon Kim’s (1976) conception of events.

generates the problem of the many. For example, suppose *d* is a cloud's moving. Unger could, of course, argue that because this situation has to involve millions of clouds, it also has to involve millions of events which satisfy the description 'is a cloud's moving'. Thus, there is a problem of the many for events, too. What van Inwagen ought to show is that the event of life is not constituted by anything which generates the problem of the many.

2.2. Lewis's solution

David Lewis (1993) distinguishes five different solutions to the problem. In the first two, it is denied that any of the many candidates in Unger's example is the cloud. The first solution refers to the distinction between material things and their constituters: the many are constituters of clouds, and not identical with the cloud. Non-identical constituters can, according to this solution, be constituters of one and the same material thing. According to the second solution, the thing itself - the ordinary thing - is a vague object, and as such none of the many.¹⁵ In the third solution, one of the many is claimed to be the ordinary thing in question. All the others are disqualified on the ground that they are a little bit more or a little bit less than the ordinary thing in question. In the two remaining solutions it is accepted that each of the many is a cloud. The fourth solution uses the concept of relative identity: the many are different as aggregates but identical as clouds. The fifth solution in Lewis's list relies on the concept of partial identity.¹⁶

¹⁵ van Inwagen's solution is of this type.

¹⁶ Lewis also refers to Geach's (1980, 215) paradox of 1001 cats. Let Tibbles be a cat with hairs $h_1, h_2, \dots, h_{1000}$. Let c be Tibbles with all these hairs. Let c_1 be the thing (the aggregate) composed by all the same parts as Tibbles except h_1 , and similarly with c_2, \dots, c_{1000} . Geach says that we have to accept all of these c 's, i.e. $c, c_1, c_2, \dots, c_{1000}$ as cats, so that in addition to Tibbles there are 1000 other cats on the mat. Geach finds a solution to this paradox in the concept of the relative identity: c, c_1, \dots, c_{1000} are not identical as aggregates ("lumps of feline tissue"), but they are identical as cats, so there is only one cat. But Lewis says that there is still no paradox. Apparently Lewis wants to say that there is no reason still to think that all of c_1, \dots, c_{1000} are cats. If hair h_n is plucked out, e.g., then we can say that c_n turns "from a mere proper part of cat Tibbles into the whole of a cat". The principle we can use here to exclude c_1, \dots, c_{1000} as cats is the following: if there exist a compositional thing of the kind K , then no proper part of the K is of the kind K . But we think that there might still be a problem: how to justify the principle in question. Of course, it brings out well our common sense way to count compositional things, but couldn't we still ask: all of c_1, \dots, c_{1000} are very much like c ; they are very much like cats (they are furry, they catch mice, they purr etc.); are we justified in ignoring

Lewis seems to believe that the third and fifth solution are the most promising. So let us consider what he says about them.

The third solution coheres well with Lewis's view of vagueness as semantic indecision.¹⁷ The concept of cloud is vague, and this means that we are not able to select one of the many as the referent of, say, 'this cloud'; we have not made the decisions concerning the concept which would enable us to do this, but when we talk about clouds and other things we are, as it were, pretending that the decisions are made. We ignore all but one of the many concrete complex entities present in the situation because all but one are either proper parts of our one cloud or our one cloud plus something more. We just have not decided which one to single out. There is no point in actually making this decision, making our language completely precise, but still we can count our ordinary things as if it were precise.

However, this solution, where vagueness is seen as semantic indecision, is problematic. Lewis accepts the existence of many concrete complex entities, and accepts that they are not identical with each other. *Any* of them *could* be the cloud, but, at the moment, when no decision about the reference of the term has been made, none of them *is* identical with it. But is there one cloud *here right now*? Well, there are many things very much like each other, any of them quite suitable to be our cloud. The fact is, and it seems to be a fact about our linguistic practices, that we accept only one of them as our cloud, though we do not care to pick it out from the many. But doesn't this leave the problem of the many somehow intact? It is accepted here, after all, that there are many distinct entities which are almost similar with each other. If one of them is a cloud, why not all? Surely, the fact that we accept only one of them as the referent of the term 'cloud' does not make one of them somehow radically different from the others? It seems to us that Lewis's (first) solution either leaves the ontological side of the problem unsolved - leaving the many as clouds - or leads to the same direction Unger wants to go: there are no clouds or any other ordinary things.

them. This, however, leads us too far from Unger's paradox. It leads us to problems concerning the identity over time of continuants.

17 Lewis (1986, 212) writes: "The only intelligible account of vagueness locates it in our thought and language. The reason it's vague where the outback begins is not that there's this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders; rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word 'outback'. Vagueness is semantic indecision."

Lewis considers the objection that this solution works “too well”.¹⁸ According to this objection, this solution makes it impossible to state the problem of the many at all, which is paradoxical because apparently we can understand it perfectly. How does the impossibility arise? First of all, Lewis notices that when the semantic decision is made, then the candidates for cloudhood do not have equal claim. And this is true no matter how the decision is made; so we have to say that it is supertrue¹⁹ that the candidates do not have equal claim. But to state the problem of the many we should be able to say and accept as supertrue that the candidates have equal claim for cloudhood. And in some sense, surely, they do have equal claim. Lewis says that this shows that “fanatical supervaluationism” is false. We need not apply the supervaluationist rule automatically, we can - and sometimes we must - suspend the rule, and “suspending the rule it is right to say that the candidates have equal claim, and that all of them alike are not definitely not [clouds]. Suspending the rule, it’s even right to say that they are all [clouds]”. But isn’t it then the case that the problem of the many has not really (at the ontological level, as it were) been solved?

At this point Lewis brings in the fifth solution where he makes use of the concept of partial identity.²⁰ It is supposed to help us to diminish the sense of paradox we feel when we end up saying that if there is one cat on the mat, there must be many cats on the mat.²¹ According to this solution these many cats are not really many but *almost* one, i.e. *almost* identical.

Suffice it to say here only that the notion of partial identity, upon which this solution is based, is problematic in itself. It seems to us that the sense of paradox is not significantly diminished in this solution. We are still left with many cats of which any two are like Siamese twins but unfortunate (or perhaps fortunate) enough to have only one or two tiny parts which are not shared by the others.

¹⁸ Lewis (1993), 29.

¹⁹ A vague sentence is supertrue iff it is true on all “sharpenings” of its terms.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹ Instead of clouds, Lewis uses cats as examples of ordinary objects.

3. Leibniz and Kant on ordinary things as phenomenal objects

Some of the same problems about composition and compositional objects which occupy philosophers today also occupied Leibniz and Kant. In the preface to *Material Beings* van Inwagen says that Leibniz thought deeply about composition and compositional objects, and what he says of Leibniz can be said of Kant, too. Our aim is to present a solution to the problem of the many that is based on Leibniz's and Kant's views about composition.

When Leibniz speaks about what exists in the absolute sense, i.e. about what exists independently from the other existing things, he uses the traditional term 'substance'. For Leibniz, the most important feature of substances is their unity: a substance is *one* entity in some very strong sense; one way to put this is to say that substances are the ultimate subjects of predication. When a property is ascribed to a *substance*, there is no way to get rid of the subject of this predication. Using van Inwagen's terms, it is impossible to express the same fact by ascribing a multigrade relation to a plurality of things. The unity of substances is their essential feature, but the unity of everything else - including the unity of ordinary things which are not substances for Leibniz - is somehow derivative and has to be explained.

Compositional things do not satisfy the criterion of strict unity applicable to substances. Leibniz's argument for this claim proceeds as follows. The existence of compositional things are based on relational facts. If a compositional thing X is made of parts A and B, then nothing else is needed for the existence of X but that A and B are related to each other in a certain definite way. One way to explicate this is to consider how God had to proceed in order to create compositional things. He had to create the simple things, the real unities, and then he had to put them into certain relations. He did not have to care about the compositional things *themselves* at all. From God's point of view, compositional things do not appear in the blueprint for reality. The things that truly exist are the individual substances and they are characterized by absolute simplicity and, for that reason, by absolute unity in contrast to relational unity, which for Leibniz, in the end, is unity with respect to an observer.

One of Leibniz's favourite examples of things having only relational unity is a flock of sheep: it is not one thing except in the weak sense that the sheep may be considered or thought of as a unity by someone. Leibniz also thinks that the difference between cases of mere heaps and flocks and so on,

and cases where it might be more natural to speak of some really existing thing is only a matter of degree. He says that “the tangibility of a heap of stones or of a marble block does not constitute a better proof than the visibility of a rainbow does of its substantial reality”.²² For Leibniz, then, the fact that the elements of some pluralities are more closely connected than the elements of some other pluralities, does not have any ontological significance. This is highlighted by the following passages from Leibniz’s letters to Arnauld:

... I think that a block of marble is, perhaps, only like a pile of stones, and thus cannot pass as a single substance, but as an assemblage of many. Suppose that there were two stones, for example, the diamond of the Great Duke and that of the Great Mogul. One could impose the same collective name for the two, and one could say that they constitute a pair of diamonds, although they are far part from one another; but one would not say that these two diamonds constitute a substance. More and less do not make a difference here. Even if they were brought nearer together and made to touch, they would not be substantially united to any greater extent. And if, after they had touched, one joined to them another body capable of preventing their separation ... all this would make only what is called an *unum per accidens*. For it is by accident that they are required to perform the same motion. ... There is as much difference between a substance and such a being as there is between a man and a community, such as a people, an army, a society, or a college; these are moral beings, beings in which there is something imaginary and dependent on the fabrication [fiction] of our mind.²³

I agree that there are degrees of accidental unity, that an ordered society has more unity than a confused mob, and that an organized body, or rather a machine, has more unity than a society, that is to say, it is more appropriate to conceive them as a single thing, because there are more relations among the constituents. But in the end, all these unities become realized only by thoughts and appearances, like colors and other phenomena, which, nevertheless, are called real.²⁴

The end of the quotations reveal Leibniz’s view about the ontological status of compositional things: they have in them something “dependent on the fabrication of our mind”. Leibniz’s preferred term for things that are not unities *per se* is ‘phenomenon’. It is important to note that Leibniz uses the term ‘phenomenon’ to refer to objects which are presented to us in our

²² Leibniz (1967, 126).

²³ Leibniz (1989, 79).

²⁴ Leibniz (1967, 126).

experiences of the world, not straightforwardly to those experiences themselves. Thus, three levels can be discerned here. First, there are the simple substances; second, there are the phenomena; and third, there are experiences “in which” these phenomena present themselves. The existence of the phenomena derives somehow from relations which subjects have to the world of substances. The theory can be put briefly as follows. When we perceive material objects, we have perceptions of individual substances; there is never a single object of experience but always several of them. However, we do not experience these pluralities as pluralities. Instead, we collect them together into a unity, we *imprint* a unity onto the world.²⁵ When I see a table, what constitutes this visual experience is not one thing but a plurality of things. The table exists only in relation to me, it is not any of the many substances and these substances do not, by themselves, compose any complex. Leibniz describes the formation of phenomena as follows:

Our mind notices or conceives of certain genuine substances which have various modes; these modes embrace relationships with other substances, from which the mind takes the opportunity to link them together in thought and to enter into the account one name for all these things together, which makes for convenience in reasoning.²⁶

For Leibniz, compositional things have some sort of dual existence. On the one hand, they derive a certain reality from the individual substances upon which their existence is partly based. On the other hand, their real nature is to be pluralities, and their status as unified things is mind-made. This latter idea leads Leibniz to talk about ordinary things as phenomena.²⁷

Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds, or between things-in-themselves and empirical objects, is better-known than

²⁵ One thing which does not play major role in our presentation, because our main interest is the problem of the many, but which is important if we want to understand Leibniz’s way of thinking, is that he sees his considerations concerning the ontological status of aggregates as leading to a view of *all* material things, no matter how small, as not truly existing as substances. All material things are extended, and as extended they are in principle divisible, and as such they are compositional, or aggregates. This means that Leibniz’s basic substances, his monads, are in some sense mental.

²⁶ Leibniz (1967, 127).

²⁷ Russell (1937, 116) writes: “The mind, and the mind only, synthesizes the diversity of monads; each separate monad is real apart from the perception of it, but a collection, as such, acquires only a precarious and derived reality from simultaneous perception.”

Leibniz's distinction between substances and phenomena. The major difference between Kant and Leibniz is that Kant denied that any genuine knowledge about the noumenal world is possible whereas Leibniz thought we could get a perfect understanding, at some general level, of it. Kant thought, however, that it is possible to prove that our empirical world, the world of common sense and of natural science, is not the *noumenal* world, i.e. that all the ordinary things are mind-dependent constructions which have some unknown ground in the things-in-themselves. In the antinomies of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant shows that the assumption that empirical objects are things-in-themselves leads to contradictions. Thus, empirical objects must be seen as mind-dependent phenomena. Our suggestion is that the problem of the many can be seen as a new kind of antinomy leading to a conclusion which is similar to that of Kant's antinomies, a paradoxical conclusion which can be avoided only by rejecting the assumption that ordinary things are things-in-themselves; i.e. things which have a mind-independent reality.

Kant says of the transcendental realist, i.e. of anyone who thinks the objects of our senses are things-in-themselves, that "after wrongly supposing that objects of the senses, if they are to be external, must have an existence by themselves, and independently of the senses, he finds that, judged from this point of view, all our sensuous representations are inadequate to establish their reality".²⁸ This is the traditional problem of the knowledge of the external world. Unger's problem can be understood as a new twist in this problem of the transcendental realist: now the problem is not the existence of the external noumenal world but rather the impossibility to find a place there for our ordinary things. Starting with a scientific picture of a noumenal world consisting of small indivisible things, we reach the conclusion that there is no way to select from there anything determinate enough to count as our cloud or cat. But neither is there anything indeterminate, so we are on the verge of denying the existence of ordinary things altogether. Leibniz and Kant thought (or would have thought) that we should not do that, however; instead, we should make a distinction between different levels of, or ways of, existence.²⁹

²⁸ Kant (1929, 346: A 369).

²⁹ The theory of phenomenal existence is, of course, difficult to work out in detail, and there are many deep philosophical questions in this area which we have to ignore in this paper. The argument of the paper as a whole could, perhaps, be seen as giving some idea of the usefulness of the notion of phenomenal existence. It is interesting to note that van Inwagen (1990, 99) seems to reject this kind of approach when he says: "My position vis-à-vis tables and other

4. The problem of the many reconsidered

The distinction between things-in-themselves and phenomena is essential in our solution to the problem of the many. However, we embed this idea into a three-level ontology that is not as such accepted either by Leibniz or Kant. The three levels in this ontology are the following:

Level A. The atoms. Truly existing unities.

Level B. The aggregates which are formed from atoms. These are Unger's complex concrete objects, or mereological sums of simples.

Level C. The ordinary things. Things as they are perceived. These things may also be called phenomena, or phenomenal wholes.

In this ontology, any A- or B-level object is a thing-in-itself. How does this help in our attempt to find a solution to the problem of the many? In Unger's construction of the problem, the many are concrete complex entities which belong to level B. They are objects build up by some plurality of atoms. Or, perhaps, we should say that they are pluralities of atoms, in a sense not existing at all beside the atoms themselves. But it is useful to talk about objects belonging to that level, because they are needed in the clearest formulation of the problem of the many – they *are* the many. The selection problem is a consequence of the assumption that the ordinary things we are interested in, are objects of this sort.

However, when ordinary things are interpreted as C-level objects, the situation is different. The relation between the many and the one, i.e. the relation between the pluralities and the ordinary thing, is not that of identity; rather it is the relation of foundation. The ordinary things have their foundations in the things belonging to the B-level. The crucial point with regard to the problem of the many is that there is no need to think that there is a one-to-one correspondence between B-level and C-level objects. Several B-level objects can serve as the foundation for one and the same C-level object in the sense that were any of them present in a situation, the C-level object would also be present. Unger's mistake lies in his assumption that if there are ordinary things they must be pluralities of the micro-level entities. We would suggest that instead of constituting in this sense the ordinary things, the

inanimate objects is simply that there *are* none. Tables are not defective objects or second-class citizens of the world; they are just not there at all."

micro-level entities, the things-in-themselves, serve as the foundation for ordinary things.

Why doesn't the problem of the many exist in the case of phenomena? This is because the ontological nature of phenomena differs radically from the nature of compositional objects. An important assumption in Unger's argument is that ordinary things - if they existed - would be identical with complexes of simple things, i.e. they would be compositional and they would be composed ultimately of simple particles. When this assumption is connected to the vagueness of ordinary things, i.e. to the assumption that ordinary things have borderline parts, the problem of the many is inevitable. But in the case of phenomena these assumptions cannot be made. In the case of phenomena the relation between a whole and its parts is different. Phenomena are not compositional in the same sense as the concrete complex entities in Unger's argument. How exactly should we understand the ontology of phenomena here is, of course, a big question, and so our suggestions here can only be preliminary. What are phenomena is a question which we think could profitably start from a more extensive historical discussion of Leibniz's and Kant's metaphysics. In Kantian terms, we could say that the problem of the many threatens us only, if we start to think about phenomena as things-in-themselves, existing independently from the minds.

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