

THISNESS AND EVENTS*

Introduction

This essay is an investigation into the existence of a very unusual and—some would say—unacceptably exotic type of property: namely, the property of being a certain individual; or, if you prefer, the property of being identical to a certain individual. In other words, this essay will investigate whether—in spite of their exotic nature—there are *thisnesses*, and, in particular, whether thisnesses are instantiated by events. Of course, I have not really said enough yet about thisnesses to motivate the criticism that such properties are exotic; for it might be the case that an individual x 's thisness is merely a conjunction of all of x 's qualitative properties. And, if we allow for the existence of all of the properties of an individual, it is not overly profligate to allow for the existence of this one additional conjunctive property. This, apparently, was Leibniz's view. Though seemingly ontologically mundane, however, such a qualitative¹ thisness is not ontologically innocent. Given the definition of a thisness above, an individual's thisness is essential to it, and there are few philosophers who would wish to hold that all of an individual's properties are essential to it.² Rather, it

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¹ Assuming that a conjunction of basic qualitative properties is itself qualitative (though obviously not basic). See Robert Adams, "Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity," this JOURNAL, LXXVI, 1 (January, 1979): 5-26.

² Adams, *ibid.*, p. 10 notes that this unpalatable ramification of Leibniz's view can be avoided, without rejecting his conception of thisnesses as qualitative, by claiming that they are disjunctions of basic

is the Scotistic³ variety of thisness—according to which thisness is primitive and purely non-qualitative—that I am interested in pursuing here. And it is precisely the non-qualitative aspect of Scotistic thisness that strikes many as being unacceptably exotic.

What is it for a property to be non-qualitative? The distinction between a qualitative property and a non-qualitative property is one that belongs to that family of philosophical distinctions which, though not admitting of analysis, can be made easily enough through the use of a loose definition and some intuitive examples. Here is the definition offered by Adams:

a property is purely qualitative—a suchness—if and only if it could be expressed, in a language sufficiently rich, without the aid of such referential devices as proper names, proper adjectives and verbs (such as ‘Leibnizian’ and ‘pegasizes’), indexical expressions, and referential uses of definite descriptions.⁴

So, living in a large city and being the son of a carpenter are qualitative properties, while living in New York and being the son of Henry are non-qualitative properties. The reason non-qualitative thisness is sometimes thought to be ontologically suspect is that, by definition, we are unable to describe such a property other than through the use of such devices as demonstratives and proper nouns. Thus, for example, if the event of the Battle of Waterloo has non-qualitative thisness, then there exists⁵ a property that is the property of being that particular Battle, or of being identical to it;

qualitative properties. Such disjunctions would allow for an individual to instantiate different basic qualitative properties in different worlds.

³ After Duns Scotus, who coined the Latin term ‘*haecceitas*’, of which ‘thisness’ is a translation.

⁴ Adams, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ Or existed, depending on whether you think a past individual’s thisness continues to exist. See Robert Adams, “Time and Thisness,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XI (1986): 315-29.

and this property exists over and above all the Battle's more mundane, qualitative properties and relations, such as being bloody, being such as to have occurred 39 years after the American Revolution, and being a battle in which a diminutive French general was decisively defeated.

Now, suppose we were able to list all such qualitative properties of the Battle of Waterloo. The opponent of thisness will want to know what further property could that event possibly instantiate? If all we are after is the concept of what it is for an individual to be the individual that it is, then surely such a concept could be captured by an exhaustive list of all that individual's qualitative properties. The intuitive thought behind this objection is that ontological parsimony (not to mention sobriety) dictates against the postulation of mysterious individual essences, when the concept that such essences are meant to explain can be equally well explained by non-mysterious qualitative properties. So we can conceive of what it is to be a particular individual without claiming that there is a corresponding property that is had essentially by that individual, and that, necessarily, no other individual has.

That is a brief account of the objector's motivation. What of the proponent of thisness? What motivates him to violate—by the objector's lights—principles of ontological parsimony? One thought is that the existence of non-qualitative thisness provides a plausible argument for the transworld identity of individuals; and, since many modal actualists will want to endorse such an identity, they may wish to avail themselves of thisness as well.⁶ Another thought, from the philosophy of time rather than modality, is that the existence of the thisnesses of past events, and the non-existence of thisnesses of future events, can provide the framework for a growing

⁶ See Adams (1979) and "Actualism and Thisness," *Synthese*, LVII (1981): 3-42. As has no doubt become clear, I have Adams in mind as my proponent of non-qualitative thisness (at least at this stage).

universe temporal ontology (according to which past events exist and future events do not).⁷ I will not say much more about either of these motivations, other than to note that it is the latter thought that has piqued my own interest in non-qualitative thisness. The task I have set myself here, however, is to investigate whether some independent argument—*independent, that is, of one’s motivation*—for the existence of non-qualitative thisness might be forthcoming. Nevertheless, stating my motivation from the outset will explain why I am particularly interested in whether events instantiate non-qualitative thisness.⁸ It also explains why a favourable outcome—from my perspective—would involve a demonstration of the existence of thisness that is independent of the existence of human beings; since I take it that the existence and nature of time is logically independent of the existence and nature of human beings.

I will begin my investigation in Section I with a look at what is commonly taken to be the test for non-qualitative thisness, namely, the failure of application of the principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles for some class of individuals. The two classes that we will look at are those of material objects and events. In Section II, I will discuss Hacking’s objection to the general project of seeking counterexamples to the Identity of Indiscernibles, and then consider a response due to Adams. Finally, in Section III, I will offer my own response to Hacking, and then go on to draw some conclusions with respect to thisness and events.⁹

I. A Test for Thisness

⁷ See Adams, 1986.

⁸ The term ‘instantiate’, and its related forms, strike me as slightly unfortunate in this context. Given that thisnesses are like tropes in that they are unique, unrepeatable properties, it is not quite proper to speak of their having instances. Nonetheless, I like the alternatives to ‘instantiation’ even less, so I will continue to use it and its related forms.

⁹ For the remainder of the paper, I intend ‘thisness’ to be read ‘non-qualitative thisness’.

A. *The Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles*

It is widely acknowledged that the appropriate test for the existence of thisness involves finding some class of suitably arranged individuals for which the principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles does not apply. As has also been widely acknowledged, however, it is crucial to the legitimacy of the test that the principle take the proper form (proper, that is, for the intended purpose in this context). In its general form, the principle states that any two individuals which share all of their properties are identical. But what kind of properties are we interested in in this context—that is, in the context of applying a test for the existence of Scotistic thisness? Suppose that objects x and y share all their properties. One of x 's properties is being identical to x , so, *ex hypothesi*, y has the property of being identical to x . Thus, when the principle is interpreted as quantifying over not only qualitative properties, but also non-qualitative properties, it is trivially true and therefore incapable of yielding interesting metaphysical theses. Given this, it is necessary to strengthen the principle by restricting the domain of properties quantified over to that of qualitative properties alone. For if it can be shown that individuals x and y share all their qualitative properties, and yet are distinct individuals, then there must be some further, non-qualitative property that accounts for their distinctness (though we will look at an objection to this inference in Section I.B.1, below).

Notice, too, that we need not strengthen (in this respect) the principle any further; say, by restricting the domain of properties quantified over to that of non-relational, qualitative properties. To do so would certainly yield a metaphysically interesting thesis, since, according to it, individuals are differentiated solely by their intrinsic qualitative properties. But, based on the above inference pattern, if we could show that objects x and y share all their intrinsic qualitative properties, and yet are

distinct individuals, then either they are differentiated by thisness *or* by their relational qualitative properties. In which case, we would not have conclusively demonstrated the necessity of the former. The lesson is that, in testing for thisness, we should utilize the weakest, non-trivial form of the principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. Restricting the domain of properties quantified over to that of all qualitative properties, both relational and non-relational, satisfies this desideratum.¹⁰

So, for our purposes here, there is at least one adjustment that must be made to the general form of the principle. Are there any others? What about the principle's modal status? If we interpret the principle as stating a contingent truth, as opposed to a necessary truth, then even this modally weak form of the principle will be of metaphysical interest. As we have seen, it is by no means trivial to claim that individuals are differentiated by their qualitative properties alone, since such a claim disbars non-qualitative properties as differentiating features; and this non-trivial claim would certainly not be trivialized by restricting the domain of individuals quantified over to that of actual individuals. Nevertheless, when we consider that we have very little reason to believe that there are two actual, distinct individuals which share all their qualitative properties, it becomes clear that the counterexamples we will be looking for in the course of the investigation will have to involve possible individuals, and such individuals can only serve as counterexamples to the principle in its necessary form. On the basis of these considerations, then, we are in a position to

¹⁰ But see Gonzalez Rodriguez-Pereyra, "How Not to Trivialise the Identity of Indiscernibles," in P.F. Strawson, and A. Chakrabarti, eds., *Concepts, Properties and Qualities* (Ashgate: 2006), who argues that there is a yet weaker, non-trivial version (that is, a non-trivial version that restricts the domain of properties quantified over even less).

formulate the principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles that will best suit our purposes in this context:

(I/I) Necessarily, any two individuals that have all the same qualitative properties, both relational and non-relational, are the same individual.

B. Counterexamples to the Principle

Now that we have the proper form of the principle (I/I) in view, we can consider what types of possible individuals might serve as counterexamples to it. We can think of such counterexamples as potentially providing i) a general conclusion about the existence of thisness, as well as ii) a specific conclusion about the existence and instantiation of thisness in a particular class of individuals. So, for example, if we can devise a counterexample to (I/I) that involves material objects, then we can infer from this counterexample both that, generally, there are thisnesses, as well as that, specifically, material objects have them. This point has important consequences, since it may be that only certain classes of individuals instantiate thisness, so we should not infer from successful counterexamples that all individuals instantiate thisness, nor should we infer from unsuccessful counterexamples that no individuals instantiate thisness. The best way forward, then, will be to devise potential counterexamples to (I/I) involving the classes of individuals that we are most interested in evaluating as candidates for the instantiation of thisness. I have already stated that I am primarily interested in whether events instantiate thisness, but since the standard counterexamples to (I/I) involve spatially dispersed material objects, it will be instructive for what follows if we first consider this class of individuals.

1. Spatial Dispersion

In the recent literature, the most commonly cited version of the argument from spatial dispersion is Max Black's famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view)

thought experiment involving two iron spheres.¹¹ We are to imagine a world which has as sole occupants two, qualitatively indistinguishable, large, solid globes of iron. How do we know that there are two of them, if they share all of their qualitative properties? Owing, of course, to the fact that they are spatially dispersed. And, importantly, it is not only their non-relational qualitative properties that they share, but also their relational ones, since all the relations that one bears to the other are born by the latter to the former: it is a perfectly symmetrical world. So, for example, each sphere has the property of “being two diameters from another iron sphere similar to itself.”¹² Of course, there is a suppressed premise here, but it is one that would be difficult to resist; namely, that one and the same object could not possibly be in two different places at the same time. As others have done in this context, I will simply assume the truth of this premise.¹³ So here we have a seemingly straightforward counterexample to (I/I): a possible world in which two material objects share all of their qualitative properties, yet are clearly distinct objects. And, given their distinctness, each globe must have some property in virtue of which it is the globe it is. That is to say, each globe must have primitive, non-qualitative thisness.

In Section II, we will look at an important objection to this defence of the instantiation of thisness by material objects. For the moment, however, I want to look at two other objections which I believe are cause for less concern, but which merit a brief discussion nonetheless. First, one might worry that the leap from a possible world—in particular, a possible world far removed from the actual world—containing

¹¹ Max Black, “The Identity of Indiscernibles,” *Mind*, LXI, 242 (April, 1952): 153-164.

¹² Adams (1979), p. 13.

¹³ A notable exception is John O’Leary-Hawthorne, “The Bundle Theory of Substance and the Identity of Indiscernibles,” *Analysis*, LV, 3 (July, 1995): 191-6, where he argues that the bundle theory of substance can allow for identical, yet spatially dispersed, bundles of universals.

material objects with thisness, to the claim that actual material objects have thisness, is not warranted. I agree, however, with Adams, when he claims that, intuitively, the structure of individuality, whatever it might be, must be the same in all possible worlds.¹⁴ In light of my approach here, of course, I would modify this claim by adding that it is the structure of individuality in particular classes of individuals that must be the same in all possible worlds. Thus, if in some possible world the structure of individuality for material objects is such that they are individuated by thisness, then, plausibly, that is the structure of individuality for material objects in all possible worlds.

By my lights, the plausibility of this claim is grounded in the following line of thought. Individuation is determined by criteria of identity—criteria which vary according to the class of individual under consideration. Now, if these criteria of identity can serve to individuate a certain class of individuals in one possible world, then, given the necessity of the law of identity, they must do so in all possible worlds in which that class of individuals exist. So, the structure of individuality—for a particular class of individuals—must be the same in all possible worlds. For, suppose that this were not the case, then the spheres that are (allegedly) individuated by their thisnesses in a Black world, would not be so individuated were they to exist in a world *W* just like the actual world except that *W* also contains both of the spheres from the Black world (i.e. the difference between the Black world and *W* is that *W* is not symmetrical, and thus the spheres in *W* do not share all their relational properties, as they do in the Black world). Given this, the spheres' qualitative properties would have to individuate them in *W*. But suppose that the spheres had precisely the same non-relational qualitative properties in *W* that they had in the Black world. How

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

could the very same properties that failed to individuate, that is, failed to identify, the spheres in the Black world, succeed in doing so in *W*? If the properties of ‘being a sphere’, ‘having mass *m*’, ‘having radius *r*’, ‘being composed of iron’, etc., are unable to individuate the spheres in the Black world, then given the necessity of identity, neither would they be able to in *W*. The only other potential candidates for individuating properties are the different relational properties the spheres instantiate in *W* (in virtue of its asymmetry); but, *ex hypothesi*, these properties do not exist in the Black world, and so cannot individuate the *very same* spheres in *W*.¹⁵

Nevertheless, this defence of the argument from spatial dispersion leads to the second worry I mentioned—one that has been voiced by O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cover. They argue that the spatial dispersion argument suffers from an unwarranted bias in favour of taking transworld identity claims at face value.¹⁶ Thus, in my example above, they would say that it is open to the opponent of non-qualitative thisness to deny that it is the very same spheres in the Black world and in *W*; for it might be the case that there are no determinate *de re* propositions true of either sphere in the Black world. Perhaps the only propositions true of the Black world are general ones such as $\exists x (x \text{ is a sphere})$, $\exists x \exists y (x \text{ is a sphere and } y \text{ is a sphere and } x \neq y)$.¹⁷ Hence, though there are two spheres, there is nothing that there is for each sphere to

¹⁵ There is, of course, another way to defend Adams’ principle about the structure of individuality. By definition, thisnesses exist in all possible worlds in which the individuals that have them exist. So if thisnesses exist in the Black world, then they also exist (and, also by definition, individuate) in *W*. This defense, however, would not do much to persuade the opponent who is already sceptical of the concept of thisness.

¹⁶ John O’Leary-Hawthorne and J.A. Cover, “Framing the Thisness Issue,” *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, LXXV, 1 (March, 1997): 102-108.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

be the particular sphere that it is—that is, they do not have thisnesses. And, given that there are no determinate *de re* propositions true of the spheres in the Black world, we cannot talk about one of those spheres existing in *W*. Transworld relations between qualitatively similar individuals are not structured in terms of the identity relation, but in terms of the counterpart relation. On this view, then, the possible existence of a Black world does not imply that thisness must be non-qualitative rather than qualitative, it implies that there is no thisness at all.

The lesson O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cover glean from these considerations is that an appropriately unbiased test for non-qualitative thisness must not only show that there is a pair of distinct individuals with all the same qualitative properties, but also must show that each member of the pair has different *de re* propositions true of them. I take it that strengthening the test in this manner is meant to dissuade actualists from defending their endorsement of transworld identity with an appeal to thisness, since it now appears that an assumption in favor of the former is required to establish the existence of the latter. For my part, I am happy to allow the more stringent test, as well as the assumption in favor of taking transworld identity claims at face value, since I am not trying to defend transworld identity. It would, of course, be unfortunate if any positive conclusions I come to about thisness—in particular, any conclusions that I might seek to employ in defense of a temporal framework—could only be accepted by those who endorsed transworld identity, but I am prepared to accept the inevitable exclusionary nature of systematic metaphysics. The systems generated from such an endeavor rarely produce a broad range of adherents, necessarily dependent as they are on a complex interweaving of doctrines, some of which will certainly be controversial. In any case, I take the assumption in favor of

transworld identity to be considerably less controversial than some other assumptions one might make in arguing for thisness.¹⁸

2. Temporal Dispersion

Setting aside, then, those two objections, we will move on to the temporal dispersion counterexample to (I/I). Now that we have the general strategy in place for dispersion type arguments against (I/I), it will take less work to set up the one from temporal dispersion: we simply substitute events for material objects, and time for space.

Before explaining how this works, however, I will need to say something about the conception of events I will be working with; since event theory is one of the more contentious areas of metaphysics, and my subsequent arguments will depend upon transparency with respect to my basic conception of what is to be an event.

Nevertheless, I do not want to say anything now that would diminish the scope of those arguments, by, for example, assuming a specific (perhaps contentious) theory of events that turns out to be a necessary condition for accepting my ultimate conclusions. Thus, in order to steer a course between these two dangers, I will be explicit about what I minimally take an event to be, but I will refrain from offering or endorsing a fully worked out theory of events.

Minimally, then, I take an event to be a non-repeatable, concrete particular. Of course, even this characterization of an event is not free from controversy, since some event theorists will claim that, inasmuch as distinct events can be co-located, they cannot be concrete. For my part, I take the concreteness of an event to consist in its being spatio-temporal and part of the causal nexus. Thus, I take this controversy to be grounded in the abstract/concrete distinction itself, rather than in different theories of events. The important point to take from my minimal characterization is that it

¹⁸ In Section II, below, we will consider—and ultimately reject—two such controversial assumptions.

rejects Chisholm's conception of events, according to which events are universal or repeatable entities.¹⁹

We now are in a position to discuss the argument from temporal dispersion. Again, the methodology is much the same as it is in the spatial dispersion case: if we can describe a possible world in which there are temporally dispersed events that share all of their qualitative properties, both relational and non-relational, we will have provided a counterexample to (I/I) with respect to events. What would such a world look like? Hacking, quoting from Ayer, suggests a world consisting of "an infinite series of sounds ... A B C D A B C D A ..., succeeding one another at equal intervals, with no first or last term."²⁰ As I understand this example, we are to think of the terms 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D' as each referring to an event with a particular set of qualitative properties. So, perhaps every occurrence of A has the property 'having pitch A'. For the sake of simplicity, and to avoid having to spell out a more thoroughgoing metaphysics of events, we will assume that the sounds and their properties are the sole constituents of these events. This assumption is in line with Ayer's original, minimal description of the example, as one involving just the sounds themselves, and not, for example, any material objects.²¹

In elucidating and discussing the example, it will be helpful to make use of the type/token distinction. We will say that there are four event types in Ayer's world, where these types are individuated by the set of qualitative properties, both relational and non-relational, that are instantiated by every token of that type. Thus, every occurrence of, for example, A, is a token of the event type 'A'; that is, an occurrence

¹⁹ See Roderick Chisholm, "Events and Propositions," *Nous*, IV, 1 (February, 1970): 15-24.

²⁰ Ian Hacking, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," this JOURNAL, LXXII, 9 (May 8, 1975), p. 254.

²¹ See A.J. Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (New York: St. Martin's, 1954), p. 32.

of an event with the properties ‘having pitch A’, ‘being earlier than a token of event type ‘B’’, ‘being later than a token of event type ‘D’’, etc. It is immaterial, in this context, whether or not one wishes to think of the event types as universals, since the events themselves (i.e. the token occurrences) are certainly not universals, and that is all my minimal conception of events requires. So, by stipulation, each of the token events in this world shares all of its non-relational qualitative properties with all of the other tokens of its type; and the uniformity of the intervals, coupled with there being no first or last event, ensure that they also share all of their relational qualitative properties. Yet clearly, tokens of event type ‘A’, for example, are all distinct events, given that they are temporally dispersed. Thus, (I/I) fails for events in this possible world, and, given the preceding arguments, we may conclude that all events, both possible and actual, instantiate thisness.

II. An Objection to Dispersion Arguments

A. *Hacking*

I think the most powerful objection to the dispersion arguments we have just looked at comes from Hacking.²² His objection, and its application to these arguments, is important enough that we should take the time here to gain a thorough understanding of it; for it will have a significant bearing on the outcome of the investigation.

Hacking objects not only to the dispersion arguments themselves, but to the whole strategy of inferring substantive metaphysical theses (such as the existence and instantiation of thisness) from supposed counterexamples to (I/I). His objection is that such examples can always be redescribed in a way that preserves all of the (non-question begging) truths in the possible world under consideration, but in a way that does not imply that the qualitatively indistinguishable individuals in that world are

²² *Ibid*, pp. 249-56.

distinct. It is important to note here that Hacking is not arguing for or against (I/I), he is simply arguing that the examples that are supposed to settle the matter are underdetermined.

Take the Black world, for example. According to Hacking, we are no less justified in claiming that there is only one sphere in that world, than we are in claiming that there are two.²³ All of the propositions, expressed in purely general terms, that are true of the world under the initial two sphere description, are also true of the world under the one sphere redescription--save the question begging, "There are two spheres". According to Hacking, the latter proposition is question begging because asserting it is paramount to denying the truth of (I/I) without argumentation. Hacking anticipates the reply that "Every sphere is two diameters from a sphere" is neither question begging nor true in the one sphere world, while it certainly is true in the two sphere world. He acknowledges that this reply would be successful if space were absolute, since, on an absolutist view, relations such as 'being two diameters from a sphere' are not basic, but are determined by space itself. But if space is relational, and spatial relations are nothing more than relations between objects, then the totality of objects determines what spatial relations obtain. Thus, if space is relational, then "Every sphere is two diameters from a sphere" is true in the Black world in virtue of the truth of "There are two spheres"—and the latter is a proposition that we have agreed to omit from the Black world on the grounds that it is question begging.

So, according to Hacking, in order to demonstrate that there is a metaphysical difference between a Black world described as having one sphere and one described

²³ I should note that Hacking actually discusses Kant's dispersion argument involving two rain drops abstracted from the actual world, rather than Black's argument from a two sphere world.

as having two spheres, we would first have to argue—on independent grounds—that space is absolute. One might think, of course, that absolute space is ruled out *ex hypothesi* in the Black world; since that world is set up as one in which nothing exists but the spheres (in which case there is no such entity as absolute space). This dismissal of absolute space might be question begging itself, however, so we will interpret Black’s world as one in which no material objects exist but the spheres. Indeed, this must be the interpretation that Hacking makes, as he allows for the possibility of absolute space. Still, he claims that no good independent argument for absolute space is forthcoming; since it implies that a Black world where the spheres move a short distance along the ‘natural’ axis is different from a Black world in which the spheres are stationary. Thus, “One should not commit oneself to such non-differences to show that a two-[sphere] universe differs from a one-[sphere] universe.”²⁴ Furthermore, once we allow that space is relational, then, as others have noted, we can redescribe the Black world as one in which space is curved, such that there is just one sphere that is spatially dispersed from itself; in which case, spatial dispersion does not imply distinctness.²⁵

As we have seen, Hacking also considers the temporal dispersion argument, and he makes essentially the same point as in the spatial dispersion case. We simply redescribe the world containing the series of events ... A B C D A B C D A ... as one that only contains A B C D (i.e., for each event type, there exists only one token). This redescription is legitimate if time is relational, since temporal relations are then relations between events, and are determined not by the times at which they occur, but

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

²⁵ Though Hacking does not make the possibility of space-time curvature explicit in the spatial case, he does in the temporal case, as we shall see below.

by the events themselves. Of course, inasmuch as this redescription implies that there is a first and last event, it is not faithful to the original description. Here, again, however, we import the notion of curved space-time, and claim that the world under the new description is circular: “with D preceding A, which precedes B, which precedes C, which precedes the very same D that precedes A.”²⁶ Thus, though there are only four events under the redescription, the world is still faithful to the original description, since there is no first or last event.

B. Adams' Response

Adams, in responding to Hacking's objection, acknowledges that an acceptance of absolute space-time is too strong an assumption to make in defending dispersion arguments against (I/I).²⁷ He also acknowledges that, in the spatial case, the redescription of the Euclidean Black world as a non-Euclidean one in which space is curved, does not make for a difference in possible worlds. If one were to claim that “a difference in geometries makes, in its own right, a difference in possible worlds”, then one must assume that “what geometry the universe has does not depend on a determination of the number of objects in space.”²⁸ Adams rejects this assumption on intuitive grounds, though he is not explicit about what those grounds are. I take it the thought is this: Just as, in our search for a non-question begging counterexample to (I/I), we were unwilling to assume that relations between objects obtain independently of the number of objects in space (thus the ban on assuming absolute space), we should also deny the same assumption in the case of the universe's geometry. After all, for all we know, whether a world is Euclidean or non-Euclidean might have

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

²⁷ Adams, *op.cit.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

everything to do with how many objects it contains; and if it does, then we will have begged the question against (I/I) in assuming that the two sphere world is different from the one sphere world in virtue of being Euclidean. Thus, given that the above assumptions are questionable, and given that they are required in order to warrant the assertion of “There are two spheres” with respect to the Black world, Hacking is justified in claiming that this assertion is question begging.

In light of Adams’ concessions to Hacking, how does he defend the argument from spatial dispersion? He does so by claiming that it is only plausible to regard the Euclidean and the non-Euclidean descriptions as indicating fundamentally different worlds if one has independent reason to believe that material objects have thisness; which he does not, given that he is “inclined to take a phenomenalist view” of such objects!²⁹ So much for our test for thisness—at least in the case of material objects—since *it* was supposed to give us independent reason for believing that such objects instantiated thisness.

Adams does, however, offer another brief argument in defense of the spatial dispersion counterexample. He considers the possibility of a world with *almost* indiscernible twin spheres. Here we are to imagine one sphere, for example, having a small chemical impurity that the other lacks. Such a world is clearly possible; and if a slight change in the chemical composition of the imperfect globe results in the two globes now being indiscernible, then, unless such changes affect the modal status of the world in question, the Black world should also be possible. I, however, find this argument inconclusive. Hacking’s point was that the possibility of a two sphere Black world hinges upon question begging assumptions (this, in spite of the fact that such a world is conceivable), and that, absent those assumptions, Black worlds

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16n.

underdetermine the number of objects they contain. So, although the very same world with indiscernible twins can be redescribed as a single sphere world, obviously the world with almost indiscernible twins cannot be so redescribed. In order for the two to be the same world, there must be something in the latter world to affect the change that brings about complete indiscernability. But it is hard to see what there could be in a world that, *ex hypothesi*, only contains iron sphere(s), that could possibly affect such a change. Perhaps, however, there need not be any entity that brings the required change about—perhaps it is just a brute change. Even allowing this, however—that is, even allowing that the chemical impurity of the one sphere is inexplicably removed at time *t*, rendering the two spheres indiscernible from *t*—the two spheres would still be discernible with respect to their distinct histories. Thus we are left with a world that is uncontroversially possible, but also one in which the spheres do not share all of their relational qualitative properties (they bear different temporal relations to their earlier states); in which case, it is no longer clear that thisness is required to distinguish them.

Perhaps, however, we should be considering two different possible worlds here, rather than a change in one. We have the world with the chemically impure sphere, which is clearly possible, and the world where the very same sphere is not chemically impure. So, given that the latter differs so slightly from the former, must not the latter also be possible? Again, this strikes me as being inconclusive. Clearly, if (I/I) turns out to be true in the case of material objects, then the world with indiscernible twins is not possible; in which case, small differences in chemical composition can make substantial modal differences. The point is, if one finds Hacking's objection compelling, then an appeal to the possibility of some world

which is not a counterexample to (I/I), no matter how similar it is to the alleged counterexample, is not going to convince one of the possibility of the latter.

Adams does, however, go on to consider Black like worlds inhabited with almost indiscernible twin human beings, and argues that the possibility of these worlds counts more conclusively against (I/I). And I grant that populating the spheres does make the argument from “almost indiscernibility” much more convincing, but it looks like material objects themselves, apart from any relations they might bear to human beings, have not conclusively passed the test for thisness. What about the temporal dispersion argument, can it stand up any better against Hacking’s objection? Or must our conclusions about thisness and events mirror those of thisness and material objects? It is this question to which we will turn next.

III. A Way Forward: Static vs. Dynamic Worlds

We have taken stock of the most serious objection to arguments purporting to establish the existence of thisness, and we have looked at responses to that objection which are, at best, inconclusive (at least when considered independently of the existence of human beings). What, then, is the best way forward for the proponent of thisness? In particular, what is the best way forward for the proponent who suspects thisness might be a fundamental feature of reality—one that is independent of the existence of human beings? In the case of material objects, there appears to be no way forward. Given the reasonable ban on assuming absolute space, and given the equally reasonable ban on the assumption that a difference in geometry makes for a difference in possible worlds, there is no non-question begging way to infer the instantiation of thisness in material objects from spatial dispersion arguments. In the case of events, however, there is a way forward, and the key to recognizing it lies in recognizing an important disanalogy between space and time.

Recall the intuitive reasoning behind rejecting the assumption that a difference in geometry makes for a difference in possible worlds: whether or not a Black world is Euclidean or non-Euclidean may very well depend on whether or not it contains two spheres or only one. Thus we cannot validly infer that a Black world contains two spheres simply from the stipulation that it is Euclidean. What about the temporal case? Are we equally obligated to accept a ban on the assumption that a difference in chronometry makes for a difference in possible worlds? Given the ban on assuming absolute space-time, we cannot claim that the number of events in a temporal series are determined by relations to the times at which they occur; but must we also reject the thought that the number of events in a temporal series might be determined by whether that series is linear or circular? If we take a moment here to reflect on the nature of circular time, I think it will reveal that a difference in chronometry does make for a difference in possible worlds.

Consider some of the necessary characteristics of circular time: First, as we have already noted, there is no first or last event in circular time. It might be contended that this is not a necessary characteristic, but is instead a contingent characteristic stipulated in order to remain faithful to the original description of Ayer's linear repeating time. But if we think of the series of events in circular time as forming "a seamless, closed circle," as Sorabji urges in his discussion of circular time, then it is clear that there is no non-arbitrary way of designating a first or last event.³⁰

Secondly, although there is a sense in which the events in a circular time series continually repeat themselves, strictly speaking, each event occurs only once—given that each event is numerically identical to all of its "repetitions." Again, the type/token distinction can help clarify the distinction between Ayer's linear repeating

³⁰ Richard Sorabji, *Matter, Space, and Motion* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 165.

world and the corresponding circular world: both worlds contain only four event types, but Ayer's world also contains an infinite number of tokens of those types; whereas the circular world only contains four tokens--one corresponding to each type. It is also helpful here to think of events in circular time on analogy with the numbers of a clock face. Just as 12 o'clock only occurs once on a clock face, so each event in circular time only occurs once.³¹

Third, given the first and second characteristics, all events in a circular time series must be equally real. This follows because if each of the four events in the circular time series A B C D occurs once and only once, and there is no beginning to the series, then it is always the case that every event has occurred (which, of course, is just to say that every event *occurs* (tenselessly)). And I know of no more apt criterion for the reality of an event than its occurrence. So when event A is present to a subject, it is also the case that that very same event lies in the subject's past and future, and thus there can be no objective distinction between past, present, and future in circular time. And finally, it follows from all this, that a circular time series is necessarily static. By this, I mean that a circular temporal world is necessarily one in which the B-Theory of time obtains.³²

Now consider linear repeating time. Clearly, it is conceivable that such a time series be static, but it should be just as clear that it is also conceivably (i.e. conceptually possibly) dynamic. Certainly, *actual* linear time is conceivably dynamic—by which I mean that holding actual linear time to be dynamic does not

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For my purposes here, I take the B-Theory of time to denote a static conception of time according to which there is no objective temporal becoming, and according to which past, present, and future events all tenselessly exist. I take the A-Theory to denote a dynamic conception of time according to which temporal becoming (however conceived) and tense are objective features of reality.

involve any logical or conceptual incoherence (*pace* McTaggart³³). This is precisely why there exists such a lively debate between the static and dynamic theorists: there is no way to logically or conceptually demonstrate the falsity of either theory. In contrast, it is my contention that if time were circular, one *could* conceptually demonstrate the falsity of the dynamic theory; since it is conceptually incoherent to claim that i) all events exist tenselessly (as I argued, above, that circular time entails), and ii) tense is an objective feature of reality (as the A-Theory entails). Thus, if actual linear time is conceivably dynamic, then I can see no reason to deny that the repeating linear time of Ayer's world is also conceivably dynamic. After all, the differences between Ayer's world and the actual linear world are not ones that obviously entail the incoherence of the dynamic theory in the former.

As an example of what an A-Theoretic Ayerian world might look like, suppose the linear world that contains the series ... A B C D A B C D A ... is a dynamic one, according to which temporal becoming is an objective feature of reality. Further suppose that on this particular dynamic conception of time, each event causes its successor to come into existence. So, for example, when A begins to occur, the subsequent occurrence of B does not yet exist.³⁴ Now compare this with static

³³ Even if one were to acknowledge the alleged contradiction of the A-series that McTaggart argued for, there is nothing intrinsic to linear time that entails the contradiction. Consider that all sides to the debate agree that presentism is a dynamic theory that is immune to the contradiction, and presentism normally assumes linear time.

³⁴ As will become evident, the line of argument I am pursuing here could be simplified by stipulating a 'moving spotlight' dynamic conception for the linear world, rather than a non-existent future dynamic conception. The former acknowledges the reality of past and future events, but weds this ontology with an objective temporal becoming, that is, the moving spotlight of the present. The benefit of simplicity in this approach, however, is outweighed by a greater cost: the moving spotlight conception

circular time, where A, B, C, and D always exist. We have here a very real difference in possible worlds, given that the two have different ontologies; and, importantly, this difference in ontology is not determined by questionable assumptions about absolute space-time, nor by question begging assumptions that *presuppose* a difference in ontology. On the contrary, the difference in ontology follows *from* the non-question begging descriptions of a world as linear and a world as circular. Given these descriptions, which both parties to the debate acknowledge, our goal has been to determine whether they indicate two different worlds, or whether the linear world can be equally well described as a circular world. What we have discovered is that a circular world is necessarily static, while a repeating linear world is not, and that this difference determines a difference in ontology. So although a difference in geometry does not make for a difference in possible worlds, a difference in chronometry does. And the disanalogy between space and time that underpins this conclusion is that, while we can conceive of time being static or dynamic, we can only conceive of space as being static; thus there is no corresponding ontological distinction to be made when comparing Euclidean and non-Euclidean spatial worlds.³⁵

fails to provide a robust enough distinction between past and future; and it is precisely such a distinction that best supports the claim that there is a metaphysical difference between the circular and linear worlds. For a defence of the view that a dynamic conception of time requires an existent past and non-existent future, see my "Presentism and Ontological Symmetry," *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXIII, 2 (June, 2005): 223-240.

³⁵ I have put the modal claims in the foregoing discussion in terms of conceptual-- rather than metaphysical--possibility and necessity. I take conceptual necessity to be narrower than metaphysical necessity, and strictly logical necessity to be narrower still. These grades of necessity assume a tradition of modality that can be found in Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 2 and Jonathan Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 13-16. It is, in my view, an advantage of this tradition that it allows for the

Let us now consider possible objections to this line of argumentation. First, one might object to the proffered dynamic conception of infinitely repeating time on the grounds that a non-existent future cannot be infinite. But we can certainly conceive of this series continuing to infinity without it being the case that—at the time of an event’s occurrence—any of its successors exist. Whether or not there could be an end to time is an entirely independent question from whether time is static or dynamic. It is not as though a philosopher who endorses a dynamic conception of time and a non-existent future is thereby forced to deny that time continues to infinity.

Secondly, one might argue that a non-existent future implies that the different repetitions of each event have different qualitative properties; in which case, we do not get a counterexample to (I/I).³⁶ The worry would be that a given occurrence of *A*, for example, differs from previous occurrences perhaps because it has different tensed properties, or perhaps because it bears no future directed relations to other events; and if either or both of these differences are qualitative ones, then (I/I) succeeds in differentiating between distinct occurrences of *A*, thus nullifying the justification for postulating thisness. My response to this objection is, first, to note that if the relations that are meant to qualitatively distinguish a present event from its previous occurrences are relations between particular events, then they are not qualitative relations at all and we still have a counterexample to (I/I). Furthermore, the same point can be made in connection with times: relations to particular times cannot qualitatively distinguish between event repetitions. If, however, the properties and

conceptual possibility of both the A-Theory and B-Theory (and so meaningful debate), while also allowing that the theory that actually obtains is metaphysically necessary (i.e. obtains in all logically possible worlds), and that the one that does not actually obtain is metaphysically impossible.

³⁶ Let “repetitions” in this context mean “different token occurrences of the same event type.”

relations that are meant to qualitatively distinguish a present event from its previous occurrences are characterized in purely general terms, then I acknowledge that for my argument to succeed, these properties and relations must fail to distinguish between event repetitions.

First, let us consider whether tensed properties can distinguish between event repetitions. Take, for example, the following propositions, each of which ascribes a tensed property to every event in our dynamic, linear repeating time series:

- (1) Every event is past at some time.
- (2) Every event is present at some time.
- (3) No event is future at any time.

Since (1), (2), and (3) are all true in the world under consideration, their constituent tensed properties fail to differentiate between event repetitions.

What about temporal relations between events in the world under consideration, do they qualitatively distinguish between event repetitions? At this point in the debate, one might just appeal to the nature of a dynamic world and claim that such relations are not basic, but are reducible to tensed properties. This response, however, fails to take into account the possibility that a dynamic world with a lopsided ontology, such as the one currently under consideration, requires that tenseless temporal relations be basic and irreducible to tensed properties.³⁷ Given this possibility, I wish to remain agnostic on whether tensed properties or tenseless temporal relations are more basic. So let us consider

- (4) Every event is earlier than another event at some time.

³⁷ See Michael Tooley, *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). On Tooley's view, though tensed properties and concepts are not basic, the concept of actuality as of a time is basic, thus preserving a dynamic world.

Once again, (4) is a purely general proposition with no particular constituents, and, once again, given that it is true in the world under consideration, it fails to differentiate between events. Now, however, consider

(5) Every present event is earlier than another event.

(5) is false in the stipulated world, and so, if it is purely general, its constituent relation does qualitatively distinguish different event repetitions. But is (5) purely general? On any dynamic view, given the objectivity of temporal becoming, what is present is objective and unique, and so there is only ever one present event.

Therefore, 'present event' denotes a particular event, and thus (5) is not purely general. A similar point can be made against

(6) Every event is earlier than another event at the present time.

Although (6) is false in the world under consideration, it is not purely general, given that, on a dynamic view, the 'present time' is a particular time. Likewise for any proposition that has the 'the present' as a constituent, such as

(7) Every present event is three event occurrences earlier than a similar event.

Again, this proposition, though false in the dynamic, linear repeating world, makes reference to a particular event (the 'present event'), in which case the world under consideration remains a counterexample to (I/I).³⁸ In a dynamic world, it is an objective fact about which particular event is present at which particular time, so

³⁸ I hope it is clear that this proposition is also open to the same objection that Hacking alleged, in the spatial case, against, 'Every sphere is two diameters from another sphere'. That is, it assumes that we can determine the number of events in a temporal series from the relations that hold between times, and this assumes absolute time. Clearly this is not an assumption that the opponent of thisness would be willing to make, since, as we have seen, the spatial and temporal dispersion arguments provide clear cut counterexamples to (I/I) if absolute space-time is assumed.

propositions in such a world cannot contain references to ‘the present’ and remain general. It is important here to be clear about what this claim entails, and what it does not entail. It does not entail that there are not different ways of carving up the temporal boundaries of the present. What it does entail is that whatever way we choose to stipulate those boundaries, and so designate a present event, that way must make some reference to the edge of becoming. On the view under consideration, the edge of becoming is the time t at which events come into existence: prior to t the designated event does not exist, and subsequent to t it does exist. It is the reference to this edge of becoming that makes propositions about the present singular rather than general.

There are no doubt many other potential candidates for propositions that are not true of all events in the dynamic, linear repeating world, but I maintain that any such propositions would fail to be purely general, and thus would be unable to qualitatively distinguish between different tokens of the same event type. I therefore conclude that this linear world does provide a counterexample to (I/I), and that the objection under consideration therefore fails. In light of that failure, we can stand by the claim that a circular world is necessarily static, while a repeating linear world is not, as well as the conclusion that this constitutes a real difference in possible worlds.

Conclusion

We have been trying to discover whether there are thisnesses in the world, and, in particular, whether events instantiate them. Along the way we also looked at arguments for the view that material objects instantiate thisness. What we have learned is that, unless we are willing to endorse absolute space-time, we are unable to successfully argue that material objects, in and of themselves, instantiate thisness. Initially, it also appeared that the same considerations which cast doubt on thisness for

material objects weigh against thisness for events as well. Then, however, we noticed an important disanalogy between space and time: a temporal series might be static or dynamic, but space can only be static. This disanalogy gave us room to assert that temporal dispersion cases are definitive, non-question begging counterexamples to (I/I), even though spatial dispersion cases are not. This is because it is no arbitrary matter how many events exist in the temporal dispersion cases. If one such case is described as a dynamic, linear repeating temporal world with infinitely many events, then one cannot redescribe that very same temporal world as a circular one with only four events; since circular time is necessarily static, and a static temporal world is an altogether different one from a dynamic temporal world. Therefore, given that temporal dispersion cases—even ones not involving human beings—are counterexamples to (I/I), events do have thisness, and their instantiation of thisness is logically and metaphysically independent of the existence of human beings.

If this last conclusion is correct, and the temporal dispersion argument goes through, then am I not being a little pessimistic about the spatial dispersion argument? Perhaps I am simply overstating the disanalogy between space and time, since one might wish to question whether our inability to conceive of dynamic space is really indicative of the actual, underlying ontology, or whether that inability is merely a limitation of our conceptual framework. These questions might encourage us to run the argument in the opposite direction. Instead of diagnosing our success in the temporal dispersion argument, and failure in the spatial dispersion argument, as involving a disanalogy between space and time; we could cite the close *analogy* between space and time, and our success in the temporal dispersion argument, as warrant for believing there must be a successful version of the spatial dispersion argument.

But what would such an argument look like? It would either have to propose a coherent conception of what dynamic space would involve; or it would have to propose some other, particularly spatial—perhaps geometrical—distinction, that was analogous to the particularly temporal distinction of static/dynamic. Furthermore, bear in mind that such a proposal on its own would not suffice to rescue the spatial dispersion argument; since the successful proposal would also have to entail, in a non-question begging way, that there are two spheres, rather than one, in the Black world. As we saw in Section II, assuming absolute space cannot satisfy this condition, nor can stipulating that the Black world is Euclidean. Stipulating that the Ayerian world is dynamic, however, did not have the same question begging consequences in the temporal case; since there is not the analogous concern that a world's being dynamic or not plausibly depends upon the number of events in that world. We therefore would require, in the spatial case, something very similar indeed to the static/dynamic distinction, in order for the spatial dispersion argument to go through. Unless such a distinction is forthcoming—and I am skeptical that it is—then the only way forward for the proponent of thisness in material objects is to take Adams' route, and tie thisness to the existence of human beings. As we have seen, however, in the case of thisness and events, that move is not required.

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