

## Scattered Artifacts

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The watch undergoing repair, its parts spread across a craftsman's table, is the paradigmatic scattered object.<sup>1</sup> The commonsense ontological assumption that artifacts can exist in such a scattered state deserves to be challenged. Believers in the existence of such scattered artifacts have to impute to human intentions an ontological power that they do not have.

Defenders of scattered objects owe us an explanation of what distinguishes the still existing watch whose parts are spread across the repairman's table from qualitatively similar pieces in the craftsman's wastebasket that do not compose a scattered object.<sup>2</sup> It cannot be that the craftsman has been involved in fixing the former because he may also have just as recently labored over the metallic pieces now in the waste bin before abandoning the repair project. It appears then that the difference between the two is that the craftsman has no intention of reassembling the pieces in the waste basket, while he does have plans to fix and put back together the watch on his worktable.

But what if the repairman decides not to reassemble the watch spread across his table? Perhaps the owner has decided not to pay for its repair. Can the mere decision of the craftsman cause the watch to go out of existence? A thought unaccompanied by any action has no power to transform the components of an existing watch into items that are no longer parts of any watch. Nevertheless, it would seem that the reader who believes in the existence of scattered objects is committed to such a result being brought about by a *mere* change of mind.

What else would the repairman have to do to destroy the scattered watch? Must he collect the pieces and throw the entire aggregate into the wastebasket? To counter this

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temporal part of a greater perduring object. This is misleading. While it is true that any particular temporal slice can become an early part of a greater object X if there occur later time slices properly connected to the earlier, the later time slices of X don't *bring into existence* the earlier temporal parts as the reassembly of the watch is alleged to do. The past temporal slices, which may become early parts of X, exist whether or not X ever does. They are objects in their own right. The scattered watch—or more accurately, the temporal part of it that is scattered—*only exists* if the pieces are later reassembled. If they are not reassembled, then there wasn't an earlier scattered object, just as the pieces in the wastebasket didn't compose a scattered object. So four-dimensionalism does not enable us to avoid backward causation or make it seem less bizarre.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps those philosophers who believe, pace Aristotle, that there now exist true propositions about the future won't find it problematic that an existence claim about a present object depends upon what transpires in the future. According to this position, there has always been a truth about whether the repairman will return and reassemble the watch. We may not be able to *know* whether he will or not, so we can't tell whether the pieces in front of us compose a scattered object, but that is just because of our epistemological limitations.

The position that there now exist true propositions about the future is plagued by two well-known problems. One concerns identifying the truthmakers of such propositions and the other difficulty is that such truths would seem to entail an unwelcome fatalism.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps these can be satisfactorily resolved. Fortunately, we can dodge these debates. Whether or not there now exist true propositions about the future, neither position will be of any help in determining the ontological status of the pieces on the worktable. On the one hand, if there is no fact now about the future, then there isn't a fact of the matter about whether the watch exists in the present. That is a very counterintuitive view. And if we take the other view and assume that propositions about the future are now true, there are a pair of obstacles. The first of the troublesome pair is that positing truths about the future doesn't really lessen the implausibility of backward causation. True propositions about the future don't remove the queerness of the future events determining whether or not objects exist in the present. The dilemma is whether there can be backward causation, not whether it is *always* true that a particular later event is the cause of an earlier one. And even if backward causation wasn't a drawback, the second problem is that we still must decide what future event determines whether the pieces spread across the table have ceased to compose an existing watch.

This second problem involves ascertaining the relevant future event, not whether the description of it is always true.

Is the event that of the repairman dying without reassembling the pieces? Why should death be decisive? Imagine that the repairman is immortal. If positing an immortal repairman is too farfetched, consider an immortal watch repair company that survives endless turnover of its mortal employees. Surely if two employees were working on the watch, then the death of just one of those craftsmen would not mean the watch has ceased to exist. And even if the second repairman was not assigned the task of reassembling the watch until the first employee died, this wouldn't mean the watch went out of existence and then came back into existence when it was reassembled. Watches may be able to exist intermittently, but the case just described doesn't seem to warrant such a description. So the possibility of immortal repairmen or immortal repair companies mean we can't just declare that it is a repairman's death or a company's failure that determines whether a watch has not existed the entire time its (ex)-parts were spread out on the repair table.

Readers should not lose sight of the fact that we are trying to distinguish the parts spread across the table from those in the waste bin. We have assumed that the latter no longer compose anything. But what right do readers have to say this if they also believe the status of the watch depends upon what happens later? They don't know whether a repairman will reassemble the parts in the trash in the future. Yet we surely do want to be able to declare such pieces to presently be no longer the parts of a watch. If we can't assert that, it doesn't seem that we in the present will ever be justified in claiming that *any* scattered object has ceased to exist.<sup>6</sup>

If we are right to assume that the parts presently in the garbage don't compose a scattered watch, then even if there were not immortal repairmen and eternal companies, there would still be a problem of determining the relevant event in the *past or present* that distinguishes the scattered watch from the pieces of metal in the garbage that at that time don't compose a watch.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, we ruled out that the repairman must throw the pieces into the trash to destroy the watch because he could have had an understanding with the cleaning staff that things left on the floor were to be treated like those in the trash bin. Since we don't need to wait for the demise of the repairman or his company nor for him to make use of the waste basket in order to declare that a watch is no longer with us, then what event is decisive for determining the ontological status of the scattered pieces? I can think of only one alternative and that has to do with the intentions of the repairman. So we are back to where we started. The watch could cease to exist when the repairman decided not to reassemble it. His mere intention would be ontologically decisive.

Maybe some readers are willing to accept that intentions have such a role, especially given the scarcity of plausible alternative accounts. But such a position is stranger than they realize. We have seen that the repairman destroys the watch when he forms the intention not to reassemble it. Consider what would happen if the repairman immediately changes his mind and decides to reassemble the watch. Assuming that intermittent existence is possible, when does the watch come to be resurrected? One possibility is that it comes back into existence as a scattered object at the moment that the repairman changes his mind. Another possibility is that the watch is not restored until he actually starts working again and comes into physical contact with the pieces. A third possibility is the pieces don't again compose a watch until they are reassembled and functioning as a whole. But since we assumed that the repairman could initially destroy the scattered object without physically interacting with it, then why can't he bring it back into existence without physical contact? Given the assumption governing the destruction of the scattered watch, considerations of symmetry would favor the view that the watch can come to exist again due to a mere change of mind. But the reader should acknowledge that this means that every time the repairman changes his mind, the watch either comes into or out of existence. And what are we to say about a situation in which another person notices the scattered watch and decides to reassemble its pieces at the same time that the first repairman decides to abandon his repair project? Has the watch been saved or are we caught in a contradiction of asserting both that the watch exists and that it does not?

My hope is that the reader will find the assumption about mere intentions determining the watch's destruction to be implausible and thus be spared such questions about the watch's resurrection. It is better that we deny the existence of scattered artifacts than accept that *mere* intentional states have such creative and destructive powers.<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> When I discuss scattered objects in this paper, I have in mind only scattered *artifacts*. And I do not mean to include as a scattered object the fusion of any set of artifacts. The aims of this paper can be met by withholding the label "scattered object" from all but those medium size specimens of dry goods whose parts are not in their normal distance relations. See Richard Cartwright's seminal article for the more liberal view of scattered artifacts "Scattered Objects" in *Analysis and Metaphysics: Essays in Honor of Roderick Chisholm* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975), 153-71.

<sup>2</sup> If someone maintains that the pieces in the wastebasket still compose a scattered object, it is likely that they don't believe anything can cause a scattered object to cease to exist as long as the physical particles that composed have not been annihilated, that is, removed

from the universe. Although I find such a view very implausible, the arguments presented in this paper will not work against such a conception of scattered objects.

<sup>3</sup> This was suggested by an anonymous reviewer at *Analysis*.

<sup>4</sup> This passage was added in response to a query made by Heather Salazar.

<sup>5</sup> On this issue, conversations with Mark Fiocco provided me with a rough sketch of the surrounding philosophical landscape.

<sup>6</sup> Since most readers would grant that the pieces in the trash no longer compose a watch, their position should be that the later reassembly of the pieces in the trash results in either the earlier watch coming back into existence or a duplicate of the earlier watch being made.

<sup>7</sup> Readers may be thinking that there is more than one way for a watch to go out of existence. The watch could be destroyed if its pieces are thrown out or just never reassembled. Perhaps I have given the impression that I consider these two forms of destruction to be incompatible alternatives. That was not my intention. But multiple ways of destruction don't matter. A reader who takes the view that destruction of the watch can occur in both ways will still be plagued by backward causation in the case in which destruction depends upon the pieces being reassembled. And if the reader claims that throwing the pieces in the trash destroys the watch, then there is not an available account of why an agreement with the cleaning staff doesn't entail that the scattered watch is destroyed if the repairman decides to leave the pieces on the floor at the end of the day.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Heather Salazar, Mark Fiocco, and especially Nathan Salmon for helpful discussions about the issues raised in this paper.