

In Defense of Flattened Statues:
The Contingency of Artifactual Kinds

In the familiar tale of the lump and the statue, Lump, a lump of clay, lies on a table at T1. Lump then is molded until Statue, a statue, lies on the table at T2. Statue is then flattened at T3. It seems plausible to suppose that Lump still exists at T3, as it did at T2 and T1. Why should changing the shape of a lump of clay destroy it? It also seems plausible to many to deny that

(1) Statue exists at T3.

A statue seems to many not to be the sort of thing that can be flattened. Since Lump but not Statue exists at T3, Lump has a property—existing at T3—that Statue does not. By the indiscernibility of identicals, Lump and Statue are discernible and therefore not identical. It appears there are two objects on the table at T2—Lump and Statue. This is remarkable because the two objects occupy exactly the same spatial region and have all the same proper parts at the same time—both possibilities that have seemed to many counterintuitive.

While it is implausible to suppose two things can so coincide, the ways of avoiding this conclusion on offer all have their own problems. One alternative is to take persistence to be perdurance, so that Lump and Statue persist by being composites of diverse temporal stages (Heller 1990: 19). On this view, Lump and Statue are distinct objects that coincide only in sharing a temporal stage—a metaphysical consequence no more problematic than the sharing of a leg by conjoined twins. But this view, in addition to involving a commitment to perdurance, also fails to handle cases in which Lump and State exist at all the same times (Gibbard 1975). Another solution involves distinguishing Lump1—the lump that exists at T1—and Lump2—the lump that exists at T2 (Burke 1994 and Rea 2000). Lump2 is a statue, and specifically, it is Statue. But Lump2 does not exist at T3 any more than Statue does, because Lump2, while being both a lump of clay and a

statue, is essentially a statue and not essentially a lump of clay. On this view, an object may belong to different kinds, only one of which determines the object's essential properties. But this account is only as plausible as the highly counterintuitive claim that Lump1 and Lump2 are distinct (Lowe 1995).

It would be interesting to see whether one can avoid commitment to coinciding objects¹ without accepting perdurance or the other unpalatable alternatives. I propose therefore to take another look at the argument.

1. Artifactual Kind Essentialism

Why think (1)—the claim that Statue exists at T3—is false? One thing that might motivate this is the fact that there is no statue on the table at T3. Notice, however, the difference between

(1) Statue exists at T3

and

(1') Statue exists at T3 and is a statue at T3.

Since nothing on the table at T3 is a statue² it is clear that (1') is false. But the falsehood of (1') is compatible with the truth (1). Those who deny the identity of Statue and Lump do so even granted this distinction because many claim that (1) cannot be true unless

(2) There is a statue on the table at T3

is true. The reason (1) has been thought to require the truth of (2) is because it has been assumed that something that is a statue could not possibly fail to be a statue.³ Let's say that F is an essential property of X iff (if and only if), necessarily, if X exists, X is F. The thesis that motivates the rejection of (1) is

¹ By "coinciding objects" and cognate expressions, I mean *distinct* coinciding objects.

² Stipulate that Statue does not exist elsewhere at T3.

³ See Lowe (1995: 172), Burke (1994: 592), and Rea (1995: 545).

Statue Essentialism: Being a statue is an essential property of any object that is a statue.

Granting Statue Essentialism and that no statue exists on the table at T3, it follows that Statue does not exist at T3. Statue Essentialism in turn is most straightforwardly motivated by the thesis that all artifactual kinds are essential⁴:

Strong Artifactual Kind Essentialism: Necessarily, for any artifactual kind K, K is an essential property of any object that is K.

Strong AKE holds that shoes, desks, and statues must be shoes, desks, and statues. By artifactual kinds in general I mean such kinds as being a chair, being a shoe, being a house, and so forth. The connection between artifactual kinds and statues should be obvious: artistic objects seem to be a subset of artifacts. Roughly, both artifacts and works of art are products of human invention intended for human use (Dipert 1993). Since the motivation behind Statue Essentialism concerns artifactual kinds in general, I will concentrate on Strong AKE.

The most prominent recent defender of coincidence is also the most full-throated advocate of Statue Essentialism and Strong AKE. In a series of papers and books (e.g., 1997, 2004, 2007⁵), Lynne Rudder Baker has championed coincidence in large part on the grounds that being a statue is an essential property (36) and that artifactual kinds in general—which she takes to include artistic kinds—are essential (59). Because of her prominence, I focus especially on Baker's view. I believe intuitive as well as theoretical considerations show that Strong AKE is false. I begin with the intuitive case.

⁴ See Baker (2004) and Burke (1994: 592).

⁵ The references to Baker are all to this text.

2. Counterexamples to Strong Artifactual Kind Essentialism

Strong AKE asserts that for any artifactual kind *K* and any object *X*, if *X* is *K*, then necessarily, if *X* exists, *X* is *K*. Strong AKE entails that if something is ever an artifactual *K*, it is always a *K*. My examples will not involve things that are in fact *K* but could have failed to be *K*. They will involve possible objects that are at one time *K* and at another time not *K*.

Suppose *A* owns a T-shirt, *T-Shirt*, that exists at *T1* and over a long period of time changes both intrinsically and in how it is considered by people. Suppose at the end of this process there is a more tattered object that has only one “sleeve” and is not considered or used as an item of clothing. The item that exists at the end of the process—say *T2*—is then considered and used as a washrag. Indeed, at a certain point of the process, the item was altered for the purpose of being used as a washrag. It seems beyond question that there is at the end of the process a washrag. Suppose there is and call it *Washrag*. It is highly intuitive to say that *T-Shirt* was not a washrag at *T1*. At *T1*, *T-Shirt* is neither designed nor used in the ways characteristic of a washrag. And, for parallel reasons, *Washrag* is not a T-shirt at *T2*. But it seems eminently plausible to say that *Washrag* is *T-Shirt*. Suppose the question arose as to how long *A* has owned *Washrag*. It seems clear that *A* acquired *Washrag* when he acquired *T-Shirt*. Or suppose *T-Shirt* was a gift to *A* by *B*, who now wants to know whether *A* still has it. It seems clear that *A* still does own the shirt, although, embarrassingly, it is no longer a T-shirt. So, despite their difference in artifactual properties, *T-Shirt* is *Washrag*. But this is impossible if artifactual kinds are essential. If something is ever a T-shirt it must always be a T-shirt; and if something is ever a washrag it must always be a washrag.

Baker mentions being a bicycle as an example of an essential kind (64). So suppose a bicycle—Bicycle—is sitting on a driveway at T1 and that at T2 another wheel next to the back one is added to it. It seems plausible to suppose that at T2 there is on the driveway a tricycle—call it Tricycle. Tricycle is not a bicycle at T2, and neither is Bicycle a tricycle at T1. Yet it seems that Tricycle is Bicycle. Suppose the question arose as to when A first bought Tricycle. The appropriate answer would seem to be that he bought Tricycle just when he bought Bicycle. Suppose it was B who added the wheel to Bicycle. It would be unreasonable for A to complain that B had destroyed his bicycle.⁶

What might Baker and other supporters of Strong AKE say in response?⁷ Take the bicycle again. The defender of Strong AKE might concede that at T1 there is an object, O1, that is a bicycle (and not a tricycle). And she might concede that at T2, there is an object, O2, that is a tricycle (and not a bicycle). Given Strong AKE, O1 cannot be identical with O2. But the champion of Strong AKE might argue that we believe—correctly in Baker’s view (50)—that there is a bicycle-shaped hunk of metal at T1, call it O1*. And we believe—again correctly, for Baker—that there is a tricycle-shaped hunk of metal at T2, call it O2*. In identifying the bicycle with the tricycle we really

⁶ These cases involve putative intrinsic change in artifacts. There are also cases where something changes its artifactual property just because of how other things are related to it. Suppose A owns a townhouse and that over the years the adjoining townhouses have been torn down, leaving A with a free standing home. Is this a case where A has lost his home? No; it is much more plausible to suppose that A has the same home. It has simply ceased to be a townhouse.

⁷ Rea (2000: 184-185) discusses an analogous example of a statue that is used as a pillar. Should we say it is essentially a statue, essentially a pillar, or essentially something else? He says it would not be “terribly implausible” to claim either that “one way to destroy a statue is simply to use it as a pillar” or that “no one really knows what the essential properties of many ordinary artifacts are” (*ibid.*: 185). But it is terribly implausible to believe that by merely moving something while thinking of it as having a certain purpose—i.e., using it—one could destroy an object. And since the same problems arise with respect to what can be done to any artifact, no artifact is immune to these doubts concerning its essence. Therefore there is the same reason for skepticism about every artifact’s essence. But if we don’t know the essential properties of any artifact, why believe Strong AKE at all? (Note that although Rea expresses sympathy for the doctrine that artifactual kinds are essential at least in some cases—ordinary picket fences are “probably” essentially fences (2002: 608)—he does not commit himself to Strong AKE.)

mean to be identifying O1* with O2*, not O1 with O2. Since hunks of metal can survive the acquisition of a wheel, the intuition is well-founded but poorly expressed.

This explanation does not require attributing to the naïve the belief that hunks of metal are distinct from bicycles, only that there are hunks of metal in the vicinity of bicycles. Let's concede the latter. The example can be saved if we ensure that our attention is directed toward the thing that is an artifact. Suppose A entrusts B with Bicycle, A's treasured family heirloom. While emphasizing the importance of Bicycle to her, A allows that B may modify Bicycle, if B thinks it very appropriate, in a way that is consistent with preserving its existence. A also emphasizes the unimportance of the material of which Bicycle is made. Only Bicycle itself matters. B keeps Bicycle for years, during which time A gets married and has children. B takes it upon herself to add a third wheel to Bicycle to make it more useful for A's growing family. At this point, A could not reasonably complain that B had not done her job. Adding the wheel has not destroyed Bicycle. And there seems no danger in this case of A's confusing Bicycle with its hunk of metal.

Or suppose that the metal of which Bicycle is made rusts very quickly—over a few seconds, say—so that the object at the end of the process contains none of the metal contained at the beginning. Suppose the third wheel is added during this very brief rusting process. At the end of the process, again, it seems there is a tricycle. And again it seems that this tricycle, Tricycle, is Bicycle. There is no question here that we are mistakenly led to identify Bicycle and Tricycle because of the identity of their respective hunks of metal. The hunks of metal in this case are evidently distinct.

So Strong AKE is false. But even if artifactual kinds are not essential, there is a weaker principle in the vicinity that would guarantee that Statue does not exist at T3:

Weak Artifactual Kind Essentialism: Necessarily, for all X and artifactual kinds K, if X is K, then it is impossible that X exists and is not some artifactual kind.

According to Weak AKE, statues, shoes, and desks need not be statues, shoes, and desks, but they must be some kind of artifact. Since the flattened object at T3 does not exemplify any artifactual kind, Weak AKE would still guarantee the falsity of (1). But Weak AKE is also false, and in the next section I offer a theoretical reason to reject it.⁸

3. A Theoretical Argument against Weak AKE

Briefly put, the problem with Weak AKE is that it is not neutral on some highly controversial metaphysical questions.⁹ All things being equal, it would be best to have a view of artifacts that was neutral on such questions. Therefore, all things being equal, it would be best to avoid Weak AKE.

What is an artifact? What makes something an artifact for Baker is the fact that it is designed and produced in a certain way. Specifically, according to Baker, X is an artifact iff: (i) X is produced and designed by some authors; (ii) X's primary kind (its function) is determined in part by the intentions of its authors; (iii) X's existence depends on the intentions of its authors and the execution of those intentions; and (iv) X is constituted by an aggregate¹⁰ that the authors have arranged or selected to serve the function entailed by X's primary kind (52-53). K is X's primary kind iff X is K and X could not exist without being K¹¹ (33-34). Primary kinds therefore are essential

⁸ Notice that since Strong AKE implies Weak AKE, the theoretical argument against the latter is also a reason to reject the former.

⁹ I also believe the answers it gives to these questions are wrong, but I don't have the space to argue that here.

¹⁰ According to Baker, aggregates are complex objects that obey an unrestricted principle of collection: for any objects at all, there is something that is the aggregate of those objects (50). There is, for example, the aggregate made up of all the cells in my body right now.

¹¹ This is inexact. Baker's precise definition of primary kind appeals to the distinction between derivative and non-derivative properties (166-170). But this latter distinction makes no difference for the following argument.

properties. And the primary kind of an artifact is its “proper function – what it was designed to do, the purpose for which it was produced” (52). So a boat, for example, is something constructed from some pieces of wood by one or more individuals for the essential purpose of providing aquatic transportation. Notice that this view implies Weak AKE. Suppose X is an artifact. By (ii), X has some function essentially. Could X have its function without being an artifact? X’s function is “determined by the intentions of its designer and/or producer” (52). So X is essentially produced in accordance with some intentions. That means X satisfies (i) and (iii) as well. Since the production of something with an artifactual function must involve the arrangement of some material objects, X satisfies (iv), also. In other words, as required by Weak AKE, X is essentially an artifact.

On Baker’s view the essential properties of an artifact are determined¹² by its function, which is in turn determined by its implemented design. There are two elements of designed production.¹³ Producing in accordance with an intended design is something only conscious beings do. And producing in accordance with a design is a causal relationship to an object. Baker’s theory has the problematic consequence that artifacts have certain causal properties essentially and that they are essentially connected to conscious beings.¹⁴

¹² Baker says artifactual primary kinds are determined “in part” by the intentions of the designers. She does not say what else might contribute. But it does not matter for my purposes, since my complaint applies as long as design is at least a necessary condition for an artifact’s primary kind.

¹³ It is possible to design something without producing it. The relevant relation here is not design in that sense but producing something in accordance with a design, which does require an object be produced.

¹⁴ Note the difference between (1) artifacts are objects that necessarily are designed in a certain way and (2) necessarily, artifacts are objects that are designed in a certain way. The essentialist holds (1). I return to this point in the penultimate paragraph.

According to Baker, an artifact X has its function essentially. The function of X is determined by two things: the intentions of its designers and the efficacious execution of those intentions in the production of X. Therefore, an artifact X has the essential property of being efficaciously produced in accordance with some design intentions. So an artifact X cannot exist without being produced in accordance with some intentions. Therefore, X cannot exist without being produced.

This is the first contentious consequence of Weak AKE as manifested in Baker's view. There is an impressive philosophical tradition going back to David Hume that holds that causal relations are contingent. One aspect of this tradition holds that it is metaphysically possible for an object to begin to exist without a cause. But artifacts, according to Baker, could not begin to exist without a cause.¹⁵ Nor would it be plausible to construe the spirit of the tradition as holding only that at least *some* objects can begin to exist without a cause. The sorts of considerations that imply the metaphysical possibility of uncaused existence—the conceivability of something's existing uncaused, for example—appeal to features of the nature of objects as such.

Another aspect of the tradition holds that any object that is caused by something of type F could have been caused by something of some other kind. The thunderstorm was caused by a low-pressure system, but it seems possible that it would have been caused in some dramatically different way. Since artifacts for Baker are essentially produced by designers, they could not have existed and been produced in any other way. Even if causal laws are necessary—as on some versions of necessitarianism (see

¹⁵ An advocate of Weak AKE could avoid this implication by separating something's being an artifact from any connection with some way of being produced. But even "found" artifacts—a piece of driftwood used as a coffee table, for example—seem to require manipulation in order to be artifacts. The piece of driftwood used as a coffee table is only a coffee table because it is brushed off and placed in a living room.

Bird 2004)—this is no comfort to Baker. Causal laws relate properties or states of affairs: something's being F causes something's being G. If causation is a relation between properties, then it may be that causal laws are necessary. But the necessity to which Baker is committed involves a connection between properties and objects, not properties and properties. Objects that are artifacts are supposed to be necessarily caused only by beings that have the property of being conscious.

Baker's account also requires that artifacts are essentially produced by *designers*, that is, conscious beings of certain kinds. Therefore, those objects that are artifacts could not have existed in the absence of consciousness. They are, in other words, metaphysically dependent on the mind.¹⁶ Baker concedes that artifacts are mind-dependent in the sense of existing only if there are minds, and that other objects are mind-independent in the sense of not requiring minds, but doubts the "philosophical significance" of the distinction (20). But the main reason she doubts the significance of this distinction is that artifacts come out—counterintuitively—on the same side as dreams and afterimages (20). The problematic aspect of Baker's account that makes them mind-dependent in the sense above is just the claim that they are *essentially* produced by designers. Note the difference between

De Re Mind-Dependence: Necessarily, for all X, if X is an artifact, X is necessarily such that if it exists it is produced by some designers

and

¹⁶ An advocate of Weak AKE could avoid this consequence by denying that being an artifact has any essential connection with consciousness. Rea may be flirting with this possibility when he says that something "perfectly resembling an ordinary hammer" not produced for the purpose of hammering or used for hammering would still be a hammer (2000: 192). (The disconnection from consciousness is not complete since the so-called hammer is produced by an "artist.") But this just seems misguided. If something perfectly resembling an ordinary hammer were found on Mars, but without any agent who produced or used it for the purpose of hammering, this would not show there were artifacts on Mars.

De Dicto Mind-Dependence: Necessarily, for all X, if X is an artifact, then X is produced by some designers

While it is likely that nothing would be an artifact in a world without conscious beings, it is much less plausible to suppose that nothing that is an artifact could exist in any world without conscious beings. There is evidence that Baker makes just this mistake of confusing De Dicto and De Re Mind-Dependence. Illustrating the supposed mind-dependent character of artifacts, Baker says “Nothing would be a carburetor in a world without intentional activity” (19). But this is most naturally understood to illustrate De Dicto Mind-Dependence, not De Re.¹⁷

In conclusion, since they are false, neither Weak or Strong AKE can be used to support a crucial premise in the argument for coinciding objects. This leaves open the possibility that the lump and the statue and other such pairs are identical—a possibility I believe to be actual, but which I cannot pursue here.

¹⁷ And in illustrating the concept of an object that “could not exist in a world lacking beings with beliefs, desires, and intentions,” (11) Baker says “If in outer space, particles were the only existing things, there would be no automobile” (12). To put the point somewhat differently, if true this most straightforwardly shows that the property of being an automobile requires intentional beings, not that the objects that are automobiles do.

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