

The Constitution Theory of Intention-Dependent Objects and the Problem of Ontological Relativism

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ABSTRACT: According to Lynne Rudder Baker's constitution theory, all artworks and artifacts are constituted intention-dependent (ID) objects which are irreducibly real and cannot be reduced to the collections of particles which make them up. The constitution theory of ID objects is based on Baker's theory of practical realism according to which our everyday life-world is a resource for metaphysics. This paper will focus on the problem of ontological relativism entailed by the constitution theory of intention-dependent objects. I will argue, by way of an example, that the constitution theory of intention-dependent objects entails ontological relativism. That is because everyday life worlds vary from culture to culture. Finally, I examine if there is any possibility for the constitution theorist to avoid the problem of ontological relativism. I discuss Baker's idea of a thin commonsense framework.

KEYWORDS: Constitution – everyday life-world – intention-dependent objects – ontological relativism – practical realism.

1. Introduction

Lynne Rudder Baker's constitution view is a metaphysical theory of everyday objects. Ontologically speaking, the constituted object could not be reduced to its constituter. Both the constituted object and the constituter are individual objects individuated by their different primary-kind properties which

are described by substance sortals (cf. Baker 1997, 602). Baker's paradigmatic example of a constituted object is Michelangelo's *David* made from a piece of marble. *David* is an irreducible real entity which is neither identical to the marble piece (hereafter as Piece) nor is independent of it (see Baker 1999, 145-147; and Baker 2000, 33). According to Baker, whenever the constituting object x (e.g. Piece) with its primary-kind property F (e.g. being a marble piece) is in certain circumstances required for instantiating the constituted object y (e.g. *David*) with its primary-kind property G (being a statue) the constituted object will come into existence. Baker has dubbed those certain circumstances as "G-favorable circumstances". For example, if anything that has 'being a piece of marble' as its primary-kind property is presented as a three-dimensional figure in an art-world, given a title, and put on display at t , then there is something that has 'being a statue' as its primary-kind property which is spatially coincident with the piece of marble at t . As Baker explains, the constitution view can be employed in order to explain the ontological status of two groups of objects; "intention-dependent objects," or "ID objects" and "non-intention-dependent objects" or "non-ID objects".¹ Everyday objects, artworks and artifacts are ID objects while a piece of stone which is constituted by a sum of molecules is a non-ID object (see Baker 2000, 35).

Accepting Leibniz's Law, Baker states that there is a property we can use to differentiate between *David* and Piece. Therefore, they are not identical (see Baker 2000, 31; and Baker 1997, 601). *David* has the property of being a statue at any possible world and at any time, while Piece does not have such a property. There could be a world in which there is no concept of art. In such a world Piece exists but *David* does not. So, there is a possible world in which Piece does not have the property of being a statue. Piece could have existed without having the property of being a statue while *David* could not since Piece could have existed in a world in which there is no convention and practice required for instantiating art-works (cf. Baker 2000, 30). *David* has the relational property of being related to an art-world or artist's intention in virtue of which it exists whereas Piece does not have this kind of relational property; it exists in virtue of its properties which are not the same as *David*'s

¹ In her earlier works, like *Persons and Bodies*, Baker uses the expression "intentional object" to refer to ID objects. But in her other book, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, she employs the "intention-dependent object" to refer to this kind of objects. See Baker (2009, 11, footnote 13).

properties (cf. Baker 2000, 39). A consequence of this idea of difference is that the existence of some entities depends on their relational properties (see Baker 1997, 603; and 2009a, 151). For every x and y if they do not have the same relational properties they do not belong to the same kind (cf. Baker 1997, 605). Thus, by virtue of relations to the artist's intention, the art-world or the history of the medium, an entity can be constituted. Baker labels entities like *David* as "Intention-dependent" objects. An ID object then is an object which exists in virtue of its relational properties which involve intentions (see Baker 2009, 10). As another example, consider one of the Dadaistic artworks made by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) dubbed *Fountain*. It was an ordinary porcelain urinal exhibited in 1917. It constituted a new entity when hung on a wall in an art gallery, and given a title.

According to the constitution view, constituting an ID object requires a mind. When x is in a world in which there is no mind x cannot constitute any ID object. Although the presence of a mind is a necessary condition for constituting of an ID object, it is not sufficient. In order to constitute any kind of ID object the constituting object must be intended by a mind to constitute that kind of ID object, and the mind must be in a world – or in a society – that has the situation needed for constituting that kind of ID object (see Baker 1997, 602). Hence, in regards to constituting a kind of ID object y , whenever a constituting object x is intended by a mind which is in a world – or in a society (in our actual world) – without the special conventions and practices required for instantiating that kind of ID object y , the constituting object x would have existed and there will not be any ID object. Piece in a context without conventions and practices required to produce artworks is just a piece of marble.

To sum up, the necessary and sufficient conditions for constituting an ID object are: (1) a mind; (2) a world – or a society (in our actual world) – with the conventions and practices required for instantiating that kind of constituted object; (3) the relation involving intention between the mind and the constituting object both of which are in that world; and (4) something of a suitable primary kind. In regards to constituting an ID object the existence of special conventions and practices are as necessary as the existence of a mind. Therefore, we can call this kind of object a context-dependent object.

Baker's theory of ID object depends on her theory of Practical Realism according to which what makes something the thing that it is, is determined by what it does in relation to other things and intrinsic properties have no

special authority to determine the nature of a thing. The gist of practical realism denies the idea that we must take metaphysics to be exclusively informed by science. According to the reductionist view in metaphysics, everyday objects are not irreducibly real, and we can reduce the ontological status of the ordinary things to the ontological status of particles and their sums (cf. Baker 2009, 10). By contrast, practical realism holds that ordinary objects (e.g. hammers, cars, tables, and etc.) are irreducibly real. According to practical realism, our everyday life-world is a resource for metaphysics (see Baker 2000, 22, 24; and 2009, 15). The reason for the epistemic legitimacy of practice-based claims goes back to the fact that they are used successfully in practice. Although *David* and *Piece* are intrinsically the same and they have the same fundamental particles – atoms or quarks – they differ in their relational properties, so they are not identical.

One problem with this theory arises when we consider the fact that the everyday life-world varies from culture to culture. If there is no “one and the same everyday life-world” for all human beings, the constitution theory and practical realism entail ontological relativism. In this article, by way of a factual counterexample, I will argue that the constitution view of ID objects entails ontological relativism unless we maintain that the theory can only be used to explain the ontological status of objects which exist in the part of our everyday life-world which is common to all cultures and societies. By “ontological relativism” I mean the view that the existence of some entities depends on cultural frameworks such that it is possible that an entity x exists at time t for a group of people with a special cultural framework C and at the same time it does not exist for the other group of people whose cultural frameworks are different with C .

2. Intention-dependent objects and the problem of ontological relativism

According to the constitution theory, our everyday-life world is the foundation for metaphysics. Now we can ask “What if the everyday life-world varies from culture to culture?” In fact, there are some examples showing that the everyday life-world varies from culture to culture. In what follows, I will discuss an example showing that the constitution theory entails ontological relativism where two different life-worlds clash.

Suppose that in a museum there is a glass box with an exhibit inside which is a marble Lord Krishna statue from the 12th century. This statue is an idol for Hindu believers and at the same time it belongs to India's history and civilization. Imagine that at time t the statue is considered by a Hindu believer and a serious Christian believer simultaneously. The piece of marble constitutes the statue which in turn constitutes an idol for the Hindu believer. For the Christian, however, the piece of marble constitutes only the statue and there is no idol constituted by the statue. Here we have a case of ontological relativism.

To see this, firstly, note that Krishna statues are worshipped by Hindu believers as manifestations of a Hindu God and they worship them. According to Baker, the Krishna statue constitutes an idol at t for the Hindu believer. Following Baker, we can say that if the idol (the Lord Krishna) and the statue are identical, then, by a version of Leibniz's law, there would be no property borne by the statue but not borne by the idol and no property borne by the idol but not borne by the statue, but the idol has a property – the property of being essentially an idol that the statue lacks. That is because, the statue could have existed in a society or world without the conventions and practices required for producing sacred things and idols while the idol could not exist without these conventions and practices. The statue could have existed in a society as an artwork and not as a sacred object. The statue is not essentially an idol and the Lord Krishna is essentially an idol. They differ in their modal properties, hence they are not identical.

- (a) The Lord Krishna is essentially an idol
 - (b) The Krishna statue is not essentially an idol
- ∴ The Krishna statue \neq The Lord Krishna

According to Baker, a statue and an idol are two primary kinds, since their primary-kind properties are different with each other. This difference rests on the fact that the causal properties of an idol are different from the causal properties of a statue. If the idol (the Lord Krishna) and the statue are identical, then, according to Baker, their causal properties must be the same. In order to understand Baker's idea of the causal properties of the constituted objects consider an example given by her where a piece of stone constitutes a monument (see Baker 2000, 33). According to Baker, ontologically speaking, the constituted object – the monument – could not be reduced to the con-

stituting object – the piece of stone – because the causal properties of the constituted objects are irreducible to the causal properties of the constituter. Similarly, the causal properties of the idol are irreducible to the causal properties of the statue. The causal property of the idol is that it causes the Hindu believers take this object as a manifestation of their god and they worship it while the statue lacks those causal properties. It causes that the sense of the sacred arises when a Hindu believer stands in a relation with it.

The statue is in idol-favourable circumstances and based on the constitution theory necessarily the idol is constituted. The necessary and sufficient conditions for constituting the idol are met; (1) there is a mind; (2) the mind is in a society with Hindu beliefs (required conventions and practices); (3) the mind stands in a relation with the Krishna statue while the relation involves intentionality and both the statue and the mind are in the same world and the mind takes this statue as the idol; (4) we know that the statue is something of a suitable primary kind.

Now, secondly, consider that the serious Christian believer stands in front of the statue. The mind of the Christian believer stands in relation with the statue while the relation involves intentionality. The piece of marble constitutes the statue which does not, for him, constitute the idol. The Christian believer may be aware of the fact that the statue is an idol for the Hindu believers but, obviously, he is not ready to accept that there exists a real thing dubbed the Lord Krishna. This is because he does not behave as if the statue is an idol. He does not worship the statue. In fact, for the Christian believer the necessary and sufficient conditions for constituting an idol are not met.

As shown, intention-dependent objects are context-dependent objects, ontologically depending on an everyday life-world. In this example, two different contexts – two different everyday life-worlds – clash. On the basis of the constitution theory, a real thing exists for the Hindu believer at t which does not exist for the Christian believer at the same time. Thus ontological relativism follows.

According to Baker's view, the identity of a constituter is determined on the basis of the identity of the constituted object. That is because the constitution relation is a unity relation (cf. Baker 2000, 46). Baker state that constitution is unity without identity. She writes:

For when x constitutes y , there is a unitary thing – y , as constituted by x ...
As long as x constitutes y , x has no independent existence... During the

period that x constitutes y the identity of “the thing” – y , as constituted by x – is determined by the identity of y . (Baker 2000, 46)

For example, when we face the Lord Krishna we face a unified individual thing which is an idol-constituted-by-a-Krishna statue (cf. Baker 2009, 166). Baker again: “As long as x constitutes y , x has no independent existence” (Baker 2000, 46). In this example, at time t , the identity of the piece of marble is determined by the identity of the idol for the Hindu believer while the identity of the piece of marble is determined based on the statue for the Christian believer. Baker (2000, 33) writes: “The identity of the constituting thing is submerged in the identity of what it constitutes.” Now the question is which one of the two constituted objects the identity of piece of marble will submerge in. Is this object – the thing which both Hindu believer and Christian believer encounter – a statue or an idol? It is noteworthy that, ontologically speaking, the constituted object is more important than the constituting object. “The constituted thing has ontological priority over its constituter” (Baker 2009, 166). This is because the constituted object has greater causal powers. Baker again:

If we suppose that the greater a thing’s causal powers, the greater its ontological significance, then a constituted thing ontologically more significant than what constitutes it. If x constitutes y , then y has all the causal powers that x has plus some new kinds of causal powers of its own. (Baker 2000, 25)

Moreover, according to Baker (2009), constitution is a transitive relation. Therefore, what exist for Hindu believer is an idol which encompasses the identities of the Krishna statue and the piece of marble and what exists for Christian believer is just a statue which encompasses the identity of the piece of marble. So, in regards to our question mentioned above we will have two different answers. “What is this?” The Hindu believer says “This is the Lord Krishna” and the Christian believer says “This is the Krishna statue”. The Lord Krishna does not exist for the Christian believer. Is this object (ultimately) a statue or an idol? Given Baker’s view about what ultimately determines the identity of an object, we will have different answers ‘a statue’ and ‘an idol.’

One way to avoid the problem, based on the constitution theory, might be to maintain that the idol really exists but the Christian believer is not aware of its existence. Such a claim might be made about the existence of artworks.

For example, it is quite possible that someone who is not familiar with the history of art and Dadaism cannot recognize that the urinal – *Fountain* – is an artwork, but once he knows about Dadaism he will be able to recognize the *Fountain* as a real constituted entity. Baker states:

If you went into a gallery of the Louvre that is lined with works by Antonio Canova and you identified them only as pieces of marble, you would be missing what is there. The constituted thing has ontological priority over its constituter. (Baker 2009, 166)

Can we say that in our example the Christian believer is missing something real? The answer is no. For Christian believer idol does not exist, even if he is well aware of the fact that the Hindu believers worship this object and they take it as an idol. As long as the Christian believer believes in Christian doctrines it is definitely not the case that there exists a real thing called the idol.

This case differs from the case of Duchamp's *Fountain*. This is because if you describe Dadaism to a person who cannot recognize *Fountain* as an artwork the person would be able to discern the artwork. But the Christian believer here is aware of Hindu beliefs. In fact, the difference is about the fact that in the case of *Fountain* the person is not aware of the conventions and practices based on which an ID object is constituted while in this case the Christian denies the existence of such conventions and practices as real things. If he accepts the conventions and practices based on which the idol is constituted, then he has already converted to Hinduism. So, from a Christian point of view the idol does not exist even if the Christian is well aware of Hindu's beliefs. In other words, in Christian's context there isn't a necessary condition which is required to constitute the idol. The Christian believer might show respect to this object if he knows that this is a sacred object for a group of people, but he does not worship the statue.

Thus, the constitution theory of ID object entails the problem of ontological relativism where the ID objects are religious objects. As another example, imagine that in a museum there is a glass box with an exhibit inside which is an upside down cross from the 14th century. The cross is an evil object for serious Catholic believers and at the same it belongs to western history and civilization. If at time t the cross is considered by a Hindu believer and a serious Catholic believer simultaneously, then for the Catholic believer the piece of metal constitutes the cross which in turn constitutes a demonized object (with its causal powers). On the other hand, however at the same time,

for the Hindu-believer the piece of metal constitutes only the cross and there is no demonized object that it constitutes.

But what is the importance of knowing that constitution theory of ID objects entails ontological relativism? Besides the fact that so far there has been no discussion on this consequence of the constitution theory of ID objects in the literature, I believe there is more to discuss. Here, I do not intend to argue that any theory in metaphysics which implies ontological relativism must be avoided. One might accept the idea that the theory of ID entities entails ontological relativism, yet still believes in the constitution theory of ID entities as a sound theory in metaphysics. However, if one accepts the constitution theory as a sound theory while the theory entails ontological relativism, another problem arises.

Ontological relativism follows that there is no universal reality for all human beings, that is, there are different *realities*. According to the constitution theory, cultures are resources for reality. Hence, cultural relativism entails the relativity of reality. Based on the constitution theory of ID objects people with various cultures do not have one and the same reality to share. Hence, no one is in a situation to make any strict ontological judgment about the existence of entities in a culture to which she does not belong. In contrast to Baker, if someone who does not belong to western culture goes into a gallery of the Louvre that is lined with works by Antonio Canova and she identifies them only as pieces of marble, she would *not* be missing what is there. The constitution theory of ID objects entails that the reality for a person (A) whose culture is different with person B's culture can be inaccessible for person B. Consequently, the possibility of communication or interaction becomes blocked.

However, on the other hand, in our everyday life people from various cultures communicate with each other. This communication is possible only on the basis of the assumption that reality is one and the same for all human beings. At least, the reality for a person (A) whose culture is different with another person's culture (B) can be accessible for person (B). As mentioned, the constitution theory of ID objects has been based on the theory of practical realism which is, in turn, based on our everyday life experiences. According to practical realism, our everyday life-world is a resource for reality.

Now we can see the problem of ontological relativism for the constitution theory of ID objects. The theory entails that the reality for a person (A) can be inaccessible for another person (B) whose culture is different with the first

person (A). While the constitution theory of ID entities has been grounded on our experiences of everyday life, it entails a consequence that is at odds with our experiences of everyday life.

3. A suggestion to avoid the problem of ontological relativism

It seems that in order to avoid the relativism problem, constitution theorist can ground ontology only in what is common to all everyday life-worlds. If the ID objects are ontologically dependent on an everyday life-world, and if the everyday life-world varies from culture to culture, then the only way to avoid the problem of ontological relativism is to maintain that the constitution theory of ID objects can only be applied to a part of each everyday life-world which is common to all different cultures. If all different everyday life-worlds overlap each other there might be an area which is common to all culture. If the ID objects, ontologically speaking, depend on such a common area, then the problem of the ontological realism would be removed.

Nevertheless, the above suggestion would only be helpful on the basis of the idea that necessarily for all human cultures there is a common area. Therefore, the ontological problem will be removed if and only if we maintain two conditions. First, necessarily for all human life-worlds there is a common area. Second, the constitution theory of ID objects can only be applied on the common area.

If we look to Baker's (1995), we see that she has discussed just such an idea of such a common realm to all everyday life-worlds, though she has not argued that necessarily all cultures have such a common area. Talking of the concepts of thick and thin commonsense frameworks, she writes:

I use the term 'commonsense framework' to refer to any set of concepts expressed by non-logical terms occurring in sentences understood by almost everybody in a linguistic community. The 'commonsense conception' refers to the sentences containing terms expressing those concepts. (Baker 1995, 221)

The commonsense conception reflects the everyday life-world. Everybody learns the commonsense conception of his culture when he learns the natural language of his community (cf. Baker 1995, 221). This is because the everyday life world is embodied in natural language (see Baker 1995, 223).

According to practical realism, different cultures have different thick conceptions of common sense. But there is a commonsense framework in a thin sense which does not vary from culture to culture. It provides a common background for all cultures which includes concepts of medium-sized objects. Baker (1995, 222) writes: “In the broadest terms, the thin commonsense framework is not restricted to some particular outlook that may vary from culture to culture. Rather, it provides a common background against which differences among cultures become visible.” If, as Baker says, there is a thin conception of common sense framework for all human beings, then we can state that the constitution theory can avoid the problem of ontological relativism if we maintain that the constitution view of ID objects is about the part of everyday life-world of each culture which can be reflected in the thin commonsense framework. But, then, the constitution theorist may face another problem. How can she recognize which part of an everyday life-world is the part that can be reflected in the thin conception of commonsense framework? Is there any possibility to provide a criterion to enable us to know that the constitution theory is about which part of our everyday life-world? I think this is a hard task to do for the constitution theorist, if she wants to avoid the problem of ontological relativism.

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