

Constituted Simples?

Jens Johansson

Many philosophers maintain that two (or more) material objects can occupy the same place at the same time. In such cases, they say, one of the objects “constitutes” the other without being identical to it. For instance, lumps of marble constitute statues; pieces of plastic constitute driver’s licenses; our bodies constitute us. The numerical distinctness is secured by difference in modal properties.

This view may appear to lead to an absurdity. Suppose a statue weighs 150 pounds. So does the lump of marble with which it coincides. If they are numerically distinct, we should expect the scale to read 300 when they are both on it. But it reads 150. There is a common and straightforward response to this charge, however (e.g. Lowe 2003, 156). According to constitutionalism, statue and lump have the same proper parts (at least “at one level of decomposition”). So it is no stranger that the scale reads 150 when they are both on it than that the statue’s top-half does not contribute any weight to the scale in addition to what the statue has already provided. No shared part should be counted more than once.

Constitutionalists tend to say that, whereas the piece of marble could have existed without ever coinciding with an artwork, the statue is *essentially* an artwork. The view, then, is a competitor to, for instance, (a) the thesis that the statue is only contingently a work of art and (b) the thesis that, though the statue is essentially a work of art, it is not constituted: even if the artist fashioned the statue from the whole of a piece of marble, the piece of marble ceased to exist when the statue came into existence (Burke 1994).

Here is a novel argument against this view.

A mereological simple—an object without proper parts—could be an artwork. For example, suppose that an artist has a sizable lump in front of him. “I’d like to offer the world a symbol of the littleness of everything,” he thinks. To this end, he very carefully carves out a simple. He takes the simple to Tate Modern, where it is displayed to the public (presumably visible only through a very sophisticated microscope).¹ As philosophers have often pointed out,² something is an artwork by virtue of the artist’s or others’ attitudes to it. Surely the artist and others can have the relevant attitudes to this object, so that it is a work of art, in spite of its unimpressive size. However, this seems to be an *unconstituted* work of art, for it is hard to see how a simple could be constituted by another simple (and what else would constitute it?).

In particular, if we hold that a simple can be constituted by another simple, the “non-additivity” charge, applied to this kind of case, cannot be answered in the straightforward way noted above. Suppose the putatively constituting simple weighs 0.000000000...0001 pounds; so does the putatively constituted simple (the artwork). Note that if there really were two simples here, they would have no parts in common. For none of them has any proper parts; moreover, no object can be an improper part of any other object. Now, if we put on the scale two material objects that do not have any parts in common, each of which weighs 0.000000000...0001 pounds, then the scale should read 0.000000000...0002. It doesn’t; it reads 0.000000000...0001. This indicates that only one simple was put on the scale, not two. Identity, not constitution.

There are two ways in which the constitutionalist can resist this conclusion. One possibility is to appeal to Ned Markosian’s “MaxCon” account of material simples, according to which simples are made of maximally continuous *stuff* (e.g. Markosian 2004). The constitutionalist could say that since the two simples are made of the very *same* stuff, they weigh no more together than the constituting simple did before it came to constitute the artwork. This solution has clear similarities to the one already noted. However, while the MaxCon view of the nature of simples has important virtues, it also has consequences that many philosophers find less

appealing. For example, it appears to entail that two simples would necessarily cease to exist if they came into contact. Moreover, the MaxConner has to deny the popular idea that talk about stuff can always be analyzed in terms of talk about things. Given the controversial status of the MaxCon view, it would certainly reduce the attractiveness of the constitutionalist view of artworks if it committed its exponents to this theory.

Another option would be to adopt Lynne Rudder Baker's reply to the "non-additivity" objection (Baker 2000, 176–177). According to Baker, the statue has its weight derivatively. This is not to say that it does not really weigh 150 pounds, but that its doing so just consists in its being constituted by something—the piece of marble—that has this weight non-derivatively. Since the statue thus has no weight independently of the piece of marble, Baker thinks, there is no reason to expect the scale to read anything other than 150. This view seems to be applicable to simples as well, and is not vulnerable to my argument. Still, Baker's use of the derivative/non-derivative distinction is unpopular even within the constitutionalist camp. It seems intuitively unattractive to hold that the statue has to "borrow" its weight from another object. And if the statue has its weight derivatively, we probably also have to say, for instance, that the statue has its *shape* derivatively. That is difficult to swallow. So is Baker's idea (2000, 101–102) that human persons have their sophisticated thoughts non-derivatively but many of their pains only derivatively—and, hence, that each self-conscious human person coincides with a conscious but not self-conscious human animal.

If we reject these two options, what should we say about the case I have described? What it involves, we have to say, is either an object that is only contingently an artwork, or an object that is essentially an artwork and which, when it came into being, replaced a non-artwork (i.e., the simple that was a part of the original lump).³ Those two claims correspond, of course, to views (a) and (b) above.⁴ It seems arbitrary to make any of these two claims in this sort of case and yet treat statues, and other artworks, differently. But that is precisely what advocates of the target view, as opposed to views (a) and (b), have to do—unless, to repeat, they take any of the

abovementioned two controversial ways out.⁵ The case at hand, then, seems to pose an interesting and hitherto overlooked challenge to the target view.⁶

References

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¹ Of course, there are in fact no such artworks, and no such microscopes. But I take it that proponents of the view in question do not want to rely on such accidental facts—or on how impressive our eyesight is.

² Including constitutionalists such as Lynne Rudder Baker: see e.g. her (1997), (2000), (2007).

³ I am ignoring four-dimensionalism here. A four-dimensionalist could describe the case as follows: the artwork is a *spatial* simple which is a proper temporal part of the spatial simple that used to belong to the original lump. Of course, a defender of the view I am attacking cannot say this, because constitutionalism is a three-dimensionalist view. (Moreover, I suspect that most four-dimensionalists would deny that the artwork is essentially an artwork.)

⁴ I make no claim here about what Burke would say about the present case.

⁵ It would hardly be a good idea to respond that simples are impossible. Constitutionlists often emphasize that their view has the clear advantage (over, in particular, mereological nihilism, according to which there are no composite objects) of being compatible with both the existence and the non-existence of simples.

⁶ [acknowledgments]