

Baker's Theory of Material Constitution and Thinking into Existence

Abstract: In this paper, I critically evaluate Lynne Rudder Baker's nonmereological theory of material constitution in light of the "thinking into existence" objection from Theodore Sider and Dean W. Zimmerman. Baker does respond; however, she focuses only on the specific versions of the objection that has been posed by Sider and Zimmerman, and she does not address the underlying problem. Baker maintains that beliefs, social practices and conventions can make something constitute a new object, namely, an intention-dependent object; however, as I argue, the thinking into existence objection shows that constituted objects, if there are any, are ontologically independent of beliefs, social practices and conventions. In fact, Baker's theory doesn't give us any reason to believe that the intention-dependent objects are more real than fictional objects.

Keywords: Material Constitution, Ontology, Fictional Objects, Thinking into Existence

In this paper, I critically evaluate Lynne Rudder Baker's nonmereological theory of material constitution in light of the "thinking into existence" objection, which has been raised most powerfully by Theodore Sider (2001) and Dean W. Zimmerman (2002). Baker does respond; however, she focuses only on the specific versions of the objection that has been posed by Sider and Zimmerman, and she does not address the underlying problem. In the first section, I give a brief summary of Baker's theory of material constitution and in the second section I discuss the thinking into existence objection and Baker's response. Lastly, I apply the thinking

into existence objection to fictional objects and argue that the objection raises a much more serious problem to Baker's theory than she addresses in her response.

1. Baker's Theory of Material Constitution

In what follows, I mainly focus on three books in which Baker develops and defends her views on constitution: *Bodies and Persons* (2000), *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (2007), and *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (2013). In all three of these books Baker maintains a Practical Realist approach to metaphysics. According to Baker's Practical Realism, which purports to theorize a common sense approach to metaphysics, ordinary objects such as trees, chairs and statues irreducibly and ineliminably exist; they are as real as the fundamental particles by which they are ultimately constituted.

The fundamental idea of constitution, according to Baker, is this: When things of a certain primary kind are in certain circumstances, a thing of a different primary kind—a new object, with different persistence conditions and different causal powers—comes to exist (2013: 224; 2007: 32; 2002: 32). Primary kind of x is what, most fundamentally, x is (Baker 2007: 33; 2013: 147). Things have their primary kind properties essentially, that is, if x is primarily an F, then x cannot exist without being an F.

When, for example, a piece of marble is in certain conditions, “statue-favorable conditions” in Baker's terminology, such as bearing a certain relation to the art world, a statue comes to exist. A statue and a piece of marble are of different primary kinds, namely, *statue* and *piece of marble*.

According to Baker, when x constitutes y, “the coming-into-existence of y brings into new causal powers” (Baker 2002: 33; also see Baker 2007: 236). But, when do new causal

powers indicate coming into existence of a new thing rather than ordinary property acquisition?

In *Persons and Bodies* (2000) Baker writes:

A theory of primary kinds would provide a principled way to distinguish between cases ... in which an object merely acquires a property and cases ... in which a new entity comes into existence. Since a theory of primary kinds would be tantamount to a theory of everything, it is not surprising (although still regrettable) that I do not have one. (40-1)

In her later works she does not offer a theory of primary kinds either. However, in *Persons and Bodies* she suggests an alternative consideration that could help us in the absence of the theory of primary kinds, and in her later works she utilizes this principle to distinguish between mere property acquisition and constitution: “If x constitutes y, then y has whole class of causal properties that x would not have had if x had not constituted anything” (2000: 41). So, new causal powers that belong to the constituted object cannot be reduced to the causal powers of the constituting object. But this is not really helpful either. How do we know whether the new causal powers that are not reducible to *other* causal powers of x are simply acquired by x or they belong to a new object which spatially coincides with x?

Baker gives an example to clarify. If we use an anvil to hold open a barn door, the anvil does not thereby constitute a new object – a doorstep. This is because, Baker writes,

The anvil acquires the property of being a doorstep by our enlisting a physical property of the anvil – its heaviness – for a special purpose: to hold open the barn door. The use of the anvil as a doorstep does not bring about instantiation of whole classes of properties that anvils per se do not have. (2000: 41)

However, she also asserts that when a nonhuman primate uses a thin stick to get out edible insects from holes “the natural stick comes to constitute an implement, an artifact, by the

intentional use made of it” (2013: 199). What is the relevant difference between using an anvil as a doorstep and using a stick to reach inside holes for insects? In the latter case, why cannot we say that the primate is simply enlisting a physical property of the stick – its shape – for a special purpose, instead of making a new thing come to exist?

Baker insists that we know some clear cases of constitution and if it is not obvious whether constitution or property acquisition takes place in a certain case, we should look if genuinely new causal powers are generated or not. Importantly, an object can have some of its causal powers in virtue of the social practices and intentional attitudes about it. There are some objects, such as “carburetors, cathedrals, menus, birth certificates, flags, search warrants, trophies, obituaries” that cannot exist without beliefs, desires and intentions about them (Baker 2000: 35). Such an object is what Baker calls an “intention-dependent object” or an “ID-object” (Baker 2007: 11). All artifacts, which have their intended functions as essential properties, are ID-objects (Baker 2013: 198).

Lastly, in Baker’s theory, things have their properties in two ways. If *x* has property *H*, then either *x* has *H* nonderivatively or *x* has *H* derivatively. *x* has *H* derivatively iff *x* borrows *H* from another object to which *x* has constitution relations, otherwise *x* has *H* nonderivatively. For example, David, the statue, is derivatively 6 tons, because David borrows its weight from a piece of marble in virtue of being constituted by it. If *x* has property *H* derivatively, it still *really* has *H*. David is really 6 tons, albeit derivatively so. Likewise, the piece of marble is derivatively a statue.

2. The Thinking into Existence Objection

One objection to Baker’s theory of constitution from Theodore Sider is that “it is tempting to conclude that she thinks we create the world, that these continuants exist because we have

concepts for them” (Sider 2001: 3-4). Zimmerman points out a similar unpalatable implication of Baker’s theory: “Changes in our ways of talking about things, even coupled with simple changes in some of our nonverbal reactions to things, could by themselves bring any concrete [intention-dependent] physical object into existence” (Zimmerman 2002: 335).

Baker’s reply to the claim that according to her theory we create the world by our concepts is “yes and no” (2002: 48, 2007: 46). Yes, Baker says, some objects, namely ID-objects, match our concepts because we manufacture them to match our concepts. But, when it comes to non-ID-objects, no, we do not create them, they could still exist even though we had no intentions and propositional attitudes about them.

Contrary to how Sider and Zimmerman interpret Baker’s theory, she explicitly rejects that thought and talk alone, or primarily, can make things, including ID-objects, come to exist. She points out that not only having concepts of things and some nonverbal reactions to them, but also having conventions and social practices about these things is required for creating ID-objects. And these practices that are capable of creating new things cannot be whimsical; “I do not think that we just conjure up new concrete physical objects of an afternoon” Baker says (2007: 46). Intricate and long-term economic practices and conventions are required for, say, a piece of paper to constitute a dollar bill.

So, Zimmerman asks, our practices and conventions can make *dollar bill* a primary-kind, but what about *president*? Can we make *president* a primary-kind? “How differently would we have to talk and act before G. W. Bush, the man, would come to coincide with another thing, a person (derivatively) who is (nonderivatively) commander-in-chief of the armed forces, etc. but who will outlive the man G. W. and always be president?” (Zimmerman 2002: 334).

Baker gives two replies to this question. First, she points out that we do not currently believe that we have a president who has been constituted by different persons in the past and she states that bringing ID-objects into existence is not done by treating an already existing kind as a primary-kind:

We did not start with passports as nonprimary kind and then use our talk and thought to convert them into primary kinds. The sort of talk and thought that can contribute to bringing a new primary kind into existence is not talk and thought about a kind that existed already as an old nonprimary kind (like president) (Baker 2007: 45).

Secondly, she argues that the notion of conventions and practices that can make *president* a primary-kind is unrealistic; our conventions are based on our interests and we cannot choose and change our interests at will (2007: 45).

3. Thinking about Fictional Objects

I do not think Baker's replies are convincing. The idea that long-term conventions and practices can create new things is in some respects as problematic as the idea that thought and talk alone can create new things.

Suppose, in a society of idol-worshippers a craftsman builds an idol by carving it from a piece of wood. It is not just a piece of wood anymore; it is an idol constituted by a piece of wood. An adherent of Baker's theory of constitution should concede that religious practices and conventions can create idols in the same way economical and artistic practices and conventions create dollar bills and statues.

However, probably, at least possibly, the first idol in human history was not manufactured but found in nature. Take the Sun, for example. It existed for a long time before people worshiped it as a god. The Sun-worshippers did not manufacture the Sun, but they sure

utilized it in their religious practices. They, as a society, worshiped, prayed, feared, loved the Sun as their god. The Sun does seem to have constituted a new ID-object: The Sun-God. Like the piece of paper coming to constitute a dollar bill in certain circumstances, Baker's theory of material constitution implies that the Sun constitutes a god in certain circumstances and this god is a real addition to the ontology of the world¹.

As I mentioned above, Baker takes her theory of constitution to be a Practical Realist common-sense theory. But, it seems, a proponent of this theory should concede that, for example, in virtue of the religious beliefs and practices on a Sun-worshipping society, a Sun-god comes to existence, or, in virtue of the religious beliefs and practices of a pantheistic society, the universe constitutes and really becomes (derivatively) a god. I don't think these claims are commonsensical, as opposed to what Baker says about her theory. This is a problem, but these considerations reveal an even more serious problem for Baker, as we shall see next.

According to Baker, conventions and practices cannot create an ID-object *ex nihilo*, but only make an already existing object constitute a new ID-object. Baker states that "conventions, practices, and *preexisting materials*" are required for constitution of ID-objects (2007: 46 - emphasis added). So, worshiping practices can bring an idol or god, which is constituted by, say, a piece of wood or the Sun, into existence, but if the same worshiping practices are directed not at an existent material but at a fictional object, such as a supposed divine being residing on Mount Olympus, they cannot make that being, Zeus, come to exist. But, why not? It seems, nonexistent Zeus had very similar causal powers to whatever causal powers the idol

¹ To be consistent with Baker's views on personhood, this has to be a non-personal god. According to Baker's constitution view of persons in *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (2013), having a first-person perspective is a necessary condition for personhood, which cannot be conferred upon a body by social practices and conventions.

nonderivatively (that is, in virtue of being an idol) has, which are based on religious beliefs and practices².

The important point is this: We know that the worshiping practices and religious conventions about Zeus do not confer causal powers upon Zeus, since Zeus does not exist. Then, what makes it the case that very similar practices and conventions about an existing piece of wood confer a new set of causal powers upon it, in virtue of which an idol is constituted? If practices and conventions are not sufficient for Zeus's coming into existence, then I cannot see how very similar practices and conventions are sufficient for any *y*'s coming into existence when they are directed at an existent material.

To elaborate: According to the picture Baker paints, a piece of wood, in virtue of the religious beliefs, practices and conventions of a society, constitutes an idol and the idol is a new thing because it has a new set of causal powers that the piece of wood doesn't have as a piece of wood. What are those causal powers that the idol has? Presumably, the powers to lead and motivate members of the society to do certain things, such as pray, fear, perform certain rituals, punish individuals who disrespect the piece of wood, etc³. My point is, whatever causal powers the idol, as an idol, is supposed to have, Zeus also seems to have all those causal powers, but, of course it doesn't, because it doesn't exist. So, if Zeus doesn't play a causal role in the religious attitudes and behaviors in a Zeus-worshipping society, then, I think it is reasonable to think that the idol, as an alleged further entity from the piece of wood, also doesn't play a causal role in the

² If, *per impossibile*, Zeus was constituted *ex nihilo*, it wouldn't be a personal god, but, still, according to what Baker says about generation of new causal powers by social practices and conventions, it would genuinely be part of the ontology of the world. See footnote 1.

³ Baker (1999: 147, 2000: 33) states that a monument "attracts speakers and small crowds on patriotic holidays; it brings tears to people's eyes; it arouses protests" as an example of new causal powers that an ID-object has. I think it is safe to say that an idol would have similar alleged causal powers to a monument.

religious attitudes and behaviors in an idol-worshipping society and that the idol doesn't have a new set of causal powers that the piece of wood doesn't have.

In short, considering Baker's emphasis on social practices and conventions and given that we have social practices and conventions about nonexistent things, if ID-objects such as idols, statues, cars, dollar bills, etc. are not identical to (a temporal part of) their material, then I cannot see why we should think that they are more real than Zeus.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I've applied Sider and Zimmerman's *thinking into existence* objection to fictional objects that are treated by the society as real. Baker's nonmereological theory of material constitution cannot satisfactorily explain the ontological difference between a constituted real ID-object and a fictional object around which there are social practices and conventions similar to those that are directed at real materials. It is unacceptable that real objects, such as a real mythological creature, can be created *ex nihilo* in virtue of beliefs and social practices directed at that creature. People's sincerely believing that a certain fictional object really exists and treating it as such in their long established social practices and conventions doesn't make that object really exist. But, if social practices cannot make a fictional object come to exist, then it is hard to see how the same sort of social practices make an ID-object emerge from an existing material. It seems, then, as opposed to Baker's view, beliefs, social practices and conventions cannot endow any (real or fictional) object that they are directed at with real causal powers, in virtue of which a new object is constituted.

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