

## Shrinking Difference—Response to Replies

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First, I'd like to express my appreciation to Amie L. Thomasson, Beth Preston, Peter Kroes and Pieter E. Vermaas, and Roxanne Kurtz for their thoughtful replies to my article, "The Shrinking Difference Between Artifacts and Natural Objects."

In response to Amie Thomasson:

Amie Thomasson and I are in agreement about artifacts, in particular about the existential dependence of artifacts on human intentions. Thomasson says, "Since the very idea of an artifact is of something mind-dependent in certain ways, accepting mind-independence as an across-the-board criterion for existence gives us no reason to deny the existence of artifacts; it merely begs the question against them." I agree entirely.

Thomasson discusses two very interesting issues about mind-dependent objects that I did not raise. First, she mentions the distinction between imaginary objects (if there are any) there are merely the products of human thought and more familiar artifacts like tables and hammers. I agree that this is an important distinction; I was concerned only with technical artifacts.

Second, and relatedly, Thomasson mentions "abstract artifacts" like "novels and laws of state, songs, and corporations"—artifacts that are not constituted by aggregates of particles. Her own work has been a contribution to understanding such abstract artifacts. I think that she is entirely correct to draw attention to the increasing importance of abstract artifacts—databases, search engines, computer programs—in daily life. This whole area is crawling with philosophical issues that need more philosophical attention. Although I dealt only with concrete artifacts, a complete account of artifacts must include all kinds of "abstract artifacts."

In response to Beth Preston:

Preston's comment is very thought-provoking. Preston has an admirable store of knowledge of pertinent examples. She fascinatingly shows how my examples of blurring the line between natural and artifactual objects are really just developments of ancient human interventions in nature. It still seems to me—and, I think to Preston as well—that there is a line (although "blurry") between objects whose existence depends on intentional human interventions and objects whose existence does not so depend. Be that as it may, Preston goes on to argue that there is not an *ontologically important* line between intention-dependent (ID) objects and nonintention-dependent (nonID) objects. She advocates abandoning the distinction altogether. Indeed, she says, "the distinction between artifacts and natural objects is *itself* ontologically unilluminating." (28)

I think that there is a terminological issue about 'ontologically important' or

‘ontologically illuminating.’ Preston thinks that she disagrees with me because she does not think the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction (along with associated distinctions between natural objects and artifacts, or between nonID objects and ID objects) is ontologically important. Kroes and Vermaas think that they disagree with me because they do think that the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction is ontologically important. But all of us agree that ‘mind-dependence’ does not mark any ontological deficiency.

The fact remains, however, that the putative distinction between mind-independent and mind-dependent objects is the basis for mainstream analytic metaphysics. A mainstream corollary is that mind-dependent objects are ontologically deficient. In the face of this unfortunate situation, it seems to me a reasonable strategy to acknowledge that there is a coherent distinction between what is mind-independent and what is not, but to deny that the distinction is ontologically important.

Preston has two reasons for abandoning the distinction between ID and nonID objects: (1) The distinction is vague; many objects do not fit well on either side of the line. (2) Use of the distinction to understand artifacts is suspect.

As to (1), I subscribe to ontological vagueness generally. Spatial boundaries and temporal boundaries are all vague, independently of our concepts. Exactly when did our solar system come into existence? What are the spatial boundaries of a tree with autumn leaves in the process of falling? If our distinctions are to be accurate, they should permit indeterminate cases.

As to (2), my view is that the identity and nature of an artifact depends on its proper function, and its proper function depends on human intentions. I admit that I have not studied artifact functions as extensively as Preston has, but as long as “most of the big issues are still up in the air, including the issue of where and how artifacts get their proper functions,” (28) I’ll stick with my view.

In response to Kroes and Vermaas:

Kroes and Vermaas agree that artifacts should not be regarded as ontologically inferior to natural objects, but still want to maintain the importance of the mind-dependent/mind-independent distinction. As experts on technical artifacts and the philosophy of engineering, their “take” on the issues is somewhat different from mine. I found their discussion (and different interpretation) of internal principles of activity, as well as the philosophical questions they raise about the nature of regularities (or laws) in the engineering sciences, quite instructive. I certainly agree that more epistemological work needs to be done by people (like Kroes and Vermaas) with greater knowledge of engineering than I have.

Kroes and Vermaas have a different interest in the mind-dependent/mind-independent distinction from mine. My interest is to deny that the distinction can be a basis for ontology in this sense: Mind-independence cannot be the criterion for being in the

ontology. Kroes and Vermaas agree with that point. What they are interested in is that we maintain the difference between artifacts (mind-dependent) and natural objects (mind-independent) without downgrading artifacts. As I said to Preston, I can agree that there is a such a distinction, and that a version of it (the ID/nonID distinction) marks the difference between artifacts and natural objects. I am uncertain whether the apparent difference between Kroes and Vermaas and me regarding the mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction is merely terminological.

One small final point: Kroes and Vermaas take issue with my example of automobiles. I said that “when automobiles were invented, a new kind of thing came into existence: *and* it changed the world.” They say that if we apply Alexander’s Dictum (“To be real is to have effects”), I should have said: “when automobiles were invented, a new kind of think came into existence *because* it changed the world.” I disagree. The automobile had effects quite independently of its changing the world: It had the effect of conveying its passengers from one place to another in a private vehicle.

In response to Roxanne Kurtz:

Kurtz agrees with me that artifacts are intention-dependent and that artifacts are not ontologically deficient compared to natural objects. She offers novel support for this position by exploiting a point on which she and I agree: We—and thus our intentional activities—are part of nature.

As I understand her argument, it is a kind of sorites: My opponent offers Intention Independence as the criterion of ontological robustness:

Intention Independence: An object is ontologically robust only if it could exist in a world that lacks beings with intentions.

My hypothetical opponent accepts Intention Independence. But why, Kurtz asks, should we accept Intention Independence as a criterion of ontological robustness instead of various alternative candidates as a criterion of ontological robustness that would also demote increasingly many kinds of natural objects: Instinct Independence, Learning Independence, Biological Independence, Geological Independence. Each of these alternatives is more draconian than its predecessor. By the end of this series, hardly any medium-sized natural objects count as ontologically robust. Perhaps we would be left only with simples. For the sake of argument, Kurtz (quite reasonably) rejects the simples-only position.

Since we are part of nature, we have a series of candidate criteria of natural processes beginning with Intention Independence and ending with Geological Independence. Each of the candidates invokes natural processes for the creation of objects. If someone (e.g., my opponent who accepts Intention Independence) accepts any of the criteria, she should accept them all. There is no principled place to stop. “[I]t is reasonable for us to expect the ontological robustness criteria that invoke these processes to stand and fall together in virtue of the metaphysical similarities of the involved processes.” (33) Thus, all of them

should be rejected as criteria of ontological robustness, including Intention Independence.

Thus, my opponent cannot hold that artifacts are ontologically deficient because they depend on intentions. She must reject Intentional Independence as she hits “an ontologically robust brick wall.” (32)

If I have Kurtz’s argument right, it is an interesting one. But I am not convinced that the “metaphysical similarities of the involved processes” are sufficiently strong to warrant Kurtz’s conclusion that Intention Independence should be rejected along with the other criteria. That said, however, I certainly agree with her conclusion.

A note on some remarks by David Leech Anderson:

Mind-dependence or intention-dependence, as I construe it, is not causal dependence but ontological dependence. When I say that an artifact (ontologically) depends on human intentions, I mean that it could not have existed in a world without beings with intentions. I do not mean that anyone has to think of the artifact to keep it in existence. An object that comes off an automated assembly line after an attack that kills all human beings but leaves inanimate objects intact is still a car. It is not mind-independent in the sense that I am talking about. Its existence is still dependent on human intentions.

If atoms spontaneously coalesced in outer space to form an object that was molecule-for-molecule just like your ’87 Chevy, the car lookalike would not be a car. (It would be mind-independent, however.)

On my view, the table in your kitchen and the table in your Second Life kitchen are both artifacts and both dependent on intentions. However, I agree with you that there is an ontological difference between them--a difference that I have not explored. Philosophical exploration of the difference is certainly worth undertaking!

## References

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