**The Ontological Significance of Constitution**

Amie L. Thomasson

University of Miami

There is much to admire in Lynne Baker’s (2007) *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life,* and much that I agree with: particularly the need to defend the existence of ordinary objects such as tables and chairs, sticks and stones, and against various forms of eliminativism and reductionism. Given this common orientation, we also fight many of the same battles—e.g. against arguments for denying the existence of ordinary objects on grounds of their alleged causal redundancy or violation of constraints of parsimony. Finally, we both agree that the distinction between those objects that are and are not ‘mind-dependent’ is, as Baker would put it, not ‘ontologically significant’: that mind-dependence is no grounds for denying the existence of entities like drivers’ licenses, works of art, or college degrees, so that “What is in the ontology need not be wholly independent of us” (2007, 20). In fact, on most of the major first-order issues in metaphysics, Baker and I are in broad agreement.

There is, however, a significant area in which we at least seem to disagree: in our metametaphysics, or perhaps more simply put, in how we each see what we are doing in making our first-order metaphysical claims. Throughout her new book, Baker often turns to defend what she calls a ‘robust’ approach to metaphysics, and rejects ‘conceptual’ or ‘linguistic’ approaches to metaphysical problems. Accordingly, she has expressed reservations about what she sees as my ‘linguistic’ approach, writing, e.g. (in her comments on *Ordinary Objects*): “Whereas Thomasson takes metaphysical problems to be dissolved by conceptual analysis and empirical discovery, I’ll suggest that we still need good old-fashioned metaphysics,”… ”linguistic considerations” (she writes) “are not enough to vindicate our commonsense worldview of ordinary objects. We need a more robust metaphysics.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is true that our approaches differ, at least on the surface: I tend to defuse the arguments against ordinary objects by showing how some of the key arguments against them rely on misuses of words, or on treating certain metaphysical principles as perfectly general which don’t apply when the claims involved are analytically interrelated. And I argue that the questions of metaphysics are answerable straightforwardly by a combination of conceptual and empirical enquiry: questions of what exists are answerable by determining what the application conditions for our terms are (conceptual analysis) and seeing whether they are fulfilled (the empirical part)[[2]](#footnote-2). True claims of metaphysical necessity, I have argued (2007b), are object-language reflections of rules of use for our terms (or their consequences).

Baker, by contrast, appeals to the metaphysical relation of constitution both to explain what ordinary objects are and how they are related to underlying physical objects, and to explain away various puzzles associated with ordinary objects. Constitution, she writes “Is a single comprehensive metaphysical relation that unites items at different levels of reality into the objects that we experience in everyday life” (2007, 32); it “is the metaphysical glue, so to speak, of the material world” (2007, 177-8). Properly understood, she argues, constitution can provide a “theoretical explanation” (2007, 239) of certain facts about constituted entities. It “accounts for the unity of a constituted object” (2007, 165) and explains, e.g., why “many properties are shared by both constituter and constituted” (2007, 39).

What I will suggest here is that Baker’s way of presenting her constitution view as a robust metaphysical discovery of a relation that plays a theoretical-explanatory role opens her up to a line of awkward questions and objections about whether it *really* does explanatory work or just gives a name to the various problems. These, in fact, are some of the objections that have been most repeatedly raised against her account.

My project here is to examine what happens if we pair Baker’s first-order metaphysical story of constitution with a more deflationary metametaphysical picture. I will begin by reviewing what Baker’s constitution view was supposed to do for us, and then will turn to survey some of the recurrent objections that have arisen to her approach—particularly to the idea that her account of constitution can *explain* various puzzling states of affairs. I will suggest that she unwittingly invites objections like these by characterizing her work in metametaphysically ‘serious’ terms. Can we instead reinterpret much of what Baker is doing in first-order metaphysics in more deflationary terms—as providing a way of systematizing and giving a common name to certain linguistic/conceptual rules, expressed in the object language? I will point towards how this might be done, and will argue that if we can do so, we can retain many of the attractions of the constitution view while avoiding many unwanted questions and objections.

1. **Attractions of the Constitution View**

Let me begin by reviewing some of the major things the constitution view was supposed to do for us. For I want to be sure that, in reinterpreting what it’s up to at the metametaphysical level, I don’t undercut any of its substantial strengths and advantages.

First, the constitution view is supposed to provide the basis for a non-reductive materialist approach to everyday objects that will take them seriously, preserve their centrality and importance. By ‘non-reductive materialism’, Baker means a view that “is materialistic in that it holds that every concrete particular is made up entirely of microphysical items. It is nonreductive in that it holds that not all objects and not all properties are reducible to physical particles or simples, and their properties” (2007, 99). Baker identifies various senses in which everyday objects are important to us: they are things we care most about in our lives; they are things we appeal to in much of our ordinary talk (both descriptive and causal) about the everyday world; they are the things that figure most obviously in our sense experience.

Taking everyday objects seriously is something that Baker argues that neither eliminativist nor reductionist views can do. The eliminativist, of course, denies that ordinary objects exist at all, while the sort of reductionist Baker has in mind treats ordinary objects as mere mereological sums of particles arranged in certain ways (2007, 26). Eliminativists and reductionists (she argues) risk treating our concern about everyday objects as irrational, and our apparent experience of them as less than fully accurate (2007, 6-7), and must paraphrase much of our talk about them. In sum, “Only non-reductive materialism offers a metaphysics that takes ordinary things and their interactions with them at face value and makes them intelligible” (2007, 120). Another reason for thinking we need a non-reductive view of ordinary objects (that doesn’t take them to be identical to particles in a certain arrangement) is that “the persistence conditions of ordinary objects are strikingly different from the persistence conditions of, say, the atoms that make them up…The atoms existed before and will exist after the demise of the medium-sized thing.” (2007, 42).

Second, the constitution view is supposed to provide us with an understanding of a special relation among objects—a relation of ‘unity without identity’—that will enable us to *explain* certain otherwise metaphysically puzzling features of the ordinary world, e.g.:

1. Why there are not two (or more) objects present, when we have (in some sense) ‘both’ a statue and its constituting matter. This is a matter of responding to the ‘counting’ problems supposed to plague those who accept ordinary objects: if we accept that there is a statue, but deny that it is reducible to the particles that compose it, we seem left positing two objects in the same place at the same time, and composed of the same parts. But this (the opponent of ordinary objects suggests) is simply implausible.
2. Why there are not two (or more) property instances present, when there apparently is but one. That is, e.g., if we accept that there is a statue weighing 10 pounds, and a sum of particles weighing ten pounds, and deny that they are identical, it seems that when we place ‘both’ on the scales, it should read ’20 lbs.’, though of course it does not.

How is Baker’s constitution view supposed to give us these benefits? First, it is supposed to provide the basis for a non-reductive understanding of ordinary objects by giving us a view on which objects like statues and tables really exist, and are not identical to their constituting matter—though they are in a substantial ‘unity without identity’ relationship with that matter. The idea that constitution is a relation of unity without identity, in turn, is supposed to enable us to stave off some classic problems like (a) and (b) that notoriously arise for nonreductionists. In response to (a), Baker argues (following Aristotle) that nonreductionists are not stuck saying that there are two (or more) objects in a situation in which a statue is constituted by some particles. For (she argues) we need not ‘count by identity’: “Aristotle’s notion of numerical sameness without identity shows that we need not (and frequently do not) count by identity” (2007, 41). Aristotle applied the idea to cases such as the man and the seated man, which he held to be ‘accidentally the same’ but not identical (2007, 40). Baker develops the idea by saying that “If x and y are constitutionally related, then I would deny that where x and y are, there are two things. x and y are numerically the same” (though they are not identical) (2007, 171). Elsewhere she explains why we count only one by suggesting that the identity of the constituting matter is “encompassed or subsumed by” the constituted thing “The constituted thing has ontological priority over its constitutor” (2007, 166), explaining why we count only one thing: the statue.

With respect to (b), the constitution view is supposed to provide a way around the problem by showing that property instances are not additive when the possession of the property is derivative in one of the cases (2007, 179). Where two objects are in a constitution relation, on Baker’s view, they may ‘borrow’ properties from each other. So, to use her example, my driver’s license has the property of being rectangular derivatively from the constituting piece of plastic’s being rectangular (2007, 37). But where a property is possessed derivatively “there are not two separate exemplifications of the property” (2007, 39). Given this view of properties had derivatively, we can say that if the particles (jointly) weigh ten pounds, they do so nonderivatively. But the statue constituted weighs ten pounds only *derivatively*—so the two weights aren’t additive (there are not two exemplifications of the weight property) and we’ve no reason to expect the scale to tip to twenty pounds.

There are other things the constitution view is supposed to do for us, e .g. explain how constituted entities can have new properties and causal powers distinct from those of their parts (42, 239). Space constraints force me to leave those complex issues to one side here, though ultimately a deflationary approach to constitution will also owe work on these issues, too.

1. **Problems Commonly Raised for the Constitution View**

Perhaps the most recurrent line of objection against Baker’s view, however, is that her constitution view simply doesn’t offer the needed kind of *explanations* of these facts at all. Thus, for example, Ted Sider notes that a central objection to constitution views is that it involves positing “numerically distinct but extremely similar things located in exactly the same place” (2002, 45).

“The usual response [by constitution theorists], that the consequence is unremarkable because the animal *constitutes* the person, only invites the question: What is constitution?... [but Baker’s definition] cannot explain away the oddness of spatial coincidence, since spatial coincidence is *built into* the definition… Labeling the relation of necessitated collocation ‘constitution’ is no answer” (2002, 46)

Baker, as we have seen, has an immediate response: She denies that there are two numerically distinct things there at all: given the relation of constitution, we have numerical sameness without identity; the identity of the constitutor is ‘subsumed under’ that of the constituted.

But others have objected that this, too, simply puts a label on the problem without providing a sufficient *explanation*. Thus, e.g. Charlotte Witt writes:

“Another aspect of constitution does provide grounds for a unity without identity claim, and that is the idea that the identity of the constituted object is given by its primary kind and not the primary kind of the constituter…. This is a crucial step in rendering the unity without identity aspect of constitution coherent, and I do not think that Baker's metaphors [of ‘subsumption of identity’] will do the job without further explanation. Since the idea of unity without identity is central to the Constitution View, Baker owes us an explanation of how the subsumption of identity differs from plain old identity.” (2008, http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13725).

Dean Zimmerman similarly objects to the idea that the constitution relation explains why there isn’t problematic multiplication of property instances (his examples are being in pain or thinking):

… it still needs to be shown that there are not two thinkers or two pains when there are two things thinking or in pain but nonseparate in her sense. And it cannot be shown simply by *calling* the relation ‘nonseparateness’ and insisting that it is part of one’s theory that nonseparate things in pain do not add more pain to the world than a single thing in the same sort of pain. (2002, 327)

These questions are asked as if constitution is supposed to be a relation *discovered by* the metaphysical theory on offer, which purports to offer an *explanation of* puzzling surface phenomena—much as the scientific discovery of magnetism provided an explanation of certain puzzling phenomena. Thus, e.g.:

* Puzzling fact: Although it was a separate object, unsupported and unattached, the picture did not fall off the refrigerator.
* Invoked explanatory relation: Magnetism.
* Follow-up questions: What is magnetism and how can it explain why the picture doesn’t fall off the fridge?

For the case of constituted objects:

* Puzzling facts: Although there is a statue and a lump of clay (with which it isn’t identical)
  + there not two objects present, and
  + although each weighs 10 pounds, they don’t jointly weight twenty pounds
* Invoked explanatory relation: constitution.
* Follow-up questions: What is constitution? How can it explain these facts?

In the scientific realm, such explanatory appeals to new relations in the world clearly do owe us more information about what exactly this relation involves, and how it is supposed to explain the surprising phenomena—thus we go on to investigate magnetic attraction and its basis in the alignments of electron spins. But (the objections go) all we get from Baker’s account is some suggestive language (subsumption of identity, unity without identity) and new labels on the problem: say that the statue is *constituted by* the clay and has *ontological priority* over the latter; that the statue has its weight *derivatively*…

Baker invites this sort of objection by the kind of ‘robust metaphysical’ spin she puts on her constitution view: treating constitution as a special kind of relation in the world, a kind of ‘metaphysical glue’ that she is discovering the nature of, and the presence of which will explain these otherwise strange features about ordinary objects. And if we think of what she is doing in this way, it is hard to put off persistent questions like those raised by Zimmerman, Witt and Sider. But I will suggest that we need not put it that way, and that if we put a more deflationary spin on what Baker is doing, we can then stave off some of these recurrent lines of objection.

1. **Constitution Deflated?**

On the view of metaphysics I have been developing and arguing for elsewhere (2007b), basic truths about metaphysical necessity and the like are object-language reflections of rules of use for our terms (or their consequences). Along these lines, we can understand talk of an object’s basic persistence conditions as the object-language correlate of the most basic (conceptually relevant) conditions under which a term may be re-applied: to say ‘the statue can’t survive a crushing’ is the object-language expression of the rule: ‘if ‘s’ is a statue name, and its referent is crushed, don’t reapply ‘s’”. Similarly, to speak of an object’s metaphysical dependence relations is the object-language correlate of speaking of the relations among the application conditions for our terms: to say ‘statues can’t exist without artists’ is the object-language correlate of the rule that ‘statue’ may not be applied if ‘artist’ cannot be applied.

While this approach to metaphysics is undeniably controversial (and I won’t have space to fully explain and defend it here)[[3]](#footnote-3), it also has certain undeniable advantages. We need no longer face the ‘placement problem’ of how modal facts and properties may ‘fit’ into the natural world: we arrive at talk of modal facts and properties by way of hypostatizations out of necessary truths that are understandable as object-language expressions of rules of use. Maybe even more importantly, we can clarify the epistemology of metaphysics: metaphysics simply involves a form of conceptual analysis that involves moving from mastery of certain expressions to the ability to explicitly express their rules of use (and what follows from these) in the object-language, using the terms in question (in some cases knowing metaphysical truths may also require combining these with empirical facts). But perhaps the most important consequence of this deflationary metametaphysical approach for present purposes is that it denies that metaphysics is, or should be, *explanatory* in anything like the sense that the natural sciences are: it is not involved in discovering deep new facts in the world that will *explain* superficial observations; instead it is simply involved in making explicit and systematizing certain linguistic/conceptual rules and reasoning through their relations and consequences.

Basic notions of primary kinds, constitution, property derivation, ontological significance and the like, I will argue, can all be reconstructed in deflationary terms like these. I will begin with Baker’s notion of ‘primary kinds’, since she uses that in defining ‘constitution’. A primary kind is supposed to be a property such that “an object could not exist without having its primary-kind property” (2007, 34). These primary kinds can be fruitfully understood as the object language correlates of basic sortals.[[4]](#footnote-4) A sortal is a term ‘S’ that comes associated with conditions of application (conceptually relevant conditions under which it may be properly applied) and coapplication (conceptually relevant conditions under which it may be applied again to *the same S*). A basic sortal is a sortal term such that, for any x such that Sx, x continues to exist only as long as ‘S’ continues to apply to it—otherwise put, that a singular term for an individual of kind S may be reapplied only provided ‘S’ may be reapplied. This distinguishes basic sortals like ‘animal’ and ‘artifact’ from derivative sortals like ‘caterpillar’ and ‘redhead’.

We can now turn to Baker’s definition of ‘constitution’. Constitution, as she understands it, is a relation that holds between entities of distinct primary kinds F and G, where (among other conditions) “the addition of an appropriate F to G-favorable circumstances guarantees that there is an instance of G” (2007, 113).I take it that thisis supposed to be a kind of *metaphysical* necessity: that it is necessary that if there is an F in G-favorable circumstances, there is a G. If we then interpret claims of metaphysical necessity in a deflationary way, we can see this as the object-language expression of a relationship in the rules of use for our terms ‘F’ and ‘G’. If the term ‘F’ applies in G-favorable circumstances, that analytically entails that ‘G’ applies. So, in the object language, we can say that: the presence of an F in these circumstances guarantees the presence of a G. For example, if there is a lump in statue-favorable circumstances (suitably shaped by an artist with the right intentions in an art-world context…), that guarantees entails that there is a statue—that is all it takes, according to the rules of use for ‘statue’, to guarantee that ‘statue’ is properly applied there, and so to guarantee that there is a statue.

With that much in place, we can take a definition of ‘constitution’ to be introducing a (formal statement of a) rule of use for ‘constitutes’, as a way of giving a relational label to things that is just the object-language reflection of a network of relationships among rules of use for the two basic sortal terms, and names used to pick out things of the kind. So we can reconstruct a definition of constitution along the lines of Baker’s (2007, 161) as follows. Where ‘r’ and ‘s’ are singular terms and ‘F’ and ‘G’ are basic sortals:

Say that ‘r constitutes s’ if and only if:

1. ‘r’ is a name for an F and ‘s’ is a name for a G (where ‘F’ and ‘G’ are basic material object sortals)[[5]](#footnote-5)
2. ‘r’ and ‘s’ apply in the same place, at the same time
3. the application of ‘F’ plus the fulfillment of certain other (‘G-favorable’) conditions analytically entails the application of ‘G’ in those circumstances
4. but the application of ‘F’ does not otherwise analytically entail the application of ‘G’ (if circumstances are not G-favorable)
5. and those other (‘G-favorable’) conditions are fulfilled

So, for example, we can say that Lumpl constitutes David given that the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) ‘Lumpl’ is a lump name, and ‘David’ is a statue name (2) the two names apply in the same place and time (3) There is a relation in the rules of use for ‘lump’ and ‘statue’ such that if ‘lump’ applies in a situation where certain other conditions are fulfilled (the lump has the right relations to artist, art-world context, etc.), that analytically entails that ‘statue’ applies in that situation, (4) but ‘lump’ may apply without that analytically entailing that ‘statue’ applies (say, if the conditions are not fulfilled), and (5) the other conditions (relations to artist, context, etc.) are fulfilled.

The may not capture absolutely every element of Baker’s definition, but I hope it’s enough to give some substance to the idea that what a good definition of ‘constitution’ does is to provide a name for a relation said to hold among two entities when the rules of use for the terms used to refer to them have certain characteristic interrelations—such rules of use as do typically hold between terms like ‘lump’ and ‘statue’, ‘body’ and ‘person’, ‘wood’ and ‘tree’.

Now, if we take this deflationary approach, it will be inappropriate to demand any further explanation of *why* the constitution relation holds between these entities, or to ask for a ‘deeper explanation’ of what constitution *really is,* and how it can *explain* certain puzzling features. Thus we stave off some of the objections of the serious metaphysicians: showing why they are out of line to demand a story about how constitution gives a theoretical explanation of the surface phenomena.

Ah, but then aren’t we then just admitting that, after all, as the critics allege, Baker is just giving a *name* to the classic metaphysical problems for nonreductionism, rather than giving a *metaphysical theory* of what *substantial relation* these objects stand in that can *explain* why the puzzling features arise and are not a problem? Well, in a sense it’s true that we are just supplying a (very useful) name (or rather, giving more precise definition to a name already sometimes used), not giving a theoretical explanation of why the puzzling features arise.

But the really interesting thing is that approaching the subject in this deflationary way not only staves off the annoying questions of the serious metaphysicians—it also gives us a way to debunk the ‘puzzles’ that motivated adopting an ‘explanatory theory’ of constitution in the first place, enabling us to have all that we wanted out of a ‘theory’ of constitution—without going ‘theoretical’. Let us see how.

1. **What deflated constitution can do for us**

As I mentioned out the outset, the first aim of the constitution view was to take seriously the existence of artifacts, to accord “artifacts ontological status as artifacts” (2007, 59), acknowledging their importance to our lives, sense experience and talk, so we can to preserve the idea that something important went out of existence when the twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed, and that artifacts are ‘genuine substances’ in the sense that “any full account of the furniture of the world will have to include reference to” them (2007, 59). Baker puts this in terms of an account of ‘ontological significance’ developed in Chapter 11, arguing that “The familiar things that we interact with daily have ontological significance in their own right… [their] appearance in the world makes an ontological difference” (2007, 218).

Now I must admit to feeling a bit nervous at the prevalent use of phrases like ‘ontological significance’, ‘genuine substance’, and ‘furniture of reality’ in many discussions of ‘serious metaphysics’. But if we look more closely at the way Baker defines ‘ontological significance’ and why she invokes it, we can see that her use of it is entirely open to a deflationary reading. To say that Fs have ‘ontological significance’, in Baker’s view, is “to say that the addition of a (non-derivative) F is not just a change in something that already exists, but the coming-into-being of a new thing” (2007, 218). The primary bearers of ontological significance are properties, where:

The property of being an F has ontological significance if and only if for any x, if x has the property of being an F (nonderivatively), then x’s persistence conditions are partly or wholly determined by being an F. (2007, 219)

What sorts of properties determine the persistence conditions of their bearers? Primary-kind properties. So “every primary-kind property has ontological significance… primary-kind properties determine persistence conditions and hence confer ontological significance on their (nonderivative) bearers.” (2007, 219).

As I argued above, primary-kind properties are just the object-language correlates of basic sortals. So to identify an entity by its primary-kind property (e.g. being a statue) is just to identify it using a basic sortal (‘statue’) rather than a derivative sortal (like a phase-sortal). Baker notices this herself: in the opening paragraph on ontological significance, she writes:

Persons, microscopes, cats, and all the other inhabitants in the everyday world are of real kinds whose appearance in the world makes an ontological difference: ‘Person,’ for example, is not just a phase-sortal like ‘child’… (2007, 218)

Given the apparatus of basic versus derivative sortals, and their object-language correlates of primary-kind properties and other kind-properties, we can easily make good on some of Baker’s initial goals. First, we can offer the basis for a non-reductive view, according to which everyday objects cannot be simply identified with mereological sums of particles. The basic sortals ‘statue’ and ‘mereological sum’, for example, come with different co-application conditions. These are reflected in different persistence conditions for statues and sums. Thus we can account for the differences in persistence conditions for the statue and the mereological sum as reflecting differences in the co-application conditions used to pick out each of them; given the rules of use for the terms, it is analytic that a statue cannot survive a crushing but a sum can. We need not look for a deeper ‘explanation’ (in answer to the ‘grounding problem’) of how entities otherwise so similar (sharing all their parts and non-sortal, non-modal properties) may have different persistence conditions.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (2007, 57), identity claims ‘a=b’ are only true provided that ‘a’ and ‘b’ are terms of the same category (carrying the same co-application conditions), and that these conditions are fulfilled. Since ‘statue’ and ‘sum’ have different co-application conditions, no identity sentence using a statue-term and a sum-term can be true. This, then, enables us to account for the ‘ontological significance’ of statues: Since statues may not be reduced to (identified with) sums, when there is a statue, there is, in that sense, a ‘new thing’[[7]](#footnote-7), not identical to the sum of particles that can survive a crushing and that was there before the artist began work. It is statues, and not mereological sums of particles, that we are interested in when we go to museums, that we lament the destruction of, that we see before us and make aesthetic judgments about.

The second aim was to use ‘constitution theory’ to ‘explain’ certain puzzling phenomena often raised in objection to non-reductionists, for example:

1. Why there are not two (or more) objects present, when we have (in some sense) ‘both’ a statue and its constituting matter.
2. Why there are not two (or more) property instances present, when there apparently is but one.

As we have seen, Baker responds to the counting problem by suggesting that we needn’t ‘count by identity’; that the statue and lump are ‘numerically the same’ though they are not identical. She adds to this the idea that the identity of the constitutor is ‘subsumed under’ that of the constituted, giving the statue ‘ontological priority’—so that we merely count that. I must admit to having some reservations about this account, and I’m not sure how to understand the notion of ‘numerical sameness without identity’ or ‘subsumption of identity’ directly in deflated terms.

But let’s look at the fundamental goal here: to find a way to respond to the standard accusation against non-reductive views, that such views lead to multiplication of objects and to counting problems—to implausibly saying that there are ‘two [or more] things’ on the pedestal instead of just one. We can respond to this worry in a deflationary way by paying attention to our counting practices—and this may also reveal the basis for also some of Baker’s intuitions.

The apparent evidence that makes (a) look like a problem is this: If asked “how many things are on the pedestal?”, the answer normally given (outside of philosophical contexts) would be “one”. Yet according to nonreductive physicalism, there is a statue, there is a lump, and the statue is not identical to the lump. To deal with the situation, we must first ask about the semantics of ‘thing’. “Thing”, as I have argued (2007a, 2009), is a tricky word, with different uses in English. In one standard use ‘thing’ is used as a sortal term of its own, to pick out, roughly, unified, independently mobile medium-sized lumps of stuff. This is the sense in which “thing” is generally used in generic counting questions, like “how many things were on the tray?” in party games. Used in that sense, the answer to “how many things are on the pedestal?” is ‘one’, hence the intuition.

But ‘thing’ in English is also used in a ‘covering’ sense—as a dummy sortal, guaranteed to apply provided any first order sortal (‘statue’, ‘lump’, ‘electron’, ‘party’, ‘grease-stain’…) applies. Used in that sense, we can always infer from ‘there is an S’ (for any sortal S) to ‘there is a thing’. (On other uses, it may be used to just cover some limited range of first-order sortals). Using that covering sense we can infer from ‘there is a statue’ to ‘there is some thing’ and from ‘there is a lump’ to ‘there is some thing’, and then from these and the non-identity of the statue and lump to ‘there are two things’—the result that is supposed to get the nonreductivist in trouble. But does it? As we’ve seen, we can account for the apparent truth of the lesser counting claim, done using ‘thing’ in the standard sortal sense. And the truth of that claim does not genuinely conflict with the truth of the claim that there are two ‘things’, where ‘thing’ is employed in the covering sense.

This gives us a way to explain away the apparent conflict between the nonreductivist view of ordinary objects and the ‘common sense intuition’ that there is but one thing on the pedestal, without appealing either to a notion of ‘numerical sameness without identity’ or to the ‘subsumption of identity’ of the constitutor into the constituted. We can still account for some of the intuitions behind Baker’s treatment, though: the idea that the statue and lump are ‘numerically the same’ may arise from the fact that counting how many ‘things’ there are typically involves a sortal sense of ‘thing’. The idea that the identity of the lump is ‘subsumed under’ that of the statue may arise from the fact that we typically take more interest in higher-level primary kinds (such as statues) rather than lower-level kinds (such as lumps), and so even if we count in a covering sense, we often only use ‘thing’ to cover the relevant *highest-level* primary kinds (or rather, the corresponding highest-level basic sortals), and so just count the statue, not the lump—again getting the answer ‘one’. But this way of defusing the counting-type objections against ordinary objects is all done by appeal to how terms like ‘thing’ and practices of counting work—not by appeal to some underlying explanatory metaphysical relation of ‘numerical sameness without identity’ or ‘subsumption of identity’.

What then about part (b): Explaining why there are not two (or more) property instances present, when there appears to be but one? As we have seen, Baker addresses this problem via the notion of ‘having a property derivatively’—where “to have a property derivatively is to have it in virtue of constitution-relations to something that has it independently of *its* constitution relations” (2007, 167). The statue is not separate from but constituted by the lump, and has the property of weighing ten pounds derivatively on the lump doing so, and that is why there is no doubling of the weight (2007, 179).

Critics like Zimmerman, however, allege that this is not enough, and persist in asking why “there are not two thinkers or two pains when there are two things thinking or in pain but nonseparate in her sense” (2002, 327). Again, Zimmerman asks the question as if he is demanding an answer that would explain why the presence of constitution explains the failure for properties to double (when they otherwise would); just as one might appeal to the presence of a large quantity of salt to explain the failure of dough to rise when it otherwise would.

But again, I think this is not the best way of understanding what’s supposed to be going on in cases of property-derivation. Rather than making it look like we’re appealing to property derivation as a way of theoretically explaining why something expected (doubling up of properties) doesn’t happen, we can show that the alleged expectations of doubling-up were bogus to begin with.

The idea that a constituted entity, s, has a property P *derivatively* may be understood in deflationary terms as a case in which s’s having P is analytically entailed by the fact that 1) r has P, and 2) r constitutes s. When do such analytic entailments hold? Precisely when the property term ‘P’ is a term for a spatio-temporal or material property. More generally, then, we can treat property derivation as the object-language expression of another relation in rules of use for our terms: where ‘r’ and ‘s’ are names for objects of distinct material primary kinds (F and G), and r constitutes s (according to the earlier definition), for any spatio-temporal or material property term ‘P’, we are entitled to infer from the truth of ‘Pr’ to ‘Ps’.

Given that reading of property derivation, we can easily say why we shouldn’t have expected any doubling-up.[[8]](#footnote-8) It may be a plausible general principle that if x weighs 10 lbs. and y weighs 10lbs, and x≠y, then x and y together weigh 20 lbs. But this is a principle that derives its plausibility from considering cases in which the claims to possess a certain property are analytically independent; the same principle doesn’t apply across the board, substituting in names for any entities whatsoever. Properties possessed by x and y aren’t to be taken additively (it doesn’t make sense to add an ‘and’ or to take them to add up) when there are analytic relations between the claims to possess a certain property. If there’s a red right glove, and a red left glove, and they match, that analytically entails that there’s a red pair of gloves; but there are not three instances of redness. Similarly, Lumpl’s weighing ten pounds and constituting David analytically entails that David weighs ten pounds, and that is why it is inappropriate to expect their weights to be additive—given the truth of the constitution claim, the first truth analytically entails the second; no additional truth-makers are required and so there needs to be no ‘extra’ property instance to make the second claim true.

That takes care of bottom-up cases of property derivation (from a constitutor to the constituted)—what about the reverse cases Baker discusses: e.g. the piece of plastic impresses the police officer because it constitutes my drivers’ license; the stone’s being worth $1m because it constitutes a work of art, etc.? These cases, in which x is the constitutor and y the constituted, and x has P derivatively on y’s having P, it seems to me are best read not as directly ascribing properties to the constitutor (i.e. saying that Px), but as shorthand for ‘x constitutes a y that is P’. Indeed many of the non-derivative properties of the constituted don’t seem to literally, unequivocally apply to the constitutor: it makes sense to say that the drivers’ license (but not the plastic) is valid for five years; that the sculpture (but not the stone) was influenced by Rodin. So understood, these cases of top-down property derivation don’t even threaten to leave us with a multiplication of property instances.

1. **Conclusion**

I have attempted to show how some basic notions of constitution and property derivation (though perhaps not exactly put in the same terms as Baker’s) may be understood in a deflationary fashion—as object language correlates of rules of use for our terms. We can use these rules of use to show why it’s correct to say that there is something ‘new’ in the world, ‘ontologically significant’, when we have a constituted entity (say a statue) produced (from a lump of clay); why it’s still incorrect or at least misleading to say that there are ‘two things’ on the pedestal: a statue *and* a lump of clay; and why it would be mistaken to ‘expect’ that the scale should tip to 20 lbs. if the statue *‘and’* the lump of clay (each of which weighs 10 pounds) were placed on it.

But these ways of arguing for a form of non-reductivism about ordinary objects, and of responding to some of the most common objections against this, do not raise any suggestion of ‘discovering’ some special feature in the world (of ontological significance), nor of discovering some special relation in the world (constitution, subsumption of identity) or a special way of having properties (derivatively) that promises to provide ‘theoretical explanations’ of the purportedly strange observed features of ordinary objects. They thus don’t invite the kinds of awkward and—to my mind at least—inappropriate questions and demands for further ‘explanation’ that have been raised against Baker’s constitution view.

Will Baker like this deflationary approach to a metaphysics of the everyday world? Perhaps not: she certainly talks a lot in her book about the need to do proper, ‘robust’ metaphysics, not just to address problems in conceptual or linguistic terms. (Though of course on my view one can equally well speak engage in semantic descent from talk about conceptual interrelations, to talk about necessary relations among objects in the world. That is in no way precluded by the deflationary approach.) But Baker does also at places nod to the relation between conceptual/linguistic and metaphysical truths—e.g. “To learn a language is to learn the way the world is (or might be). When a child learns what ‘brother’ means, she learns what brothers are” (2007, 13), and a bit later she acknowledges “of course, language is not isolable from the world” (2007, 20). Moreover, her pro-metaphysical anti-conceptualist/linguistic talk is almost exclusively raised in opposition to reductionists about ordinary objects, who would treat our talk about ordinary objects as really just employing new terms or concepts to apply to certain arrangements of particles, and so could not accept, e.g., that something went out of existence when the space shuttle exploded—rather than just that certain particles became rearranged (2007, 58-59). But reductionist views are every bit as firmly rejected as before when we take a deflationary approach to our work on ordinary objects.

The approach I offer is not conceptual/linguistic in the sense of taking our talk of ordinary objects to be just applying different concepts or terms to *the same things* as are described in the language of mereological sums. Instead, it’s a matter of beginning by asking *what it can really mean to say* that there ‘really’ are towers and tables and drivers’ licenses, and that these are not identical to sums; and then showing that given all it can mean, it’s clearly true that there *are* such entities, and that they’re *not* identical to sums. So we needn’t worry about this deflationary approach deflating what we wanted to say about ordinary objects: that they exist, that they are not identical to mereological sums, that they play a central role in our lives. The deflationary metametaphysical approach does, however, do a great deal to deflate the problems that defenders of ordinary objects are thought to face. For these reasons it seems to me that a first-order realism about ordinary objects—along the lines Baker so nicely defends—works best when paired with a deflationary interpretation of what we are doing when we are describing the interesting relations that hold among ordinary objects—including relations like constitution.

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1. Author Meets Critics session, Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, December 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Though in some special cases it may be that no empirical work is required, as we may infer that the term applies from either a statement or its negation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I do so elsewhere, e.g. in my 2007a, 2007b, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For further discussion of sortal terms, application conditions and co-application conditions, see my 2007a, Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I argue in *Ordinary Objects* (Chapter 2)that singular terms have determinate reference only to the extent that they are associated with basic application and co-application conditions, fixing what basic sort of thing associating they are to refer to, should they refer at all. So to say that ‘r’ is a name for an F is to say that the associated conditions with ‘r’ entail that if ‘r’ refers at all, it refers to an F. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Ordinary Objects,* chapter 4 for a fuller discussion of these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Employing ‘thing’ in a covering sense and covering both the sortals ‘statue’ and ‘sum’. See below for more on the covering sense of ‘thing’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a fuller response to the ‘doubling up of properties’ problem, see my 2007a, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)