

is there such a thing as the statue of david?

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Abstract

Prima facie, we believe that works of art, like the statue of *David*, exist. Commonsense tells us that there is such a thing as this work of art. But there is an interesting metaphysical question about this commonsense belief. This question is known in the philosophical literature as the puzzle of material constitution. In this paper, I sketch a possible answer to this puzzle. I argue that though it is true that there is such a thing as the statue of *David*, such a thing does not exist at the fundamental ontological level. In this way, I could further claim that the original puzzle is not really that puzzling. Finally, I show why this answer fares better against other leading answers to this puzzle.

Keywords

Statue of David, commonsense belief, works of art, truthmaking principle



Commonsense View about Works of Art and the Truthmaking Principle

P*rima facie*, we believe that works of art exist. Commonsense tells us that Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Raphael's *The Academy* and Michelangelo's *David* all exist. To put it more baldly, all works of art are elements of reality. But is this claim—that works of art really exist—true? That is, are there such things as works of art?

Let's focus our attention on one particular work of art: viz., Michelangelo's *David*. If we were to ask a knowledgeable person whether such a thing exists, the reply might be in a form of an incredulous stare or an irritated snarl. Of course, this person might retort, the statue of *David* exists! Isn't it an already obvious fact? Too obvious in fact that it would simply be silly to ask whether such a thing exists.

For those who know the statue of *David* the question of whether there is such a thing would indeed be a silly one. Obviously, there is such a thing. Surely this is the case since we know a lot of truths about it! We know that it was created from Carrara marble. We know that Michelangelo sculpted it in the 16th century. We know that it is currently located at the Galleria dell'Accademia, in Florence, Italy. So why ask whether there is such a thing?

Surely, commonsense tells us that works of art, such as Michelangelo's *David*, exist. But what kind of philosophical motivation could be given for this kind of reply? That is, is there any philosophical ground by which such a commonsense view about the existence of works of art rests on?

One philosophical motivation for this commonsense claim perhaps is grounded on the principle of truthmaking. The principle of truthmaking is formulated in different ways. One way of getting a handle of it is by putting it in terms of supervenience: "truth supervenes on being."¹ The idea here is that truths (i.e., the truth of any proposition) are grounded on reality.² Alternatively, "truth ought to be determined by being."³ That is, truths are necessitated by what actually is.

How does this philosophical motivation underlie most of our commonsense claims? Well, the idea is that there is something (in the world) that makes propositions true. Or that true propositions are made true by something that exists in the world. Consider our commonsense claims about Michelangelo's *David*. We say that it is true that it is currently located at the Galleria dell'Accademia, in Florence, Italy. Given the truthmaking principle, this true claim is made true by the fact that there exists such a thing

¹ This slogan comes from John Bigelow, *The Reality of Numbers* (Clarendon Press, 1988).

² See Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, 'Truthmakers', *Philosophical Compass* 1 (2006).

³ See D. M. Armstrong, *Truth and Truthmakers* (Cambridge University Press 2004), 8.

as the statue of *David* and it is located at the Galleria dell'Accademia, in Florence, Italy. Of course a complete analysis of this true proposition would further entail the existence of an art gallery, of a country called "Italy," of Michelangelo, and so on. But the point here is that true propositions are made true by something that exists in the world.

Let's summarize what we have so far. We are inquiring whether works of art—particularly Michelangelo's *David*—exists. Commonsense tells us that such things exist. And this is motivated by a philosophical principle that we all share; viz., the truthmaking principle. The idea of truthmaking is that there exists something in the world that makes true propositions true. Since we have true propositions about works of art, it follows that such works of art exist.

Though our commonsense commitments to the existence of works of art are grounded on the sound philosophical ground of truthmaking, there are still problems both for these existential commitments and the truthmaking principle. To show one of these problems, we turn now to an interesting metaphysical puzzle about material constitution. We will see later how this puzzle plus the commitment to the truthmaking principle lead one to inflate one's ontology.

A Metaphysical Puzzle about Michelangelo's *David*

There is an interesting metaphysical puzzle about material constitution that teaches us how to think about the existence and identity of things.⁴ The puzzle has a long philosophical history and has been told in different ways.⁵ It goes something like this:

Before Michelangelo created the statue of *David*, the statue as such has not yet existed. After he created it, the statue of *David*, in some sense, came into being. But even before the statue's creation, the marble from which it was sculpted already exists. And even after its creation, the marble is still there. Perhaps even after the destruction of the statue, the marble will still be there. Clearly then, the statue of *David* is not identical with the marble from which it was sculpted (since the latter has properties that the former lacks). So, at least at a given time, there are two distinct objects made up of the same matter. But how can this be?

What is the puzzle here? The puzzle could be cashed out if we look at the premise-conclusion form of the story:

⁴ See Brian Garrett, *What is this Thing called Metaphysics?* 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 52.

⁵ See Ross Cameron, "There are no Things that are Musical Works," *Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 297-298; also Theodore Sider, "Temporal Parts," in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, ed. Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne and Dean W. Zimmerman (London: Blackwell, 2008), sec. 3; and J. J. Thomson, "The Statue and the Clay," *Nous* 32.

- P1: At an earlier time, t1, the marble exists but the statue of *David* does not exist.
- P2: At another time, t2, Michelangelo creates the statue of *David* from the marble that existed at t1.
- P3: From P1 and P2, if the marble exists at t1 and at t2 and *David* exists at t2 and not at t1, then the marble is not identical to *David* (for they differ in their properties).
- C: Therefore, there are two different objects occupying the same space and time and constituted by the same matter.⁶

Here's a thing to note about this argument: it is logically valid and the premises are seemingly true. That is, it seems that the conclusion follows necessarily from true premises. Given P1, we are given the idea that the marble from which the statue was sculpted was prior to the statue itself. By P2, we get the idea that the marble still exists and *David* came into being because of Michelangelo's act. P3 is a natural consequence of P1 and P2: if two objects differ in one or more of their (temporal) properties, then these objects are not identical. Again, it seems that the premises are all true. But they lead to the paradoxical conclusion that two different objects could occupy the same space and time and be constituted by the same material base.

Why is this puzzling? For one, we ordinarily take objects at face value. We say that marbles, chairs, and statues all exist, and their existence is an existence over time. This chair I'm sitting on right now is the same chair I sat on five minutes ago. This computer I'm looking at right now is the same computer I turned on a couple of seconds ago. Existence over time necessarily involves change. The computer I have turned on and the computer I'm looking at are one and the same, but of course the computer I'm looking at right now already changed some of its properties since I have turned it on. But we still say that it is the same computer even amidst this change. But now we should also think of the parts of the computer: the motherboard, the monitor, etc. It seems, on the one hand, that they constitute what we ordinarily refer to as a 'computer.' On the other hand, it seems plausible that though the computer is constituted by these components, it does not follow that they are identical to the computer per se (some properties attributable to the parts do not seem attributable to the whole).

The puzzle arises when we think about the very object itself. In terms of the statue of *David*, it seems plausible that it is constituted by, but not identical to, the marble it was formed from. If such were the case, then we would have to embrace the conclusion that two distinct objects occupy the same space and time, and are constituted by the same material base. Now this idea is puzzling.

⁶ Cf. Sider, op. cit.

Truthmaking and Inflating Ontologies

There are many answers to this puzzle.⁷ But many of them could be lumped into two general views: the perdurantist and endurantist views. On the perdurantist view, the conclusion of the puzzle is rejected. We're not dealing with two distinct objects here. We are just dealing with one. And this one is a really complex thing. The marble from which *David* was sculpted from has different spatial and temporal parts. And just like how the spatial parts of a thing are extended in space so do the temporal parts of a thing are extended in time. It just so happens that *David* is a temporal part of the marble. It is the temporal part that is statue shaped. Since being a part of a thing does not entail being a distinct object from another object, it follows that the conclusion of the puzzle is wrong.

On the endurantist view, rejecting the perdurantist commitment to the existence of temporal parts, the conclusion of the puzzle is accepted. *David* and the marble are indeed two distinct objects. But though this is the case, we should not be puzzled for the two bear an intimate relation with one another; the so-called relation of constitution. So the idea here is that ordinary things could be constituted by other things, but the constituents are not identical to the constituted object. Thus, *David* is constituted by the marble, but the marble is not identical to *David*.

Let me expound on these two views. The endurantist and perdurantist views are metaphysical theories of persistence: they are metaphysical in that they are concerned with the very nature and identity of things; they are theories of persistence in that they both offer views about what it is for objects to persist over time.⁸

In the perdurantist picture, objects persist by having temporal parts. An ordinary object is the same object over time by having suitably related temporal parts at different times. To have a handle of what's going here consider your own life. Look at it as a timeline. Perhaps, there will be a point in the timeline indicating your birth, another point indicating your first kiss, and so on. Take each point in the timeline as one of your temporal parts. You persist in time by having those points in the timeline.

The perdurantist's answer to the puzzle of material constitution is to reject the conclusion and embrace temporal parts. There's only one object considered in the case, an object that has temporal parts. Just like your timeline where different temporal parts of you differ in some properties, there will be a point in the history of the marble that it acquires a different set of properties—e.g., being statue-shaped—other than what it previously had—e.g., being a plain marble in Carrara.

In the endurantist view, on the other hand, the picture is quite different. Objects don't have temporal parts. An object persists, on this view, by having intimate connections

⁷ Sider, op. cit., outlines many of the other answers not given discussed here.

⁸ The discussion here follows Garrett, op. cit., 54-55.

with different three-dimensional objects each of which is wholly present at different times. To have a handle of this, imagine your present self. This self has a unique existence: it exists wholly only at this particular time. You persist over time if and only if the person who wholly exists yesterday is identical to (or bears a close identity relation to) you who is wholly existing now.

The endurantist picture seems intuitive, but it could only account for the puzzle of material constitution by accepting its conclusion. It tells us that two distinct objects—the marble and *David*—could occupy the same space and time, and be made up of the same material constituents. The marble has a different set of identity conditions from *David*. The marble that existed at t1 is identical to the marble at t2; *David* is identical to *David* at t2. Given this, the marble is a distinct object from *David*, though both are constituted by the same matter.

Both views are problematic. The endurantist view wants us to embrace the paradoxical conclusion that two distinct objects could occupy the same space and time, and be made up of the same matter. The perdurantist view, on the other hand, wants us to embrace the ontology of temporal parts in order to undermine the puzzle of material constitution. Both offered options are not plausible to any commonsensical chap. Hence, the puzzle remains.

Let me digress a little bit and try to make a diagnosis of what's going on here. As mentioned earlier, the endurantist and perdurantist views are metaphysical theories about ordinary objects. Both want to ground our ordinary beliefs about what it is for an object to persist over time. But we have seen that each offers an outrageous—inflated—ontological account of the puzzle material constitution. I think that one reason for this is the commitment to the truthmaking principle.

To review, the truthmaking principle states that some true proposition is made true by something that exists in the world. That is, if there is such a thing, then it makes a given proposition true. This principle, as mentioned earlier, informs our ordinary beliefs about the truth of some propositions. We say that the existence Michelangelo's *David*, and perhaps the existence of Carrara marble, necessitates the truth of the statement, 'The statue of *David* is made out of Carrara marble.' But not only does the truthmaking principle inform our commonsense view, it also motivates ontologists to create complicated ontologies to account for certain truths.

In the case of the puzzle of material constitution, the endurantist view accepts the truth of the conclusion and accounts for it by positing a mysterious constitution relation. The perdurantist view, on the other hand, wants to reject the conclusion, but preserve our commonsense intuitions about *David* by conjuring up the theory of temporal parts.⁹ Both

⁹ We could multiply examples here. Truthmaking arguments are used to motivate and reject theories of time. Consider true past tense statements. Given the truthmaking principle,

views give an inflated ontology because both take some of our true commonsense claims about things as ontologically committing to the existence of those things. That is, in the case of the present problem, since commonsense entails a commitment to the existence of marbles and statues, the endurantist and perdurantist are also committed to them. But an inflated ontology is something that could be resisted.

Truthmaking and a Minimal Ontology

The problem, I take it, is with the truthmaking principle and how we view what ontology (metaphysics) is all about. Ontology is concerned with what ultimately—or fundamentally—exists. Truthmaking, on the other hand, is a semantic principle that we ordinarily use to get the truth of propositions. The two need not coincide. And at most times, they come apart. To show this, I will put forward a ‘toy’ minimal ontology and see how this would account for the puzzle of material constitution.

Following Ross Cameron’s lead, the claims of this ontology shall be put in boldface, while ordinary claims in English are enclosed in quotation marks.¹⁰ In this ontology, *only mereological simples exist*. This entails that *no composite object exist*. Furthermore, *statues, marbles, tables, and other composite objects do not exist*. But, *there are mereological simples arranged statuewise, marblewise, tablewise, etc.*

Suppose that our toy ontology is the true picture of reality. Would this amount to the view that true sentences in English about composite objects are not made true by anything? No! Truthmaking tells us that a proposition is true if there exists something that makes it true. Consider the true sentence: “There are statues.” Given the minimal ontology we are assuming here, this sentence is made true by the fact that *there are mereological simples arranged statuewise*. In this ontology, therefore, true sentences about composite objects are made true by the arrangement of simples in the world.

Consider now whether the true sentence, “There are statues” is made true by *there are statues*. In this case, *there are statues* is an ontological claim about what fundamentally exists. It tells us that statues are part of the furniture of the reality. This is well and good if *statues exist* is a true ontological claim. But we need not say that that “there are statues” is made true by *there are statues* if fundamentally *there are no statues*. The point of this is that we need not treat true sentences in English as ontological claims per se. Ontological claims are about what fundamentally exists. If we are to take true English sentences at face value, then we need not be committed to any ontological thesis about *what fundamentally is*.

there should be something in the world that makes them true. So, some have claimed that there are past facts and objects. And those who reject these would succumb to the truthmaking objection.

¹⁰ See Cameron, *op. cit.*, 301-302.

Going back to the puzzle of material constitution, we are led to the paradoxical conclusion that two distinct objects occupy the same space and time, and are composed of the same matter because we take the premises of the argument as ontologically committing. P1 tells us that the marble exists, but the statue of *David* does not exist. But this is just an ordinary English claim. It does not commit us to the ontological claim that *the marble exists but the statue of David does not exist*. The same goes for the other statements in the argument.

The lesson here is that we need not have inflated ontologies in order to account for the truth of claims in English. What is important to note is that truthmaking need not be ontologically committing. And that is all we need in order to deflate some problems in metaphysics, like the problem of whether the statue of *David* exists.

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