

## SOME ISSUES REGARDING ARTIFACTS\*

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**ABSTRACT.** When it comes to artifacts, the functional accounts define them as objects that have an intended function. This function is considered essential for them and is used to classify artifacts and differentiate them. However, functional accounts of artifacts face some serious criticism. It seems that a function is neither essential, nor sufficient for an artifact. Thomasson offers a new perspective on artifacts. The author defines artifacts based on their intended feature. A feature may, of course, be a function but does not have to be just that. Generally speaking, intended features are norms of how to treat that specific artifact. Such an account is able to escape the criticism raised against functional accounts. In this article is presented Baker's functional account of artifacts and some criticism that can be raised for such an account. The second part of the article critically introduces Thomasson's account for artifacts. The aim of this article is to support Thomasson's account against a functional perspective.

**Keywords:** *artifacts, mind-dependent objects, intended function, natural kinds, intended feature, Amie Thomasson, L. R. Baker*

Some common views define artifacts based on their function (Baker, 2008), their intended features (Thomasson, 2014) or based on actions (Houkes and Vermaas, 2004). However, the first two accounts are the most well-known ones in later debates.

The aim of this article is to provide a comparison between the functional and the intended features accounts on artifacts and to offer some arguments in

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favor of the latter. To be more specific, I will argue that Thomasson's view is more complex<sup>1</sup> and suitable to analyze artifacts and that Baker's account has some flaws.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section I will present Baker's account. Some flaws of the functional account are presented in the second section. Finally, in the last section, Thomasson's alternative is presented. Thomasson's account is presented critically; thus, some possible issues of the account are pointed out and some answers are sketched.

### I. Baker's account

The distinction between artifacts and natural kinds is not a new one.<sup>3</sup> Artifacts are artificial or non-natural kinds. If one wants to classify kinds based on their origin (i.e. how they appeared) a dichotomy occurs: natural kinds and artificial kinds. When it comes to natural objects (kinds) they come into being without any rational intervention, therefore, they are considered mind-independent.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, artificial kinds are created by a rational mind (or by a causal chain that ends with a rational mind); because of this they are considered to be mind-dependent.<sup>5 6</sup>

Since artifacts are considered mind-dependent, there are controversies regarding their existence; some authors<sup>7</sup> claim that they do not properly exist. There are authors that claim that only natural kinds exist and artificial kinds are composed of particles of natural kinds, therefore there is no need to inflate the ontology with artificial kinds.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By complex I do not want to suggest that it is more inflated terminologically, but rather that it has a degree of generality that the functional account lacks.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that by no means I want to suggest that Thomasson's view is the best account for defining artifacts. An article would not be enough for such a big aim. The purpose of this article strictly refers to these two views and their comparison.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle – in *Physics* – tried to offer a criterion in order to distinguish between these two kinds.

<sup>4</sup> Their existence is considered mind-independent. However, this view might be criticized from an antirealist perspective. I am not going in depth with this discussion in this article. The main point I want to emphasize is that there is a distinction between the existence of natural kinds and the existence of artificial kinds.

<sup>5</sup> According to Baker (2008) artifacts are 'intention-dependent', therefore 'they could not exist in a world without beings with propositional attitude' (Baker, 2008, pp. 2-3)

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Baker's aim is to argue that the distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent objects is not essential and does not provide a strong difference between artifacts and natural kinds; but this is not relevant for the aim of this paper. For more see Baker 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Merricks (2001), Unger (1979)

<sup>8</sup> For more see: Merricks (2001)

Against this view, Baker (2008, p. 1) argues that the existence of artifacts is obvious. Artifacts exist not only because most of the ordinary objects are artifacts, but also because ‘without artifacts, there would be no recognizable human life’.

Baker (2008, p. 1) defines artifacts in the following way:

‘Artifacts are objects intentionally made to serve a given purpose’

According to Baker (2008) an artifact  $x$  has a function  $F$ , therefore  $x$  has its function essentially. This means that the nature of an artifact lies in its function. The persistence condition for an artifact is explained in virtue of being the kind of artifact that it is; this leads us back to its function. For example, let us suppose that we have an object  $O$  – a chair.  $O$  is a chair as long as it can fulfill its function. If  $O$  is unable to fulfill its function, it loses its status; although  $O$  may still look like a chair and have properties that chairs have.

Baker (2008, p.2) considers that artifacts are produced to perform the function they are designed for “whether they successfully perform their proper function or not”. This mention might suggest that a degree of error is permitted. Another interpretation<sup>9</sup> might be:

$F_{\circ}$ : an artifact  $x$  has a function  $F$  such that  $Fx$  is possible

This means the artifact can fulfill its function, but does not necessary have to do it. Thus, the artifact potentially has the function  $F$ , but it is not necessary to have it actually. This interpretation seems to raise many questions for Baker’s account. The obvious question is how do we know that an artifact has a specific function only potentially and how it can be proved that it has it? This issue can be solved if an additional clause is introduced, obtaining:

$F_{\circ a}$ : an artifact  $x$  has a function  $F$  such that  $Fx$  is possible, and  $F$  is fulfilled (actualized)<sup>10</sup> at least once by  $x$ <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The following interpretations (both  $F_{\circ}$  and  $F_{\circ a}$ ) have their roots in Baker’s paper (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Possible objects are not taken into consideration.

<sup>11</sup> A possible counterargument to this might be the Chair – a chair used to put clothes on it. We can imagine a possible chair – let us call it  $c$  – such that we accept that  $c$  is a chair, but it was never used as one. Does  $F_{\circ a}$  still stand? It seems that it does not. I have to thank my colleague Andrea Popescu for this example and for all the fruitful discussions and feedback on this article.

It should be noted that Thomasson’s view does not have a similar problem. Thomasson may take into consideration the intended feature of the builder of the chair. In this situation,  $c$  would still be a chair, but it would not be used accordingly.

Baker's account has three main points. Firstly, artifacts are functional objects. Secondly, the function determines what kind of artifact an object is. Two objects,  $x$  and  $y$ , are of the same kind if and only if they perform the same function. Thirdly, because artifacts are intentional products, they are mind-dependent.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, if Baker's account is accepted, then artifacts are defined and classified based on their function and they are mind-dependent objects. Such an account raises some questions.

## II. Raising some questions for Baker

A functional account of artifacts – as Baker's – has some weak points. Thomasson (2014) questions Baker's proposal in the following way: having a specific function is a necessary or sufficient condition for having a proper classification of artifacts? Thomasson's answer is a strong no. Is the artifact's function essential to it? Once again, Thomasson's answer is no.

If we put it formally<sup>13</sup>:

$(\forall x)(Ax \rightarrow Fx)$  or, even stronger  $(\forall x)(Ax \leftrightarrow Fx)$ ,  
where  $A\_ =$  is an artifact  
and  $F\_ =$  has a function.

This means that we are not supposed to find something that is an artifact ( $A\_$ ) and fails to have an intended function ( $F\_$ ). In this situation, the following formula should be false if Baker's account stands:

$\sim(\exists x)(Ax \& \sim Fx)$

Let us assume that there is an  $a$  such that  $(Aa \& \sim Fa)$  is true. What can  $a$  be?

Thomasson suggests that  $a$  can be any piece of art. According to Thomasson artifacts that are pieces of art do not have a specific function. However, an advocate of Baker's account could suggest that the function for artistic objects could be a

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<sup>12</sup> Following from these points, artifacts and natural objects are different from (at least) three aspects:

- (i) Artifacts depend ontologically on humans and human purposes, natural objects **do not**
- (ii) Artifacts could not exist in a world without minds. On the other hand, natural objects can exist in a world without any rational mind, despite the fact that they can also be used to serve human purposes.
- (iii) Artifacts essentially have intended functions, while natural objects do not have such functions essentially.

<sup>13</sup> This is my interpretation and formulation of Thomasson's example.

trivial one, as ‘being a piece of art’. This can work pretty well in order to differentiate between common objects and pieces of art. Returning to the three parts of Baker’s account:

- (1) Artifacts are functional objects
- (2) Function determines what kind of artifact an object is
- (3) Artifacts are intentional products; therefore they are mind-dependent

(1) is fulfilled if the trivial function ‘being a piece of art’ is introduced. (3) is not the subject of this critique. However, (2) seems to fail. If artful artifacts have a trivial function, then, how can we distinguish between a sculpture and a picture only using their functions? If the function is supposed to be the criterion used to classify different kinds of artifacts, this means that the function cannot be a trivial one. The link between an artifact and its function is not a trivial one; it is rather a metaphysical one.<sup>14</sup> A function is something that is essentially connected to that specific artifact. Thus, it seems that Baker’s account has some weak points.

Another question is the following: what happens with a specific object that loses its function because it receives a new one? For example, O may become a piece of art. Would O still be considered a chair? We would still consider it a chair, despite the fact that, given Baker’s analysis, we should consider O otherwise. However, Baker can provide an answer to this counterargument. Since the definition provided by Baker states that the object has to be unable to fulfill its function in order to lose its status, Baker could say that the chair did not lose its ability to fulfill its function. Thus, O still has – potentially – the ability to fulfill its function, but does not do so actively. In this situation, the interpretation presented at  $F_{\circ a}$  can be used. This answer solves the problem only apparently. In fact, such a possible answer just raises another question. Since objects have their function essentially, if O is still a chair, it means it cannot be a piece of art, because artistic objects have different functions than chairs. Baker’s account states that an artifact has to be classified based on its function. Thus, pieces of art and chairs obviously have different functions; therefore one object cannot be both essentially. Therefore, Baker’s account must choose to either consider O a chair, or a piece of art, and not both.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Taking into consideration that the function is essential in order to classify a specific object, it cannot be trivial. If it would be trivial – like identity – then every object would have it; thus, it cannot be used as a criterion of classification.

<sup>15</sup> Of course an artifact can have multiple functions, in this passage I focus on that specific function – according to Baker – that is essential for an artifact and provide a classification criterion. For example, an object that is a sculpture can have the form of a chair. However, that specific object would not fulfill the specific function of a chair, but rather the one for being an artful artifact; thus, such an object has essentially the function of being a piece of art, not that of being a chair.

To conclude, Baker's account fails to provide answers to some critical questions. First of all, artifacts' functions are not sufficient to classify them. Secondly, having a function is not essential for an object to be an artifact. Thirdly, even though it would be accepted that having a function is sufficient to classify artifacts, this does not solve the problem of classification, since there would be artifacts of different types and the same function.

### III. Thomasson's account

Accounts that define artifacts to have intended features have their weak points. Thus, Thomasson provides a new definition for artifacts:

'Artifacts must have certain intended features' (Thomasson, 2014, p. 58)

An intended feature is more general than a function. An intended feature may be a function, a structural feature, a perceptible feature or something else. Quoting Thomasson:

'(...) must have intended *features*, but these may include not only functional, but also structural, perceptible, or even receptive and normative features: features regarding how the object is to be regarded, used or treated.'

(Thomasson, 2014, p. 57)

The resulting question is when we can consider the intended feature to be successfully accomplished? Thomasson provides an answer:

'(...) something is a member of an essentially artifactual kind K only if it is the product of a largely successfully executed intention to make K, where the maker must have a substantive concept of the nature of Ks that largely matches that of some prior K-makers (if any) and intend to realize that concept by making an object with K-relevant features.'

(Thomasson, 2003, pp. 599-600)

This definition allows the feature to vary from kind to kind (Thomasson, 2014, p. 60). The formulation – 'largely successfully executed intention' – is meant to underline the possibility of error. Therefore, some degrees of error are accepted. This is indeed needed in order to accept that something is an artifact, even though it is not perfectly executed, but it is recognized as an object of a specific kind. However, I believe that accepting some degrees of error leads us to some forms of

vagueness. A form of sorites paradox can be formulated. Let us assume there is an object  $c$  of a specific kind  $K$ . If a small error is made  $c_1$  is obtained. This new object is still  $K$ , since Thomasson's formulation accepts some small errors. Successive errors are made until we reach  $c_n$ . If  $c_{n-1}$  was still  $K$ , then  $c_n$  should also be accepted as  $K$ . Thus, at which point do we reach the limit of errors such that from that point forward the object does not belong to  $K$  anymore? It seems that we are not able to provide an answer to this question and we are stuck with a form of paradox.

In a day to day situation an answer to the vagueness problem can be provided for specific cases. Thus, there is no general (or a priori) answer to the already mentioned question, but only individual answers for each situation. Those answers are a posteriori and can be provided only for a specific case. However, I am not sure that this solution may work properly. The changes mentioned in the form of the sorites presented are minimal; in a day to day situation such changes might not be easily observable.

However, it should be pointed out that from a pragmatic point of view, Thomasson's account provides a criterion of separation between failed artifacts and useful ones. In a day to day situation, sorites would not occur. Those kinds of questions and issues are purely theoretical. A pragmatic view may be the way out for Thomasson.

According to Thomasson (2014, p. 62), artifacts are 'intended to be *recognizable* by a certain *intended audience*'. This intended recognition serves the further purpose of treating the artifact in appropriate ways, 'as subject to the relevant norms' (Thomasson, 2014, p. 63). Thus, artifacts are linked to (public) norms.

Artifacts may be used in three ways: standard, alternative and improper (Houkes and Vermaas, 2004, 53). This usage can be accounted for by Thomasson, but Baker's account fails to do so. It is obvious that an account that defines artifacts based on their function cannot distinguish between these three uses. Thus, Baker's account cannot provide a criterion to differentiate between a standard and an alternative or improper use. The account provides a criterion to classify artifacts based on their function, but cannot offer degrees for those functions or classify between ways of using a specific artifact. Thomasson's account, on the other hand, may be developed with such an analysis. If an artifact is defined and characterized given its intended feature, the distinction between standard and improper use is already incorporated. Thomasson considers that the intended features are meant to point out how the object should be treated. Those normative features might be used to distinguish between these three uses of an artifact. Despite the fact that this account can provide a differentiation criterion, the improper use might raise some issues. An improper use presupposes a violation of the norms suggested by

the intended features of the artifact. Therefore, those accounts that define artifacts based on their features should be developed with a proper analysis for improper uses.

A theory of artifacts based on intended features may accept the improper use as a transformation of the artifact into one of a different kind. For example, let us assume that we have an artifact C that is a chair. An artist may use C in an improper way, and put it in an art gallery as an exhibit. In this situation C would no longer be a chair, but a piece of art. Baker's account fails to support such an answer, but Thomasson's one has no problems in this situation. Even more, it seems that an account based on intended features might accept the fact that C is both a piece of art and a chair. C would firstly be a piece of art, because its creator sees it in that way. However, because he has more than one intended feature, C is also a chair used in an improper way.

To conclude, an account based on intended features is able to solve some of the issues raised against an account based on intended functions. However, Thomasson's account faces the problem of vagueness, if it is not understood from a pragmatic point of view.

#### **IV Conclusions**

This article aimed to present two theories on artifacts and some problematic issues concerning each of them. Baker's functional account considers that artifacts are mind-dependent objects which should be defined and classified given their functions. Thus, an artifact that fails to fulfill its function does not belong to its kind anymore.

This view faces some serious criticism. First of all, there are artifacts which do not have an intended function. Such artifacts are pieces of art. A trivial function – such as 'being a piece of art' – is not enough to provide a classification criterion since we would not be able to draw a distinction between different types of artful pieces. This means that the function of an artifact is neither sufficient for its classification, nor essential for the object. Secondly, Baker's theory fails to accommodate that an artifact can change its function and it does not tell us what happens to the object if its function is changed. To sum up, it seems that Baker's account fails in some important aspects.

Thomasson's perspective defines artifacts based on their intended features. Features may incorporate functions, but they are not limited to those. The criticism raised for the previous account does not apply to the one based on intended features. Thomasson's view can offer answers when it comes to different uses of artifacts

and degrees of error. However, a paradox similar to sorites may be formulated for this account when it comes to errors. A pragmatic solution can be offered, but the theoretical problem still haunts the account. Despite this flaw, Thomasson's view is more suitable in analyzing artifacts.

To conclude, this article aimed to offer some arguments in favor of Thomasson's view when compared to Baker's. When it comes to artifacts, they can be better understood if they are defined based on their intended features, rather than functions.

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