

Dissertation Summary

My dissertation gives a comprehensive account and critical analysis of a medieval debate that has not been studied in depth before, about the metaphysical status of artefacts. Are artefacts, such as statues, chairs, and houses, things distinct from their component parts? For example, is a chair something over and above the pieces of wood out of which it has been made? It is well known that these issues are intensely debated in contemporary metaphysics. But what is much less known, even to historians of philosophy, is that the contemporary discussion had a precedent in the Middle Ages. As I show in the dissertation, there were two main camps in the medieval debate: realists and reductionists. The realists argue that an artefact is something distinct from the natural things composing it because it adds over and above them a new form: an artificial form, which is added to natural things by the artificer in the process of making a given artefact. For example, a chair is a thing distinct from the pieces of wood composing it because it adds over and above them a new form, the form of a chair. The reductionists argue against the realists that such artificial forms should not be posited and that hence an artefact is nothing more than the natural things out of which it has been made. From a historical perspective, my dissertation studies the origin, development and dissemination of the medieval debate. For example, I demonstrate that, while the debate only really took off after William of Ockham had articulated his reductionist view, there were some discussions preceding Ockham, for example in the works of John of Pouilly and Bernard of Auvergne. Furthermore, I provide evidence that it was reductionism about artefacts that was a vastly predominant view in the later fourteenth and in the fifteenth century. In addition, I show that neither the realist, nor the reductionist view were a completely uniform movement. For example, within reductionism, there were two main strands, one originating from William of Ockham and one from John Buridan.

From a more systematic perspective, my dissertation investigates the broader context of the debate, the main problems that it involved, and the key arguments used in addressing them. I show that two most fundamental problems shaping the debate about artefacts have to do with (1) truthmaking and the nature of change and (2) the productivity of art. The first of these problems consists in the question of how to account for the change in the truth-value of propositions concerning artefacts, such as 'These pieces of wood are a chair'. I demonstrate that both parties agree that a change of truth-value must be grounded in some change in reality, but they then disagree about what such a change in reality would consist in. The realists argue that it must consist in the production or loss of some things in the world whereas the reductionists argue that the relevant change is local motion, which does not involve the production or loss of any things in the world.

One of many arguments that I analyse in the dissertation is an argument first proposed by William of Ockham for the thesis that artefacts made by composition, such as houses, cannot be anything more than their component parts. I show that the particular strength of Ockham's argument lies in the plausibility of its premises. The most important premise is that local motion cannot by itself produce any new thing. All that happens if a thing is moved in space is that it begins to occupy a new place. Now, Ockham argues that when bricks are put into a house, all that needs to happen is that they be appropriately moved so that they form a house-shaped structure. Hence, all that occurs in this process is that already existent things acquire a new place; so the making of a house does not involve production of a any new thing over and above the bricks used in this activity.

My general assessment in the dissertation is that the reductionist view of artefacts has an upper hand in the debate, since in at least a couple of instances, such as the one described above, realists about artefacts seem to have no convincing reply to the arguments put forward by the reductionists. In addition, I also show that artefact realism fails to deliver on one of its main promises, which was to show that (and how) an artefact such as a chair is a thing in its own right, distinct from its components. I demonstrate that this failure has to do with the fact that the realists hold that artificial forms are mere accidents, and hence that artefacts are not new substances but rather merely accidental unities. As a result, an artefact exemplifies the same kind of unity as the unity between Socrates and his whiteness. Hence, if an accidental compound such as white Socrates is not an entity distinct from Socrates, neither should an artefact such as a marble statue count as a thing distinct from the piece of marble; which ultimately means a complete failure of the realist programme about artefacts.

The Appendix contains critical editions of twelve most important texts concerning artefacts which were hitherto available only in manuscript form.