

Constitution and Causation

Nick Zangwill

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Abstract I argue that the constitution relation transmits causal efficacy and thus is a suitable relation to deploy in many troubled areas of philosophy, such as the mind–body problem. We need not demand identity.

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We often appeal to the idea of constitution where we are unwilling to accept a claim of identity. Examples are the relation between artefacts and their material basis, and between mind and body. The question I ask here is: what is the relation between the causal properties of things that stand in the constitution relation? This question is important for assessing the feasibility and ultimate plausibility of appeals to constitution. To answer this question, I begin by making some preliminary remarks about the constitution relation, or perhaps about one way to construe it, before turning to consider the causal properties of things that stand in that relation. The point is to explore the notion of constitution and its consequences, and partly to defend the deployment of the notion. It turns out that constitution is after all an attractive option for those with anxieties about non-basic properties, for example in the mind–body problem or in special sciences such as biology, geology or chemistry.

1

What, then, does constitution consist in? And how should we conceive of constitution? Some who have utilized the notion of constitution have tried to explicate it in *other* terms. But I propose leave the notion unanalyzed, as a primitive. Lynne Rudder Baker makes constitution central in some of her work (Baker 2000,

N. Zangwill (✉)
Philosophy Department, Durham University, 50 Old Elvet, Durham DH1 3HN, UK
e-mail: Nick.zangwill@dur.ac.uk

2007). But, in my view, she makes a mistake when she attempts to *explicate* the constitution relation in other terms. In her 2000 book, she does so in terms of spatial coincidence, but this left her open to Ted Sider's counterexample of distinct things that occupy the same space (Sider 2002). Furthermore, perhaps some abstract objects can constitute others. I believe that she should, instead, have taken a *primitivist* stance on constitution. Instead of attempting to explain it in other terms, she should take it as basic and explain other things in terms of it.

Nevertheless, some things can be said about the relation. We can be pretty open-minded about the relata of the constitution relation. I cannot see any categorical restrictions. Objects, events, facts, properties and tropes can all stand in the constitution relation, at least with respect to other entities of a similar category, and in some cases between entities of different categories. Objects may be constituents of states of affairs, for example. Also, things that stand in the constitution relation may have parts, so we may say that something is partly or wholly constituted by another. Given this, I propose that where one thing partly or wholly constitutes another, the things that stand in the constitution relation are neither *distinct* things, which are causally related, nor are they *identical* with each other: they are neither distinct nor identical. For example, a goalkeeper is not identical with the football team, nor is he distinct. There is middle ground between these. Identity and distinctness are not exhaustive. Distinctness is not merely non-identity.

This approach may make some uncomfortable, and it may conflict with certain doctrines of twentieth century classical logic. But allowing a middle possibility has the advantage that it avoids the problem of saying that there are two things that occupy the same space–time region, or such that if each of them weighs 10 lbs, then they weigh 20 lbs together. Better to give up the doctrine that identity and distinctness are exhaustive.

Where one thing is distinct from another and both things are F, then there are two Fs. But this does not follow from non-identity. The notions of identity and distinctness are to some extent open for stipulation, but it is useful to tie identity to Leibniz's law—that identical things have all their properties in common. And identity is usually stipulated to be a reflexive, symmetrical and transitive relation. Given such a notion of identity, non-identity does not imply distinctness.¹

Constitution can be compared with the part–whole relation. Both parthood and constitution seem intuitively to fall between identity and distinctness. When A is a proper part of B, it is plausible that A is neither identical with B nor distinct from B. Distinct things share no parts. Similarly, when C is a constitutive part of D, but not vice versa, it is likewise plausible that C is neither identical with D nor distinct from D. Distinct things can not stand in a constitution relation. One difference between parthood and constitution is that if A is a proper part of a whole, B, then B has *other* proper parts which are *wholly* distinct from A. If A and B are distinct, then they share no parts and A and B do not stand in a constitution relation. Both the parthood and constitution relations are asymmetrical, unlike identity, though like identity they

¹ I think that it is not an implausible view of identity that it is a *complex* notion. Perhaps, A and B are identical when A is a part of B and B is a part of A, or perhaps A and B are identical when A is constitutive of B and B is constitutive of A. Why take identity to be fundamental? It is common to assert that it is. Perhaps it is, but I have never seen a good reason for taking it to be fundamental. Perhaps, other notions are fundamental and identity can be explained in terms of them.

are transitive. There is also the idea that *A partially constitutes B*, where *A* is part of a whole *C* and *C* constitutes *B*.)

What then is distinctness, if it is more than mere non-identity? Distinctness and non-identity can be distinguished as follows. If *A* is distinct from *B*, and *A* is *F*, and *B* is *F* then there are two *F*s. But if *A* and *B* are merely non-identical, then this does not follow. This might seem to be merely a matter of stipulation concerning how to use the words “identity” and “distinct”, but the hope is that this stipulation more or less follows the folk view, or a folk view, or is a reasonable reconstruction (reconstitution?) of a folk view, since it avoids the puzzling and intuitively repellent idea that constitution relation relates *two* things. Where *A* is a part of *B*, or where *A* constitutes *B*, common sense denies that there are two things, occupying the same space–time and weighing the sum of each of the two things. And if identity is out of the question, then there must be other possibilities between identity and distinctness.

2

Let us now consider the causal properties of things that stand in the constitution relation? Once we embrace the relation of constitution, we need to adjust what we say about causation. Two wholly distinct things may have causal *relations* between each other. But what are the causal relations between things that are neither identical nor distinct, such as parts and wholes, or things that stand in constitution relation?

Consider parts and wholes first. Consider a tree and its trunk. The trunk is a part of the tree, and a very important part. Where the trunk goes, so goes the rest of the tree. If the trunk is uprooted and replanted, then so too is the whole tree. And many properties of the trunk will also be properties of the tree. But these determination relations are not causal determination relations, not at least in a straightforward way. It is unclear whether there are causal determination relations between a thing and its parts, and it is unclear how the relations between parts and other things relate to the causal relations between wholes and those other things.

What about causal relations between things that stand in the constitution relation? Despite the differences between parthood and constitution, the causal situation in the constitution case has significant similarities with the part–whole case. Consider a dog and the state of affairs, its barking. The dog is a constituent of the state of affairs. No dog, no barking (that is, no state of affairs involving barking). The dog is not a proper part of the state of affairs, since there are no parts of the state of affairs that are wholly distinct from the dog. But what are the determination relations between the dog and its barking? Well, given what dogs are like—that is, the general fact about dogs that they tend to bark—it is true that if a dog exists then it barks (at some time or other). And there is a conditional relating a constituent to the state of affairs it partly constitutes. The metaphysical relation between the dog and the dog’s barking is metaphysical constitution, and this relation underwrites the conditional. But is there a *causal* relation between the dog and its barking? This is a difficult question.

Once we have admitted an extra metaphysical relation between identity and distinctness between objects, events, facts and whatever, then we should modify what we say about causation. In particular, it need not be the case that causal *chains* are either identical or distinct. Or perhaps the idea of a ‘causal chain’ is not helpful at all, since it assumes the very idea that needs to be questioned. To reach for some somewhat unpretty terminology, we might say that things that stand in the constitution relation are ‘causally entangled’. We allow for purely metaphysical determination, such as between H₂O and water. And we allow for purely causal determination between distinct things. I suggest that we should also allow for an intermediate category of determination. Causal entanglement is a complex and interesting relation, which needs philosophical exploration. I have merely labelled a phenomenon, which is not to understand it. But it is better to recognize a phenomenon than not to do so.

3

Someone might say that constituents of states of affairs stand in causal relation to other things only because the states of affairs they constitute do so. Suppose that X causes a state of affairs Y, and Y is constituted in part by Z. It would not be right to say in general that the object Z only comes into existence because the states of affairs Y of which Z is a constituent comes into existence. For example, it is not that some previous state of affairs that causes a dog to bark, *thereby* causes the dog’s existence. Suppose I throw the dog a bone. That causes the dog’s barking but not the dog’s existence. The dog would have existed even if I had not thrown the bone. Nevertheless, there are *other* previous states of affairs without which the dog would not have existed *and* without which it would not have barked. For example, if the dog’s mother and father had never met, the dog would not have existed and it would not have barked. In the part–whole cases, the causal syndrome that produces a part also produces the whole. The state of affairs that produces the trunk also produces the whole tree. And similarly, where one thing constitutes another, the causal syndrome that produces the object also produces the whole state of affairs of which it is a constituent. Both cases are similar to, but not exactly the same as, a common-cause scenario. (The difference from the common-cause scenario is that, where there is a common cause, there are wholly distinct effects.)

The idea of causal entanglement between constituted and constitutee offers some help with some aspects of the problem of mental causation, and also other cases where we have higher-level causally efficacious properties that are constituted but not reducible to the instantiation of other lower-level causally efficacious properties.

Almost all philosophers allow that higher-level properties can be causally efficacious, although there is disagreement about how this is possible. Some very cautious philosophers think that only the identity between higher- and lower-level properties allows for the efficacy of the higher-level properties (Kim 1993; postscripts, Kim 2000). Other less risk-averse philosophers allow for causal efficacy given other relations that fall short of identity (e.g. Fodor 1987). It certainly seems unreasonably over-demanding to require identity. It is true that the attraction of identity is that Leibniz’s law ensures that causal properties are shared between things

that are identical. Causal relations and powers are automatically transmitted across the identity relation. However, the question is whether relations other than identity also support causal transmission, and it seems dogmatic to insist that only identity will do. Current philosophy lacks any general theory of which relations transmit efficacy and why. But it is surely plausible that relations other than identity do transmit efficacy since many higher-level properties that are intuitively efficacious are not identical with lower-level ones.

Certainly, no one has ever given a reason for thinking that *only* identity preserves causal efficacy. It is true that we seem to have an explanation in the case of identity but not in the other cases. On the other hand, even in the case of identity, the explanation is not really all that enlightening. The transmission of efficacy by identity is supposed to be explained by Leibniz's law. But as Colin McGinn has pointed out, Leibniz's law contains identity—that identical objects or events have identical properties (McGinn 2002). So the identity explanation of causal transmission is not that deep.

On the other hand we certainly face a question: why think that constitution *does* transmit causal efficacy? We have no reason to think that it does not. But why think that it does? The problem is that dependence clearly does *not* transmit efficacy. Although sets depend on their members, they do not share the causal properties of their members, and although the physical world depends on God, it lacks the infinitude of His causal properties. Our question is: is constitution like identity in preserving causal efficacy? Or is it like dependence in not preserving it?

Constitution surely does transmit causal properties. It may do this even though *modal* properties are not transmitted by the constitution relation. But that is alright, since it is plausible that causal; relations are contingent.

One difference between dependence and constitution is that constitution lies half way between identity and distinctness, and this is not true of the dependence relation. Things or states of affairs that depend on each other may be utterly distinct from each other (as in the case of sets and their members and of God and the world). So of course causal efficacy is not transmitted across the relation in these cases. But where things or states of affairs are not utterly distinct from each other, causal properties of the one will surely not be completely unrelated to those of the other. So it is not implausible that constitution transmits causal efficacy.

It is true that we are still short of a full explanation of causal transmission between the relata of the constitution relation. Why, exactly, is causality transmitted? This is a difficult question. However, it is progress to realize that there is an important question about what is it about the relation of constitution that explains causal transmission? An answer to that question would, I think, be welcomed by many philosophers in many different areas of philosophy who are concerned with the causal efficacy of property instantiations that are constituted by other property instantiations. Nevertheless, it is clear *that* constitution does transmit causal efficacy, and we have no reason to think it does not. Constitution is thus a suitable relation to deploy in many troubled areas of philosophy, such as the mind–body problem and the special sciences. Exactly how constitution works its magic may still be unclear, but that it does is something we can rely on. Once we realize that there are many relations besides identity, and that identity should not be privileged, then we are liberated philosophically, since we have more relations to choose from when

describing the relations between different kinds of properties. While there is more to be said about exactly how such relations transmit causal efficacy, there is no reason to have any grand anxiety and cling nervously to identity as the only relation that could possibly afford refuge for the causal efficacy of non-basic properties.

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