

This Wooden Table Could Have Been Made from Plastic

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ABSTRACT

In defense of de re necessity, Saul Kripke proposes that a material object could not have originated in a substance different in kind from the substance in which it actually originated. I give a counterexample to this proposal.

In *Naming and Necessity* Saul Kripke revives essentialism by criticizing descriptivist motivations for anti-essentialism and proposing several examples of de re necessities. In footnotes 56 and 57, respectively, Kripke proposes the following two principles:

Matter If a material object originates in a certain hunk of matter, it could not have originated in any other matter.

Substance If a material object originates in a certain kind of substance, it could not have originated in any other kind of substance.¹

¹ In footnote 57, Kripke says that “the substance of which an object is made is essential.” At first he contrasts this principle with the principle that “the *origin* of an object is essential.” This is misleading. For, as Kripke goes on to say, “The question of whether the table could *originally* have been made of anything other than wood is relevant. Obviously this question is related to the necessity of the origin of the table from a given block of wood...” So the question *is* about the *origin* of an object: it is whether originating in a certain kind of substance is essential to the object.

In my 2005, I give counterexamples to various formulations of *Matter*. Below I give a counterexample to *Substance*.

Consider my table, *Tab*. Years ago *Tab* was constructed from 10,000 tiny, wooden, Lego-like building blocks, whose preformed grooves and ridges allowed the blocks to be joined together snugly without adhesive. While still made of the same 10,000 blocks today, *Tab* is now made partly of plastic. This is because many of *Tab*'s building blocks have been repaired, according to the following procedure. Whenever the deterioration of a given block from normal wear and tear reaches a certain degree, the block is removed and its damaged or lost bits of wood are replaced by plastic. Then it is returned to its original position in *Tab*.

Conceivably, if this repair process were to continue far into the future, all of *Tab*'s original 10,000 building blocks might some day come to be made entirely of plastic. Just as it is intuitive that the Ship of Theseus survived the gradual and complete replacement of its original planks with numerically distinct planks, it is intuitive that *Tab*'s building blocks could survive gradual and complete replacements of their original wood with plastic, in which case *Tab* itself would come to be made entirely of plastic.

The question arises: Could *Tab* *originally* have been made entirely of plastic? One is initially inclined to say *no*; any table originally made entirely of plastic rather than wood would not have been *this very table*. But this inclination fails to respect a certain possibility. Suppose that, *prior* to having been assembled into a table, *Tab*'s 10,000 building blocks had undergone gradual and complete replacements of their original wood with plastic. Suppose that the same carpenter who built *Tab* had then assembled the very same 10,000 building blocks, according to the very same plan, at the very same time, into a table. Intuitively, the carpenter would have built *Tab*. If this intuition is sound, then we have a counterexample to *Substance*: *Tab* was originally made of wood, but could originally have been made of plastic instead.

We should not, then, look to *Substance* as a source of interesting de re necessities. If such necessities are to be found, we shall need to look elsewhere, perhaps to a principle entirely unrelated to

origins.²

REFERENCES

Barnett, David. 2005: "The Problem of Material Origins". *Noûs*, 39, pp. 529-540.

Kripke, Saul 1980: *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.