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Blake Davenport
bmd5g5@umsl.edu

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Public Artifacts, Empirical Vulnerability and Descriptive Metaphysics

Blake Davenport
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Jon McGinnis, Ph.D.
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Lauren Olin, Ph.D.

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Abstract: Herein I argue that Amie Thomasson's account of public artifacts is empirically vulnerable. I first identify the descriptive claims that feature in Thomasson's argument and then outline an experimental framework in which the accuracy of those claims can be evaluated. I conclude with some brief remarks on the possible implications of my approach for Thomasson's account, and some thoughts on whether an experimental approach to evaluating projects in descriptive metaphysics might be valuable more broadly.

Keywords: artifact, coincidence, exaptation, intention, metaphysics, norm, Thomasson

Introduction

Herein I argue that Amie Thomasson's account of public artifacts is empirically vulnerable. I first identify the descriptive claims that feature in Thomasson's argument and then outline an experimental framework in which the accuracy of those claims can be evaluated. I conclude with some brief remarks on the possible implications of my approach for Thomasson's account, and some thoughts on whether an experimental approach to evaluating projects in descriptive metaphysics might be valuable more broadly.

In Public Artifacts, Intentions, and Norms¹ Amie Thomasson puts forth a descriptive account of our conception of artifacts based on our practices surrounding them in everyday life. Thomasson argues that these practices reveal that we conceive of artifacts as "public", or as inherently normative and social. She captures this conception by claiming that artifacts depend on public norms of regard. So, Thomasson calls these everyday artifacts "public artifacts."² Archetypes of public artifacts include chairs, socks, salad forks and cars inter alia. Notably, her focus is not on the philosopher or contrastive folk exclusively. Thomasson is interested in the *public* interaction with artifacts such that "we", "our", and "folk" almost always refer to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. The relevant artifact practices¹ concern *our* interactions with artifacts on a daily basis in a largely non-philosophical manner. E.g., imagine putting on socks, filling up your car with gas, and eating salad with a salad fork at a nice dinner; not whether the ship of Theseus is a space-time worm, or whether Lumpl and the statue are identical or just really close friends.

Thomasson's descriptive account aims to capture the *significance* of artifacts in our lives. Artifacts' significance derives partially from their dependence on norms of regard, which gives "normative structure" to our lives.³ These norms of regard can govern how the artifact itself is to be regarded, how those bearing/using the artifact are to behave, and how those bearers/users are to

¹ See Thomasson 2014, starting on p. 45.

² Ibid. p. 46.

³ See Thomasson 2016, p. 10. This paper is especially useful because it develops some ideas in Thomasson's account of public artifacts further. E.g., in Thomasson 2014, p. 60, she considers the practical benefits and significance of our public conception of artifacts to be captured in the "web of norms" it weaves. This significance is helpfully expanded upon in Thomasson 2016 as including the ability to structure our lives via expectations.

be regarded by others.⁴ A benefit of the resultant normative structure is that it facilitates the formation of reliable expectations about how people will behave toward artifacts. We infer that such expectations are in place based on peoples' reactions to certain behavior. For example, consider a public artifact like a church. If kids are darting between pews in an attempt to play hide-and-seek during a church service, members of the congregation will scold them. One might say we expect better behavior in a church, even though the kids' violations are somewhat expected. However, if the pastor runs underneath your legs to hide from the deacons you might either be too shocked to scold him or too busy reviving your grandmother. Scolding the kids also enforces the church norms, as much as it instills them. The pastor's violation is more surprising because we expect the church norms to have been instilled in him long ago, and for him to respect them. So while these violations vary in their degree of predictability they both illustrate how norms help us form expectations about behavior. Furthermore, these norms are evaluative in the sense that they are enforced by social sanctions or rebuke.⁵

Thomasson focuses on these kinds of social interactions between artifacts, the public and norms of regard. It helps to think of these norms of regard as evaluative and predictive like in the example above, rather than deontic. While we do enforce norms of regard they are not as strictly enforced as deontic norms, which might express moral imperatives or truths. Norms of regard for artifacts connote agreed upon ranges of acceptable behavior for the pragmatic benefit of structuring our lives. Perhaps it is not, in general, *morally* wrong that the pastor tried to play hide-and-seek during service, but it is *wrong-for-church*.⁶

The other central tenet in Thomasson's account is that artifacts must be intentionally created. The interplay of creator intentions and norms of regard in our conception of artifacts

⁴ See Thomasson 2014, p. 53 and her example of uniforms which "impose norms on how they should be regarded, how the wearer of the uniform is to behave, and how those interacting with the wearer are to regard them."

⁵ See Thomasson 2014, p. 53-5. Also see Thomasson 2016, p. 13, for how expectations about how to act, and how we might be sanctioned otherwise, plausibly underlie norm compliance.

⁶ These evaluative norms of regard are neither as universal nor as heavily enforced as deontic norms like "one should not murder." This is plausibly due to the comparatively low cost of having a failed expectation for how people will act in church versus the high cost for wrongly predicting that a hooded figure in a parking garage will not kill you. These evaluative norms may also not be explicitly known or promulgated, perhaps primarily being internalized. As such, a primary resource to infer that an evaluative norm is in place is people's behavior.

reveals a further social phenomenon. Thomasson calls this phenomenon the ‘general coincidence of intended and actual regard’ for some public artifact.⁷ This coincidence expresses a specific relationship between artifacts, the public and the *creator-intended* norms of regard. Thomasson recognizes the significance of this coincidence and suggests that her account can explain it. Furthermore, she explicitly considers her account to solve cases of exaptation.⁸ I argue that Thomasson’s account *should* be able to explain coincidence and solve cases of exaptation. I also argue that what I call the “inferred norm” is the tool she needs to do both.⁹ However, Thomasson only *implies* that the inferred norm is in place, or is a part of our conception of public artifacts.¹⁰ I argue that she relies on it and that without the inferred norm Thomasson will leave an explanatory gap in her account.¹¹ Luckily, we can test for the presence of the inferred norm, or so I argue. In the next section I elucidate how the norms of regard and creator intentions feature in Thomasson’s account. Then I explain why coincidence and exaptation are phenomena that Thomasson should be able to capture and why she relies on the inferred norm to do so.

Section 1: *Norms of regard, creator intentions, coincidence and exaptation*

❖ **Section 1.1:** *The dependence of public artifacts on norms of regard*

What does it mean to say that artifacts depend on norms of regard? Thomasson looks to language in order to understand what a public artifact, like a church, is. The rules of use for the term “church”, or the conditions in which the term is used, largely determine and reveal what it is to be a church. These rules of use define the “application conditions” for an artifact term, or when the term applies to some object. These application conditions reveal what our conception of

⁷ See Thomasson 2014, p. 53. I often refer to this as merely “coincidence” for simplicity.

⁸ Exaptation concerns successfully created artifacts that are regarded by norms other than those intended. Ibid.

⁹ The inferred norm says that artifacts are to be regarded as intended by their creators. I focus on this in section two.

¹⁰ See Thomasson 2014, p. 53, where she states that the inferred norm explains coincidence. This can even be read hypothetically as: the inferred norm would explain coincidence if it were in place. I also argue that she uses the inferred norm to reach her intuitive solution to her thought experiment on exaptation. I consider Thomasson reliant on the inferred norm to do substantial explanatory work regardless of whether this reliance is explicit or not.

¹¹ This is not to say that Thomasson cannot find another norm to fill the gap. Rather, the inferred norm is only candidate that Thomasson identifies and it does the relevant explanatory work very well.

artifacts consists in. Thomasson argues that such application conditions reveal that we make use of an inherently normative conception of artifacts. Namely, we consider artifacts, and the surrounding practices, to be bound by norms of regard. So, to be a public artifact is to be intentionally created as subject to some norms of regard. Without these norms in place, public artifacts would not exist.¹²

Artifacts can even be distinguished from one another according to the norms of regard they are governed by. E.g., salad forks are to be used in dinner parties, to eat salad with, while holding them at an angle between your middle and ring finger, etc. Plastic forks are to be used in cafeterias or sack lunches, to eat basically any food with, and to be held casually. To refer to some artifact as a salad fork is to claim that it was intentionally created as to be regarded by salad fork norms.¹³ So, the dependence of artifacts on norms of regard expresses our conception of artifacts on both an abstract level, as inherently normative objects, and on a concrete level as objects distinguishable by the particular norms of regard they are governed by. This ability for norms of regard to distinguish between artifacts further structures our lives by bolstering the ability to form reliable expectations about artifact behavior.

Although these evaluative norms of regard are less stringent than deontic norms they also need to be distinguished from mere regularities. Thomasson considers a mere regularity nothing more than a “descriptive statement about what people happen to do.”¹⁴ Regularities describe *what* happens whereas norms might also explain *why* something happens or predict whether it *will* happen. So, it is important that artifact behaviors are normative, rather than merely regular, so that we can structure our lives with greater precision. To see this, take some behavior plausibly ranged over by a norm and change it into a regularity by removing any social sanctions or rebuke against misbehavior. E.g., imagine that driving slowly in the leftmost lane of traffic is no longer governed by rebuke like honking or ‘waving’ (the bird). We can imagine that the result might be more people

¹² Here Thomasson takes her well known deflationary stance which ties semantic rules of use for “refer” to the rules of use for “exists” *inter alia*. I cannot do her general ontological stance any more justice here, but see Thomasson 2007 and 2015 for the most robust treatments. See Thomasson 2008 and 2009 for shorter papers which sum up her stance nicely.

¹³ See Thomasson 2014, pp. 52-3.

¹⁴ So these norms of regard are understood as “genuine norms”, not mere regularities. *Ibid* p. 53.

sauntering along in the left lane. Letting slowpokes, like myself, do whatever they please is likely to ruin the flow of traffic. This may cause wrecks and traffic jams because we will be less likely to reliably predict the traffic conditions.¹⁵

So, Thomasson is committed to the idea that the behavior constitutive of our artifact practices, like the classification or regard of some artifact, is normative and not merely regular. If such behavior were merely regular it would run contrary to our conception of artifacts as normative. For, our conception of artifacts is derived from our practices surrounding them and is then used to explain such practices. If Thomasson's derivative conception of artifacts fails to explain the behavior it was derived from, or the behavior it applies to, such is evidence that the conception is inaccurate to say of the folk. This is like checking the solution to a math problem by inputting the solved variable's value back into the equation to see if it balances. So, how do creator intentions play into the mix?

❖ **Section 1.2: *The necessity of creator intentions***

Thomasson considers it a conceptual truth that all artifacts are the products of intentional creation and this truth features in her account of public artifacts.¹⁶ Creators cannot merely will artifacts into existence though, they must attain some degree of success. Thomasson uses the idea of "intentional recognizability" to capture the success conditions for creator intentions when making public artifacts.¹⁷ Namely, when a creator intends to make a public artifact they must have a description of the artifact in mind. This description contains some perceptible or structural features of the artifact and the norms of regard that artifacts *like that* are to subject to. Then, the creator intentionally brings about those perceptible or structural features to make the artifact capable of being recognized as subject to *those* norms of regard. So, what makes an intention to

¹⁵ Most states only have laws that require "slow" vehicles to stay to the right. The discretion is almost solely left to the motorist to determine whether they are driving slowly. So, it is plausible that primarily social norms influence the standing rule: slowpokes keep right. See <http://www.mit.edu/~jfc/right.html>.

¹⁶ See Thomasson 2014, p. 46.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 50.

create a public artifact successful is that the artifact be 'recognizable as subject to certain norms of regard'.¹⁸

The intentional recognizability of public artifacts functions like a form of communication between a creator and some agent. Here Thomasson follows Randall Dipert in claiming that artifacts are inherently social and serve the purpose of communicating a creator's intention by prompting a belief in some agent. For public artifacts, this belief is about how the creator intends the artifact to be regarded. The actual features of an artifact communicate this message from creator to agent. So, for an artifact to be recognizable as subject to certain norms of regard is for the artifact to likely prompt a belief in some agent about how the creator intends the artifact to be regarded. Prompting this belief ultimately depends upon the existence of those public norms of regard. Without those public norms of regard in place, creators could not successfully communicate to agents because there would be no stable way to associate artifacts to certain intended regard.

For example, imagine you intend to create a rocking chair. To have a successful intention your rocking chair should resemble whichever rocking chairs are subject to the norms of regard that you wish your rocking chair to be subject to. If your intention is successful you will have created a rocking chair that is recognizable as subject to at least your intended norms of regard. This is because your rocking chair resembles other rocking chairs also governed by those norms of regard.

Furthermore, if your rocking chair is recognizable, there is a good chance it will actually be recognized, or will prompt a belief in some agent that corresponds to how you intend your rocking chair to be regarded. If it is recognized as intended, there is a good chance it will actually be regarded via the intended rocking chair norms. This connection expresses the coincidence of intended and actual regard. Thomasson recognizes the significance of this coincidence and the value of capturing it.¹⁹ It is also a fact of the matter that she thinks the inferred norm is what will

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Thomasson, p. 53. Thomasson does not explicitly state that this coincidence is a significant feature of our conception of artifacts. However, she clearly does consider coincidence significant and as something worth capturing. This is evidenced by her flagging it and considering the inferred norm to explain it. She also considers it a virtue of her account that she explains cases of exaptation, which are special cases of the failure for intended and actual regard to coincide.

capture, or explain, this coincidence.²⁰ Beyond that, Thomasson claims that her account solves cases of exaptation. I argue that Thomasson flags these phenomena because she needs to be able to account for both of them.

❖ **Section 1.3:** *Two important phenomena: the coincidence of intended and actual regard and cases of exaptation*

Coincidence and exaptation are important phenomena for Thomasson because they display how her theory of public artifacts works in its full capacity, with norms of regard and creator intentions featuring prominently.²¹ However, Thomasson does not explicitly state why she considers coincidence significant and so I start by explaining why she might. Since Thomasson explicitly aims to solve cases of exaptation, considers it a virtue of her account that she can do so, and cases of exaptation have been dealt with perennially by artifact theorists, I do not have to motivate the significance of exaptation too much. However, I do explain how coincidence and exaptation are intimately connected and why this connection makes Thomasson's reliance on the inferred norm more salient.

The main reason why I think might Thomasson consider the coincidence of intended and actual regard significant is because it captures the most robust sense of creator success and plausibly motivates the creation of artifacts in the first place. To see this, imagine your rocking chair again. According to Thomasson's account, you succeed in creating your rocking chair if it is recognizable as subject to at least the rocking chair norms you intend. Like I said above, it may then be likely that your rocking chair actually gets recognized and regarded in the way in which you intended it to. When it actually gets recognized and regarded accordingly, this seems to capture a more robust sense of creator success than mere recognizability. Namely, the prospect of actual

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Recall that the significance of artifacts lies in the normative structure they give our lives. When evaluating the significance of explaining coincidence and solving exaptation, it is helpful to think of how doing so would help to structure our lives. Explaining coincidence plausibly secures the motivation to create a public artifact by giving creators (and agents) more reliable expectations as to how the resultant artifact will be regarded. Solving exaptation carries a similar benefit: it enables us to predict how people will classify artifacts in especially tricky cases, which bears on how we classify artifacts in general.

recognition and regard are likely what motivated you to create the rocking chair in the first place.
 You created the rocking chair so it would be sat in!

Here the question might be why Thomasson does not account for coincidence in the obvious way, by including actual recognition and regard in her success conditions for creator intentions. Thomasson gives a clear answer here. She does not do such because seemingly arbitrary circumstances could produce counter-intuitive results. E.g., imagine your rocking chair that is perfectly recognizable as subject to the norms you intend it to be subject to. Also imagine that you locked your rocking chair in your workshop permanently and that it will never be recognized or regarded in the way in which you intended. In this case, if actual recognition and regard are components of your intention, then your intention fails and the rocking chair fails to exist as such. But, there is an obvious sense in which you did create a rocking chair; namely, it is perfectly recognizable as a rocking chair and if someone broke into your workshop it will probably be recognized as such (*ceteris paribus*). Due to cases like this, Thomasson opts to exclude actual recognition and regard from the success conditions for creator intentions.²²

Nevertheless, I think Thomasson considers coincidence important because it represents the motivating force to create public artifacts. It is plausible that we create public artifacts *precisely because* we want them to actually be recognized and regarded in intended ways. Coincidence secures creator motivation and captures the most robust sense of successful communication from a creator to an agent, which connotes the social component of our public conception of artifacts.

However, in some cases the recognizability of an artifact is as likely to prompt a belief in some agent that the artifact is to be subjected to norms of regard (A) as it is to some other norms of regard (B). These cases occur especially when distinct artifact kinds have similar structural or perceptible features. In cases like this, the creator intention is still successful; namely, the artifact *is* recognizable as subject to the intended norms of regard (A). But, the artifact is *also* recognizable as

²² However, this need not mean that creators fail to intend for their artifacts to actually be recognized and regarded in certain ways. These may be the components of another intention the creator has, other than the literal intention to create a public artifact. If this is right to say of Thomasson then it explains how she can afford to exclude actual recognition and regard from her success conditions on creator intentions, while still considering such coincidence an important social phenomenon to capture.

subject to other norms of regard (B). When an artifact is successfully created like this but is regarded by non-intended norms (B), coincidence fails to occur. The failure of coincidence in this way is what marks a case of exaptation.²³ If creators are motivated by the prospect of their intended regard coinciding with actual regard, then exaptation represents a threat to this motivation. So, it is important to solve or explain cases of exaptation in a way that preserves this coincidence between intended and actual regard, such that the motivation to create an artifact can be preserved.²⁴ Even without this threat to creator motivation though, cases of exaptation pose difficult questions that any theory of artifacts should answer to; namely: what plays the lead role in the classification of an artifact? Is it the *actual* regard an artifact is subject to, or the regard an artifact is *intended* to be subject to?

So Thomasson has independent reasons to solve cases of exaptation. But, exaptation and the coincidence of intended and actual regard are closely related phenomena. They are so closely related that a solution to cases of exaptation plausibly explains the general coincidence between intended and actual regard for public artifacts. Conversely, an explanation of such coincidence also predicts how people will classify exapted artifacts. So, Thomasson explicitly aims to solve exaptation and at least implicitly aims to explain coincidence as well. However she accomplishes these tasks will have to wield our putative conception of artifacts and preserve the role of norms of regard and creator intentions. Furthermore, the connection between coincidence and exaptation alludes to a single normative explanation working for both. Looking to the available ways she could solve cases of exaptation makes this connection clearer.

There are two ways we could classify exapted artifacts: 1) by the actual norms of regard they are subjected to, or 2) the norms of regard they were intended to be subject to. I argue that Thomasson relies on it being the case that we classify artifacts according to their intended regard,

²³ I deal with Thomasson's thought experiment on exaptation in the next section. The main point here is the connection between exaptation and coincidence.

²⁴ Furthermore, there is nothing about our conception of artifacts so far that secures this coincidence. Namely, just because some agent believes that an artifact was intentionally created for some purpose or regard does not give a normative explanation for why the agent would go ahead and regard it accordingly. Why should the creator's intention matter here? Even holding creator success conditions relative to an intended audience does not do the trick, especially when intended audiences might have more than one set of norms capable of ranging over some artifact.

and that we do so because of the inferred norm. Namely, if we classify artifacts according to their actual regard, rather than their intended regard, then, *prima facie*, we are not holding the intentions of the creator significant in such classificatory practices. For, the intentions of the creator could have been different than they were and it would have made no difference to how we classified the exapted artifact (so long as it was still regarded in the same way). Furthermore, if the actual norms of regard an artifact is subjected to *grounds* its classification, then there is a plausible case to be made that we do not consider artifacts to be intentionally created. Namely, if the creator intention does not weigh more than the actual norms of regard an artifact is subjected to, then what is to stop us from claiming that non-intentional objects that are subjected to norms of regard are also artifacts? If we do not classify artifacts according to their intended regard, then what reason do we have to consider whether the artifact was intentionally created? Specifically, there does not seem to be a reason that hinges on our normative conception of artifacts. This might cast doubt on the descriptive accuracy of the conceptual truth that artifacts are intentionally created. For, our normative conception of artifacts, which supposedly holds intentional creation as essential, would not explain such classificatory practices. At any rate, the classification of exapted artifacts according to the actual norms of regard they are subjected to is not conducive to creator intentions being a central tenet in our conceptions of artifacts. Or, as a weaker claim, the classification of exapted artifacts via their intended regard is much *more* conducive to the central tenets of Thomasson's account.

If we classify exapted artifacts according to their intended norms of regard, then this classificatory practice would evidence our conception of artifacts as packaging creator intention and norms of regard into one significant bundle. Even though the creator intention would weigh more in the classification of an exapted artifact than the actual norms of regard it is subjected to, the creator intention would weigh more partly *because of* the norms of regard which the creator intended to govern the artifact. In this case, by respecting creator intentions, we are also respecting the actual norms of regard which would have had to have been in place in order for the creator's intention to have been successful in the first place. So, by classifying exapted artifacts via their

intended regard we are exhibiting a conception of artifacts which holds norms of regard and creator intentions primary.

Finally, if our classification of exapted artifacts, or our intuitions about such, sides with intended regard, then it is likely that such a corresponding conception of artifacts will explain the coincidence of intended and actual regard as well. Namely, if we think that artifacts are to be *classified* according to the norms of regard that a creator intended them to be subject to, then we might also think artifacts are to be *treated* according to those intended norms of regard. Concisely, it is likely that we think artifacts are to be regarded according to how we classify them. On the converse, a normative explanation for why intended regard generally coincides with actual regard for public artifacts would also govern, or predict, our classificatory behavior surrounding exapted artifacts. Namely, if we think that artifacts are to be regarded as they are intended to be regarded, then we might also think that artifacts are to be classified according to their intended regard.

So what kind of normative explanation could Thomasson give that would handle both coincidence and exaptation? Well, Thomasson is going to want to claim that our normative conception of artifacts is what explains our classification of exapted artifacts and the general coincidence of intended and actual regard. But, in order for Thomasson give such an explanation of these phenomena, there has to be a norm in place which ranges over them. The only norm that Thomasson identifies as capable is the inferred norm. The inferred norm says that artifacts are to be regarded as their creator intended them to be regarded. The applicability of the inferred norm to Thomasson's account is clear. It not only specifically addresses coincidence, as Thomasson explicitly states, it also addresses exaptation. Namely, the connection between exaptation and coincidence suggests that a norm which ranges over coincidence plausibly ranges over exaptation, and vice versa. So, the inferred norm can solve cases of exaptation and explain the general coincidence of intended and actual regard in one fell swoop.

Even though the application of the inferred norm to Thomasson's account is fairly clear, Thomasson's relationship with it is a bit slippery. She does not tell us how it will explain coincidence, even though she claims such. She also does not make explicit how, or whether, she uses it to solve her thought experiment on exaptation. So, making these applications clear is my

aim in the next section. Seeing how the inferred norm is poised to do such tidy explanatory work for Thomasson helps show that she is committed to it. Even if she is only committed implicitly or hypothetically, it is clear that the inferred norm is something Thomasson's account relies on in order to explain coincidence and solve her case of exaptation. I close the section by elucidating how the inferred norm bears the empirical vulnerability of Thomasson's account.

Section 2: *The inferred norm*

I argue that Thomasson needs the inferred norm to be accurately said of the folk so that she can handle coincidence and exaptation in a way which utilizes our putatively public conception of artifacts. Otherwise, Thomasson would either have to inaccurately posit the inferred norm amongst the folk or fail to be able to explain coincidence and solve exaptation. Furthermore, coincidence and exaptation are exactly the kind of phenomena that Thomasson's account *should* explain.²⁵ Namely, these phenomena concern the exact kind of behavior Thomasson claims to range over: the interplay of norms of regard and creator intentions. So, just how is the inferred norm poised to do such tidy explanatory work in Thomasson's account?

First a bit on the inferred norm. The inferred norm says: 'artifacts are to be treated as their creator intended them to be treated.'²⁶ Notice that agents cannot be required to *know* the actual intentions of some creator for their behavior to be governed by the inferred norm. When we recognize some public artifact as intended to be regarded in some way, we are only able to confidently believe that a creator intended the artifact to be governed by certain norms of regard. So, the inferred norm is not applying to the *actual* intention of the creator, from the believer's point of view. To say that we are to regard artifacts the way in which they are intended to be regarded is really saying that we are to regard artifacts the way which respects our most confident belief for what norms of regard the creator intended the artifact to be governed by.

²⁵ This is not to say Thomasson couldn't go another route, but that she does not offer one. Furthermore, the inferred norm does the relevant explanatory work very well, so it is not clear why she would go another route anyway.

²⁶ The actual quote says: "We can perhaps uncover a deeper norm regarding treatment of all artifacts: that artifacts are (*prima facie*) *to be treated as their creator intends them to be treated.*" Emphasis original. *Ibid.* p. 53.

Furthermore, I think the inferred norm is most clearly read as stating that artifacts are *only* to be regarded according to our most confident belief for how the creator intended them to be regarded (*ceteris paribus*). Since this intended regard can specify how the artifact is to be used, in what ways, by whom etc. -- there is a sense in which it is only to be used or treated *like that*.²⁷

❖ **Section 2.1:** *How the inferred norm explains coincidence*

If the inferred norm were a part of our conception of artifacts then it would explain the general coincidence of intended and actual regard. Imagine that some agent recognizes an artifact as intended to be subject to certain norms of regard. Further imagine that the creator's intention was successful and the agent's belief accurately corresponds to the intended regard of the artifact. Assuming the inferred norm is a part of our conception of artifacts, we will then regard the artifact according to that belief, and so, coincidence occurs.²⁸ Thomasson needs to invoke the inferred norm to do this explanatory work because she considers our conception of artifacts as inherently normative; or as characterizes by genuine norms, not explanatorily inadequate regularities. Furthermore, because the inferred norm ranges over our most confident belief, we can change how we regard the artifact as new evidence rolls in for how the creator intended the artifact to be regarded. This continuous tracking of the creator's actual intention further shores up the likelihood of coincidence occurring. This tracking is also salient when looking at how the inferred norm might solve Thomasson's case of exaptation.

²⁷ Norms of regard do not have to be this specific though and can be fairly general. Furthermore, situations with conflicting sets of norms only preclude the inferred norm from applying when the conflict between the norms is overwhelming. I give an example of such an overwhelming conflict in section three.

²⁸ The general distinction between declarative and imperative speech acts may be helpful here. Our public conception of artifacts holds the behavior surrounding them as normative. So, coincidence should be explained normatively. If an artifact is like a declarative speech act, then the artifact merely makes the creator's intended regard apparent. Even when coincidence occurs, this declarative way of thinking fails to *explain* such coincidence. Just because an artifact communicates a creator's intentions does not explain why we respect those intentions. Fortunately, the inferred norm *does* explain exactly that. The inferred norm essentially turns an artifact from a declarative speech act to an imperative one, by enforcing respect of creator intentions.

❖ **Section 2.2:** *How the inferred norm solves cases of exaptation*

Exaptation occurs when a public artifact is successfully created with the intention that it be recognizable as subject to one set of norms, but is in fact subjected to another. Importantly, Thomasson says in cases like this we classify artifacts according to their intended norms in their intended contexts, not the actual norms they are subjected to in their actual context. Plausibly, Thomasson is making this descriptive claim for two reasons: 1) she thinks that our classificatory practices actually do prioritize intended regard, and 2) she relies on it to being the case that we classify exapted artifacts according to their intended regard. For reasons discussed in section 1.3, if exapted artifacts were classified according to their actual regard, then Thomasson would struggle to capture our actual artifact practices while preserving the central tenets of her account.

So, what motivates Thomasson to make such a descriptive claim? Here she uses a thought experiment on exaptation for which she offers an intuitive solution. Thomasson asks us to imagine chopstick creators from China who expect that Westerners eat like they do. They send chopsticks west, unaware that Westerners have hair-stick norms rather than chopstick norms. The Westerners recognize the chopsticks as hair-sticks, and use them like hair-sticks, without knowing the intention of the Chinese creators.²⁹

Thomasson thinks that the clear intuition here is that these artifacts are chopsticks and not hair-sticks. Furthermore, she says that in cases like this it is 'clearly the intended norms which are used to classify the artifacts, and not the actual norms they were subjected to'.³⁰ Thomasson's intuitive solution is supposed to corroborate her descriptive claim: actual regard does not feature, or feature as strongly as intended regard, in our classification of exapted artifacts. I argue that the inferred norm is employed within Thomasson's thought experiment and leads to such a solution. One way to see the plausibility of this is to reason through her thought experiment while employing the inferred norm, which I do below. If the result is an intuitive solution that matches Thomasson's,

²⁹ See Thomasson 2014, pp. 53-4.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 54.

then such is evidence that the inferred norm is employed within her reasoning or the design of her thought experiment.

First notice a possible framing effect. Thomasson's discussion of the inferred norm leads directly to her thought experiment on exaptation. Within that discussion she states that the inferred norm explains coincidence, which I have shown to have an intuitive connection to exaptation. These factors plausibly prime the reader to reason through the thought experiment via the inferred norm. Will doing so lead to Thomasson's intuitive solution?

It is interesting first of all, that Thomasson makes the artifacts involved, hair-sticks and chopsticks, structurally identical. This effectively controls for the inferred norm by holding the relevant difference between the classificatory options to be whether we respect the intended regard or actual regard when classifying exapted artifacts. Thomasson reasons that the intended regard is clearly how we would classify the artifacts here. The inferred norm predicts exactly that behavior.

Furthermore, Thomasson reasons that the Westerner's might "dither" over how to classify the exapted artifacts when presented with evidence for the creator's actual intention.³¹ Their dithering is plausibly due to either the weakening of their original belief for how the creator intended the artifacts to be regarded, or the resultant competition between two now conflicting beliefs for such. This reactive dithering shows the continual tracking of the creator's actual intention that the inferred norm pushes us towards.³² On top of that, the readers *know* what the creator's intention was. Thomasson stipulates that the creator in fact intended for the artifacts to be regarded as chopsticks. The reader, privy to this fact, has the most confident belief they could have for which regard the creator intended the artifact to be subject to. So, assuming the inferred norm is in place, the reader will classify the artifacts as chopsticks.

If we reason through Thomasson's thought experiment *without* thinking of the inferred norm, it is hard to explain why she thinks her solution is either intuitive or right. What does seem

³¹ Ibid. See her ninth footnote.

³² Also notice that the Westerners are not rebuked or socially sanctioned. This is because they are not violating the inferred norm. They are behaving via their most confident belief for how the creator intended the artifact to be regarded.

clear is that the inferred norm is needed to explain coincidence and solve exaptation, and does so very well. For, just because we recognize that an artifact was intentionally created to be regarded by certain norms does not mean that we will, or explain why we do, classify or regard the artifact according to that belief. We might think that other factors, like the actual regard of the artifact, matter more for classification. The inferred norm ranges over just these situations, explaining coincidence and securing the classification of exapted artifacts via intended, not actual, regard. So, Thomasson either explicitly relies on the inferred norm to explain coincidence and reason through exaptation as she does, or apparently should rely on it to do such.³³

❖ **Section 2.3:** *The empirical vulnerability of the inferred norm*

At any rate, it is clear that the inferred norm being accurately said of the folk is valuable to Thomasson's account because it allows her to make good on both of her overarching theoretical aims, namely: 1) to accurately describe our artifact practices and our conception of artifacts, and 2) to do so in such a way that explains artifacts' significance in our lives, specifically regarding the apparent normative structure they provide. So, we can see her project as descriptive at the ground floor. In order to gauge the descriptive accuracy of her account she can use her derivative artifact conception to explain the phenomena which give rise to it. Some of the most important phenomena here are coincidence and how we classify exapted artifacts. If our putatively public conception of artifacts fails to explain or predict such phenomena, then this would indicate the descriptive inaccuracy of Thomasson's account. Since the inferred norm can capture such phenomena, then testing for it would be especially informative. In order to test for the presence of the inferred norm we can test for the classificatory behavior of exapted artifacts that it predicts, and which Thomasson thinks clearly obtain.

One way we can test for such behavior is by presenting people with a vignette like Thomasson's thought experiment and then asking them questions like: Did the Westerner's do

³³ Thomasson's reliance on the inferred norm holds especially in cases where exaptation occurs within an intended context. In these situations the expectations for coincidence to occur are likely to be very strong (*ceteris paribus*).

something *wrong*? Is the artifact a chopstick or a hair-stick? If you found out that the artifact was actually intended to be regarded as a chopstick, would you feel as if chopstick use was more appropriate? Such an experiment would put test subjects in a situation nearly identical to Thomasson's readers. Namely, the subjects would also have the relevant knowledge that the Chinese creator actually intended the artifacts to be chopsticks. If the subjects side with the Westerners, then such is evidence that their conception of artifacts conflicts with Thomasson's account.³⁴ Namely, they apparently would *not* think that exapted artifacts are to be classified via intended regard. If they respond in such ways, which run contrary to what the inferred norm predicts, then we have reason to doubt that the inferred norm is accurate to say of the folk. In that case, Thomasson will leave an explanatory gap between her account and phenomena like coincidence and exaptation.

However, the devil is in the details for an experiment like this. There are a number of relevant factors which might affect the scenario in important ways or throw off the ability for the results to bear on peoples' conception of artifacts. So I will discuss some of these features and how they might affect an experiment to test for the inferred norm. In doing so, I hope to have established a working experimental framework that is useful for designing such experiments.³⁵

Section 3: *An experimental framework to test Thomasson's account*

Do we classify exapted artifacts based on the intended regard of the artifact or the actual regard it is subject to? While this question is testable, there are multiple features that need to be

³⁴ Considering responses to vignettes to reveal intuitions or concepts is by no means an uncontroversial position. This claim is the subject of some central debates over whether experimental philosophy is a feasible enterprise. I discuss this connection to experimental philosophy in section five. Nevertheless, such responses to a vignette seem as likely to accurately reflect our conception of artifacts as the behavior that Thomasson otherwise relies on (*ceteris paribus*). Plus, Thomasson herself uses such responses to bolster her descriptive claim that we classify exapted artifacts via their intended regard.

³⁵ While I do not fully pitch an experiment to test for the inferred norm herein, I plan to design and conduct such an experiment in a follow-up project. Nevertheless, Thomasson's thought experiment on exaptation is already fairly suitable to be tested and I discuss how certain features of her account might be brought out experiments on exaptation.

taken into consideration in order to design an experiment which bears on the presence of inferred norm.³⁶

➤ The prompted belief

The most obvious feature that any experiment must have, if seeking to test for the inferred norm in cases of exaptation, is the ability to prompt a belief in an experimental test subject about how a creator intends for an artifact to be regarded. The inferred norm cannot be tested if the subject does not plausibly believe that the artifact is to be regarded in some way or another. The subject should also be fairly confident that their belief is accurate. It is not arbitrary that Thomasson gave the readers no room for doubt about the intended regard in her thought experiment on exaptation.

Furthermore, the test subject's belief should probably conflict with some stipulated belief of an experimentally designed agent as to how the creator intended the artifact to be regarded. Doing this makes it possible to ask the test subject questions about whether the agent was in the *wrong*, so to speak. Questions like that will make evaluating the normative force of the inferred norm relatively easy. It also might be interesting to vary how justified the designed agent is in their belief. For, if they do not seem to be justified in their apparent belief for how the creator intended the artifact to be regarded, then we might see more evidence of social rebuke by the test subjects. The inferred norm plausibly predicts such rebuke because of the continual tracking of the creator intention that it presses upon us, including the designed agent. So, making a designed agent either negligent in their belief formation or unreasonably stubborn in the face of counterevidence might help indicate whether the inferred norm is in place among the test subjects.

➤ Overwhelming norms

One feature to avoid is the presence of norms which might unintentionally override the normative pull of the inferred norm. For example, imagine you are appreciating the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. All of the sudden, a nun runs by screaming for help because her robe is on fire. You grab the Mona Lisa to beat the fire out of the nun's robe to save her life. It would not be insightful

³⁶ Nevertheless, however we classify exapted artifacts will plausibly bear on how we classify artifacts in general. This is why exaptation has been such an important phenomenon to artifact theorists.

at all, for the inferred norm's sake, to ask whether you did anything wrong by using the Mona Lisa like such. The inferred norm fails to govern your actions because it is clearly overwhelmed by the moral or deontic norms at play.

➤ Qualitative similarity

A particularly interesting feature is how qualitatively similar the types of artifacts are, like in Thomasson's thought experiment with chopsticks and hair-sticks. Chopsticks and hair-sticks are essentially qualitatively identical types of artifacts. Thomasson most likely uses this feature to control for the inferred norm. For, when asked to decide how the artifacts are to be classified, the only intuitive difference between the possible classifications is that one respects the creator intention, and the other respects the actual regard. This allows for the presence of the inferred norm to make itself apparent.

Furthermore, because chopsticks and hair-sticks are qualitatively identical, this qualitative identity plausibly makes the artifacts just as useful in one normative context (chopsticks) as in the other (hair-sticks). I think this feature points out something interesting; namely, that the perceived likelihood of exaptation being *pragmatically* successful might affect how likely the exapting community is to be socially rebuked, or disagreed with, by the test subjects. I.e., we might test cases where the exapted artifacts are subjected to a set of norms which renders the artifacts less useful than they would have been by their intended norms of regard. E.g., imagine that the chopsticks were explicitly stipulated to have a glossy finish that made it difficult for them to stay put in peoples' hair. Such a condition might make the test subjects more likely to rebuke the exapting community or less likely to classify the artifacts as hair-sticks. On the converse, perhaps exapting an artifact in a way that makes it more useful might have the opposite effect.

➤ Nested norms

Nesting one set of norms within another might also test this pragmatic feature. E.g., imagine an office space where coworkers routinely make works of art for one another to be displayed around the office. Pretty much everyone enjoys and partakes in this practice and they do not take kindly to people disrespecting the office artwork by throwing it away, carelessly damaging it, and even not displaying it, etc. I.e., imagine that there are some evaluative norms of regard in

this office community for how coworker art is to be regarded. Also imagine that one employee, Frank, takes a bunch of spare wooden wedges and spends the weekend carving intricate artistic designs into them. When he presents his wedges on Monday, everyone reacts accordingly; they appreciate his artwork and regard the wedges by displaying them around their office. On top of that, they even realize that Frank's wedges have the added practical benefit of putting an end to the door-stopper shortage. All of the employees appreciate Frank's wedges as art and some of them **also** use them as doorstoppers (without damaging them or otherwise violating the norms in place). Is there a correct way to classify artifacts here? Are Frank's wedges being exapted?

➤ Intended audiences, multiple norms and creator awareness

The example above makes evident another feature worth considering. What difference does it make when the intended audience has more than one set of norms which might range over an artifact? All things being equal, in cases like this we might consider the likelihood for coincidence to occur at about 50%. This feature, if placed within Thomasson's thought experiment, would mean that the Westerner's would have had chopstick and hair-stick norms of regard. In this case we just might not consider the creator to be that successful because their artifact is not *more likely* to be recognizable via the intended set of norms, rather than some other set of norms. So, in cases like this, perhaps Thomasson's account implies we would not consider exaptation inappropriate because we might effectively blame the creator for the oversight of making artifacts that were equally suitable to be regarded by multiple sets of norms.³⁷ So, perhaps this suggests that the perceived degree of creator success positively correlates with the perceived degree of creator awareness when multiple norms of regard are in play, and affects when we consider the inferred norm to apply.

On the converse, it might be the case that we think that such an artifact, intentionally created via one set of norms while the creator is also aware of other norms that equally apply to it, indicates something like *over-success*. In these cases perhaps we think that the classification of exapted artifacts need not hinge on intended regard because the artifact is just as well suited for

³⁷ This might explain why Thomasson kept the Chinese ignorant of the Westerners and vice versa. For, if the Westerners had constituted the intended audience we might have had less clear, or opposite, intuitions for how to handle the exaptation.

other norms of regard.³⁸ In this case, we may not consider the creator intention as important as what the artifact is capable of.

Here we can play with the structural similarity between artifacts to further tease this feature out. We might expect that as types of artifacts become less and less structurally similar that exaptation becomes more and more likely to be rebuked (*ceteris paribus*). This might indicate that the perceived likelihood of the artifact to be recognizable by one set of norms predominantly, is a relevant factor in how we treat and classify artifacts.

This is by no means considered to be an exhaustive list of the relevant features for an experiment that tests for the presence of the inferred norm, and I am probably overlooking some of the relevant features of these relevant features. Nevertheless, this section has drawn up a working experimental framework that can get the experimentalists up and running. The features I have discussed are fairly intertwined and are to be the most valuable to experimental designs that focus on exaptation and testing for the inferred norm. Nevertheless, they might also be valuable in their own right and experimented on individually.

Section 4: *Implications for Thomasson's account*

Fortunately, by explaining why the inferred norm is important to Thomasson, I have covered most of the specific implications that testing for the inferred norm may have for Thomasson's account. Nevertheless, I will briefly discuss such implications but would then like to focus on the implications in the bigger picture. Doing so helps to see why my experimental approach to Thomasson's account may be valuable more broadly.

An experiment which tests for the presence of the inferred norm, or lack thereof, among our conception of artifacts can bear on Thomasson's account in a few ways. If the results of such an experiment indicate that the inferred norm is not active in our artifact practices, then Thomasson will not be able to include it within her account. As I have pointed out, Thomasson is plausibly

³⁸ Here an account of what we consider to be involved in creators' intentions may be very valuable. Namely, if a creator foresees that it is a logical consequence that their artifact is equally recognizable via disparate norms, then are such consequences *also* intended? There is a debate within experimental philosophy which focuses on just this kind of question. See Adams and Steadman for a good discussion here.

committed to the inferred norm to explain coincidence and solve exaptation. Whether this commitment is explicit, implicit, or merely hypothetical, Thomasson has no other obvious options to capture such phenomena. So, right where her account is supposed to apply in its fullest would be where she would leave an explanatory gap.

Results which indicate that the inferred norm *is* in place will serve to maintain Thomasson's descriptive claims for how we classify (exapted) artifacts and will help to elucidate how the inferred norm explains coincidence. Even results from experiments testing individual features of her account can yield valuable insight towards its descriptive accuracy.

I have spent much effort explaining how the inferred norm nestles within Thomasson's account. Such effort has been well spent but it is important to understand the implications for Thomasson's account in the bigger picture as well.

I frequently call Thomasson's account descriptive. I have Peter Strawson's distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics in mind here. Strawson said: "Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure".³⁹ Revisionary metaphysics values our actual structures of thought to the extent that they indicate where our representation of the world errs. Descriptive metaphysics values our actual structures of thought for what they might reveal, without the aim of improving them. I think it is clear that Thomasson falls into the descriptive metaphysical camp.

However, Beth Preston makes a further distinction between two types of descriptive metaphysics: the "traditional option" and the "naturalistic social science option."⁴⁰ I call these "traditional metaphysics" and "social metaphysics" respectively, and focus on the metaphysics of artifacts. Traditional metaphysicians might investigate our actual practices and attempt to account for them in theories, but typically while precluding certain ontological commitments from being empirically vulnerable. E.g., a traditional metaphysician might account for actual folk practices in their theory of artifacts. However, they might also hold firm to the reality of 'artifact-kinds' or the

³⁹ My source for this Strawson quote is Preston, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

stability of the category of 'artifact', regardless of what the folk artifact practices indicate. So, traditional metaphysics is plausibly inadequate to allow for full descriptive accuracy of our conception of artifacts.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Preston considers traditional metaphysics as a step in the right direction, away from the insularity that revisionary metaphysics enjoys from other disciplines.⁴² In order to fully account for our actual conception of artifacts, metaphysicians need to embrace artifacts' inherent social nature and allow actual practices to *inform* ontological commitments. Social metaphysicians do just that.

Social metaphysicians are willing to structure their ontological commitments to reflect actual artifact practices. Nevertheless, Preston thinks that in order to fully understand artifacts in their social environments, it is important to cooperate with other fields of expertise like biology, anthropology and sociology. Beyond the myriad of research projects in these disciplines that focus on actual folk practices, some of them even study practices legitimately surrounding artifacts. For example, some researchers in ethnobiology study various types of domesticates, or domesticated plants and animals. Namely, they...

...already study the processing and use of plants and animals in foodways and medicine, and what is in your cooking pot or medicine bottle is clearly artifactual. Perhaps more pointedly, your cooking pot and medicine bottle are essential to the processing and use of whatever is in them, so the ethnobiologists can hardly fail to be taking artifacts into their purview, no matter what.⁴³

Here it seems that integration of social metaphysics into ethnobiology would be mutually harmonious and beneficial for understanding the role of artifacts in our lives. The social metaphysician has a legitimate ability to collaborate with other disciplines in this mutually beneficial way.

I consider Thomasson to be doing social metaphysics for multiple reasons. She aims to capture the actual artifact practices in place and grounds our conception of artifacts in public norms of regard. These norms of regard facilitate the communication from an artifact creator to

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 157.

⁴² Ibid. pp. 156-8.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 159.

some agent, which expresses the inherent sociality of artifacts. Beyond these clearly descriptive components of her account, Thomasson even overturns a previous ontological commitment which held the intentional states of the creator alone as sufficient to create artifacts and categorize them by. Now she thinks artifacts depend on norms of regard, which means she also holds intentional states beyond those of the creator as essential to our conception of artifacts.⁴⁴ Finally, her account is empirically vulnerable via the inferred norm. These features make it awfully hard to deny that Thomasson fits the social metaphysical bill.

So, how does this social metaphysical perspective affect the experimental implications for her account and the ability for my experimental approach to be valuable more broadly? In general, experimental results might cause Thomasson to change her account to more accurately reflect folk practices, or may bolster her account as is. In either case, the results are likely to make her account more, or more obviously, descriptively accurate. Given the connection to other disciplines that social metaphysics enjoys, such accuracy will not only be valuable to Thomasson; for, the more accurate Thomasson's account is the more likely it is to help explain phenomena that other research projects, like the ethnobiological one above, are focusing on.

These implications for Thomasson's account, which express how her account might apply more broadly, show how my experimental approach, if only vicariously, is valuable broadly as well. I see at least one more way in which an experimental approach to descriptive metaphysics, like mine, can be valuable more broadly and it is to that which I now turn.

Section 5: *Descriptive metaphysics and experimental philosophy*

Experimental philosophy, henceforth "x-phi", might benefit from my experimental approach to Thomasson's descriptive metaphysical project in a few ways. Namely, my approach elucidates the ability of social constructionist accounts in general to integrate x-phi. To make this clear I first say a bit about x-phi.

⁴⁴ See Thomasson 2014, p. 55.

X-phi is primarily the intersection of psychological experimentation and conceptual analysis.⁴⁵ The purview of x-phi has typically concerned topics like morality and intentionality, and Joshua Knobe has conducted well-known experiments on such topics in order to better understand the relevant folk conceptions. Hereafter, unless explicitly stated otherwise, “folk” is understood in contrast to philosophers because it is a central aim of x-phi to compare folk concepts to philosophical concepts. This is considered to be primarily useful for informing the accuracy of certain philosophical theories. Knobe’s experiments are supposed to show the connection between folk concepts of intentionality and morality, and how they might differ from philosophical concepts of such.⁴⁶ However, his results sparked a debate over the efficacy of x-phi that questions whether or not x-phi research methods can accurately bear upon folk concepts.⁴⁷ One specific research method of x-phi that came under fire is the use of surveys to gather folk intuitions about vignettes. Certain critiques question whether surveys are a reliable way to get at the corresponding concepts, which the vignettes are supposed to range over, and whether intuitions are the right kind of results to try and elicit.⁴⁸

The critiques leveled against x-phi are numerous and I do not handle any of them in the depth they deserve because I am not interested in solving the potential problems of x-phi. However, in general, it is useful to see what kind of criticisms might apply to an experimental approach in metaphysics. Off the bat, folk intuitions might seem fairly worthless when supposed to inform metaphysical questions. For, metaphysicians have acquired a great deal of expertise, especially compared to the folk, in dealing with such esoteric and vexing topics like time, causation, and consciousness.⁴⁹ So eliciting folk intuitions about such things is not likely to be informative, and the folk may even lack the requisite understanding to have intuitions *about* such things at all. Furthermore, their responses might either be predictable⁵⁰ or indicative of a lack of stable concepts

⁴⁵ See Kriegel for a good overview of the potential rationales for x-phi.

⁴⁶ See Knobe 2003 and 2004.

⁴⁷ See especially Adams & Steadman, p. 173.

⁴⁸ See Huebner who argues for the tendency of vignettes and thought experiments to distort intuitions.

⁴⁹ See Rose & Schaffer for discussion. They go on to reject the coherency of this expertise position.

⁵⁰ See Dunaway et al. for this critique of the utility of x-phi for philosophy.

altogether⁵¹, making such research relatively futile. For, if we can already predict what the folk will say, or if they fail to have a corresponding conception in mind, then comparing their conception to our own is likely to lack insight.

While I am not interested in solving such problems here, I am interested in how an experimental approach to *descriptive* metaphysics might nevertheless benefit x-phi. Namely, while x-phi has been employed to investigate folk conceptions of morality and intentionality quite broadly, there has been little integration of x-phi within descriptive metaphysics.⁵² I think that there are *prima facie* reasons for why an experimental approach, like mine, to a descriptive metaphysical account, like Thomasson's, might evade some of the critiques pressed against experimental approaches to metaphysics in general. Namely, Thomasson is focusing on artifacts, which are robustly social and normative. These features tie the behavior surrounding artifacts to what it is to *be* an artifact. Namely, these behaviors evidence our conception of artifacts (now in the inclusive sense of "our" or "folk"). These constitutive behaviors can include references to artifacts, classifications of artifacts and the actual regard of artifacts.

Furthermore, I have argued that Thomasson's account is the kind of descriptive metaphysics I refer to as "social metaphysics." This identifies Thomasson's theoretical methodology as willing to inform ontological commitments based upon actual folk artifact practices in place. This metaphysical methodology is plausibly shared by other fields of study, which also focus on folk practices in order to understand how they relate to various social constructs and our conceptions of them. Examples of such social constructs include artifacts, gender, race, and those ethno-biological domesticates referenced above (*inter alia*). For these fields of study, the relevant constructs *depend upon* folk conceptions, intentions, thoughts, intuitions, or what have you. These social constructs are created through social interactions, sometimes intentionally, and plausibly structure our everyday lives. So, rather than be insulated from what the folk think, understanding a social

⁵¹ See Huebner and Bernstein for discussion here.

⁵² Although there has been some integration generally. Bernstein investigates the folk-concept of causation. See Rose & Schaffer for a study of how the folk concept of teleology affects their intuitions about composition; and see Korman & Carmichael for a response.

construct like artifacts depends upon understanding what the folk think and preserving/respecting it.

So, when looked at from this descriptive metaphysical perspective, an experimental approach seems conducive to accuracy and value, rather than potentially devoid of such. This descriptive metaphysical perspective is understood as a form of social constructionism. Since other social constructionist accounts also focus on socially constructed entities like artifacts, the role for x-phi need not be limited to something like my experimental approach to Thomasson's account and may apply more broadly. I am not suggesting that we let x-phi off the hook from responding to the critiques pressed against it, especially in regards to metaphysics. Rather, I am suggesting that social constructionist accounts, and specifically descriptive metaphysical ones, might be a useful platform to structure such responses from.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that Amie Thomasson's descriptive account of public artifacts, and our conception of them as inherently normative and social, is empirically vulnerable. I placed this vulnerability on the inferred norm, which I have argued is relied upon by Thomasson to account for such relevant phenomena like the coincidence of intended and actual regard for public artifacts and the way in which we classify exapted artifacts. These phenomena are just the kind of phenomena Thomasson's account should be able to handle and the inferred norm allows her to do so. I then sketched an experimental framework that discussed relevant features for experiments testing for the inferred norm. The experimental implications center on making Thomasson's account more descriptively accurate. Such an experimental approach builds on the ability of Thomasson's account to feature in interdisciplinary discourse and exemplifies Beth Preston's naturalistic social science option for descriptive metaphysics. Finally, I showed how such an experimental approach to descriptive metaphysics might indicate the value of integrating experimental philosophy into other social constructionist accounts more broadly. In all, Thomasson is as likely as anyone to appreciate the work done herein, since she is concerned with accurately

capturing our conception of artifacts. As such, the empirical vulnerability of her account is a principally good thing.⁵³

⁵³ Special thanks to Billy Dunaway, Jon McGinnis and Lauren Olin for helpful comments and feedback on earlier drafts.

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