Do we need two notions of constitution?

One prominent theory on the nature of middle-sized material objects like statues, flags, cats, etc... claims that these objects and the objects from which they are made —the statue from a piece of marble, the flag from a piece of fabric, the cat from an organism, etc...— are different objects. Moreover, the theory claims that the relation held between them is that of constitution. The piece of marble constitutes the statue, the organism constitutes the cat, etc.

Robert Wilson claims that the theory stating that there is just one notion of constitution is incorrect. He argues that there are reasons to differentiate between two notions of constitution.

In this paper I argue that Wilson's reasons are not convincing.

He presents four arguments, three of which are closely related. First, I present and discuss these three arguments. Afterwards I do the same for the fourth argument.

1st argument: Wilson argues that to explain the different intuitions we have in cases like (1) and (1*) we need to differentiate between two notions of constitution:

(1) This chain is constituted by metal links

Our intuition here is that the constituted object is *nothing more than* the objects which constitute it in a certain configuration. However, in

(1*) The statue David is constituted by a piece of marble

our intuition is that the constituted object is *more than simply* the object which constitutes it in a certain configuration.

2nd argument: consider the following arguments.

(2a) This chain is constituted by metal links
(2b) These metal links are constituted by physical particles
_____
(2c) This chain is constituted by physical particles

(3a) David is constituted by a piece of marble
(3b) This piece of marble is constituted by physical particles
_____
(3c) David is constituted by physical particles

Wilson claims that even if at first one thinks that they have the same form, they do not display the same pattern of intuitions. In (2), our intuitions display the following pattern: a metal chain is *nothing more than* metal links arranged in a certain way and so, it is *nothing more than* physical particles arranged in a certain way, given that these links are *nothing more than* these physical particles arranged in a certain way. However, in (3), the pattern is different: a statue is *more than simply* a piece of marble in a certain configuration, in the same way that it is *more than simply* certain physical particles, however these are arranged; and this is so even if this piece of marble is *nothing more than* these physical particles arranged in a certain adequate manner.

Wilson argues that to explain these different patterns of intuitions we need to differentiate between two notions of constitution.

3rd argument: In Wilson's view there is a difference between the relation that entities of the kind of chains bear to the matter constituting them, and the relation that entities of the kind of statues bear to the matter constituting them. Consider a piece of matter. If we add more matter, there will be a way to do so that will create a chain by itself. But this is not so for statues. For a statue to exist, the world beyond it has to be a certain way. Wilson concludes, therefore, that the constitution relation in the two cases is not the same.

Now, are Wilson's arguments convincing?

1st argument: I argue that we can explain the different intuitions by appealing to the fact, accepted by constitutionalists (Wilson among them), that the constituted objects in (1) and (1*) have different kinds of principles of existence–persistence. Chains are objects whose principle of existence–persistence does not require the objects beyond the spatiotemporal region they occupy to be a certain special way. However, the principle of existence–persistence of statues, apart from requiring the objects in the same spatiotemporal region to have certain properties, also requires the world around them to be of a certain way.

2nd argument: I argue that we can explain the different patterns of intuitions just by appealing to the different kinds of principles of existence–persistence of the different entities involved in the arguments. In (2) all the entities have the same kind of principle of existence–persistence but in (3) this is not so.

3rd argument: I argue that the facts which Wilson refers to can be explained equally well assuming there is a unique relation of constitution and taking into account the different kinds of principles of existence–persistence of chains and of statues.

And, as I have stated, these principles of existence–persistence are already in the conceptual apparatus of constitutionalists.

Now, let me present Wilson's last argument and explain why I think it is not correct: the *many-many problem*.

Let us accept that the statue David is constituted by the piece of marble Piece. Wilson asks whether there are also a work of art, a valuable artefact and a sculpture by Michelangelo in addition to David and also constituted by Piece. This is the many-one side of the many-many problem. The other side (the one-many side) is the following. There is Piece constituting David. But are there, in addition to Piece, smaller marble chunks, some undifferentiated stuff and an aggregation of elementary particles constituting David too?

Wilson claims that by having two different notions of constitution, we can argue that there can be different constituents for a given constituted object without ontological amplification. Therefore, the one-many side of the many-many problem is solved.

I argue, against Wilson, that we do not need two different notions of constitution to solve the one-many side of the problem. To show this I introduce Baker's theory of constitution. Slightly modifying it, I show that in the same way as Wilson claims his constitution-chains avoid ontological amplification, the constitution-chains I propose, and that are based on Baker's notion of constitution, can be seen as doing exactly the same job.

Finally, I present Wilson's concrete criticisms to Baker's theory and argue that none of them affect the previous conclusion.