The ontological status of artifacts has long been a problem for philosophers in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. The problem arises because Thomas is clear that substantial forms are limited to organic beings, and that artifacts are agglomerations of independent substantial forms united by an accidental form. While this position solves the pseudo-problem of Theseus’ ship, it also opens itself up to the problem of relativism with respect to artifacts: since Thomas argues that the standard of truth for artifacts is in the mind of the artificer, this appears to imply an extreme nominalism with respect to the specification or truth of the artifact. This problem is increasingly acute inasmuch as human ingenuity continues to develop more and more artifacts out of the rich resources of the organic world.

My reply will reflect both a MacIntyreen idea of cultural practice, as well as a existential Thomism indebted to Gilson, Maritain, and Norris Clarke. I will argue that while the form of the artifact is indeed an accidental union of independent substances, it has objective truth insofar as the artifact is defined by the final cause imputed to it by the culture which has created it. Artifacts must be seen as cultural constructs, but since culture may be understood as the set of habits which bring man to perfection, there is an underlying objective criterion for the truth of cultural constructs. Thus, the most important constructs—virtue, science, and religion—must objectively direct us to perfection to be seen as true. Similarly, artifacts, as the transformation of the potential of natural resources, illustrate man’s progress toward perfection. Thus, an artifact is primarily a culturally constituted ens rationis, since the final cause is defined by the artificer’s culture, and yet its truth is objectively defined by the united being that it is given by the efficient cause in light of the final cause. So, even though an artifact lacks a single act of existence, it is one being to the extent that it is understood as meaningfully united by the one who makes use of it. The meaning of artifacts are thus grounded in culture as perfective of human nature; if someone does not share the culture, the artifact lacks existential unity and so is meaningless.