

Reflections on the Ontological Status of Persons

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Lynne Rudder Baker's "The Ontological Status of Persons" is a sophisticated attempt to answer the difficult, perennial philosophical question, "What is the relationship of human beings to the natural world?" According to Baker's double-stranded answer, our having reflective consciousness implies that we are not identical with our bodies, yet we are physical beings who are united with our bodies in a strong metaphysical sense. This answer combines dualistic and materialistic elements in an extremely interesting and novel way.

Baker calls the view that we are essentially animals *Animalism*. The animalist maintains that each of us is identical with a human animal. Baker argues that if Animalism is correct, then we have ontological significance in virtue of our being human animals or organisms, but not in virtue of our being persons.

Baker opposes Animalism with the *Constitution View*. This view implies that we are essentially persons, but only accidentally animals. A further implication is that none of us is *identical with* a human animal; rather each of us is *constituted by* a human animal. According to the Constitution View, we have ontological significance in virtue of being persons, but not in virtue of being animals.

On the plus side, Baker's metaphysical theory that some physical objects constitute others accommodates our intuitive or folk-ontological beliefs about the existence and persistence conditions of statues and statue-shaped pieces of bronze, credit cards and credit card-shaped pieces of plastic, and so on. On the minus side, as Baker acknowledges, there is a worry that this metaphysical theory multiplies physical objects unnecessarily.

According to Baker's Constitution View, *person* is a primary-kind. Such a kind, she says, need not be a kind of a broader kind such as *animal*. I'm not sure exactly what Baker means by this. In particular, I wonder if she doubts Chisholm's view that, necessarily, a person is a kind of *substance*.

Baker defends the view that there are primary-kind properties that are essential to one thing and accidental to another. Baker's view is illustrated by

her claim that *personhood* is essential to *persons*, yet accidental to *human animals*. I do not accept this view. A primary-kind is what a thing most fundamentally is. How, then, can a thing have a primary-kind property accidentally? The answer seems to be that in such a case the thing has the primary-kind property only *derivatively*. But something has a primary-kind property, *F-ness*, derivatively, only if the primary-kind property of a nonderivative *F*, i.e., the property that *determines* what a nonderivative *F* most fundamentally is, is *nonderivative F-ness* (rather than *F-ness*). After all, such a determination relation is an *entailment* relation; yet on Baker's assumptions, a nonderivative *F* is most fundamentally a nonderivative *F*, and having *F-ness* does *not* entail being a nonderivative *F*. It follows that *nonderivative F-ness* cannot be had accidentally. Thus, a primary-kind property cannot be had accidentally or derivatively. This, I believe, amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that a primary-kind property can be had accidentally or derivatively.

Baker argues that *person* is a primary-kind on the grounds that reflective consciousness is a salient property of persons, that this property is very unlike every other property in nature, and that what a thing most fundamentally is, is a matter of what is distinctive about it. According to Baker, when reflective consciousness arose, "it was sufficiently different from every other property in the natural world that it ushered in a new kind of being." I shall critically assess this argument in what follows.

Baker's claim that reflective consciousness is very unlike every other property in the natural world may be appealing. Yet, there are good reasons to be hesitant about accepting this claim. For one thing, two very dissimilar forms may be connected by a graduated series of forms such that each form is similar to its neighbors in the series. According to evolutionary biology, of course, there are series of biological forms of this sort. There also appear to be such series connecting biological and psychological forms. For instance, even an ameba has a salient biological quality which to some extent resembles a person's reflective consciousness, namely, a tendency to respond to external stimuli so as to maintain itself, and this biological quality can be augmented through the gradual addition of the following psychological or proto-psychological qualities, in this order: first, intelligent behavior of an instinctive nature, second, learned behavior, third, transfer of acquired information between members of the same species, fourth, *consciousness*, fifth, emotions, moods, and personality traits, sixth, communication of beliefs or desires between members of the same species, seventh, language-use, and eighth, *reflective consciousness*. (Note that there may be significant stages other than the ones I've mentioned, and that within each significant stage, various further sub-stages or degrees of development can be distinguished.) To the extent that gradations of mentality are found in nature, the justification

for Baker's premise that reflective consciousness is very unlike every other property in the natural world is weakened. Although Baker does not deny that gradations of mentality are found in nature, I worry that she underestimates the extent of these gradations.

Moreover, the dissimilarity between conscious living things which are non-reflective, e.g., dogs, and living things which are non-conscious, e.g., amebas, appears to be at least as great as that between conscious living things which are reflective, e.g., humans, and conscious living things which are not. Thus, *consciousness* seems to be no less distinctive to the beings that enjoy it than *reflective consciousness*. (Of course, Descartes's notion that all non-human animals are nonconscious beings is implausible in the light of the total physiological and behavioral evidence available.) So, on Baker's principles, it appears to follow that *conscious being* (or more precisely, *being with an appropriate capacity for consciousness*) is a primary-kind, and that a living organism may constitute such a conscious being. In that case, it appears that a human person is co-located not only with a diverse human organism, but also with a *conscious human* that is diverse from both the *human organism* and the *human person*. An account that posits three such things in the same place at the same time is neither intuitive nor parsimonious. (Note that such a trinitarian account of human existence bears some resemblance to Aquinas's doctrine of the vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls of a human organism.) In the light of the foregoing considerations, I do not find Baker's argument that *person* is a primary-kind persuasive as it stands.

Baker suggests that animalists would be inclined to hold that *human organism* is a primary-kind property. But many contemporary philosophers of biology reject the notion that biological species are natural kinds, along with the related notion that biological species properties are essences. For example, Elliot Sober has written as follows. "If species have essences, it is surprising that evolutionary biology has not only failed to find them but shown scant interest in doing so... Two organisms are in the same species in virtue of their genealogical relatedness, not in virtue of their similarity; they are kin, but do not thereby comprise a natural kind."¹ Even if two organisms are in the same species in virtue of their similarity, it can be argued that for any species, *S*, there could be a transitional organism, *O*, such that *O marginally belongs* to *S*, *O* does not belong to *S* derivatively, and *O possibly does not belong* to *S* due to the occurrence of a mutation. (What I have in mind is the possibility of a genetic mutation occurring when *O* is *generated*, so that *O* would be a *mutant* and not in *S*.) But on Baker's view, whatever is nonderivatively of a primary-kind is *essentially* of that primary-kind. So,

¹ This quotation is from Sober's entry on natural kinds in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), p. 346.

arguably, no species is a primary-kind. For parallel reasons, it is not clear that every member of a higher-order taxon such as *animal* or *plant* essentially belongs to it. Baker acknowledges that there are controversies in biology about individuating species. Still, the foregoing doubts about whether biological species are primary-kinds undermine Baker's basic assumption that every being has a primary-kind. (But these doubts do not undermine the apparently plausible idea that there are *nonmarginal* or *paradigm* members of higher-order taxa that essentially belong to them.)

Even if biological species are not primary-kinds, an animalist can plausibly argue that carbon-based living organisms, e.g., living human animals, have persistence conditions. In particular, a carbon-based living organism, *O*, possibly undergoes only a limited range of changes in structural or compositional properties, $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n$, reflecting lawfully interrelated requirements such as (i) *O*'s having a certain *compositional nature*, one which apparently includes liquid water, proteins, and self-replicable organic macromolecules, (ii) *O*'s having a narrowly defined capacity for certain *basic biological activities*, e.g., metabolic ones, (iii) *O*'s having a *master-part*, i.e., a vital proper part which regulates or controls the biological activities of *O*'s parts, and (iv) *O*'s having a *hereditary-type* which is molecularly encoded in its master-part right from the start. So, arguably, the persistence conditions of a carbon-based organism are more a matter of its original genotype or hereditary-type than its species. Even if a *marginally human* living animal, *H*, were *accidentally* human, *H*'s having such persistence conditions would ensure that *H* could not become an oak tree, an ameba, a tiger, or a thing composed of aluminum, silicon, plastic, and gold.

Baker claims that Animalism is incompatible with Chisholm's requirement that a person is necessarily such that it is physically possible that it consciously thinks. Baker assumes that in some possible world there is a living human animal, *H*, which never develops a cerebral cortex because *H*'s mother was exposed to a toxic chemical. Baker argues that in such a possible world *H* *consciously thinks* would be *physically impossible*. I do not find this argument persuasive. By 'physically possible', Chisholm means *consistent with the laws of nature*. Since the laws of nature are physically necessary, something's being physically possible cannot hinge upon anything that is physically contingent, i.e., such that both it and its negation are consistent with the laws of nature. Of course, it is physically possible that *H*'s mother undergoes a toxic exposure of the sort that Baker envisions, in which case *H* would never develop the ability to consciously think. But it is *also* physically possible that *H*'s mother does *not* undergo such a toxic exposure, with the result that *H* eventually develops conscious thought. Thus, whether *H* is ever able to consciously think hinges upon something that is physically contingent, i.e., *H*'s mother being exposed to a toxin of the sort in question.

It follows that even if *H* were never to develop a cerebral cortex for the reasons that Baker envisions, *H* *consciously thinks* would *not* be physically impossible. (Notice that this seems to be consistent with *H*'s *consciously thinking without a cerebral cortex* being physically impossible.) I conclude that Animalism is *compatible* with the aforementioned Chisholmian requirement; Baker is wrong to suppose otherwise.

Baker defends her Constitution View of human persons by arguing that a thing's nature is more a matter of what it can do than what it is made of. In contrast, Joshua Hoffman and I have defended a substance ontology that implies that a physical thing's essential nature is a *natural kind*, and hence more a matter of what it is made of (and of how its parts are united) than of what it can do.² This substance ontology does *not* assume that there are physical objects that are constituted by other co-located physical objects. *Person* does not qualify as a natural substance-kind because some possible persons are not similar in make-up to others, as illustrated by the possibilities of a reflective thinker who is *carbon-based*, a reflective thinker who is *physical* but *not carbon-based*, and an *altogether nonphysical* reflective thinker. The animalist claim that human personhood is a phase, and hence an accident, of certain carbon-based living organisms fits comfortably within our ontology of natural substance-kinds; but the Constitution View does not.

² Joshua Hoffman and Gary S. Rosenkrantz, *Substance: Its Nature and Existence* (London: Routledge, 1997).