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WE ARE NOT, FUNDAMENTALLY, PERSONS

abstract

We are fundamentally persons, so Lynne Baker says; I argue that, assuming her metaphysical framework, this cannot be the case.

keywords

Human persons, primary kind, God, angels, souls

In this paper I want to argue that, assuming Lynne Baker's metaphysical framework, one has to conclude that, contrary to what she says, beings like us are not fundamentally persons.

Let us begin by considering some features Baker attributes to beings like us, and let us focus on me, for the sake of simplicity.

As is well known, Baker is a prominent supporter of what can be called the 'metaphysics of constitution'¹, and, she says, I am constituted by, but not identical with, my body². And notice: I am essentially constituted by a body, even though not necessarily a human one; I could, in fact, be constituted by an artificial or a bionic or even a spiritual body, but I could not survive the sudden disappearance of all bodies³.

So I am constituted by a body and this, according to Baker, is an essential feature of mine. What other properties do I possess? Well, I have many other properties, but the one which characterizes me fundamentally is the property of being a person: *person*, as Baker says, is my 'primary kind'⁴. Let us briefly see what, exactly, a primary kind is.

For any entity *x* we can ask "What fundamentally is *x*?" and the answer will be what Baker calls "*x*'s primary kind": everything that exists is of *exactly one* primary kind – e.g. a horse, a tomato, a passport, an apple, a statue, a dog, and so on and so forth⁵. Moreover, an object's primary kind determines what sort of changes it can undergo and still exist, and what sorts of changes would result in its ceasing to exist altogether; put briefly, an object's primary kind determines its persistence conditions, so that if *K* is a primary kind, and *x* and *y* are *K*s, then *x* and *y* have the same persistence conditions, namely the ones *K* determines⁶.

What I have said so far will be, of course, very familiar to every reader of Baker's books and papers: I have simply given a brief summary of some of the theses Baker most frequently insists on. So one may be surprised to discover that these theses seem to lead quickly to a thorny problem.

1 Baker (2000, 2007a). See, also, for example, Wasserman (2004) and Olson (2007, pp. 48-59).

2 Baker (2000, pp. 91-101; 2007a, pp. 67-94).

3 Baker (2000, p. 214; 2007b).

4 See, for example, Baker (2000, p. 96; 2007a, p. 38).

5 For example: Baker (2000, pp. 39-40; 2007a, pp. 67-68).

6 See, for example, Baker (2000, pp. 39-40; 2007a, p. 33, pp. 219-220; 2013, p. 224).

Let us see what the problem is by considering the following argument, whose first and second premises simply restate two of Baker's main tenets which I have just talked about:

Premise 1) Person is a primary kind.

Premise 2) If Person is a primary kind, and x and y are persons, then x and y have the same persistence conditions.

Now add to these two premises the following thesis:

Premise 3) God (if He exists), angels (if they exist), immaterial or Cartesian souls (if they exist), and beings like us are all persons.

From the three premises just stated, one can immediately conclude that God, angels, Cartesian souls and beings like us all share the same persistence conditions. But this, of course, is simply absurd (for example: we cannot survive the disappearance of all bodies – we are essentially constituted by a body – while God, angels and Cartesian souls can). So here we have a real predicament: what premises would Baker reject?

Consider the possibility of rejecting premise 3). Perhaps a non-Christian philosopher would be inclined to say that it is a mistake to think of God as a person – and so she would deny the thesis according to which if God exists, then God is a person. Yet, notice that this idea is a non-starter for Baker, who is a committed Christian.

But let us set aside divine – and angelical – topics, and let us focus just on Cartesian souls. These entities have a sophisticated mental life – they reason, desire, hope, feel, and so on: denying that these things have the *status* of persons is indeed very implausible, and so it seems difficult to deny premise 3) entirely. But supposing premise 3) was concerned just with souls, a friend of Baker could perhaps say that they are not persons exploiting the following idea: according to Baker, if x is a person, then x has a language, and if something has a language, then it belongs to a linguistic community⁷. But, one could say, souls cannot belong to a linguistic community, so souls are not persons – and the 'just souls' version of premise 3) would be refuted.

And yet: is it really true that souls cannot belong to a linguistic community? I do not think so. Suppose that something like Descartes metaphysics is on the right

⁷ See, for example, Baker (2013).

track, and so suppose that there are immaterial souls causally interacting with bodies and, through these bodies, with each other: given this mutual interaction it is quite obvious, it seems to me, that these souls *can* belong to a linguistic community, and so they may well be persons.

Thus the prospects for denying premise 3), even in its 'just souls' version, are, I think, rather dim. Let us focus, then, on the second premise, and let us consider three different ways of denying it.

1st way – A denier of premise 2) could say: "It is true that *person* is a primary kind, and it is true that, God, angels, souls and beings like us are all persons; but it is not true that God, angels and souls share with us their persistence conditions. This is because God, angels and souls simply *cannot have persistence conditions*. Why so? Well, God is the absolute, infinite being, an entity to which one cannot correctly attribute any persistence condition; as for angels and souls, they are immaterial beings and it is not clear what would make them cease to exist". To this I offer two answers.

a) The persistence conditions associated with an entity *x* can be thought of as determining two disjoint sets: the set of what *x* can survive and the set of what *x* cannot survive. In the case of God the second set is plausibly empty, but this is not to say that God does not have persistence conditions: rather, He possesses *trivial* persistence conditions, which is quite another thing. As for angels and souls, God certainly could annihilate them: so they do seem to have persistence conditions, and not even trivial ones.

b) But let us concede, for the sake of argument, that God, angels and souls do not have persistence conditions. In this case, and by Baker's own lights, one has to confront a troublesome consequence. Let us see what this consequence is, by first considering the following principle held by Baker: for every possible world *w* and every time *t*,

(PC) If *x* exists in *w* at a time *t* and *x* is not eternal in *w*, then *x* has persistence conditions in *w*⁸.

Now, let us focus on souls, and consider any possible world *w* in which souls exist. We are assuming that souls cannot have persistence conditions, and so souls do not have persistence conditions in *w*. So, by PC and *modus tollens*, one has to conclude that

It is not the case that (souls exist in *w* at a time *t* and souls are not eternal in *w*).

⁸ Baker (2007a, p. 221). Reference to possible worlds is mine but it can be considered implicit in Baker's original statement.

So, either souls do not exist in time in w – that is, in w they exist outside of time – or they are eternal in w ⁹. And, given that “eternal” can mean “outside of time” or “existing at each moment in time”, the upshot is that, in w , either souls exist outside of time or they exist at each moment in time.

Let us state briefly where we have got to: if one assumes that souls cannot have persistence conditions, then

For every possible world w in which souls exist, either souls are outside of time in w , or they exist at each moment in time in w .

But, of course, Cartesian souls do not exist outside of time, and so, for every possible world w in which souls exist, they exist at each moment in time in w . And this is the troublesome consequence of assuming that souls cannot have persistence conditions: saying that for every possible world w in which souls exist, they exist at each moment in time in w , means that it is *metaphysically impossible* for a universe inhabited, at a certain time, by souls to exist without souls – a quite implausible thesis by itself, and certainly not a thesis that most committed Christians like Baker would be happy to endorse.

2nd way – A denier of premise 2) could, nonetheless, try another line of argument: “The persistence conditions of beings like us are not determined solely by our being persons, but also by the bodies that constitute us. So it is true that *person* is a primary kind, and it is true that, God, angels, souls, and beings like us are all persons; but it is not true that God, angels and souls share with us their persistence conditions, because our persistence conditions are partly determined by the bodies that constitute us, and these bodies do not constitute God, angels and souls”. In conversation Baker herself has suggested a reply along these lines to me but I have to say that I find it quite puzzling, and I am going to briefly explain why.

Certainly God is not constituted by anything – and Baker says so following what most Christian traditions have upheld¹⁰; moreover postulating a sort of ‘spiritual stuff’ constituting angels or souls is really quite implausible. So one should say that God, angels and souls are not constituted by anything, and therefore that their persistence conditions are fully determined by the

⁹ Let me unravel this line of reasoning a little. It is not the case that (souls exist in w at a time t and souls are not eternal in w) implies that either (1) it is not the case that souls exist in w at a time t or (2) it is not the case that souls are not eternal in w . Let us consider (1). Souls do exist in w , we have assumed, so if (1) is true, then it has to be the case that souls exist in w and they do not exist at a time t . But, of course, time t is a variable standing for any time whatsoever, and so one has to say that souls exist in w and that they do not exist at any time; therefore souls exist in w outside of time. Finally, and obviously, (2) implies that souls are indeed eternal in w .

¹⁰ Baker (2007a, p. 79).

primary kind to which they belong, namely the primary kind *person*. But then – first problem – it seems rather peculiar to say that this is not the case for beings like us.

More importantly – second problem – it is quite difficult to reconcile the idea according to which we are fundamentally persons with the idea that what we fundamentally are does not fully determine our persistence conditions.

And to these one may add a third problem. Baker says that the body that is now constituting me, let us say B, belongs to the primary kind “human body”, and so, of course, B cannot survive the disappearance of all biological bodies¹¹. But if B contributes to determining my persistence conditions, it seems that I cannot survive the disappearance of all biological bodies, either, and this runs against what Baker says about beings like us, namely that we can have bionic or artificial bodies, and so that we *can* survive the disappearance of all biological bodies.

3rd way – Let us finally consider a third way to deny premise 2) which is somewhat related to the one just examined¹²: “We are fundamentally persons, and *person* is a determinable kind-property which can be determined in different ways – *human person* being one such possible determination. If so, then, arguably, from ‘x and y are persons’, it does not follow that ‘x and y have the same persistence conditions’ – *contra* premise 2)”. Is this a convincing line of reasoning? Clearly, it does not seem to be. If we are fundamentally persons, then *person* is our primary kind – a primary kind, Baker says, is by definition the kind-property which determines what a thing fundamentally is. So according to the proponent of the 3rd way, *person* is at the same time a primary kind and a determinable kind-property. But how could a *determinable* kind-property determine what a thing fundamentally is? Determinable kind-properties, such as *mammal*, *artifact*, *elementary particle*, or *vegetable*, clearly do not define the fundamental nature of their bearers, as instead kind-properties such as *horse*, *statue*, *electron* or *cabbage* do. So one cannot say, on pain of contradiction, that person is both a primary kind *and* a determinable kind-property.

To conclude: I have considered some arguments through which Baker could deny premise 2) or premise 3), and could block the conclusion that God, angels, Cartesian souls and beings like us all share the same persistence conditions;

¹¹ Suppose it can: then B, which is fundamentally a human organism, can exist in a world deprived of all biological bodies, which is absurd.

¹² I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

but these arguments, I have tried to show, fail. Now, perhaps Baker has the resources and the ability to plausibly deny, in different ways, premise 2) or 3), but I cannot see how this could be done. So, I believe, the only choice left is to deny premise 1), but this means that *person* is not a primary kind, and *a fortiori* that it is not *our* primary kind. So, assuming Baker's metaphysical framework, we are not fundamentally persons, which is what I wanted to argue for.

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