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Persons and the Natural Order

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We human persons have an abiding interest in understanding what kind of beings we are. However, it is not obvious how to attain such an understanding. Traditional analytic metaphysicians start with a priori accounts of the most general, abstract features of the world—e.g., accounts of properties and particulars—features that, they claim, in no way depend upon us or our activity.¹ Such accounts are formulated in abstraction from what is already known about persons and other things, and are used as constraints on metaphysical investigation of everything else. So, if we accept traditional metaphysics, we should be prepared to yield to abstruse pronouncements—either by giving up our most secure beliefs about the world that we encounter or by abandoning our conception of what those beliefs are really about.

In contrast to traditional metaphysics, a more pragmatic metaphysics does not hold the empirical world in abeyance until we have thoroughgoing accounts of properties and the other topics of traditional metaphysics.² Rather, a more pragmatic approach to

¹ For example, see the work of David Lewis, David Armstrong, and Peter van Inwagen. For more recent examples, see Timothy O'Connor and Jonathan D. Jacobs, "Emergent Individuals," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 540-555, and John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

² From a pragmatic point of view, traditional metaphysics has no standards of adequacy other than what is, in Peirce's words, "agreeable to reason"—what we find ourselves inclined to believe. The traditional approach not only makes metaphysics subject to fashion (as Peirce pointed out), but also cuts metaphysics off from all other forms of human inquiry. The more pragmatic philosopher sees the traditional topics to be fanciful unless tethered to something that someone might care about outside the seminar room. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," in *Selected Writings*, ed., Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover Publications, 1958): 91-112. Quote is from p. 106.

reality—an approach that elsewhere I have called ‘Practical Realism’—reverses the priorities of traditional metaphysics.³ A Practical Realist starts with the world that people successfully interact with. Instead of holding the encountered world hostage to accounts of, say, properties and particulars, the Practical Realist judges accounts of properties and particulars in terms of how well they illuminate matters that everyone—nonphilosophers as well as philosophers—cares about. To use metaphysics as a tool for understanding is not to conflate metaphysics and epistemology; nor is it to follow Quine in taking philosophy to be an extension of science. Rather, it is to pluck metaphysics out of intellectual isolation and to bring it to bear on the world that we all encounter. In this way, metaphysics can earn its keep.

Like Lewis and Chisholm, I take ordinary beliefs about human beings and their place in the world to count as data for an ontology that includes persons. But unlike Lewis and Chisholm, I take most substantive a priori commitments to be negotiable. I want to consider the world as we encounter it more or less at face value, and to formulate an ontological scheme that systematizes what we all believe. A Practical Realist seeks a unified theory that hews as closely as possible to what is common currency about the world as we encounter it.

Anyone who takes the world as we encounter it to be ontologically significant—as I do—will be attracted to the more pragmatic line. (By contrast, much traditional metaphysics either has nothing to say about ordinary things that matter, or it treats them in ways that are unrecognizable to science and to common sense.) One way that a more pragmatic metaphysician departs from traditional

³ In *Explaining Attitudes: A Practical Approach to the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), I developed what I call ‘Practical Realism’.

metaphysics is to accept that what something is most fundamentally may be a matter of what it does, rather than what it is made of. Persons, I believe, are such entities.

‘Person,’ as Locke famously noted, is a forensic term. However, it also denotes a certain kind of being. A metaphysical account of human persons should accommodate well-known established facts. First, there are the facts of biology that situate human persons in the animal world. Darwinism offers a great unifying thesis that “there is one grand pattern of similarity linking all life.”⁴ Human and nonhuman organisms both find their place in this one grand pattern. Second, there are the facts of self-consciousness that distinguish human persons from other parts of the natural world. People often know what they are thinking, feeling, deciding, etc. They can think about the future, wonder how they are going to die, hope for resurrection. They can reflect on their own motivations—from Augustine in the *Confessions* to former U.S. Presidents in their memoirs. Such descriptions all presuppose self-consciousness: they presuppose beings with the ability to be conscious of themselves from a first-personal point of view. And what they describe is unique to human persons.

The view that I shall propose fully honors both these kinds of fact—the biological facts that pertain to human beings as part of the animal kingdom and, for want of a better word, the “personal” facts that pertain to human beings uniquely. On the one hand, human persons are material objects, subject to all the natural laws that apply to other kinds of material objects.⁵ Human persons are wholly part of

⁴ Niles Eldredge, *The Triumph of Evolution* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000): 31.

⁵ The view that human persons are wholly part of the natural order, I believe, rules out the possibility that human persons have free will, as libertarians conceive of it. They do, however, have free will, as compatibilists conceive of it. See my “Moral Responsibility Without Libertarianism” in *Noûs*, forthcoming.

nature, the product of natural processes that started eons before the existence of our solar system, and that account for the existence of everything in the natural world—from atoms and molecules to solar systems and galaxies. On the other hand, human persons have evolved to have the capacity to think of themselves in the first-person. A first-person perspective is the defining property of persons and makes possible their characteristic forms of life and experience.

Not only are human persons a unique part of nature, but also—as I shall urge—they are an *ontologically* unique part of nature.⁶ By saying that persons are ontologically unique, I imply that an inventory of what exists leaving out persons would be incomplete. The addition of a person to the world is the addition of a new entity. Being a person is not just a property of some essentially nonpersonal kind of thing. (Fs are essentially nonpersonal if and only if being a person makes no difference to whether or not an F exists.) I realize that many philosophers do not take ontological uniqueness of persons to be a *desideratum* for an account of persons. Such philosophers are often motivated by doubt about the compatibility of persons' being ontologically unique and their being natural products of natural selection. Part of my aim here is to dispel that doubt. (If you do not think that ontological uniqueness of persons is a *desideratum* of an account of persons, then omit the term '*desideratum*' and take my argument to show that if persons are wholly natural, they may still be ontologically unique.) I know of no view of human persons other than the Constitution View that satisfies both these *desiderata* (as I shall continue to say): Human persons are wholly natural, yet ontologically distinctive.

⁶ For more detailed arguments, see my "The Ontological Status of Persons," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 370-388, and "The Difference that Self-Consciousness Makes," in *On Human Persons*, Klaus Petrus, ed. (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2003): 23-39.

Let me interject a word about my use of the terms ‘nature’ and ‘natural.’ I use such terms broadly to apply to anything nondivine or nonsupernatural. So, nature, as I construe it, includes culture.⁷ Both biological and cultural processes are natural, in the sense that I intend.

I have set out and defended my view of persons—the Constitution View—elsewhere in detail.⁸ Here I want to defend the kind of account that I hold, however the details are worked out, by showing how much better it satisfies the *desiderata* than its rivals. After comparing and contrasting three approaches with respect to the *desiderata*, I shall discuss the compatibility of the Constitution View with traditional theism. I hope to show that the Constitution View takes human persons to be wholly in the natural world and wholly material, to come into being without special divine intervention, and yet to be ontologically distinctive in the way required by the great monotheistic traditions. That is, I hold the Constitution View of human persons to be compatible with traditional theism without entailing it.

Three Ontological Approaches to Human Persons

There are three main ontological approaches to human persons today: Animalism, Substance Dualism, and (my own) Constitution View.

1. Animalism. Perhaps the most prominent approach to human persons today is the Animalist View. According to any version of Animalism, persons are most fundamentally animals. On Animalist

⁷ In theistic terms, the natural world is the created world, *modulo* angels.

⁸ See *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Also see “On Making Things Up: Constitution and Its Critics,” *Philosophical Topics: Identity and Individuation* 30 (2002): 31-52. “When Does a Person Begin?” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, forthcoming, contains some further developments of the view.

views, the unique features of persons—e.g., features such as wondering how one is going to die, or recognizing and evaluating one’s own desires, or inquiring into the kind of being that one is—have no ontological significance at all. Indeed, Eric T. Olson, an influential Animalist, takes mentality in general not to matter to our identity: He says, “[P]sychology is completely irrelevant to personal identity.”⁹ We are essentially animals and only accidentally persons. Olson has said:

Perhaps we cannot properly call that vegetating animal a person since it has none of those psychological features that distinguish people from non-people (rationality, the capacity for self-consciousness, or what have you). If so, that simply shows that you can continue to exist without being a person, just as you could continue to exist without being a philosopher, or a student or a fancier of fast cars.¹⁰

On this version of Animalism, what distinguishes “people from non-people” is of no more ontological significance than what distinguishes students from non-students, or fanciers of fast cars from non-fanciers of fast cars. According to Olson, the continued existence of you or me depends on “biological continuity: one survives just in case one’s purely animal functions—metabolism, the capacity to breathe and circulate one’s blood and the like—continue.”¹¹ Ontologically speaking, there is no difference between human persons and nonhuman animals; indeed, on some versions of Animalism, there is no ontological difference between human persons and any other organisms. Such is Animalism.

⁹ Eric T. Olson, “Was I Ever a Fetus?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 97.

¹⁰ Eric T. Olson, *The Human Animal: Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 17.

¹¹ Olson, 16.

2. Substance Dualism. Substance Dualism is the view that there are two fundamental kinds of substance: material and mental. Richard Swinburne is a leading Substance Dualist, who explains the view like this:

I understand by substance dualism the view that those persons which are human beings (or men) living on Earth, have two parts linked together, body and soul. A man's body is that to which his physical properties belong. If a man weighs ten stone, then his body weighs ten stone. A man's soul is that to which the (pure) mental properties of a man belong. If a man imagines a cat, then, the dualist will say, his soul imagines a cat.¹²

"On the dualist account," Swinburne continues, "the whole man has the properties he does because his constituent parts have the properties they do....I imagine a cat because my soul does." The seat of mental states is the soul. Like Descartes, Swinburne offers a modal argument for substance dualism, based on the (alleged) separability of mind and body.

William Hasker offers a different approach to Substance Dualism: Emergent Dualism. Deploying a "unity-of-consciousness" argument, Hasker holds that "a person's being aware of a complex fact cannot consist in the actions of parts of the person, each of which does *not* possess this awareness."¹³ This leads to the question, "But what *is* this self?"¹⁴

¹² Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Revised Edition) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997): 145

¹³ William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999): 129. Hasker holds that animals have souls (p. 193). But if emergent dualism applies to nonhuman animals as well as to persons, do animals also have libertarian free will? If not, why not? (As I mentioned, I do not see how a being with libertarian free will can be generated by natural processes.)

¹⁴ Hasker, p. 146.

The self is an emergent entity “endowed with novel causal powers” and “possess[ing] libertarian free will.”¹⁵ As I understand it, emergence occurs when micro-elements, governed by standard physical laws, generate higher-level properties, which, in turn, alter the laws according to which lower-level elements interact.¹⁶ The mind is, then, produced by the brain, and is “not a separate element ‘added to’ the brain from outside.”¹⁷ Emergent Dualism holds that “when suitably configured, [matter] generates a field of consciousness that is able to function teleologically, and to exercise libertarian free will, and the field of consciousness in turn modifies and directs the functioning of the physical brain.”¹⁸ Hasker considers the emergent mind to be part of nature, generated by natural processes—an “entity actively influencing the brain but distinct from it.”¹⁹

3. The Constitution View. According to the Constitution View—the view that I endorse—human persons are wholly constituted by human bodies (= human animals), just as marble statues are wholly constituted by pieces of marble. Every concrete entity is essentially of some primary kind or other. Nothing can be of more than one primary kind. *Person* and *human body* are distinct primary kinds, as are *statue* and *piece of marble*. Ultimately, human persons are constituted by (aggregates of) particles, just as, ultimately, marble statues are constituted by (aggregates of) particles. Primary-kind properties may be exemplified derivatively or nonderivatively. A member of kind K exemplifies the property of being a K nonderivatively: it has the property of being a K essentially, regardless of its constitution-relations. Something constitutionally-related to a member of kind K exemplifies the property of being a K

¹⁵ Hasker, p. 188.

¹⁶ Hasker, p. 176.

¹⁷ Hasker, p. 189.

¹⁸ Hasker, p. 195.

¹⁹ Hasker, p. 193.

derivatively: it has the property of being a K in virtue of its constitutional relations to something that is a K nonderivatively. E.g., a particular statue is a piece of marble only derivatively, in virtue of being constituted by a piece of marble, and the constituting piece of marble is a statue derivatively, in virtue of constituting a statue. Similarly, a human person is an animal only derivatively, in virtue of being constituted by an animal, and the constituting animal is a person only derivatively, in virtue of constituting a person. Human persons are just as material as marble statues.

What distinguishes a (nonderivative) statue from the piece of marble that constitutes it are the conventions of the arts—including, perhaps, the intentions of the sculptor. What distinguishes a (nonderivative) person from everything else that exists in the natural world is the first-person perspective—the ability to think of oneself as oneself, without any name or description or other third-person referring device. The constituting animal or body could exist without a first-person perspective (as it did in its early stages, and perhaps will in its later stages); the person could not. When an animal comes to constitute a person, the animal acquires the property of *being a person* derivatively; the person constituted by the animal is a person nonderivatively.²⁰ In mature persons, to have a first-person perspective is to be able to think of oneself without the use of any name, description or demonstrative; it is the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the inside, as it were. A first-person perspective is the basis of all forms of self-consciousness.²¹

Many animals that lack first-person perspectives (e.g., dogs, horses, bonobos) are sentient beings. They feel pain, have various

²⁰ Not all properties can be had derivatively (e.g., being identical with, having F essentially). For a detailed discussion of the notion of having a property derivatively, see *Persons and Bodies*, pp. 46-57.

²¹ I have discussed this at length in *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 3.

desires, and so on. They are conscious, but not self-conscious. They feel pain, but—lacking a conception of themselves from the first-person—they don't know that they are in pain. They have desires, but they don't know what they want. They are not conscious of their own thoughts. Human persons, by contrast, have rich interior lives. Beings with inner lives are fundamentally different—ontologically, but not biologically—from beings without them.

The contrast that I have just drawn between persons and nonhuman animals distinguishes between beings that have robust first-person perspectives and beings that lack first-person perspectives altogether. Human infants, which I take to be persons, may be thought to lack first-person perspectives. However, there is evidence that they have what I call a 'rudimentary first-person perspective': they are conscious; they have a capacity to imitate; and their behavior is explainable only by attributions of beliefs, desires and intentions.²² Of course, some nonhuman higher primates may have these features as well, but the difference between human infants and, say, chimpanzees is that human infants are of a kind that normally develops robust first-person perspectives and chimpanzees are not.²³

It is useful to think of human persons as animals as long as we are thinking biologically, not ontologically. But our animal nature that we share with other higher primates does not expose what we are most fundamentally. Ontology is not a branch of biology. An organism that develops a first-person perspective comes to constitute a new kind of being—one that has a first-person perspective essentially.

²² See my "When Does a Person Begin?"

²³ Gordon Gallup's famous experiments do not show that any nonhuman primates have a *robust* first-person perspective. See Gordon Gallup, Jr., "Self-Recognition in Primates: A Comparative Approach to Bidirectional Properties of Consciousness," *American Psychologist* 32 (1977): 329-38.

Biologically, the appearance of a first-person perspective is not particularly momentous. Considered in terms of genetic or morphological properties or of biological functioning, there is no gap or discontinuity between chimpanzees and human animals. In fact, human animals are biologically more closely related to certain species of chimpanzees than the chimpanzees are related to gorillas and orangutans.²⁴ So, *biologically considered*, there's no significant difference between human persons and higher nonhuman animals. But *all things considered*, there is a huge discontinuity between human persons and nonhuman animals. And this discontinuity arises from the fact that we, and no other part of the animal kingdom that we know of, have first-person perspectives. (If I thought that chimpanzees or computers really did have first-person perspectives, I would put them in the same category that we are in—namely, persons.)

The evidence for an ontological difference between persons and nonhuman animals lies in the significantly different abilities of persons from all other kinds of beings. The unique features of persons depend on first-person perspectives that underlie self-consciousness. First-person perspectives contribute to features that are distinctive of recognizable human life. To take some obvious examples:

--Natural language. The first-person way of distinguishing between oneself and everything else is required to have the kinds of natural language that we all speak. In particular, ordinary locutions such as 'I hope that I'll get home safely' or 'I believe that I know the answer' presuppose first-person perspectives.

²⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 336. Dennett is discussing Jared Diamond's *The Third Chimpanzee*.

--Cultural achievements. Cultural achievements likewise depend on first-person perspectives. The ability to wonder what sort of beings we are and to consider our place in the universe are specifically first-person abilities that motivate much of science, art, philosophy, and religion.

--Rational and moral agency. A first-person perspective is required for rational and moral agency. A rational being must be able to ask, "Is this a goal that I should have?" A moral agent must be able to understand, from the first-person point of view, that she herself has done things.

--Control over nature. Our control over nature depends on first-person perspectives. We can modify our own natural behavior. (We can give up things for Lent, or stick to an exercise regimen.) The ability to conceive of futures in the first-person, as *our own* futures, is required to motivate attempts to control over our destinies as individuals and as a species.

--Self-understanding. Making sense of one's life is a first-personal task. Diaries, confessions, and various narratives that we construct about the course of our lives would be impossible without a first-person perspective. Likewise, for good or ill, allegiance to various groups—*my family, my tribe, my country*—presupposes first-person perspectives. Nationalism and patriotism depend on first-person perspectives.

--Inwardness. Finally, first-person perspectives make possible the existence of our "inner lives"—we imagine scenes, say prayers, rehearse speeches. There are incontrovertible facts—e.g., that Descartes was thinking that he existed—whose existence would be impossible without self-consciousness beings.

In short, with respect to *the range of what persons can do* (from planning our futures to wondering how we got ourselves into such a mess), and with respect to *the moral significance of what persons can do* (from assessing our goals to confessing our sins), self-conscious beings are obviously unique—significantly different from non-self-conscious beings. The difference that self-consciousness makes, I submit, is an ontological difference. What you are most fundamentally makes possible the life that you lead—a life that is far from exhausted by biological facts. Your biography cannot be written by a biologist.

There are some affinities between the Constitution View and Hasker’s Emergent Substance Dualism. Both employ the notion of emergence and both recognize that, in the first instance, the bearer of certain mental properties is the whole person, not any proper part like a brain. But there the similarities end. Whereas Hasker holds that a soul—a distinct spiritual substance that has libertarian free will and that “modifies and directs the functioning of the brain”—emerges from a body, I do not. Let me enumerate some differences between my view and Hasker’s: (i) I think that it is implausible to suppose that there are immaterial substances in the natural world. (ii) On Hasker’s view, the soul is a proper part of the person; on my view, there are no souls, and hence persons do not have souls as proper parts. (iii) On Hasker’s view, the soul directs the functioning of the brain; on my view, the brain functions according to natural processes. (iv) On Hasker’s view, the soul has libertarian free will; on my view, there is no libertarian free will. (v) On Hasker’s view, the relation between the soul and the body is unlike any other relation that we know of; on my view, the relation between a person and her body is an instance of a very general relation common to all macrophysical objects.²⁵

²⁵ William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999): 188-195. (i) – (v) in the paragraph to which this note is appended answer

Indeed, one of the merits of the Constitution View is that it can avail itself of many of the fruits of Substance Dualism, without endorsing immaterial entities in the natural world. A proponent of the Constitution View, as well as a Substance Dualist, can endorse the following: (i) A person is not identical to a body; (ii) a human person can survive a (gradual) change of body; (iii) a person has causal powers that an animal would not have if it did not constitute a person; (iv) concerns about my survival are concerns about myself in the future, not just concerns about someone psychologically similar to me; (v) my survival does not depend on the nonexistence of someone else who fits a particular description (like 'is psychologically continuous with me now'); there is a fact of the matter (perhaps not ascertainable by us) as to whether or not a particular person in the future is I. Despite such similarities with Substance Dualism, the Constitution View remains stoutly materialistic.

Satisfying the *Desiderata*

As I mentioned, a view of human persons should take account of these facts:

- (1) Human persons are wholly part of the natural world, produced and governed by natural processes;
- (2) Human persons are ontologically unique.

Let me explain further what I mean by these *desiderata*. First, to say that human persons are wholly part of the natural world is to endorse a kind of quasi-naturalism. Quasi-naturalism is naturalistic in

Dean Zimmerman who has asked what distinguishes the Constitution View from Hasker's. See his "The Constitution of Persons by Bodies: A Critique of Lynne Rudder Baker's Theory of Material Constitution," *Philosophical Topics: Identity and Individuation* 30 (2002): 295-338.

taking the established results of scientific inquiry seriously: Science is the source of important knowledge of the natural world that is not subject to reinterpretation by philosophers.²⁶ The natural world is a spatiotemporal order that has its own integrity and autonomy, and that exhibits regularities that can be understood without regard to any immaterial objects or supernatural beings. The sciences are sovereign in their domains (and they are silent about matters outside their domains). Regularities and processes in the natural world have naturalistic explanations—that is, explanations that make no appeal to any supernatural beings.

However, quasi-naturalism falls short of full-blown naturalism in two respects—one epistemological, the other metaphysical: First, quasi-naturalism does not claim that the sciences are the only source of knowledge; rather, it allows there are kinds of knowledge—e.g., personal experience, humanistic studies of history and the arts—that are invisible to the sciences. A second way that quasi-naturalism falls short of full-blown naturalism is that quasi-naturalism is not a metaphysical thesis at all: it does not claim that the natural world is all there is to reality; quasi-naturalism remains neutral with respect to the existence of anything that transcends the natural world. Another way to put it is that quasi-naturalism is not metaphysical naturalism, according to which science is the final arbiter of all knowable reality. Rather, quasi-naturalism implies only that scientific explanations are genuine explanations, and that most, perhaps all, events have scientific explanations.

²⁶ In reporting the results of science, scientists sometimes give interpretations that depend on philosophical assumptions that philosophers rightly criticize. Although I doubt that there's a sharp line here, I want to rule out philosophers' giving interpretations of scientific results that the scientific community largely rejects.

As the sciences have developed, all scientific explanations are naturalistic: they do not ever advert to immaterial beings. Perhaps the sciences could have developed differently. Some contemporary naturalists like Quine would countenance immaterial objects if there were an explanatory need for them. “If I saw indirect explanatory benefit in positing sensibilia, possibilia, spirits, a Creator,” Quine said, “I would joyfully accord them scientific status too, on a par with such avowedly scientific posits as quarks and black holes.”²⁷ This passage manifests Quine’s scientific pragmatism; Quine is willing to accord scientific status to all and only those posits that have “explanatory benefit.” His position combines methodological naturalism with metaphysical naturalism in a way that I would reject as begging an important question: it precludes there being genuine explanations that do not fall into the domain of any science.

Methodological naturalism, I believe, has come to be a presupposition of science. It is not an ad hoc assumption, or a bias in science: that scientific explanations make no reference to anything supernatural is partly constitutive of science today and partly responsible for its success. The sciences are in the business of discovering natural causes and only natural causes. They do not and cannot appeal to immaterial entities or to supernatural agents.²⁸

The issue of the nature of human persons is philosophical; it is not merely empirical. The sciences can tell us about the biology and biochemistry of human persons, but whether the nature of human persons is exhausted by biology and biochemistry is not itself a

²⁷ W.V.O. Quine, “Naturalism; or, Living Within One’s Means,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 252 (251-62). Quoted in Michael Rea, *World Without Design: Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002): 42. I am grateful to Rea for bringing this passage to my attention.

²⁸ For this reason, it is wrongheaded to hope to find support for theism in science. The theory of Intelligent Design, advocated by certain Creationists, is a nonstarter as a modern scientific theory.

scientific question. On the one hand, the sciences do not need a foundation of prior philosophy; on the other hand, philosophy is not just “continuous” with science (here I differ from metaphysical naturalism). Paradigmatic philosophical questions—What is the nature of necessity and possibility? How should vagueness be understood? Is reality ultimately mind-independent?—are questions that do not arise in the sciences. Although not an extension of the sciences, philosophy, according to quasi-naturalism, should cohere with the results of the sciences.²⁹

Quasi-naturalism is a *desideratum* of an account of persons because the successes of the sciences in the past four hundred years command respect. (The absence of any reason to believe that theists make better scientists than atheists or agnostics is evidence that we can discover the nature of things without assuming the existence of God.) Moreover, quasi-naturalism offers protection against metaphysical fantasy. Quasi-naturalism, which requires coherence with science, does not allow wholesale re-interpretation of the sciences or of common sense to conform to an a priori metaphysics. For example, it is ludicrous to try to trump evolutionary explanations of fossils, by saying that God just planted them in order to mislead secular scientists. (Descartes was surely correct to suppose that God is not a systematic deceiver.) Even if there is more to knowable reality than what the sciences can uncover, the success of the sciences—in shaping and re-shaping our social and physical environment and the framework for thinking about it—still gives them authority in their domains. Philosophers are in no position to re-interpret, in any large-scale or systematic manner, what scientists say in ways that the scientists themselves do not recognize.

²⁹ See my “Philosophy *in Mediis Rebus*,” *Metaphilosophy* 32 (2001): 378-394.

So, I hold views of human persons to be accountable to quasi-naturalism. Specifically, a view of human persons satisfies the *desideratum* of quasi-naturalism only if it is consistent with the following description, which has been bequeathed to us by the sciences: Human persons are part of a natural world that has evolved by means of natural causes over eons. As inhabitants of the natural world, human persons are natural entities that live under the same necessity as the rest of nature (whatever that may be).

The second *desideratum* is that human persons are ontologically unique. To say that persons are ontologically unique is to say that the properties in virtue of which things are persons (nonderivatively) are the properties in virtue of which they exist at all.³⁰ The claim that human persons are ontologically unique is common to the great monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.³¹ But I do not rely on this fact to justify ontological uniqueness of human persons as a *desideratum*; rather, a look at the natural world—in ways that I itemized when discussing the Constitution View—gives ample evidence of the uniqueness of human persons.

That human persons are in some respects unique is indisputable; everything is unique in some respects. What is controversial is whether persons are *ontologically* unique—whether, as I hold, the coming-into-being of a new person in the world is the coming into being of a new entity, or whether it is merely the acquisition of a property by an already-existing entity. I submit that our being persons is the deepest fact about us: the properties peculiar to persons are sufficiently different from the properties of

³⁰ I am speaking of nonderivative Fs here. See *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 2. For a discussion of ontologically significant properties, see my “The Ontological Status of Persons,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 370-388.

³¹ The ontological uniqueness of persons may be explained in more than one way. Some explain it in terms of an immaterial soul; I explain it in terms of the first-person perspective.

nonpersons to warrant the conclusion that persons—with their inner lives that spawn memoirs, confessions, autobiographies, etc.—are a unique kind of being. No other kind of being has values that lead to the great cultural achievements of science, technology, government, the arts, religion, morality, and the production of wealth. The variety and sophistication of the products of human endeavor are good evidence for the ontological uniqueness of persons.³²

Now consider how the three approaches to the nature of human persons each fares with respect to the two *desiderata*—quasi-naturalism and ontological uniqueness:

Animalism: Animalism does not contravene quasi-naturalism, but some of its proponents do. For example, Animalists consider human persons to be animals, and they consider animals to be what biologists tell us they are. Some Animalists believe that, whereas animals literally exist, their organs (hearts, livers, kidneys and so on) do not.³³ Anyone who denies the existence of items that are (putatively) in the domain of biology contravenes quasi-naturalism.

All animalists deny that human persons are ontologically unique. The basic metaphysical line, as they see it, is between organisms and nonliving things like artifacts. Let me remark in passing that recent work in biotechnology suggests that that line is not metaphysically basic. Advances in technology have blurred the difference between natural objects and artifacts. For example, so-called “digital organisms” are computer programs that (like biological organisms)

³² For more detailed arguments, see my “The Ontological Status of Persons,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 370-388, and “The Difference that Self-Consciousness Makes,” in *On Human Persons*, Klaus Petrus, ed. (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2003): 23-39.

³³ See Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), and Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

can mutate, reproduce and compete with one another.³⁴ Or consider “robo-rats”—rats with electrodes that direct the rats’ movements.³⁵ Or for another example, consider what one researcher calls ‘a bacterial battery’:³⁶ Bacterial batteries are biofuel cells that use microbes to convert organic matter into electricity. They are the result of a recent discovery of a micro-organism that feeds on sugar and converts it to a stream of electricity. This leads to a stable source of low power that can be used to run sensors of household devices. Finally, scientists are genetically engineering viruses that selectively infect and kill cancer cells and leave healthy cells alone. *Scientific American* referred to these viruses as “search-and-destroy missiles.”³⁷ Are these objects—the digital organisms, robo-rats, bacterial batteries, genetically engineered viral search-and-destroy missiles—artifacts or natural objects? Does it matter? I suspect that the distinction between artifacts and natural objects will become increasingly fuzzy; and as it does, the organism/nonorganism line will not be thought to mark a fundamental joint in nature. But even a sharp organism/nonorganism demarcation would not secure the ontological uniqueness of persons, as opposed to organisms generally.

According to Animalists, *person* is a phase sortal. Being a person, like being a student, is a contingent property that some animals have some of the time. A person’s persistence conditions are not determined by her being a person. On the Animalist view, being a person is not a deep fact about persons. (Recall Olson’s analogy between being a person and being a fancier of fast cars.) Ontologically speaking, the world would be no poorer without

³⁴ *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Daily News*, May 8, 2003.

³⁵ *The New York Times*, May 5, 2002.

³⁶ *The New York Times*, September 18, 2003. The lead researcher, Derek Lovley, who coined the term ‘bacterial battery’, is a microbiologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

³⁷ Email update from *Scientific American*, September 23, 2003.

persons: if an Evil Genius took away all first-person perspectives, but left lower biological functions like metabolism intact, there would be no loss in what exists. If Animalism is correct, then there could be a complete inventory of the objects that exist that neither mentioned persons nor entailed that persons exist. Therefore, according to Animalists, persons are not ontologically unique.

Substance Dualism: Substance Dualism, in contrast to Animalism, does allow for the ontological uniqueness of persons; but Substance Dualism takes human animals to have natures in part outside the purview of biology. Some Substance Dualists take human animals to be radically unlike nonhuman animals in ways that biologists cannot detect.³⁸ (Hasker takes nonhuman animals, as well as human animals, to have souls.³⁹) If part of being a human animal is to have an immaterial soul, and biologists have no truck with immaterial souls, then biologists are not authoritative about the nature of human animals. So, if Substance Dualism is correct, biologists are not authoritative about *biology*.⁴⁰ Hence, Substance Dualism violates quasi-naturalism.

The Constitution View: It should come as no surprise that the Constitution View, and the Constitution View alone, satisfies both *desiderata*. First, it is quasi-naturalistic: Human animals are exactly as biologists tell us they are. Biologists have animals in their domain, not the persons that animals constitute. (Analogously, chemists have paint in their domain, not the paintings that the paint constitutes.) Biologists are authoritative over the animal kingdom, and they agree

³⁸ I take Thomism to be a form of Substance Dualism in this respect.

³⁹ According to Hasker, "Animals have souls, just as we do; their souls are less complex and sophisticated than ours, because generated by less complex nervous systems." (p. 193)

⁴⁰ Although I agree with Substance Dualists that our person-making properties are not those that biologists care about, on my view, biologists do have the last word on human animals: human animals constitute us without being identical to us.

that the animal kingdom is a seamless whole that includes human animals; there are no significant biological differences between human and higher nonhuman animals. The Constitution View does not have to put a special gloss on biology to accommodate the ontological uniqueness of human persons.

Second, the Constitution View recognizes—nay, insists on—the ontological uniqueness of persons. *Person* is a primary kind, and each primary kind is ontologically unique. The coming-into-being of human persons introduces entities into the natural world that have the capacity to think of themselves in a unique first-personal way, and to report their feelings and thoughts about themselves. Such reports, when not deceptive, are evidence of a first-personal realm of reality. The coming into existence of human persons in the natural world ushers in a wholly new kind of reality. So, the second *desideratum* is automatically satisfied by the Constitution View.

On the Constitution View, not only are human persons ontologically unique, but they are unique in a special way. Every primary kind—from hydrogen atoms to telescopes to human animals—is ontologically unique. That is, a thing of primary kind *K* cannot lose the property of being a *K* without thereby going out of existence. If a hydrogen atom is “split,” it goes out of existence; if a sofa is burned up, it goes out of existence; if a star collapses, leaving a black hole, it goes out of existence. If something of the kind *person* loses the property of being a person, she thereby goes out of existence. So, human persons—like things of other primary kinds—are ontologically unique. But, with their first-person perspectives, human persons are unique in a special way: uniquely unique, we may say.

In sum, the Constitution View makes sense of both the biological claim that we are animals, continuous with nonhuman animals, and

the philosophical claim that we are ontologically and morally unique. The Constitution View accommodates both these claims by holding that we are animals in the sense that we are wholly constituted by animals, and yet we are ontologically unique in virtue of having first-person perspectives. A being with a first-person perspective constituted by a human body—a human person—is ontologically distinct from any animal, human or nonhuman.

Compatibility With Theism

The Constitution View is compatible with a robust theism, without entailing it. Since traditional theism entails that human persons have a special place in Creation, there is no tension between the Constitution View and theism with respect to the ontological uniqueness of human persons. If there were any incompatibility between the Constitution View and traditional theism, it would arise from quasi-naturalism.

Quasi-naturalism, however, is compatible with various kinds of theism, with varying degrees of God's involvement with his creation. On the Enlightenment conception—Deism—God is an absent clockmaker. Although he set the world in motion, he is not a personal being and does not intervene in the world. On a more traditional conception, God is an immaterial, personal Creator, who as well as being omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent, is also Sovereign of the universe—one who makes possible everything that happens, and who cares for his creatures and interacts with them. On a more traditional view, God can and does intervene in the workings of the world. Since it is obvious that quasi-naturalism is compatible with

Deism, I'll discuss only the traditional view, which takes God to be a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent and omni-benevolent.

Since God is omniscient, he knows which laws of nature and initial conditions have which possible outcomes. Since he is omnipotent, he is able to create laws of nature and the initial conditions that—without his further intervention—eventuate in a world like ours. He need not guide evolution at all. Indeed, since he is all-good, he may want to create a world intelligible to some of his creatures. It may well be God's will that the natural order operates by means of natural processes that can be understood in naturalistic terms. The operation of natural processes, understandable in wholly naturalistic terms, is compatible with God's creating and occasionally suspending them.

If the God of the Bible exists, then the natural world is not causally closed. Although God (if he exists) can intervene in the natural world in any way at any time, for the most part, in fact, he does not. For the most part, the world spins on its own natural axis, so to speak.⁴¹ So, even if the natural world is not causally closed, miracles (understood as events that contravene laws of nature) are not very frequent. An omnipotent and omniscient God need not resort to disrupting the natural order (at least not very often). Exercising his will by means of natural processes would not be too much of a challenge for an Almighty God. On this conception, God is active in the world, but works (mainly) through natural processes.

It is part of God's general providence that the world has its own integrity, and that the orderly sequence of events does not require

⁴¹ There is a Protestant view that God uses miracles to confirm revelation, and that after the canon of the Bible was closed, miracles ceased. In the 17th century, Protestants used this view polemically against a doctrine of continuing miracles in the Roman Catholic Church.

divine intervention for its ongoing operation—even if God actively sustains the world and its laws at every moment.⁴² Some hold that, in addition to general providence, there is particular providence, in which God sustains and directs particular events. Even if there is particular providence, the fact that the natural causes would (unbeknownst to atheists) ultimately depend on God’s will would not make them less natural or less explanatory. Instead, there would be a “compatibilism”—analogous to compatibilism in the free-will controversy—between natural causes and God’s will. For example, if a believer sees God as hardening Pharaoh’s heart or as offering someone the gift of faith, natural events (perhaps involving fundamental particles) may well be the vehicle of his hardening or offering. It is within God’s power to suspend natural processes (via miracle) at any time. If God intervened at the level of fundamental particles, the resulting miracles may well have naturalistic explanations at the higher levels—the only levels to which we have explanatory access.

Moreover, quasi-naturalism allows for the possibility of veridical religious experience. On the one hand, perhaps there are some religious experiences for which we have no naturalistic explanation. An atheist could hold on to the hope that there really is a naturalistic explanation that has not yet been found; and a theist could hold on to the hope that the same experience is miraculous. But having or lacking a naturalistic explanation does not affect the veridicality of a religious experience. Since God can work through secondary causes, whether or not a religious experience has a naturalistic explanation is independent of whether or not it is veridical. Perhaps there are some veridical religious experiences that are explainable naturalistically. Scoffers may argue that if phenomena—such as John Wesley’s heart’s

⁴² There is a minority view, Occasionalism, according to which God is the only causally efficacious being.

being strangely warmed—can be understood naturalistically, then it is superfluous to suppose that God exists: He would be redundant. But this conclusion does not follow. It is scoffers, not believers, who advert to a “God of the gaps.” The God of traditional believers is not a fillip for explanation in the natural world. The motivation to believe in God comes more from one’s own experience than from any paucity of scientific explanation.

In sum, if God has a role in creating and sustaining the natural order, and in caring for his creatures, his role is invisible to science, though it is thought to be visible to the eyes of faith. If theists (at least those who endorse quasi-naturalism) are right, God created the natural order so that natural processes can be understood in naturalistic terms. This picture sits easily with the Constitution View.

The Constitution View is not only compatible with traditional theism, but, more particularly, it can shed some light on orthodox Christian doctrines. I shall briefly discuss two examples—the “two-natures” doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. First, the Constitution View offers a less awkward way to describe the two-natures doctrine of Christ than does Substance Dualism. According to the two-natures doctrine, Christ is one Person with both a fully divine nature (as the Second Person of the Trinity) and a fully human nature (as Jesus of Nazareth).⁴³ If Christianity is true, the Constitution View draws a metaphysical line in exactly the right place—between the human nature and the divine nature of a

⁴³ The Council of Chalcedon, which took place in 451, declares Christ to be “of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father as regarding his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood.” Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ,, Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D., Act V; quoted in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 864. I should note that the definition also says “truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body.” It is not obvious that we should take “reasonable soul and body” to imply two substances since the definition also says “of one substance with us as regards his manhood” rather than “of two substances with us as regards his manhood.”

single Person. The Constitution View allows believers to hold that Christ is wholly immaterial in his divine nature and wholly material in his human nature. Substance Dualism is less tidy. According to Substance Dualism, Christ is wholly immaterial in his divine nature and partly material and partly immaterial in his human nature. Of course, the mystery of how anything can be both fully divine and fully human remains on any view; but the Constitution View has a neater picture.

Second, the Constitution View sits comfortably with the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. On that doctrine, the fleshly bodies of human persons that are subject to decay will be changed into incorruptible bodies. Some forms of Substance Dualism make it obscure why resurrection bodies are needed at all.⁴⁴ On the Constitution View, however, ordinary human persons are essentially embodied. Although human persons cannot exist without a body, human persons can exist without the bodies that they actually have. The very same persons who are constituted at some time by earthly bodies can come to be constituted by resurrected bodies.⁴⁵ The bodies on earth (corruptible, organic bodies) and in heaven (incorruptible, “spiritual” bodies) cannot be the same bodies, but the persons are the same persons. The same person, Smith, say, exists on earth and in heaven, because—again, by a miracle—God changes Smith’s corruptible animal body into an incorruptible resurrection body that exemplifies Smith’s first-person perspective.

⁴⁴ Substance Dualists who are Emergentists (e.g., Hasker, Zimmerman) are exceptions.

⁴⁵ An Animalist holds that an animal cannot exist without the body that it has in the here-and-now. So, an Animalist who believes in resurrection will have to hold that the incorruptible resurrection body is identical to the corruptible pre-mortem animal body. Such an Animalist will have to hold (per impossibile, I believe) that a body may be corruptible during part of its existence, and the same body may be incorruptible during another part of its existence.

Although the mysteries of Christian doctrine remain, the Constitution View of human persons has the resources to describe doctrines in a way that illuminates them. So, the Constitution View is compatible with Christian doctrine, as well as with the great monotheistic traditions generally.

Conclusion

Many philosophers, especially those with a religious bent, locate the uniqueness of human persons in the alleged existence of an immaterial soul or in the alleged possession of a faculty of libertarian free will that allows persons to intervene in the natural order in a God-like way. Although I share with such religious philosophers the belief that human persons are ontologically unique, I do not believe that these traditional philosophical views are tenable. We must look elsewhere to find an *imago dei* in human persons, and I believe that we can find it in the first-person perspective exemplified in the material world. Only the Constitution View shows how human persons are wholly within the natural order, and yet are ontologically unique.⁴⁶

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