

Our Place in Nature: Material Persons and Theism

Lynne Rudder Baker

One of the deepest assumptions of Judaism and its offspring, Christianity, is that there is an important difference between human persons and everything else that exists in Creation. We alone are made in God's image. We alone are the stewards of the earth. It is said in *Genesis* that we have "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." It is difficult to see how a traditional theist could deny the significance of the difference between human persons and the rest of Creation. We human persons are morally and ontologically special.

On the other hand, we are undeniably part of nature. In the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, God created us—man and woman—along with everything else that exists in nature. Moreover, all the sciences that in the past 300 years have exploded with knowledge consider human persons as part of nature. Scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge. It would be unthinkable to me to turn my back, intellectually speaking, on the fact that the sciences have met with astonishing success. Yet, the sciences are relentless in taking human beings to be just another part of nature: a little more complex than chimpanzees, but not

essentially different—certainly not morally and ontologically special. We are just one species among many.

So, there is a tension: On the one hand, theists take human persons to be significantly different from the rest of nature; but on the other hand, intelligent inhabitants of the scientific age take human animals to be just one species among many, not significantly different in nature from our primate cousins. Indeed, even apart from religious conviction, it seems clear to me that in some ways we are like other living creatures, but in other ways we are radically different. Only we have art, science, technology, religion; only we can fiddle with the course of evolution; only we can inquire into what kind of beings we most fundamentally are. In light of these unique features, it seems desirable that we have a conception of human nature that allows that we are both part of nature and morally and ontologically different from every other kind of thing in nature. You might think of this as a story about how we can be “in the world but not of the world.”

What I want to do here is to show how the Constitution View of human persons deals with the tension between two claims: the biological claim that we are animals, continuous with nonhuman animals, on the one hand, and the philosophical claim that we are morally and ontologically unique, on the other.

First, a note about labeling the second claim ‘the philosophical claim.’ Although the claim that we are morally and ontologically unique is a theological as well as a philosophical claim, I label it ‘philosophical’ because I think that it can be supported without any theological assumptions, as I’ll try to show. Of course, the claim that we are morally and ontologically unique has theological grounds as well, but I wouldn’t want atheists to suppose that they could ignore the claim of our moral and ontological uniqueness just because they do not recognize theological considerations as legitimate. So, I’ll defend the claim of our uniqueness on nontheological grounds.

The Constitution View

According to the Constitution View of human persons, we human persons are animals, but not *just* animals. Biology is one thing, and ontology is another. Ontologically speaking, we are most fundamentally persons, where something is a person in virtue of having what I call a ‘first-person perspective.’ A first-person perspective is a very peculiar ability that all and only persons have. Mature language-users like us have robust first-person perspectives. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to think of oneself as 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.

Linguistic evidence of a first-person perspective comes from use of first-person pronouns embedded in sentences with linguistic or psychological verbs—e.g., “I wonder how I will die,” or “I promise that I will stick with you.”¹ If I wonder how I will die, or I promise that I’ll stick with you, then I am thinking of myself as myself; I am not thinking of myself in any third-person way (e.g., not as LB, nor as the person who is thinking, nor as that woman, nor as the only person in the room) at all. To wonder how I’ll die is not for me to wonder how LB will die, even though I am LB; I could wonder how I’ll die even if I had amnesia and didn’t know that I was LB. A being with a robust first-person perspective not only can have thoughts about herself as herself, she can conceive of herself as the subject of those thoughts. I not only wonder how I’ll die, but I realize that I am having that thought. Anything that can wonder how it will die ipso facto has a robust first-person perspective and thus is a person.

A being may be conscious without having a robust first-person perspective. Nonhuman primates and other higher animals are conscious, and they have psychological states like believing, fearing and desiring. They have points of view (e.g., “danger in that direction”), but they cannot

¹ Hector-Neri Castañeda developed this idea in several papers. See “He: A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness,” *Ratio* 8 (1966): 130-57, and “Indicators and Quasi-Indicators,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967): 85-100.

conceive of themselves as the subjects of such thoughts.²
They can not *conceive of* themselves from the first-person.³

Person is an ontological kind whose defining characteristic is a first-person perspective. To say that *person* is an ontological kind is to say that when a new person comes into the world a new entity comes into the world; persons are persons essentially. (Contrast wives: a new wife is an already-existing being who has acquired a new property, but a new person is a new being.)

A first-person perspective is the basis of all self-consciousness. It makes possible an inner life, a life of thoughts that one realizes are her own. The appearance of first-person perspectives in a world makes an ontological difference in that world: A world populated with beings

² Gallup's experiments with chimpanzees suggest the possibility of a kind of intermediate stage between dogs (that have intentional states but no first-person perspectives) and human persons (that have first-person perspectives). In my opinion—for details see *Persons and Bodies*, pp. 62-4—Gallup's chimpanzees fall short of full-blown first-person perspectives. See Gordon Gallup, Jr., "Self-Recognition in Primates: A Comparative Approach to Bidirectional Properties of Consciousness," *American Psychologist* 32 (1977): 329-38.

³ They lack robust first-person perspectives. Nonhuman primates and human infants have rudimentary first-person perspectives. Although we language-users have *robust* first-person perspectives, a human person comes into existence when a human organism develops to the point of being able to support a *rudimentary* first-person perspective, which is defined by sentience, intentionality and a capacity to imitate. When a human organism gets to that point (which requires a brain), then it comes to constitute a new entity, a person. A human infant is thus a person, who has a first-person perspective (rudimentary or robust) necessarily. Although a higher nonhuman animal may have a rudimentary first-person perspective, it can only have a first-person perspective contingently; and, unlike a human animal, it does not constitute any entity that can develop a robust first-person perspective. When a human organism comes to constitute a person, the organism has the property of being a person derivatively (in virtue of constituting something that is a person nonderivatively); and the person has the property of being an organism derivatively (in virtue of being constituted by something that is a body nonderivatively). I develop these points in detail in *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* (Cambridge UP, 2007).

with inner lives is ontologically richer than a world populated with no beings with inner lives. But what is ontologically distinctive about being a person—namely, essentially having a first-person perspective—does not have to be secured by a nonmaterial substance like a soul.

If something is a person in virtue of having a first-person perspective, how is a human person related to her body, an organism? The relation between human persons and their bodies is constitution.

Constitution is a very general relation that we are all familiar with (though probably not under that label). It is a relation of real unity that falls short of identity. Every kind of thing that we know about is constituted by something else—ultimately by aggregates of physical particles. The basic idea of constitution is this: When things of certain basic kinds (say, an aggregate of a hydrogen atom and a chlorine atom) are in certain circumstances (different ones for different kinds of things), then new entities of different kinds come into existence. The circumstances in which an aggregate of a hydrogen atom and a chlorine atom comes to constitute a hydrogen chloride molecule are chemical bonding. If the hydrogen and chlorine atoms were spatially separated, the aggregate would still exist, but the hydrogen chloride molecule would not. The circumstances in which a piece of paper comes to constitute a U.S. dollar bill have to

do with its being printed in a certain way under a certain authority. In each case, new things of new kinds—hydrogen chloride molecules, dollar bills—with new kinds of causal powers, come into being.⁴

Constitution is the vehicle, so to speak, by which new kinds of things come into existence in the natural world. So, it is obvious that constitution is not identity. Constitution is contingent; identity is necessary. Constitution is relentlessly anti-reductive. If pieces of cloth constitute flags, then an inventory of what exists that included pieces of cloth but not flags would be incomplete. A flag cannot be reduced to a piece of cloth; nor can a person be reduced to a body.⁵

To sum up: A person⁶ is essentially a person—an entity with a first-person perspective: I continue to exist as long as something has my first-person perspective; if something has my first-person perspective, then that being is a person and that person is me. But a person is not essentially a human animal. She could be constituted by a human body at one time but constituted by a nonhuman body (a bionic body, a resurrection body) at another time. Human persons are

⁴ There is much more to be said about the idea of constitution. See *Persons and Bodies*, especially Ch. 2 and *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Vol. 23, New Directions in Philosophy*, Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, eds. (Boston: Blackwell, 1999): 144-165. Also see *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*.

⁵ This is a perfectly general claim about constitution; constitution is not “property-dualism.”

⁶ That is, an entity who is a person nonderivatively. See *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* for a technical formulation of the derivative/nonderivative distinction, a revision of the formulation in *Persons and Bodies*.

necessarily embodied: they cannot exist without some body or other capable of supporting a first-person perspective. But they do not necessarily have the particular bodies that they have. So, on the Constitution View, I am a wholly material being, constituted by, but not identical to, my body (by this body, this human organism, now). Although not identity, constitution is a relation of real unity—not just two things that happen to be in the same place at the same time.⁷

How The Constitution View Resolves the Tension

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 human person—a being with a first-person perspective constituted by a human body—is ontologically distinct from any animal, human or nonhuman. This is the position that I want to defend. I shall defend it by arguing that a first-person perspective really does make an ontological difference.

⁷ Some philosophers have held that the idea of unity without identity is incoherent. In *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), I give a completely general definition of ‘constitution’ that is coherent, and I improve it in *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*.

At the outset, let me emphasize exactly what I will argue for. The coming into existence of a human person is the coming into existence of a brand-new entity, not just the acquisition of a contingent property of an already-existing individual. The brand-new entity, a person with a rudimentary first-person perspective, typically develops a robust first-person perspective. A first-person perspective—robust, or if the constituter is an organism, at first rudimentary—makes an ontological difference in the world. It does not matter whether the first-person perspective is a product of evolution. My position concerns the status of the first-person perspective, not its origin. However it came about—by chance, by design, by natural selection—the first-person perspective was sufficiently different from every other property in the natural world that it ushered in a new kind of being.⁸ Since what matters is the status of a first-person perspective, not its provenance, a theistic proponent of the Constitution View has no reason to deny Darwinian evolution.

Moreover, I am not assuming that in order to make an ontological difference, the first-person perspective must make a significant biological difference. Quite the contrary: Biologists tell us that there are no significant biological differences between us and our closest nonhuman relatives.

⁸ The reason that I do not say that self-consciousness ushered in a new kind of animal is that biologists do not take self-consciousness to be a mark of a new species, and I take the identification of new kinds of species to be within the purview of biology.

I am happy to leave biology to the biologists. However, to deny that there are any significant biological differences between human animals and their closest nonhuman relatives is not, I shall argue, to deny that there are any significant ontological differences of any sort between us and animals that do not constitute persons.

I want to offer two considerations in favor of saying that self-consciousness really does make an ontological difference; then, I shall discuss the methodological principle that underlies my position. The first consideration in favor of saying that self-consciousness really does make an ontological difference is that self-consciousness is an absolutely unique phenomenon. The second consideration in favor of saying that self-consciousness really does make an ontological difference concerns the continuity found in the animal kingdom: there is no gap between human animals and other higher primates.

Then, the argument goes like this: If self-consciousness is nothing more than a contingent property of human animals, then, given the uniqueness of self-consciousness, there is a discontinuity in the animal kingdom between human animals (who are self-conscious) and other higher primates (who are not). But there is no discontinuity in the animal kingdom between human animals and other higher primates. Therefore, it is not the

case that self-consciousness is nothing more than a contingent property of human animals.

So, let us turn to the uniqueness of self-consciousness. By saying that self-consciousness is unique, I mean that self-consciousness—ultimately, having an inner life—is not an extension of, addition to, or modification of any other property we know of. A first-person perspective is irreducible to third-person properties.⁹ Manifold manifestations of self-consciousness attest to its uniqueness:

First, self-conscious beings are bearers of normativity in ways that nothing else is: Self-consciousness is required for rational and moral agency. A rational agent must be able to evaluate her goals. In order to evaluate her goals, she must be able to ask questions like “Is this a goal that I should really have?” Asking such questions is an exercise in self-consciousness, requiring that one can think of herself as herself, in the first person. Only persons, who can know that they have goals and subject them to scrutiny, can be called rationally into account. Moreover, only persons, who can appreciate that they—they themselves—have done things, can be called morally into account. A moral agent must be able to appreciate the fact that she (herself) does things and has done things in the past. In order for me to own up to something that I have done, I must be able to

⁹ See *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 3.

conceive of myself in the first-person as the one who did it. Such appreciation requires that one have a concept of herself as herself. Only persons can be rational agents and moral agents. The appearance of persons in the natural world is the appearance of a genuinely new kind of being.

Second, any reflection on one's life requires self-consciousness. Any thought about one's desires or other attitudes—"What do I really want?"—requires a first-person perspective. Being anxious about the future, wondering how one is going to die, hoping that one is making the right decision about going into a certain profession, and on and on—depend directly on self-consciousness. Things that matter deeply to us—our values, our futures, our ultimate destinies—could matter only to beings with first-person perspectives.

Third, cultural achievements are further consequences of self-consciousness. The ability to wonder what sort of thing we are, to consider our place in the universe—these are specifically first-person abilities that motivate much of science, art and architecture, philosophy and religion.

Fourth, in contrast to other primates that are conscious without being self-conscious in the sense described, we have control over nature, at least in a limited way. We are not only the products of evolution, but also we are the discoverers of evolution and interveners in

evolutionary processes, for good or ill. We clone mammals, protect endangered species, devise medical treatments, stop epidemics, produce medications, use birth-control, engage in genetic engineering and so on. Reproduction is the great biological imperative, which we can and do flout. Animals that do not constitute persons can attempt to survive and reproduce, but—being unable to conceive of themselves in the uniquely first-personal way—they cannot try to change their natural behavior.

Fifth, there is a sense in which self-consciousness itself brings into existence new reality—the “inner world” that Descartes explored so vividly in the first part of the *Meditations*. Although I do not accept Descartes’ reified conception of the realm of his thoughts nor its independence from the “external” world, I do agree that there are facts of the matter—e.g., that Descartes was thinking that he existed—and that the existence of these facts would be logically impossible in the absence of self-conscious beings. Descartes’ certainty was that he (himself) existed, not that Descartes existed. His quest in the *Meditations* was ineliminably first-personal. It is not just that Descartes spoke in the first-person for heuristic purposes; rather, *what* he discovered about reality (e.g., that he himself was a thinking thing) was first-personal. The appearance of such first-personal facts implies that self-consciousness has ontological implications, in which case it

is seems to be more than just another contingent property of animals.

Contrast the difference that self-consciousness makes with the difference that, say, wings on birds make. The appearance of wings makes possible new facts about flying. But there is a big difference between facts about flying and facts about self-consciousness. Many different species (e.g., of birds and insects) fly, and facts about flying are on a continuum with other kinds of facts—say, about swimming, running, and slithering on the ground. The appearance of self-consciousness also makes possible new facts. But the facts that self-consciousness makes possible (e.g., deciding to change one's life) are not on a continuum with other kinds of facts. Nor do we find self-consciousness among different species. Self-consciousness is novel in a way that wings are not.

Mere consciousness, too—it may be argued—is also novel. I agree, but self-consciousness is novel in a unique way. Simple consciousness is found in many species and seems to be subject to gradation. Consciousness seems to dawn gradually (from simpler organisms (like earthworms?)) and it seems to become more fine-grained as it runs throughout the animal kingdom. In contrast, we do not find self-consciousness or robust first-person perspectives in different species. The empirical studies that purport to

show that nonhuman animals are self-conscious in the sense of conceiving of themselves as subjects seem to me to be open to alternative interpretations; they do not seem to me at all persuasive. Such studies would be more satisfying if the evidence were available in the wild, and if chimpanzees, for example, passed along what researchers take to be evidence of self-consciousness to their offspring.

In sum: First, there is a much clearer line between self-conscious beings and their nearest nonself-conscious biological neighbors than between merely conscious beings (whichever ones they are) and their nearest biological neighbors. Second, the difference in abilities and achievements between self-conscious and nonself-conscious beings is overwhelming, and overwhelming in a more significant way than any other single difference that we know of. The abilities of self-conscious, brooding and introspective beings—from St. Augustine in the *Confessions* to analysts in psychoanalysis to former U.S. Presidents' writing their memoirs—are of a different order from those of tool-using, mate-seeking, dominance-establishing nonhuman primates, even though our use of tools, seeking of mates and establishing dominance have their origins in our nonhuman ancestors. With respect to the range of what we can do (from planning our futures to wondering how we got ourselves into such a mess, from assessing our goals to confessing our sins), self-conscious beings are obviously

unique. The uniqueness of self-consciousness counts in favor of taking it to have ontological significance.

The second consideration in favor of saying that self-consciousness really does make an ontological difference concerns the continuity found in the animal kingdom: there is no gap between human animals and other higher primates. Darwinism offers a great unifying thesis that “there is one grand pattern of similarity linking all life.”¹⁰ Considered in terms of genetic or morphological properties or of biological functioning, there is no 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.¹¹ So, there’s no significant discontinuity between human animals and higher nonhuman animals. But there is a huge discontinuity between us persons, constituted by human animals, and higher nonhuman animals. And this discontinuity arises from the fact that we, and no other part of the animal kingdom, are self-conscious. This discontinuity distinguishes us persons ontologically from the rest of the animal kingdom. This is to say that the first-person perspective—and thus personhood—is an ontologically significant property.

¹⁰ Niles Eldredge, *The Triumph of Evolution* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000): 31.

¹¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 336. Dennett is discussing Jared Diamond’s *The Third Chimpanzee*.

These two considerations—the uniqueness of self-consciousness and the seamlessness of the animal kingdom—may now be seen as two data:

(A) Self-consciousness is absolutely unique in the universe. We are self-conscious beings—beings with vastly different abilities from nonself-conscious beings. No other part of the animal kingdom is self-conscious in the way that we are.

(B) We are, in some sense, animals—biological beings. The animal kingdom is a seamless whole, revealing no important biological (morphological, genetic, etc.) discontinuities between human and nonhuman animals.

Now compare the Constitution View to Animalism:

According to Animalism, what I am most fundamentally is an animal; I exist only so far as a certain animal exists.

There is nothing ontologically significant about self-consciousness or about being a person. Being a person is on a par with being a fancier of fast cars—just a contingent property that some animals have during some parts of their existence. According to the Constitution View, as we have seen, self-consciousness has ontological significance: it is an essential property of the things that have it.¹²

¹² More precisely, self-consciousness is an essential property of things that have it nonderivatively.

The two considerations (A) and (B) support the following argument against Animalism:

(1) Self-consciousness is absolutely unique.

[Consideration (A)]

(2) If self-consciousness is absolutely unique, then: if self-consciousness is nothing but a contingent property of certain animals, then self-consciousness makes a gap in the animal kingdom. [Meaning of 'unique']

(3) If self-consciousness is nothing but a contingent property of certain animals, then self-consciousness makes a gap in the animal kingdom.. [From (1)-(2), modus ponens]

(4) There is no gap in the animal kingdom.

[Consideration (B)]

∴(5) It is false that self-consciousness is nothing but a contingent property of certain animals. [(3)-(4), modus tollens]

So, I conclude that any view (such as Animalism) that holds that we are essentially animals to which self-consciousness makes no ontological difference, is false because it is inadequate to the data. On the other hand, the Constitution View explains both these considerations.

The Constitution View explains the first consideration—the uniqueness of self-consciousness—by taking self-

consciousness to be what makes us ontologically distinctive. The property of having an inner life—not just sentience—is so extraordinary, so utterly unlike any other property in the world, that beings with this property are a different kind of thing from beings without it. Only self-conscious beings can dread old age or examine their consciences or try not to be so impatient. Since first-person perspectives are essential to us, it is no mystery that we human persons are self-conscious.

The Constitution View also explains the second consideration—that the animal kingdom is seamless—by holding that we are constituted by human animals that are on a continuum with nonhuman animals and then explaining what constitution is. The continuity of the animal kingdom is undisturbed. Well, almost: human animals that constitute persons do differ from other animals, but not in any essential way. Person-constituting human animals have first-person-perspective properties that non-person-constituting human animals lack; but the animals that have these properties only have them derivatively—wholly in virtue of their constituting persons.¹³ So, the Constitution View honors the continuity of the biological world and construes us as being part of that world in virtue of being constituted by human animals. Unsurprisingly, I conclude

¹³ To put it more accurately, human animals have first-person-perspective properties wholly in virtue of constituting persons that have first-person-perspective properties independently of their constitution-relations.

that the Constitution View gives a better account of human persons than does the Animalist View.

I can almost hear the question: Why not be more Aristotelian and take the “genus and species” approach? An Aristotelian may say that we are animals who differ from other animals in being self-conscious. Then I ask: In virtue of what do I have my persistence conditions? The answer cannot be that I have my persistence conditions in virtue *both* of being a human animal and of being self-conscious. Since the animal that is supposed to be identical to me existed before it was self-conscious (when it was an embryo, say), I cannot be both essentially an animal and essentially self-conscious. To say that persons are essentially animals, and not essentially self-conscious, is to make properties like *considering how one should live* irrelevant to what we most fundamentally are, and properties like *having a circulatory system* central to what we fundamentally are. I think that what we most fundamentally are is a matter of what is distinctive about us and not of what we share with nonhuman animals.

So, what is our place in nature? We are part of the animal kingdom in that we are wholly constituted by human animals, on a continuum with other species. But our first-person perspectives allow us to be, among other things, rational and moral agents—not just to have goals, but to

assess and change our goals. Among all the creatures, it is given only to us to decide how we ought to, or want to, live, to decide what sort of persons we want to become.

Although a part of nature, we can in many ways control nature. Not all wholesale changes come either from laws of nature (such as the formation of continents), or from outside of nature (such as miracles). We human persons have already changed the face of the earth (from skyscrapers to highways to strip mines), and we are on our way to changing the course of evolution. We human persons occupy a unique position—part of nature, and yet, to some extent, controlling the nature that we are part of.

Methodological Morals

This discussion raises some important methodological issues, two of which I want to discuss. First, as we have already seen, the Constitution View implies that ontology need not track biology. Second, the Constitution View implies that the fundamental nature of something may be determined by what its abilities rather than by what it is made of.

With respect to the first issue—that ontology need not track biology—my position is to take biologists as authoritative over the animal kingdom and agree that the animal kingdom is a seamless whole that includes human animals; there are no significant biological differences

between human and higher nonhuman animals. But from the fact that there are no significant *biological* differences between human and higher nonhuman animals, it does not follow that there are no significant differences, *all things considered*, between us persons and all members—human and nonhuman—of the biological kingdom. This is so, because we are constituted by animals without being identical to the animals that constitute us. For example, the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker writes, “A Darwinian would say that ultimately organisms have only two [goals]: to survive and to reproduce.”¹⁴ But he also points out that he himself is “voluntarily childless,” and comments, “I am happy to be that way, and if my genes don’t like it, they can go jump in the lake.”¹⁵ I was startled by this remark, a remark that indicates that Pinker has a first-person perspective on himself as something more than his animal nature as revealed by Darwinians. The Constitution View leaves it open to say that although biology fully reveals our animal nature, our animal nature does not exhaust our complete nature all things considered.

Thus, we have a distinction between ourselves regarded from a biological point of view, and ourselves regarded from an all-things-considered point of view. We know more about ourselves all-things-considered than

¹⁴ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977): 541.

¹⁵ *How the Mind Works*, 52.

biology can tell us. For example, the quotidian considerations that I mustered to show the uniqueness and importance of self-consciousness are not learned from biology: that we are rational and moral agents; that we care about certain things such as our own futures; that we have manifold cultural achievements; that we can interfere with the mechanisms of evolution; that we enjoy inner lives.

These are everyday truths that are constantly being confirmed by anyone who cares to look, without need of any theory. These truths are as firmly established as any in biology. So, they are available for our philosophical reflection—understood, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, as “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term.”¹⁶ With this synthetic ideal, it is clear that we cannot just read ontology off any of the sciences. Everything we know—whether from science or everyday life—should go into identifying the joints at which we are pleased to think that we carve nature.

This kind of methodological consideration underlies my holding that there is an ontological division that is not mirrored by a biological division. As Stephen Pinker and others point out, small biological differences can have big effects.¹⁷ I agree. Small biological differences can even

¹⁶ “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963): 1-40. (Quote, p. 1)

¹⁷ Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 40-1.

have ontological consequences. Biologically similar beings may be ontologically different. Indeed, that is my view.

Now turn to the second methodological issue: My position is that what something most fundamentally is—its nature—is more nearly determined by what it can do than by what it is made of. This is obvious in the case of artifacts: What makes something a clock has to do with its telling time, no matter what it is made of and no matter how its parts are arranged. Similarly, according to the Constitution View, what makes something a person has to do with its first-person perspective, no matter what it is made of.¹⁸ Self-consciousness makes an ontological difference because what self-conscious beings can do is vastly different from what nonself-conscious beings can do. We persons are ourselves originators of many new kinds of reality—from cathedrals to catheters, from bullets to bell-bottoms, from cell-phones to supercomputers. One reason that I take this methodological stance is that it allows that the nature of something is tied to what is significant about the thing. What is significant about us—as even some Animalists agree¹⁹—are our characters, memories, mental

¹⁸ I thus reject Humean metaphysics, according to which the identity of a thing is determined entirely by its 'categorical' properties that are independent of what it can do, and what the thing can do depends only on the (contingent) laws of nature and not at all on the identity of the thing.

¹⁹ A prominent Animalist, Eric T. Olson, insists that a mental life is irrelevant to what we most fundamentally are. Supposing that there could be a transfer of your cerebral cortex into another body, while your cerebrumless body still carries out biological functions like respiration, circulation, etc., Olson argues that the cerebrumless body is actually you and that the person with your memories, character, and mental life is actually not you. Nevertheless, he says that it is

lives and not the respiration, circulation and metabolism that we share with nonhuman animals. To understand our nature is to understand what is significant and distinctive about us, and what is significant and distinctive about us is, I have argued, our self-consciousness. A person is an ontologically significant thing. Having a first-person perspective is an ontologically significant property—that is, a property whose (nonderivative) instantiation brings into existence a new thing, a person.

Conclusion

Although human persons are part of the natural world, they are a distinctive part. The first-person perspective that human persons have—whether it evolved by natural selection, or was specially introduced by God, or came into existence in some other way—is a genuine novelty. The things that matter deeply to us—our values, our futures, our ultimate destinies—could matter only to beings with first-person perspectives. The first-person perspective ties what is distinctive about us and what matters most deeply to us to what we most fundamentally are.

The Constitution View offers a way to set a traditional preoccupation of the great philosophers in the context of

rational for you to care selfishly about the person who has your cerebrum (who is not actually you), rather than the cerebrumless body (who actually is you.) See *The Human Animal: Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford, 1997): 52.

the “neo-Darwinian synthesis” in biology.²⁰ The traditional preoccupation concerns our inwardness—our abilities not just to think, but to think about our thoughts; to see ourselves and each other as subjects; to have rich inner lives. The modern synthesis in biology has made it clear that we are also biological beings, continuous with the rest of the animal kingdom. The Constitution View of human persons shows how we are part of the world of organisms even as it recognizes our uniqueness.

I think that the Constitution View should be congenial to traditional theists. On the one hand, it depicts us human persons as ontologically different from the rest of Creation; on the other hand, it does not dispute widely accepted scientific claims. A proponent of the Constitution View need not postulate any gap in the animal kingdom between human and nonhuman animals that is invisible to biologists. Nor need the Constitutionalist deny natural selection. She may insist that theists can and should give science its due. Circling the wagons against the onslaught of modern science is hopeless; it just breeds a kind of defiant brittleness and alienates theists from the world that they cannot avoid living in. The Constitution View both recognizes the claims of the sciences and is compatible with

²⁰ Variations on this term are widely used. For example, see Ernst Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988); Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1982); Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

traditional theism—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So, if the Constitution View is right about our place in nature, I think that that is good news for theists.

University of Massachusetts at Amherst
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