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Lynne Rudder Baker
Human Persons as Social Entities

Abstract: The aim of this article is to show that human persons belong, ontologically, in social ontology. After setting out my views on ontology, I turn to persons and argue that they have first-person perspectives in two stages (rudimentary and robust) essentially. Then I argue that the robust stage of the first-person persective is social, in that it requires a language, and languages require linguistic communities. Then I extend the argument to cover the rudimentary stage of the first-person perspective as well. I conclude by enumerating ways in which human persons differ from nonhuman animals.

Keywords: First-person perspective; Persons; Robust; Rudimentary; Social beings.

Different philosophers construe social ontology in different ways – for example, in terms of collectivities, or institutional facts, or group agents (see, for example, Gilbert 1989; Searle 2006; Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2011; Hindriks 2013). The subjects of study of social ontology are typically plural entities, not individuals. My aim here is to contribute to an expansion of social ontology that includes *individual* human persons, as well as plural entities or institutions.

Let me begin with a quick sketch of how I understand ontology.[1] Ontology simpliciter is a complete inventory of all the entities, kinds and properties that ever exist or are instantiated. Since I believe that there is ontological novelty in the world, I think that we are in no position to consider ontology simpliciter (there may be some addition to ontology later); rather we have to deal with ontology relativized to time. Ontology at time t comprises all the entities and properties that have existed at time t or before.

In order to be in ontology at time t, a concrete entity, property, or primary kind must be (ontologically)[2] irreducible and ineliminable without loss of

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1 I am concerned only with the natural world. If the natural world does not exhaust reality, then this discussion is only partial.
2 Throughout, I use reducible to mean 'ontologically reducible.'

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completeness (at time t). An item is irreducible and ineliminable (at time t) if and only if it is not reducible and not eliminable (at time t). An entity (or property) is reducible if and only if it is entailed by local microphysical properties. More colloquially, an entity (or property) is reducible if and only if it is "really something else" (Fodor 1987, p. 97). An entity (or property) is eliminable if and only if a complete ontology does not entail that it exists (or is instantiated). Primary kinds belong in ontology, because kinds that are reducible or eliminable are not primary kinds.[3]

Social ontology, as I construe it, is part of ontology simpliciter. As part of ontology, social ontology should include all social entities, social kinds and social properties that are irreducible and ineliminable. A social property is one for which social or linguistic communities are necessary for its instantiation. A community is one whose members bear significant intentional relations to one another. I say 'significant' to rule out an aggregate of people waiting to cross the street as a community. They may all happen to have curly hair, but they are not a community. A community is a group of persons with a measure of cohesion, with common intentional properties or relations such as shared interests or values or language. A social property belongs in social ontology if and only if it is irreducible and ineliminable. An entity is social entity if and only if it has a social property, and a kind is a social kind if and only if it has social entities as members.

Over the course of three books (Baker 2000, 2007a, 2013), I have developed a metaphysical view of human persons. Here, I want to focus on the facets of my view that have implications for social ontology.

What is a Human Person?

On my view, every concrete entity is of some primary kind or other. *Person* is a primary kind; *physician* is not. Any entity of primary kind *person* is a person at every moment that she exists. An entity of (nonprimary) kind *physician* is not always a physician: she acquires the property of being a physician after arduous training, and thus has the property contingently. (For greater detail on primary kinds generally, see Baker 2007a, p. 33–39.)

A human person is a person who begins existence constituted by an organism, but is not identical to the organism that constitutes her. For purposes here, I shall leave the essential feature of embodiment aside. What matters here is another

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3 Every concrete entity is a member of exactly one primary kind. An entity x's primary kind answers the question, "What most fundamentally is x?" For a discussion of primary kinds see Baker 2000, p. 39–41.

essential property of persons, a first-person perspective. A first-person perspective is a primary-kind property that members of the kind *person* have essentially. A first-person perspective is a dispositional property with two stages – rudimentary and robust. [For convenience, I shall sometimes drop the reference to stages and talk directly about rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives. Nevertheless, the two stages are not distinct first-person perspectives. Indeed, sameness of exemplification of first-person perspective is what makes a person a unified individual over time (Baker 2012).]

A human person comes into existence when a human organism develops to the point of supporting a first-person perspective at a rudimentary stage, a nonconceptual capacity for intentional behavior that requires consciousness and intentionality. When a human organism gets to that point, a new entity – a person, who has a first-person perspective essentially – comes into being. During the developmental process, a person learns a language, and as she does, she (standardly) moves to the robust stage of the first-person perspective, a conceptual capacity to conceive of herself as herself from the first-person.

Many nonhuman mammals – those capable of intentional behavior – also have rudimentary first-person perspectives. However, there is a difference, even at the stage of a rudimentary first-person perspective, between persons and nonhuman mammals. Although human persons begin existence with only rudimentary first-person perspectives, if there were no robust first-person perspectives, there would be no human persons. In the absence of robust first-person perspectives, there would be no significant distinction between human persons and nonhuman primates. For human persons, a rudimentary first-person perspective is a preliminary to a robust first-person perspective. But for nonhuman animals, a rudimentary first-person perspective is not a preliminary for anything; it is the end of the first-person line.

For human persons, in contrast to nonhuman animals, the rudimentary first-person perspective comes with a piggybacked second-order capacity for a robust first-person perspective – that is, with a capacity to develop a capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself from the first-person. [A remote (or second-order) capacity may fail to be realized, and never become an in-hand capacity. To take an example far afield, an infant may have a remote capacity to ride a bicycle, and never learn to ride. But if nobody ever learned to ride a bicycle, there would be no bicycle-riders. Similarly, if nobody ever acquired a robust first-person perspective, there would be no persons.] So, in the case of a human person, the rudimentary first-person perspective brings with it a second-order capacity to develop a robust first-person perspective.

Let us now consider robust first-person perspectives in greater detail. One acquires a robust first-person perspective as she acquires a natural language. To conceive of oneself as oneself in the first-person, one needs a self-concept – a

nonqualitative way to think about oneself. I take concepts to be inextricably linked to language. There's no self-concept, and hence no robust first-person perspective, outside a language. Learning a language is learning concepts, and learning concepts is learning about reality. After a child acquires a battery of concepts like *water*, *mommy*, *ball*, *want*, *toy*, *chair* and so on, she is ready to understand a concept like *mine*, which she uses to apply to what belongs to her – conceived of as herself, from the first-person perspective.

A robust first-person perspective – an ability, not just to recognize oneself as distinct from everything else, but to *conceive* of oneself as oneself in the first person – makes possible almost all our characteristic human activities. To name a few: One can deliberate about what to do and can attempt to rank preferences and goals, and try to resolve conflicts among them (and thus is a rational agent); one can reflect on her motives; one can have a life of moral significance; one can have an inner life; one can conceive of herself as having a past, some of which is accessible to memory, and as having a future, some of which is accessible to intention. Robust first-person perspectives enable us to realize that we are agents, to take responsibility for things that we do, to recognize that we are subjects of experience, to care about the future, to change our habits in light of rational assessment of our goals. These abilities – made possible by our robust first-person perspectives – are unique (as far as we know) in the universe (Baker 2000, p. 147–164; Baker 2011).

We have ample linguistic evidence of first-person perspectives in the use of first-person pronouns embedded in first-person sentences whose main verbs are linguistic or psychological verbs – 'I am glad that I have such good friends', 'I wish that I were not in pain,' 'I told you that I was in pain', and so on. If I think or say that I am glad that I have such good friends, I am conceiving of myself from the first-person, without needing a name, description or other third-person referential device to refer to myself. I'll call such complex first-person thoughts 'I*-thoughts'.

There are a couple of features of I*-thoughts worth noticing: First, they are not limited to "Cartesian" thoughts about what one is thinking; they include mundane thoughts like "I wish that I* were in the movies". Second, I*-thoughts need no recourse to any peculiar object like a self, or a soul, or an ego. My I*-thoughts refer to me, a person – the same entity that you refer to by saying, "Lynne Baker". There is no special object, distinct from a whole embodied person, that is a self. All I*-thoughts are manifestations of robust first-person perspectives. Our ability to think such thoughts depends crucially on language.

To sum up: The first-person perspective is a dispositional property with two stages (rudimentary and robust). This property is manifested in countless different ways, in much more sophisticated ways at the robust stage. (Your causal powers expand as you acquire more concepts.) Throughout its indefinitely many diverse manifestations, your exemplification of the first-person perspective

remains constant. You are the same person as a certain toddler in virtue of the fact that there is a single exemplification of the first-person perspective shared the adult and the toddler – albeit manifested in vastly different ways.

Human Persons as Social Entities

Elsewhere (Baker 2013) I argued that persons and their essential properties (viz., first-person perspectives, bodies) are irreducible and ineliminable, and hence part of ontology. It remains to show that they are social in that they could not exist in a world without social or linguistic communities. The relevant essential property of persons is the first-person perspective, with its two stages, rudimentary and robust. I want to show that the first-person perspective belongs in social ontology – in virtue of its robust stage. A property belongs in social ontology if and only if: (i) social or linguistic communities are necessary for its instantiation; (ii) it is not reducible; (iii) it is not eliminable.

As I argued earlier, there would be no human persons if there were no robust stage of the first-person perspective. The robust stage of the first-person perspective is necessary and sufficient for the existence of the *kind* human person, but not for the existence of each human person.[4] (A person may die before reaching the robust stage.) Or, to put it another way, instantiation of the robust stage of the first-person perspective is sufficient for there to be human persons.

Human Persons in Social Ontology

Let's begin with the robust first-person perspective. Here is my overall argument for the place of the robust first-person perspective in social ontology:

P1.   The first-person perspective (in its robust stage) is a social property.
P2.   The first-person perspective (in its robust or rudimentary stage) is not ontologically reducible.
P3.   The first-person perspective (in its robust or rudimentary stage) is not eliminable.
P4:   If P1, P2, and P3, the first-person perspective in its robust stage belongs in social ontology.
∴ 5. The first-person perspective in the robust stage belongs in social ontology.

The argument is valid; let me consider the premises.

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4 I am assuming embodiment here, which I take to be a necessary condition of human persons.

P1:   Having a robust first-person perspective requires having a language in which one can conceive of oneself as oneself in the first-person. Mastering a language requires a linguistic community. Wittgenstein pegged why a person who did not already have a language could not make up a language in isolation: If you did, then there would be no standards of correctness. If you came to identify another item of some kind that you thought you had seen before, there would be no difference between getting it right and getting it wrong. "One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right.'" (Wittgenstein 1958, par. 258) So, whatever one did in isolation, it would not be to invent a language – public or private.

    Suppose that a theretofore nonlinguistic Robinson Crusoe found himself on an isolated island. He amuses himself by pointing to various fish and uttering sounds. One day, he points at a shark and says, 'shark.' There are many sharks and dolphins that are similar in appearance in the vicinity. Without a linguistic community, what would make it the case that our lifelong-solitary Crusoe referred to sharks rather than sharks-or-dolphins. If Crusoe said, "shark" when he pointed at a dolphin, what would be the difference between his incorrectly identifying a dolphin as a shark, and his correctly identifying a shark-or-dolphin?[5] There would be no way for our lifelong Crusoe to be right or wrong. (For extended argument, see Baker 2007b,c.) A linguistic community is generally required for learning concepts, and a self-concept is no exception. And since mastering a self-concept is required for the robust first-person perspective, the robust first-person perspective requires mastery of a self-concept, and hence is a social property.

P2.   The first-person perspective (in its robust or rudimentary stage) is not ontologically reducible. In its rudimentary stage, the first-person perspective is manifested in behavior that exhibits consciousness and intentionality, neither of which is entailed by local microproperties. In its robust stage, the first-person perspective requires a self-concept.

    In (Baker 2013), I argue that a self-concept, unlike the concept *phlogiston*, cannot be empty. If the self-concept is not empty, it expresses the property of conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first person. The self-concept that I use when I directly manifest a robust first-person perspective – expressed by 'I*' – itself expresses the just-mentioned property, which I manifest. This

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5 I suspect that it is incorrect even to say that Crusoe was identifying something or even trying to identify something. Identification, like naming, may well require numerous quasi-linguistic activities, which in turn must be taught.

property is not entailed by microproperties inasmuch as microproperties are non-first-personal. [Not everyone agrees: John Perry thinks that the first-person indexical is essential, but that all facts are objective. However, he cannot satisfactorily make out the connection between the non-first-personal properties and first-person concepts (Perry 2002, p. 239; Baker 2013, p. 51–56)]. Since a complete inventory of the world must contain not just objects, but irreducible properties as well, a complete inventory must include the self-concept, which expresses the property of conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first person.[6]

In its robust stage, the first-person perspective is directly manifested in thoughts like this:

(i)   "I wonder how I'm going to die".

Such a thought is reducible if and only if it is entailed by local microphysical properties. Well, since microphysical properties are expressible in the third-person, (i) is reducible only if it is entailed by third-person statements. I do not believe that any I*-thought is deducible from any third-person statements. Compare:

(ii)   "I wonder how LB is going to die".
(iii)   "LB wonders how LB is going to die".

It is easy to think of circumstances in which (i) is false while (ii) and (iii) are true (Baker 1982). Hence, (i) is not deducible from (ii) or (iii).

As we saw earlier, what distinguishes (i) from (ii) and (iii) is that (i) expresses a self-concept – a concept of oneself from one's own point of view. Any time one thinks of oneself as oneself from one's own point of view, one deploys a self-concept – a nonqualitative concept that manifests one's robust first-person perspective, and thoughts containing a self-concept cannot be deduced from third-person thoughts, or replaced by third-person thoughts without cognitive loss. So, the robust first-person perspective is not reducible.

P3.   The first-person perspective (in its robust or rudimentary stage) is not eliminable.

The intentionality exhibited by human infants and many nonhuman animals is not eliminable inasmuch as the behavior manifesting it would be inexplicable in a wholly nonintentional world. If intentionality were

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6 An anonymous referee noted that the fact that Hesperus thoughts are not reducible to Phosphorus thoughts need not entail that an inventory of the world that only mentioned 'Hesperus would be leaving something out. Right. But an inventory that included the property of being a human being but not the property of conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first-person would leave something out – not an object like Hesperus/Phosphorus, but a property.

eliminated from ontology, we would have no reasonable explanation for your dog's behavior when you repeatedly throw a stick and your dog repeatedly fetches it.

In its robust stage, the first-person perspective is even more perspicuously ineliminable. Elimination of the robust first-person perspective would make many, if not most, characteristic human activities – celebrating anniversaries, seeking fame, signing contracts – literally impossible. An ontology with no room for a first-person perspective would be woefully incomplete.

P4. This premise follows from the characterization of social ontology.

So, the first-person perspective in its robust stage belongs in social ontology.

An Objection?

Someone may object: It is properties (or entities or kinds of entities) that belong in ontology; it is not *stages* of properties, and the conclusion of the above argument is only that the first-person perspective in its *robust stage* belongs in social ontology.

I think that the objector is correct about my conclusion, but my argument can be supplemented to avoid the objection. The easiest response would be to hold that the ontological status of the highest level of a multi-level property is accorded to the property as a whole. So, if the first-person perspective in its robust stage belongs in social ontology (line 5), then the whole property of being a first-person perspective – without regard to stages – belongs in social ontology. Then, we can conclude that the first-person perspective belongs in social ontology.

Another way to defuse the objection is to note that the reason that the conclusion of the argument pertains only to the first-person perspective in its robust stage is that it is unclear whether the first-person perspective in its rudimentary stage belongs in social ontology. So, let us take a closer look at the rudimentary stage of the first-person perspective. Although I gave examples that suggest that consciousness and intentionality are irreducible and ineliminable, I admit that the examples are just examples; it is unclear that they are conclusive evidence for the claim that the first-person perspective in its rudimentary stage is in the social ontology.

Even though I do not have a theory of social communities, I think that we intuitively distinguish social communities, which share some salient feature (like aims or values) from mere groups, which – like the sum of insects within a certain square inch – do not share any salient feature in virtue of their spatial location. Although I am confident that evolution by natural selection requires *groups* for the rudimentary first-person perspective to have evolved, and I believe

that social communities existed at the dawn of the first-person perspective, I am less confident that *social communities* that share salient properties in virtue of their communal membership were actually required for the development of the rudimentary first-person perspective in its rudimentary stage.

Nevertheless, let me urge that we can see how the rudimentary first-person perspective *could have* evolved by natural selection (or descent with modification). Here is a Just-So story: The evolution of a rudimentary first-person perspective required many generations of many species, each adding a bit toward sentience (consciousness) and the capacity to direct attention and bodily behavior (intentionality). Finally, perhaps a species developed what is clearly intentional behavior. The last step was a step from almost having a rudimentary first-person perspective to clearly having a first-person perspective.

"Evolution will occur whenever and wherever three conditions are met: (1) replication, (2) variation (mutation), (3) differential fitness (competition)" (Dennett 2006, p. 341). In order for there to be differential fitness, there must be groups. And some of these groups had developed into social communities by the dawn of intentional behavior. There is a great deal of empirical evidence about intentional behavior that is clearly social (e.g., grooming) among nonhuman primates (e.g., Gazzaniga 2008, p. 95).

So, I am optimistic that the first-person perspective in its rudimentary, as well as a robust, stage belongs in social ontology. Admittedly, the reasons that the rudimentary and robust stages are both social are quite different: For the robust stage, language is required; and language is social. For the rudimentary stage, natural selection among groups is required, and, over generations, the relevant groups developed social behavior. However, even if one is dubious about the place of the rudimentary first-person perspective in social ontology, it is clear that the first-person perspective in its robust stage most assuredly does belong in social ontology. And what sets human persons apart is their *robust* first-person perspectives. There would be no human persons without the first-person perspective in its robust stage. So, human persons are social entities.

Conclusion

We can see how deeply social human persons are by considering the range of characteristic human activities. Any activity that one could not engage in without a language, or without a robust first-person perspective, requires us to be social entities. Even an unshared activity, like keeping a diary, presupposes, not only the existence of a social community, but also the diary-keeper's robust first-person perspective.

We can see the importance of the robust first-person perspective by comparing human persons, with our robust first-person perspectives, to animals that do not constitute persons. Let me just list some of the features that we persons share and do not share with non-person-constituting animals.

– We share with several species the ability to communicate with conspecifics; but only we persons have a fully articulated language with resources for considering necessity and possibility. Only we worry about the paradox of the heap.
– We share with several species the trait of having a perspective on our environments; but only we persons have rich inner lives, filled with counterfactuals. (" . . . if only I had locked the door. . . ")
– We share with several species methods of rational inquiry (The dog sniffs around where he saw the bone being buried yesterday and digs there); but only we persons deliberate about what to do and attempt to rank preferences and goals, and try to resolve conflicts among them (and thus be rational agents).
– We share with several species activities like self-grooming; but only we persons have self-narratives.
– We share with several species the ability to make things that we need (for example, nests), but only we persons make things that we don't need (for example, enough nuclear warheads to eliminate the human race many times over).
– We share with several species the property of having social organization, but only we persons have war crimes, international courts, and human rights.
– We share with other species the property of having a rudimentary first-person perspective, but only we persons develop a robust first-person perspective that makes us moral and responsible agents.

All these differences between persons and other entities rest on our having robust first-person perspectives. Robust first-person perspectives bring with them a cascade of new kinds of abilities: We can plan for our futures; we can deceive ourselves; we can try to reform; we can go on diets; we can have rich or empty inner lives. And on and on. With respect to the range of what we can do (from trying to control our destinies to fantasizing about the future) and with respect to the moral significance of what we can do (from assessing our goals to confessing our sins), it is obvious that beings with robust first-person perspectives are unique. The extent of the difference that the robust first-person perspective makes is a mark that we persons are ontologically different from animals.[7]

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7 One anonymous reviewer suggested that all these differences could be just differences in degree, not differences in kind. I strongly disagree. Taken one step at a time, the difference between a tadpole and in person is tiny, a difference in degree; but taken all together, the differences add up to a difference in kind. I am an advocate of ontological vagueness. For details, see Baker 2007a, p. 121–141.

Whereas our rudimentary first-person perspectives tie persons to the seamless animal kingdom, our robust first-person perspectives set us apart from everything else in the natural world. They also insure that we are unalterably social entities.

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