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Brief Reply to Rosenkrantz's comments on my "The Ontological Status of Persons"

I would like to thank Gary Rosenkrantz for his comments on my paper. I have five brief points in reply:

1. Primary-kind properties. Rosenkrantz does not see how a single primary-kind property can be had by x essentially and by y contingently (where $x \neq y$). He offers a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that a primary can be had accidentally or derivatively. The *reductio* has as a premise the following: "[S]omething has a primary-kind property, F-ness, derivatively only if the primary-kind property of a nonderivative F, i.e., the property which determines what a nonderivative F most fundamentally is, is nonderivative F-ness (rather than F-ness)." However, this premise is simply a denial of my view.

On my view, there is not a property of nonderivative F-ness that is distinct from derivative F-ness. The property in question is simply F-ness, which may be had in either of two ways, derivatively or nonderivatively. If x has a primary-kind property, F-ness, nonderivatively, then F-ness determines what x most fundamentally is (and x has F-ness essentially). If x has a primary-kind property, F-ness, derivatively, then x has F-ness only in virtue of being constitutionally-related to something that has F-ness nonderivatively (and x has F-ness accidentally). I see no *reductio*.

2. Gradations of mentality. I never suggested that there were not gradations of mentality in nature. My claim is only that a first-person perspective—unlike mere sentience—opens up new dimensions of reality and makes possible new ranges of phenomena from "false consciousness" to 12-step programs. There is only one species with a

first-person perspective, and that species is obviously different from all the others in what it manages to do and to produce.

I simply disagree that mere “consciousness seems to be no less distinctive of the beings which enjoy it than reflective consciousness.” Consciousness is not nearly as well demarcated as self-consciousness. Consciousness, unlike a first-person perspective, seems to come in degrees. It is not even clear which species (earthworms?) have it at all and which do not. But it is quite clear which species has a first-person perspective. Moreover, first-person perspectives bring with them many new and important abilities—e.g., those that involve moral or rational agency—but it is unclear what effect, if any, consciousness has on, say, the abilities of cockroaches.

3. Individuation of species. I’m aware of the controversies over species in biology; but we do talk about human animals, and human animals do have persistence conditions—as Rosenkrantz said on behalf of Animalists—that are different from persistence conditions that I take persons to have. That’s all I need. The problem for my position about species devolves into the general problem of vagueness, which afflicts my position. But vagueness is a global problem; it’s not a special problem for me. All the proposed solutions to vagueness that I know of (supervaluation, the epistemic view, 3-valued logic) either manifestly fail to solve the problem, or are manifestly absurd. I wish that we had a general solution for vagueness, but we don’t; I, like everyone else, will have to wait for one.

In any case, what I need for my view is the idea of persistence conditions. If membership in a species does not provide persistence conditions, or if an organism is not essentially a member of a species, then I would replace reference to species with reference to

persistence conditions. My point is that the persistence conditions of anything that is (nonderivatively) a person differ from the persistence conditions (whatever they are) of anything that is (nonderivatively) a human animal.

4. Physical Possibility. Rosenkrantz is unpersuaded by my argument that Animalism is incompatible with Chisholm's requirement that a person is necessarily such that it is physically possible that it consciously thinks. I argued that this requirement does not hold of human animals. Consider a human animal, H. In possible world w , it is completely normal. In possible world w' , just before H came into existence, the mother-to-be drank toxic water, and H came into existence with a deformity that made it physically impossible that H ever consciously think. (The deformity made it physically impossible that H ever develop a cerebral cortex.) If there is any possible world in which it is physically impossible that H ever consciously think, then H, on Chisholm's definition of a person, H is not a person in any possible world at all. So, even in world w , where H is completely normal, H is not a person on Chisholm's view.

Rosenkrantz points out that according to Chisholm, 'physically possible' means 'consistent with the laws of nature.' And "something's being physically possible cannot hinge upon anything that is physically contingent, i.e., such that both it and its negation are consistent with the laws of nature." Since it is consistent with the laws of nature both that the mother-to-be is exposed to the toxin and that she is not exposed to the toxin, Rosenkrantz argues, the counterexample fails: What is consistent (or inconsistent) with the laws of nature cannot depend on any contingent fact.

This conception of physical possibility is untenable. Perhaps one may hold that what is physically possible for x can not depend on any

contingent fact that involves x. But the conception of physical possibility that Rosenkrantz attributes to Chisholm is much stronger. According to that conception, what is physically possible for x cannot depend on any contingent fact whatever (such as that H's mother was exposed to toxin *before H came into existence*).

However, what is physically possible does sometimes depend on contingent facts. Suppose, as seems likely, that the earth's position relative to the sun and other planets is a result of some contingent events that occurred during the formation of the solar system before the earth existed. Since the earth supports life, it is physically possible (i.e., consistent with the laws of nature) that the earth support life. But the fact that it is physically possible that the earth support life depends on the earth's position relative to the sun; and the earth's having that position is a result of contingent events during the formation of the solar system. So, what is consistent with the laws of nature (e.g., that the earth supports life) does depend on contingent facts (e.g., that certain contingent events occurred during the formation of the solar system). To put it another way, a conception of physical possibility that holds that no contingent fact in the history of the world can affect what is physically possible is too narrow to be useful.

I conclude that, on the conception of 'physical possibility' that Rosenkrantz attributes to Chisholm, Chisholm's requirement that a person is necessarily such that it is physically possible that it consciously thinks is implausible regardless of its (in)consistency with Animalism.

5. Point of Disagreement. Rosenkrantz approves of the Animalist claim that "human personhood is a phase, and hence an accident, of certain carbon-based living organisms." Hence, he does not take

issue with my contention that Animalists must deny that persons have ontological significance. So we apparently agree that if persons are essentially Animals, then persons do not have ontological significance. Since the Constitution View does accord ontological significance to persons, it seems that we are down to holding that “one philosopher’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens.” I say, modus tollens; Rosenkrantz says, modus ponens.

Lynne Rudder Baker
University of Massachusetts at Amherst
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