

1-1-2011

Book Review: The Metaphysics Of Everyday Life: An Essay In Practical Realism

William Hasker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Hasker, William (2011) "Book Review: The Metaphysics Of Everyday Life: An Essay In Practical Realism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol28/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

give a dominant role to the doctrine of divine revelation, there is a discernible tendency for this balanced focus to be upset. The theologian's focus is displaced, for example, from the fact that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, to what this action reveals about God. Abraham speaks of "the gracious unveiling of God in the covenant acts and deliverance of Israel from Egypt" (p. 96). To the best of my knowledge, no biblical writer locates God's grace in the unveiling that occurs in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt; they all locate it in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

In our relationship to our fellow human beings, such displacement of focus would often be insulting. I insult you if, instead of responding to your request for aid, I focus my attention on what your making of this request reveals about you. Are things different in our relationship to God?

The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism, by Lynne Rudder Baker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 253 pp.

WILLIAM HASKER, Huntington College

Practical realism, the name given to her position by Lynne Rudder Baker, is analytic metaphysics with a difference. The difference is stated emphatically by Baker in her concluding summary:

It is time to get on the table an alternative to the dominant metaphysical theories that accord no ontological significance to things that everyone cares about—not only concrete objects like one's car keys, or the *Mona Lisa*, but also commonplace states of affairs like being employed next year, or having enough money for retirement. I believe that such ordinary phenomena are the stuff of reality, and I have tried to offer a metaphysics that has room in its ontology for the ordinary things that people value. (p. 240)

Baker's first chapter is entitled "Beginning in the middle," a phrase which carries three distinct though related meanings. We begin with our actual language, with its embedded picture of the world. We also begin in the middle epistemologically, aware of our presuppositions but not attempting to eliminate them as Descartes did. And we begin with the medium-sized objects—people, nonhuman organisms, natural objects, artifacts, and artworks—that are of primary concern to us in our lives. Of particular importance are "ID phenomena"—objects, properties, and events that are "intention-dependent," in that their existence depends on the existence of persons with propositional attitudes. Unlike a number of other metaphysical views, Baker's approach takes ID phenomena with utmost seriousness and refuses to relegate them to second-class ontological status.

The agenda thus established is pursued in part I, "Everyday Things." Chapter 2 argues for the reality and non-reducibility of ordinary things, a theme which continues in chapter 3 on artifacts, to which Baker (unlike many others from Aristotle on down) accords full ontological status. Any

view of this sort has to deal with the problem of material constitution. A piece of cloth is colored and sewn in a certain way, and is made into a flag. So now we have a flag, but the piece of cloth is still there. And the cloth and the flag are not identical; the cloth existed before the flag, and could survive the flag's demise (for instance, if the flag's colors were bleached out and the cloth used for a different purpose). Sorting all this out has become a cottage industry for metaphysicians, and Baker's is one of the leading brands on offer in the constitution market-place. Chapter 4 summarizes and also amplifies the constitution view of persons first expounded in Baker's earlier *Persons and Bodies*. On this view, human persons are constituted by their bodies but not identical with those bodies. She argues that the constitution view is superior to animalism (the view that persons are identical with their bodies) in that it holds persons to be ontologically unique, and superior to substance dualism in affirming "quasi-naturalism," according to which "human persons are wholly part of the natural world, produced and governed by natural processes" (p. 87).

Part II, "The Everyday World," begins with a chapter on causation, in which she defends nonreductive materialism. She argues carefully and at length against Jaegwon Kim's objections to nonreductive mental causation. Unfortunately, the "property-constitution view" which she advocates still leaves the Causal-Closure Principle unchallenged; indeed she seems to regard this as an important merit of her view. She gives no consideration to the Argument from Reason, which maintains that if causal closure is accepted (together with other typical materialist assumptions), it becomes impossible to give an adequate account of the mental life of human beings, including and especially our practice of logical reasoning.¹

In a chapter on vagueness, Baker argues that vagueness is pervasive in the world and not simply in language; ordinary things typically are vague both spatially and temporally. She writes, "On my view, the vagueness [of the spatial boundaries of a dog] is not exhausted by any indeterminacy in the concept *dog*. An animal that may have loose hairs is what the concept *dog* is a concept of" (pp. 129–130). In the following chapter on time she rejects both presentism and eternalism and develops a "BA theory" which offers a "metaphysical account of how the B-series can accommodate an A-series ongoing now" (p. 150). An important claim of hers is that the A-series "depends on there being self-conscious entities" (p. 149). Apart from self-conscious entities, there is no ongoing now, and all events from all times exist together, related by succession and simultaneity, just as depicted by eternalism. But those self-conscious entities make a difference: "An event's occurring now depends on someone's being judgmentally aware of it now" (p. 150). This seems to conflict with a truism that she acknowledges, namely that "trivially, every time is now (at that time)" (p. 150). According to this truism, the time of Big Bang was now when it occurred even

¹For an extended discussion of the Argument from Reason, see Victor Reppert, *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

though there were then no self-conscious beings. Apparently, however, Baker considers this “truism” to be false; she holds, with Adolf Grünbaum, that “there are past events that were never present” (p. 152). One might wonder how Baker’s view differs substantively from eternalism. Eternalists certainly recognize that at least for the last couple of million years there have been self-conscious entities who were aware of its being “now,” and that for each of these entities there is a temporal A-series comprising times that are past, present and future. Apparently the difference lies in the fact that for Baker the A-series facts are genuine truths about the world, rather than being “merely mind-dependent” (Grünbaum) or entirely fictional (Mellor). An interesting feature of Baker’s theory is her view that “three-dimensional objects move through time, but their doing so depends on their [*sic*]² being self-conscious beings” (p. 152). It follows from this that, whereas plate tectonics and continental drift went on for billions of years without the continents moving through time, they suddenly began to do so with the advent of self-conscious beings. An odd consequence indeed!

Part III, “Metaphysical Underpinnings,” examines selected metaphysical issues that have been passed over in the earlier chapters. In “Constitution revisited” Baker analyzes the constitution relation in depth; in the process she answers a number of objections and at times revises some of her earlier views. Unlike some others, she avoids defining constitution in terms of mereology, but in “Mereology and constitution” she considers the concepts of mereology and explains how they relate to her notion of constitution. In another chapter she defends three-dimensionalism against four-dimensionalism, which presents “the greatest challenge to the constitution view.” The concluding chapter briefly addresses “Five ontological issues,” namely ontological significance, time and existence, ontological novelty, ontological levels, and emergence.

Baker’s work on constitution is admirably careful and well-developed, yet I believe her central and most important example, the constitution of persons by their bodies, is inadequately defended. To be sure, she goes to considerable lengths to rebut numerous technical objections to her theory. What she fails to do, however, is to present a compelling affirmative case for the theory, one which would show it to be superior to dualism and animalism. Dualism, in fact, is never taken seriously as an alternative, either in the present volume or in *Persons and Bodies*. (In both books, Baker is quite concerned to reassure those who might think her views insufficiently naturalistic; the possibility that they might be overly naturalistic hardly comes into view.) In *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* she says little beyond the point already noted—that persons are ontologically unique on the constitution view, but not on animalism. In *Persons and Bodies* she does present arguments, but they are unconvincing. Some of these arguments concern matters of value: she writes, “it is an advantage of the Constitution View

²There is a genuine ambiguity here. Is the passage quoted meant to imply that *only* self-conscious beings, and not any other objects, move through time? Presumably not, and if not we should emend ‘their’ to ‘there.’ But this has the odd consequence noted in the text.

that what is ontologically significant about us grounds what we care about deeply."³ Few will dispute with her the importance of being a person, but it hardly follows from this that human persons, unlike all other animals, are distinct from their bodies. Some animals, according to her, have "a rudimentary first-person perspective," yet they remain identical with their bodies for all that. (According to Baker, a "robust first-person perspective" is what makes a person a person.) Doesn't it sound like special pleading to insist that, while a chimpanzee and a human infant each possesses a rudimentary first-person perspective, the chimp is identical with its body while the infant is not? (N. B. I am not arguing *for* animalism; I am merely pointing out that Baker does not have good arguments *against* it.)

Another group of arguments concerns the possibility of replacement of bodily parts by bionic parts. She writes, "it may be possible for a human person to undergo gradual replacement of her human body by bionic parts in a way that did not extinguish her first-person perspective; if so, then she would continue to exist, but she would cease to have a human body."⁴ And if this is possible, then she cannot have been identical with her body to begin with. I maintain, however, that we have no reason to think this *is* possible; we are totally lacking evidence that a nonbiological bionic system could sustain conscious life. But once again, the parallel with animals defeats her argument. If such gradual replacement is possible for a human being, it is also possible for a cat or a canary, which on her own view are identical with their respective bodies. Probably the right thing to say in such cases (should they after all be possible) is that the body in question still exists but that through the gradual replacement of parts it has ceased to be a human, or feline, or avian body and has become a bionic body instead. I conclude that while Baker is right about the importance of the difference between animals and human beings, she has not justified articulating that difference in terms of the distinction between constitution and mind-body identity.⁵

That Baker's book is subject to objections such as these should not come as a surprise, and it does little to detract from the book's overall merits. Anyone who devises a metaphysical system is bound to expose herself to a great many objections and disagreements in virtue of the wide range of topics that must be covered. And while it might seem advantageous to have answered all the objections in advance, this is incompatible with producing a book of reasonable length, one that will actually be read. The project of constructing a metaphysics that takes seriously the sorts of things we are all concerned with in real life is admirable and important, and Baker carries it off with distinction. *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* is a splendid achievement, one fully deserving of the attention it will undoubtedly receive.

³Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 227–228.

⁴*Ibid.*, 106.

⁵For more on Baker's arguments, see *Persons and Bodies*; and William Hasker, "The Constitution View of Persons: A Critique," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44.1 (March 2004): 23–34.