



Review: [Untitled]

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Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View by Lynne Rudder Baker
Peter van Inwagen

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BOOK REVIEWS

enology of sense includes representing moving objects, Clark's theory seems to underestimate its complexity.¹

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PERSONS AND BODIES: A CONSTITUTION VIEW. By LYNNE RUDDER BAKER.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 233.

Philosophers of mind have not in general been very attentive to metaphysics. (They discuss the place of minds or sensations or beliefs in the natural world without attempting so much as a gesture at a metaphysics of the objects that make up the natural world. They talk freely of the relation between "mental states" and "neural states" without seeing any need to tell their readers what a "state" is.) This book is a salutary exception to this general observation. A philosopher of mind—at least the body of her very influential work would be classified by most philosophers as belonging to the philosophy of mind—attempts to ground a theory of the relation between human persons and their bodies in an extended essay on the metaphysics of the natural world. Baker is a materialist (as regards *human* persons at any rate): in her book, you and I and everyone we know is a material thing. But then how are we material persons related to our bodies, which are also material things? Unlike many materialists, she rejects the following answer to this question: We are *identical with* our bodies

(or with some part of them, such as the brain). The bulk of this review is no more than a summary (very much a *metaphysician's* summary) of her answer to the "person-body question." (And it is a summary only of her *answer*; I do not touch on the arguments she presents in support of her answer or her arguments against competing answers.) My summary will use language very different from hers, since it will rely heavily on the language of parthood, and she is extremely hostile to any attempt to use the concept "part" in connection with her theory. Nevertheless, the use I make of this concept is innocuous, and my representation of her answer to the person-body question is accurate (as far as it goes: much is left out).

Let us say that x is a (mereological) sum of the y s at t just in the case that all the y s are parts of x at t , and, at t , every part of x shares a part with at least one of the y s. The population of the natural world consists of fundamental particles and such mereological sums as any of the subsets of the set of all particles may have. For any particles whatever, there is a unique object that has the following modal properties: necessarily, it exists when and only when all those particles exist, and, necessarily, whenever it exists it is then a sum of those same particles. Such objects are called *aggregates* (of particles). Consider those particles—the P s—that are my ultimate parts at the present moment. It follows from the definition of 'sum' that at this moment I am a sum of the P s. But I am not an aggregate, for my temporal extent and my modal properties are not those of any aggregate. And yet, if Baker is right, the P s now have a sum that *is* an aggregate, and have at every moment at which they all existed had that very same aggregate as a sum. (A year ago that aggregate was no doubt "smeared" across the terrestrial biosphere.) So, if Baker is right, the P s *right now* have at least two sums: one of them is I, an object that began to exist in 1942, and that has only very recently (perhaps within the last fraction of a second) become a sum of the P s; one of them is an aggregate, which has, no doubt, existed for millions of years, has always been a sum of the P s, and which, until recently—when it began the process, completed only a few seconds ago, of shrinking and congealing into a man-shaped, man-sized, solid object—has been an attenuated spherical shell of particles about eight thousand miles across and maybe a few hundred yards thick. What is the (present) relation between me and this aggregate? Well, the two of us are now composed of the same particles (and are therefore now spatially coincident). Can more be said? A great deal, according to Baker. The aggregate and I, she says, are now related by the ancestral of a relation (irreflexive, asymmetrical, and intransitive) called *constitution*. The aggregate now "constitutes" an object we have not yet mentioned, a *third* current sum of the P s, a living animal: my body. And my body, in its turn, now constitutes *me*. Each of these three current sums of the P s has different persistence conditions: the aggregate antedated both me and my body by millions of years and will outlast us; my body antedates me (it was once a fetus and I have never been a fetus: for I am *essentially* a person, and a human body, when it is a fetus, does not yet have

the right causal capacities to be—or to constitute—a person) and may outlast me (it will if it becomes a corpse or a “vegetable”).

What is this “constitution”? According to Baker, it is not a relation that holds only between bodies and human beings or aggregates and bodies. It is, she says, a relation that is *ubiquitous* in the material world. (Its relata are always mereological sums of particles. Baker appears to deny this vehemently in the section of the book called “Constitution and Mereology” (179–85). Her apparent disagreement with me on this point is only verbal. It arises because she builds much more into the meaning of ‘mereological sum’ than actually follows from the above definition.) A certain piece of marble bears it to Michelangelo’s *David*; a certain piece of cloth bears it to the U.S. flag that flies on the courthouse; a certain piece of colored paper bears it to this ten-dollar bill. (All these items are, at every moment at which they exist, then sums of certain fundamental particles.) When certain appropriately structured sums of particles are placed in appropriate circumstances, another sum of those same particles can be brought into existence, and the “new” sum will then be constituted by the pre-existent and continuing sum. Depending on how the law is written, for example, it may be that at the moment I hand a legally mandated fee to a clerk at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, a piece of colored plastic will begin to constitute a driver’s license; that is, there will begin to exist an object, a driver’s license, that is made of the same particles as the pre-existent piece of plastic. But this statement requires qualification, for it suggests that the pre-existent piece of plastic is *not* a driver’s license. Baker’s position is this: at the moment it comes to constitute a driver’s license, the piece of plastic will *become* a driver’s license. But it will differ from the “new” object it constitutes in this way: the new object will be a driver’s license *non-derivatively*, and the pre-existent object will be a driver’s license only *derivatively*: it will be a driver’s license in virtue of constituting something that is non-derivatively a driver’s license. The new object, moreover, will be *essentially* a driver’s license, and the pre-existent object, the piece of colored plastic, will be a driver’s license only *accidentally* (for the first few minutes of its existence, it wasn’t one, and it might never have become one). Moreover, the non-derivative driver’s license, the new object, *is* a piece of plastic—but derivatively, only in virtue of being constituted by something that is non-derivatively a piece of plastic.

It is important to realize that, for Baker, being derivatively F is a species of being F. It’s *not* that, after the “real” driver’s license has come into existence, we apply the term ‘driver’s license’ to the pre-existent piece of plastic “vicariously” or “only in the loose and popular sense,” as a shorthand way of saying that something intimately related to the initial piece of plastic is a driver’s license. No, the pre-existent piece of plastic now *really is* a driver’s license, and the new thing that is essentially a driver’s license *really is* a piece of plastic. The two objects are pieces/licenses *for different reasons*, but they are both literally and strictly pieces and licenses. A similar point applies to me and my body: I am a

person non-derivatively and it derivatively, but it *really is* a person—and I *really am* a body. (Are there then two co-located persons? Well, there are two numerically distinct and co-located objects each of which is a person, but the two are not, Baker says, *separate* persons—or, indeed, separate objects.)

Baker devotes the body of the book to explaining constitution (there is an elaborate Chisholm-style definition) and to meeting objections to “the constitution view” (both as a general metaphysics of the material world and in its particular application to the person-body problem). Her arguments are ingenious and enormously detailed, and they cover a range of philosophical ground it would be impossible to summarize in a review of this length. I have only one major objection to the book: I can’t bring myself to take seriously the idea that constitution is real. It seems to me as obvious as anything can be that if a piece of plastic becomes a driver’s license, that’s like a man’s becoming a husband: *entirely* a matter of a pre-existent thing’s acquiring a new legal status. It seems equally obvious to me that there is nothing numerically distinct from me that is spatially coextensive with me. And Baker’s strenuous, extended, and very intelligent efforts to convince her readers that there are good reasons to believe these things move me not at all; I retain a complacent, unworried conviction that these things that seem obvious to me deserve to seem obvious to anyone who considers them. Well, that’s philosophy. Despite the fact that I reject the book’s central idea root and branch, I found it a fascinating read, and so will anyone who is interested in the metaphysics of material objects. Those who take seriously the idea that there might really be such a thing as constitution, moreover, may well be convinced that Baker has presented the best, most convincing version of “constitutionalism.”

My only quarrel with Baker’s presentation of her material (the book is generally very well written and as clear as the subject matter permits) is that I find here and there a certain carelessness in her use of logical concepts. One example must suffice. Baker tells us (55) that, although it is possible to have the property *being a person* derivatively, it is not possible to have the property *being identical with a person* derivatively. One would suppose that anything that had the former property would have to have the latter, owing to the logical equivalence of ‘Fx’ and ‘ $\exists y (y = x \ \& \ Fy)$ ’ (from which it follows that a body, if it is a person, must have *being identical with a person*, a property a body could have only derivatively). This caused me considerable confusion for a few pages. It transpired that Baker was using ‘the property of being identical with a person’ as a name for a property that would better be called ‘the property of being identical with something that is *non-derivatively* a person’.

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