

REPLIES

Eric Olson

Reply to Baker

Whenever I try to talk about Baker's philosophy I find it hard to know where to start. We disagree about so many things. We even disagree about how to describe each other's views. When I read Baker's description of my views, I find myself wanting to say, "No! that's not what I think," or at best, "That's a misleading and tendentious description of my view." And when she reads my description of her views, she has precisely the same reaction.

For example, Baker says that "Olson's ontology doesn't mention persons"¹ (or, in ordinary English, people). That sounds like I deny the existence of people, which I don't. The truth behind her shocking headline is that on my view people have the same identity conditions as certain things that aren't people: for instance cats.

Another case: Baker says that I "define human life wholly in terms of its biological aspects" (Big Tent Metaphysics, section 'Olson's conception of a human life', p.11). That makes it sound like all there is to our careers, on my view, is our biological functioning--that the whole story about a person is a story about sodium ions and liver cells and connecting tissues. It sounds like I'm saying that we ought to throw out all the books of psychology and politics and replace them with biology books, and shut down all the psychology departments and give the money to the biologists. But I never denied the existence or the importance of the non-biological events that figure in our careers. I only said that they are not relevant to our persistence over time.

Baker thinks that if all her parts were gradually replaced with artificial gadgets, resulting in an inorganic machine with mental properties just like hers, she herself would be that machine. She says that my view, which denies this, is "totally ad hoc" and probably

¹ The earlier draft of Baker's comments on which this reply was based said, "According to Big-Tent Metaphysics, an ontology that didn't mention chairs, flowers, and persons would leave out kinds of things that are really there." She clearly took these remarks to apply to my view.

illegal (Big Tent Metaphysics, p.9). But there is nothing ad hoc about it. I think that Baker is a biological organism. I've explained why I hold that view. And Baker agrees that a biological organism could not come to be an inorganic machine.

I think Baker often misdescribes her own view too. For instance, she says she agrees with me that we are animals (p.8). That *can't* be right. Baker really does agree with what I say about the persistence of animals. At any rate, she agrees with me on the important points, such as that a human animal starts out as an embryo and may end up as a vegetable. Now if I am an animal, and every animal starts out as an embryo, it follows that *I* start out as an embryo. That's an instance of the following valid inference form:

1. x is F.
2. Every F is G.
3. x is G.

(Or: $Fa; (x)(Fx \rightarrow Gx);$ therefore $Ga.$) But Baker doesn't agree that I was once an embryo. That's because an embryo has no first-person perspective, and therefore doesn't count as a person; and she thinks I am a person essentially. She can't say that I am an animal, and every animal was once an embryo, yet *I* was never an embryo.

At one point Baker suggests that although we agree that I am animal, we disagree about whether I am *merely* an animal (p.8). (As long as I'm not merely an animal, apparently, it doesn't follow that I have the properties that all animals have, such as starting out as an embryo.) But that doesn't help. Suppose Descartes is a philosopher, but not merely a philosopher. And suppose that all philosophers are wise. Doesn't it follow that Descartes is wise? Consider this inference form:

4. x is F, but x is not merely F.
2. Every F is G.
3. x is G.

This is valid no matter what we mean by the qualification 'merely'. It would be valid no

matter what the second conjunct of 4 were.

When Baker says that I am an animal, she means that an animal “constitutes” me. Very roughly, a certain animal is located exactly where I am, and it’s in circumstances that suffice for it to coincide with something of my kind: a person. The precise details don’t matter. What does matter is that on Baker’s view I am not the animal standing here. If I were, I should have started out when the animal started out, as a microscopic embryo. So on her view, I am not an animal. Not really. Being an animal is not one of my properties. Otherwise I should have to have all the properties that being an animal entails, such as possibly existing without a first-person perspective. My property is not *being an animal*, but *being constituted by an animal*.

Baker wants to describe her claim that an animal constitutes me by saying that I *am* an animal. But that is misleading. It doesn’t mean what it seems to mean. We may sometimes say that someone is something he’s not really. For instance, in discussing Hollywood epics I might say that Charlton Heston is Moses. What I mean, of course, is that Heston played the role of Moses. When Baker says that we are animals, she means something rather like this. Imagine that there are people in California who think that Heston really is Moses, resurrected in the modern world. It would be wrong to say that I *agree* with them that Heston is Moses. Yet that is what Baker is doing when she says she agrees with me that we are animals.

What about Baker’s “big-tent metaphysics”? It’s the idea that “reality and value go together” (section 2, p.10). Every property that is distinctive or significant determines an essential kind. She doesn’t mean every property that is *metaphysically* distinctive or significant; that would make her idea trivial. She means that every kind of thing that’s distinctive or important to us in *any* way must be ontologically important--a kind that things belong to essentially if at all. All value carries ontological significance.

This is where Baker gets her view that we’re not really organisms, but are merely constituted by them. Baker thinks that having a first-person perspective is important and distinctive. It follows, according to big-tent metaphysics, that the kind *thing with a first-person perspective--person*, for short--is an essential kind. So every being with a first-person perspective has a first-person perspective essentially. Being an organism, or being

biologically alive, is also an important and distinctive property; so the kind *organism* is an essential kind. Every organism is essentially an organism. But no organism has a first-person perspective essentially. The kinds *person* (on her definition) and *organism* are incompatible. It follows that the organism standing here is one thing; the person standing here is another. Baker says they're not *separate* things. (I'm not sure what she means by 'separate'.) But they're numerically different. The person and the organism have to be numerically different because they have incompatible properties. (How I'm supposed to know which one I am is still a mystery to me.)

Maybe there are other important and distinctive properties that I in some sense have. Sentience, for instance. That seems important. If so, there is a third being standing here that is essentially sentient but doesn't essentially have a first-person perspective. And the list is unlikely to stop there. There are a lot of things in Baker's ontology. She needs a big tent to fit them all in.

Big-tent metaphysics is certainly an interesting idea. Why accept it? Baker says that unless metaphysical categories map exactly onto the kinds of things that are distinctive and significant in other ways, metaphysics loses its point. There's no point in doing metaphysics unless categories like *person*, *sentient being*, *artifact*, and whatever else we find important come into it. Any worthwhile metaphysics must say something about people and artifacts *as such*.

This argument doesn't move me. We don't expect other areas of inquiry to capture all the categories of things we find important. We don't expect physics or chemistry or meteorology to say anything about people as such. Physics is in the business of discovering physical truths. The kinds and categories that figure in those truths might match up with the kinds and categories that are important outside of physics; but there's no reason why they have to. In fact it would be very bad for physics if it were constrained to say something about people as such--if a physical theory that treated all massive objects alike were for that reason unacceptable. Does that make physics a waste of time? Surely not.

Metaphysics, as I see it, is in the business of discovering metaphysical truths. The kinds and categories that figure in metaphysical truths *might* match up with the kinds and categories that are important outside of metaphysics. But again, I see no reason to suppose

that they have to. In fact it would seem to be very bad for metaphysics if it were constrained to say something about the categories that figure outside of metaphysics. A metaphysical theory shouldn't be rejected just because it treats all organisms alike, any more than a physical theory should be rejected if it treats all massive objects alike. Metaphysics shouldn't try to tell the whole story of everything, any more than physics should.

Baker clearly thinks that metaphysics is not at all like physics or meteorology. Something about metaphysics requires it to capture all the categories that are important outside of metaphysics. But I don't know what that something is.

Reply to Markosian

Markosian has three objections to my view.

First, he says, it can be the case that I am a person now, and some being is a person in the future, and I *am* that person, but I am not the *same* person as he is. I might not be the same person now as I myself am at some later time. To put it in an awkward way, you can have numerical identity between people who aren't the same person. Markosian doesn't say whether I might be the same person as someone else--someone numerical different from me--but he might. He says that this "same-person-as" relation ought to figure in my statement of the problem of personal identity.

As far as I can tell, this complaint doesn't imply that anything I said in the book is actually wrong, but at most that I left out something important. The book was about numerical identity over time: what it takes for us to persist. Markosian is talking about something else: the same-person-as relation. Nothing I said about our identity over time rules out the existence of Markosian's same-person-as relation. My question was what it takes for earlier and later beings to be us; his is what it takes for earlier and later beings to be the same person as us in his special sense. These questions are not in competition.

Second, Markosian says my account gives the wrong result in the Salamander story. He thinks that he persists throughout the story, and changes from a human being to a salamander and then back again. So the original person and the later person are one. But

he says they are not the *same* person. He thinks I'm committed to saying that they *are* the same person: that the relation between them is "personal identity".

I don't think I am committed to this. I may be committed to saying that the original person *is* the later person: that "they" are numerically identical. (I hesitate because the story is very strange, and I have doubts about whether it's possible.) Because my view says nothing about Markosian's same-person-as relation, however, it doesn't imply that the human being at the end of the story is the same person as Markosian. I don't endorse (or deny) the claim he calls Bio EPPI.

Our only real disagreement (Markosian's third objection) is about whether we can become corpses. I said that death is the end of us (religious beliefs aside); Markosian thinks you might carry on existing for a million years as a mummy. Since he agrees with me that you and I are animals, this means we disagree about what it takes for an animal to persist. I say an animal persists by virtue of its biological life continuing; he thinks that's not necessary. He doesn't say what it *does* take for an animal to persist, but he takes my account to be wrong.

A surprising number of readers of *The Human Animal* have been happy to accept what I took to be the important claims--that we are animals and that our identity has nothing to do with psychology--but have objected to my positive account of animal identity. I'm not going to lose any sleep over this. If someone has a better account of animal identity than mine, I'll see that as a friendly amendment to what I said. But I haven't yet seen one.

Why do I say that an animal stops existing when it dies? Well, when I think about what it would take for a corpse to persist (supposing there are such things as corpses), it seems to be something completely different from what it takes for living organism to persist.

What it takes for a corpse to persist would seem to be much the same as what it takes for any other inanimate material thing to persist. Suppose we have a life-size alabaster statue of Markosian. (And suppose that there are such things as statues.) What does it take for that statue to persist? What sort of thing would bring its existence to an end? I suppose it persists, very roughly, as long as its shape is preserved. As long as enough of its atoms continue to be arranged more or less in that shape (contrasting with their surroundings), it still exists. Or maybe some of its atoms could be replaced, as long as it's done gradually

and the distinctive Markosian-shape remains. Something like that. What it takes for a corpse to persist will be analogous.

Now, what does it take for a *living* organism to persist? For enough of its atoms to remain arranged in a certain shape? Certainly not. A living organism can survive changes of a sort that no statue or corpse could survive. A human organism starts out as a microscopic embryo shaped like a frisbee. In the course of its development it increases in size by a factor of several trillion. Both its outward shape and its internal structure change radically. It could also survive dramatic losses. It could survive the loss of its arms and legs. Given enough life-support machinery, it may even be able to survive being pared down to a head. I don't suppose a statue or a corpse could survive this. Why could an organism persist through all this? It *seems* to be because its biological life continues.

The sort of thing a living organism can survive seems to me *so* different from the sort of thing a corpse could survive that I can't think of any plausible set of persistence conditions that incorporates both. In other words, I can't think of a good account of animal identity that is compatible with an animal's growing from embryo to adult, and also with its persisting for a million years as a mummy. If there is such an account, though, I'll welcome it.²

Reply to Zimmerman

I agree with nearly everything Zimmerman says. He has given two serious objections to the view that we are animals.

The first is the *rival-candidates problem*. I think there's an animal standing here, and I see no good reason to deny that it thinks my thoughts. That's why I say I'm an animal. But what if there are other things standing here too? A "mere hunk of matter", for instance, or a "mere body"? (I'm not sure what a "mere body" is supposed to be, but if it's not an animal, it's trouble.) Or a thing that persists by virtue of psychological continuity? Zimmerman might also have mentioned my head and my brain. They may not be *standing* here, exactly,

² I say more about this topic in 'Animalism and the Corpse Problem', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82 (2004), pp. 265-74.

but they sound like rival candidates for being me--rival candidates in that if they exist, it looks like they ought to think just as the animal does. That makes it hard to see what could make it the case that I am the animal and not one of the other things, and how I could ever know it if I was.

If I am to continue saying that I am an animal, I have three choices. I can deny that any of the other candidates think in the way that the animal does, and try to explain what prevents them from thinking. Or I can accept that the other things think just as the animal does, and try to give an account of how I could still know that *I* am the animal. Or I can deny that the other things exist: I could say that the only candidate for being me is the animal. (Or I could combine these options, and say different things about different rival candidates. I could even say something still wilder: endorse some sort of relative identity, say. Let's put that to one side.) So if you ask me, How do I know that I'm not my thinking head?, I can answer that my head doesn't think, or that it does but I can still somehow know that I'm not it, or that there are no such things as undetached heads.

These choices are not very nice. I've never seen a good explanation of why my head (if it exists) should be unable to think just as I do, or a satisfying account of how I could know that I'm not my thinking head. Nor am I happy about denying the existence of heads.

The rival-candidates problem worries me a lot more than the usual, familiar objections to my view: the objection that it has implausible consequences about what happens to us in brain transplants or robotic replacements, for instance, or that it implies that we are only temporarily and contingently people.

It's not my problem alone. *Any* sensible account of what we are faces its own version of the rival-candidates problem. It's just as much a problem for Baker's view that I am a thing constituted by an animal, for instance. It's no easier for her to solve the problem than it is for me. So the problem doesn't make my view any worse than the alternatives. But it does threaten to show that it's no better than the alternatives.

What if the problem had no solution? What if there were an animal standing here, *and* a hunk of matter, *and* a being that would go along with its transplanted brain, *and* an undetached head, and so on, and all those beings were psychologically indistinguishable, and there were no way for me to know that I was one of them and not any of the others?

That would be a mess. It would make it either indeterminate or unknowable what sort of thing I am. It would be indeterminate or unknowable whether I am an animal, or a hunk of matter, or a head. That would make it indeterminate or unknowable how big I am: whether I am 175cm tall, or small enough to fit into a shoe box. It would be indeterminate or unknowable what it takes for me to persist: what would happen to me if my brain were transplanted, or if all my organic parts were replaced with clever prostheses. For that matter, it would be indeterminate or unknowable whether I was a human-shaped thing a month ago, or whether I was a widely scattered cloud of particles then. No one is going to like that view.

I don't have a good solution to the rival-candidates problem. Zimmerman is right to say that I am inclined to solve it by denying the existence of the rivals. I'd like to say that there is no hunk of matter standing here, and no being with psychological persistence conditions, and--this is the bit I like least of all--no head. There is only an animal, and a lot of particles. I am inclined to accept a sparse ontology of material objects. Why? Well, because the alternatives look even worse. This is not a nice thing to have to say, but I can't see any good way of avoiding it. If you don't like it, tell me how *you* would solve the rival-candidates problem.

Now denying the existence of the non-animal rivals really would solve the rival-candidates problem. But as Zimmerman points out, it raises a hard question: Why suppose that there are human animals, but no hunks of matter or undetached heads or other rival candidates for being me? Why suppose that there is exactly *one* candidate for being me? And why suppose that it's an animal? Why not suppose instead that there are undetached heads but no human animals, say? For that matter, why not suppose that there are only simple particles, and no composite objects at all? The view that there are animals, but no other rival candidates, may sound like wishful thinking.

I think there *is* a principled reason for saying that the only candidate for being me is an animal. You won't like it, but it's the best I can do. Consider the general question of when smaller things add up to some bigger thing. If we have some particles, what has to be the case for them to be parts of something bigger? This is van Inwagen's "special composition question". One answer is that smaller things *automatically* add up to a bigger thing, no

matter what they are like in themselves, or how they are arranged or situated. Composition is universal. That would give us a lot of candidates for being me, and threatens to lead to the view that it's indeterminate what sort of thing I am. Another answer is that smaller things *never* compose anything bigger. There are no composite objects, but only mereological simples. That implies that *I* am a mereological simple--either that, or I don't exist at all.

Most of us, I think, will not want to say either of those things. We'll say that whether smaller things compose something bigger depends on what they're like and how they're arranged and situated. Some smaller things compose bigger things, and others don't. There are some composite objects, if you like, but there are not arbitrary, gerrymandered ones. That is, we'll want to give an "intermediate" answer to the special composition question. We will say that things compose something just when they are *unified* in some way. But it's very hard to give any plausible account of what sort of unity it is that makes things compose something bigger.

I claim that if there are any composite objects, there are organisms. The particles that make up a live cat are unified if any particles are. A live cat is the very opposite of an arbitrary or gerrymandered object. If you don't believe there are organisms, you might as well say there are no composite objects at all. So I feel confident that there are animals if there are any composite objects. I'm a lot less confident about the existence of any of the rival candidates for being me: undetached heads, mere hunks of matter, or things that persist by virtue of psychological continuity. So I think there is a reason to say that we are animals, and no reason to say that we are anything other than animals--except maybe mereological simples. That's not a very good answer to the rival-candidates problem, but at least it's an answer.³

Zimmerman also mentions the *vagueness problem*. His version of it says that because animals have vague boundaries, there are vastly many animal-like "hunks of matter" wherever we say there is an animal. Moreover, those hunks are the only candidates for being you or me. Each hunk, he says, would be conscious if any is. But they can't all be conscious. The conclusion seems to be that no material thing is conscious, in which case

we are not material things at all, and therefore not animals.

This too is a troubling objection. Zimmerman is right to say that I want to deny the existence of all those hunks. (I also doubt premise 4 of his argument: if there really were all those hunks, I suppose they would all be conscious.) I think there is just one animal-candidate there, with fuzzy boundaries: there are particles at its periphery that are neither definitely parts of it nor definitely not parts of it. The best account of this that I've seen is in §17 of van Inwagen's *Material Beings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). I am aware that this is an unfashionable position--it is at least as unfashionable as the sparse ontology of material objects. But the vagueness objection is a hard one to answer, and the other answers don't look any better to me. Nor is it clear that the objection is worse for the view that we are animals than it is for any other account of what we are. (I don't consider the view that it is indeterminate or unknowable what we are to be an account of what we are.) The only exception--the only view that is immune to the vagueness problem--is that we are mereological simples, presumably immaterial ones. But that view raises troubles at least as bad as those facing my own proposal.

Eric Olson

University of Sheffield

³ I say more about this in *What Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 215-36.