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Theories of Personal Identity 20 March 2025

Building Up from the Sparse Ontology – Rejecting Animalism and Constitutionalism

[FI2441C]

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I. Introduction

What are we, fundamentally? Are we biological animals, material bodies, or something more? Theories of personal identity have long wrestled with the tension between the material structure of the human organism and the immaterial qualities of thought, consciousness, and perceiving. In this essay, I explore these tensions through Eric T. Olson's *What Are We?*, focusing in particular on his critiques of constitutionalism and his defence of animalism. Constitutionalism claims that persons are constituted by, but not identical to, the organisms that underlie them—a view grounded in the idea that materially coinciding things can have different qualitative properties. Olson challenges this view and instead argues that we are simply human animals: material organisms capable of thought. While this view has some intuitive appeal, I argue that it fails to account for the nature of thought, perception, and meaning, which do not seem reducible to material structure. Drawing on a sparse ontology and an analogy with information systems, I suggest that thinking and perceiving cannot be material properties, and that we must ultimately reject both constitutionalism and animalism in favour of a view that treats persons as an immaterial structure of information that also interprets other information.

II. First-Person Perspective

Baker believes that the most important feature of a person is the first-person perspective. This is the capacity a being has to think about itself as itself. It involves more than just being conscious or having thoughts and feelings. Many animals, such as dogs or chimpanzees, may have beliefs and desires, and they may even be able to reason in a basic way. But according to Baker, these animals do not have a first-person perspective.

What sets the first-person perspective apart is that it allows a person to reflect on their own thoughts and experiences from their own point of view. For example, a dog might feel hungry and act on that feeling, but it cannot think, *"I wonder if I will still be hungry in ten minutes."* In contrast, a person can not only feel hunger but can also think about their own hunger in a self-aware way. A person can think, *"I believe that I am hungry,"* and in doing so, they are thinking about themselves in a way that does not require any name or description. They do not need to say *"Lynne is hungry"* or *"The person sitting in this chair is hungry."* They simply refer to themselves directly, as "I."

This kind of self-reference is what Baker sees as unique to persons. It is the foundation of more complex forms of thought, such as making long-term plans, taking responsibility for one's actions, and forming a life narrative. The first-person perspective allows a person to see

themselves as an individual existing in a world full of other things, and to relate their own experiences and choices to that world.

Baker also distinguishes between two levels of the first-person perspective. At a basic level, infants may begin to develop a sense of themselves as distinct from others. But at a more developed level, mature persons are capable of thinking about themselves over time and imagining their own future. It is this more developed level that fully defines personhood for Baker.

III. Constitutionalism - Baker

Lynne Baker's Constitution View is built on the idea that a person is not identical to the human organism that constitutes them. Instead, a person is a *distinct material object* that comes into existence when a human organism develops the right conditions. These conditions are psychological and social, not purely biological. Baker explains this by appealing to the notion of constitution, which she distinguishes clearly from identity. Constitution is a relation that holds between two things when one makes up the physical basis of the other but does not reduce it to what the other is. For example, a statue is constituted by a piece of marble, but it is not identical to that piece of marble. The marble could exist without being a statue, but the statue cannot exist without the marble. Similarly, a person is constituted by a human organism, but is not identical to it.

Baker applies this idea more generally. A United States dollar bill is constituted by a piece of paper, a diploma is constituted by a piece of parchment, and a gene is constituted by a DNA molecule. In all these cases, *the thing that is constituted has significance beyond the material that constitutes it*. The same is true for persons. A person is constituted by a body, but a person is not simply a body. The body could exist in a coma or without ever developing higher mental functions, but a person cannot exist in such a condition. Constitution allows for a close and unified relation between person and body without reducing the person to just a set of biological parts.

Baker gives a formal reconstruction of constitution to make her account precise. She says that one thing x constitutes another thing y at a given time t if several conditions are met. First, x and y must be spatially coincident at t. Second, x must be in circumstances that are favorable for y's kind. Third, it must be necessarily true that if anything of x's kind is in those circumstances, something of y's kind will also exist in the same space. Fourth, it must be

possible that x exists without y existing, which means that constitution is not identity. Finally, if y is material, then x must also be material. These conditions are intended to make constitution a coherent and general relation, not something specific to persons and bodies alone.

To illustrate how this works for persons, Baker introduces the example of a person named Jones and a human organism called Body. Body is a biological entity with a primary-kind property of being a human body. Jones is a person with a primary-kind property of being a person. The human organism Body constitutes Jones at a particular time, but Jones is not identical to Body. Body has biological properties like having a liver, breathing, and digesting food. Jones has these properties too, but in a different way. According to Baker, Jones has these properties derivatively, in virtue of being constituted by Body. Body has them nonderivatively, in its own right as a biological organism.

Baker introduces the distinction between having properties derivatively and having them nonderivatively. An object has a property nonderivatively if it has it independently of any constitution relation. It has a property derivatively if it has that property because it constitutes or is constituted by something that has it nonderivatively. A simple example is a driver's license. The plastic card has the property of being rectangular nonderivatively. The driver's license has the same property derivatively, because it is constituted by the plastic. But the license has the property of authorizing someone to drive nonderivatively, and the plastic has that property derivatively. In the same way, a person has the right to vote nonderivatively, and the body has that right derivatively. A body is six feet tall nonderivatively, and the person is six feet tall derivatively. Baker uses this framework to explain how one thing can inherit properties from another without being the same thing.

This distinction also helps explain how persons and bodies have different persistence conditions. A body continues to exist as long as it functions biologically. It can persist through coma, loss of consciousness, or even loss of mental capacities. A person, by contrast, cannot continue to exist if the psychological capacities that define personhood are permanently lost. If a person loses the capacity for self-awareness and it cannot return, then the person no longer exists, even if the body continues to function. This shows that personhood depends on more than just biological life. It depends on what the body becomes when it constitutes a being with the relevant capacities. Constitution is what allows that transformation to take place.

Baker argues that the Constitution View avoids the problems that arise when we assume that persons must be identical to their bodies. If person and body were the same, then any change

to the body would imply a change to the person's identity. But we know that people survive surgeries, prosthetics, and even organ replacements. Constitution allows us to say that the person remains the same even when the body changes, as long as the person's psychological and self-reflective capacities are preserved. It also avoids the need to posit immaterial souls, as in substance dualism. Persons are material beings, constituted by bodies, but not reducible to them. Baker's Constitution View provides a way to understand this without contradiction.

IV. Constitutionalism - Olson

Following Baker's account of constitutionalism, Olson offers his own reconstruction of the view in order to expose what he sees as its conceptual problems. He begins by isolating four claims that appear intuitive but, he argues, cannot all be true at once:

1) We are material things
2) Each of us has the same location as an animal
3) We are not animals
4) Two material things can never be in the same place at the same time

Constitutionalists who wish to defend the view that persons are distinct from animals but still material must reject one of these four claims. Typically, they choose to deny the fourth claim. The fourth claim states that two materials can never be in the same place at once. Intuitively, denying this claim seems to say that two different extended objects occupying space at exclusion of each other, can be in the same place at the same time. That is not the claim. As Olson explains, the claim is that two 'numerically different objects' which coincide materially (in space and time) can have different qualitative properties (Olson, 2007). Interestingly, I find this claim to be quite different than (4), because now we do not have *two materials*, we strictly only have one material, with two different qualitative properties, but I will ignore this observation. How can one material (or numerically different materials) have the same qualitative properties? This is best illustrated with the clay-modelling puzzle that Olson explains. Take for example, a lump of clay, which is then modelled into a roman statue[1]. The lump of clay is composed of clay particles, those exact same particles compose the statue. Even though the statue and the lump of clay are considered to have the same particles, they do tend to have different 'modal' properties. A modal property is a property that has to do with what is

[1] The actual example is of Margaret Thatcher but I find a roman statue more appealing to visualise.

possible or necessary for something (an object), i.e. what it could, could not, must, or must not do. In other words, modal properties describe the range of possibilities and necessities that apply to an object. In the case of the lump of clay, it will remain a lump of clay after being squashed and deformed. The statue, on the other hand, will no longer be a statue if the same thing happened to it. Therefore, they differ in their modal properties: "statues are essentially statue-shaped, but statue-shaped lumped are only contingently statue-shaped" (Olson, 2007). Another important point is that they should differ *while they coincide*, and not that they differ temporally. The statue-shaped clay is both a lump of clay *and* a statue at the same time. So now this concept can be applied to the humans. Constitutionalists argue, in the same vein, that 'we' (the thinking and perceiving we) is constituted by an animal (our physical bodies). When the organic material is arranged in a certain way, a thinking being comes into existence, and when the arrangement is destroyed, the thinking being goes out of existence. The analogy to the clay statue is clear. However, Olson rightly points out that there is a logical inconsistency there. At most, he argues, we can fairly say that a lump of organic material organised in a specific way constitutes a physical body that is alive (an organism). A further argument is required to say that that organism is also capable of thinking and perceiving. Although we are used to those things being related, strictly speaking, using the clay-modelling puzzle, we cannot allude to anything more than that a lump of organic material organised in a specific way constitutes an organism. What that organism thinks and feels is another matter. In other words, it is not an essential property of an organism to think, the essential property of an organism is a living, self-sustaining being. Unlike it is an essential property for the statue to be statue-like. It *is* an essential property for an organism to be organism-like. I want to apply this to the examples Baker gives, to show that constitutionalism applies generally to many things. First, the US dollar bill is constituted by pieces of paper. I would argue, the note as a whole is constituted by pieces of paper, but the concept of a dollar bill cannot be constituted by paper. The drivers licence is also a good example, where she says drivers licences are constituted by plastic. I would argue that the card is constituted by plastic but the concept of drivers licence is not constituted by plastic. To show this more clearly, take for example a radical hypothetical where a plastic card is naturally formed in Venus that happened to look identical to a drivers licence. Say that nobody knows about it. Is it still a driving licence? Or is it just a plastic card that is constituted by plastic? So what is actually this property of "drivers licence"?

Now relating this to persons and bodies. Constitutionalists usually assume that thinking is an essential property of an organism. So the question is, how can thinking be an essential property?

Olson argues that the most likely explanation is that "no material thing of any sort could think, essentially or otherwise: thinking beings are immaterial and are not constituted by anything." I will show in later section that I agree with this view, that thinking and perceiving is immaterial. But assuming organisms are essentially thinkers, Olson continues that the constitutional view would be hard to deny. He goes into further depth of the clay modelling puzzle, and says it leads to four claims that all seem true. If they are all true, the constitution view must be true. Therefore, to deny the constitution view, one of the claims must be denied (if the premise that organisms are essentially thinkers are accepted). They are given below (I removed the cubical example to keep it simple):

1. There is a lump of clay that is first shapeless, then Roman-shaped.
2. There is a statue that is never shapeless.
3. The statue coincides materially, while it exists, with the lump.
4. The lump has a qualitative property, while it coincides with the statue, that the statue then lacks.

In this essay I am most interested in the "more radical" rejection of both 1 and 2. This is what Olson calls *the sparse ontology*. Here we say that there is neither a lump of clay that changes shape, nor is there ever a 'statue'. The only thing that really exists in those cases are particles. We, thinkers, can assign labels to shapes and things, but that doesn't mean that those labels exist materially. The idea is that particles don't *compose* anything. I think this concept would be easier to understand if it was rephrased as to say that naming groups of particles is abstract. A left shoe is called a left shoe because we have interpreted it that way, but without the interpretation, the 'left shoe' is really nothing but atoms and molecules that happened to be arranged in that way. In the same vein, a drivers licence is only a drivers licence because we interpret it and acknowledge it to be that way. The 'drivers licence' that happened to form on Venus is not a drivers licence, because we do not interpret it that way. Even though it looks identical, it is just a rectangular piece of plastic. I find this argument very compelling and most intuitive, but not in a way that would support animalism nor deny constitutionalism. In the section below, I will build up from the sparse ontology and argue that the side of us that thinks and perceives must be immaterial.

V. Animalism

In this section I will describe Olson's account of animalism and similarly show that this view does not hold up. If 1 and 2 are rejected, then 3 and 4 are not intelligible and constitutionalism must certainly be rejected. If we accept the sparse ontology, we can no longer deny (4). But

does that then point us towards animalism? Animalism denies the claim (3), which states that we are *not* animals. What this means is that animalists believe that the thinker and perceiver is one and the same as their animal body. Olson sees human animals to be biological organisms, in the normal sense. The same way that other animals, plants, and fungi are biological animals. He assumes that organisms "made up entirely of matter: they have no immaterial or nonphysical parts". Human animals are the material thing that is the organism. He makes it clear that this does not imply we are *mere* animals as understood generally to mean that we are therefore nothing else *but* the organism. The same way, he describes, Descartes can be a philosopher as well as a mathematician, a Roman Catholic, etc. His point here is to say that calling us animals does not imply we are nothing but animals in a reductive or dismissive sense.

In denying that we have no immaterial parts does not deny our ability to think or perceive. Instead, the human animal as its material self is fully capable of thought and perception. The argument is really: our thinking and perceiving self is not another substance, quality, or something else immaterial, our thinking and perceiving self is one and the same *with* the animal. I believe the reason this view is unintuitive is because thoughts, ideas, memories etc. don't seem to be tangible in the same way our bodies are. We know the material parts of our brains that is responsible for thoughts, ideas, and memories, but could you correlate a certain memory with a specific area in the brain? Can a thought be reduced to a material area of the brain? Could taking out a section of the brain then remove your ability to think a certain thought? The answer to all those questions should be no. If that is the case, then we should ask the question; how is it possible that we have thoughts and ideas, and *what exactly* are they? I will elaborate on this in the next section.

VI. Is information immaterial?

The part of ourselves that thinks and perceives is best understood, I believe, as a form of information. If this is right, then we should deny claim (1), which states that we are material things. This claim is central to both animalism and constitutionalism, and rejecting it opens the way for a different understanding of what persons are. The argument I want to make is that thinking and perceiving are forms of information, and that information is not itself material, even if it depends on material substrates. In other words, even if information can be instantiated in material systems, its ontological status is not that of a material object.

To clarify this, consider the analogy of a computer. Computers are composed of certain particles. It would be erroneous to say that a computer is merely a collection of particles in the

same way a rock is. That is because a computer contains *information*. This information is expressed through the arrangement and function of material components, but the content of the information is not reducible to any particular set of particles. This information is only useful to users who can interpret it. Without the presence of an *interpreter*, the screen is nothing but a collection of particles that emit photons. With an interpreter, the screen is a vast abyss of information, full of meaningful content.

This information is not *tangible*. It is not located in a particular particle. It cannot be traced back to any one material point, meaning, no particle really 'holds' information. Therefore, information must be something immaterial. Information is realised in the system's structure and processing, but it is not identical to the material system itself. The same physical system could represent different information depending on how it is interpreted. That suggests that the material base and the informational content are distinct in kind. The material system enables the information, but the information is something over and above the material arrangement.

The same applies to thinking and perceiving. Our brains process signals, store representations, and produce responses. But these activities are not just chemical reactions or particle movements. They involve content: beliefs, intentions, memories, and concepts. These are not identifiable with particular atoms or molecules, even if they depend on them to exist. The memory of one's childhood, for example, cannot be identified with a specific piece of brain matter. Even if we knew which neural circuits were involved, the meaning of the memory, what it represents, what it feels like, what it signifies, is not reducible to physical description.

Take for example writing down the word "memory" or the number "2" on paper. The ink forms a shape that we understand. But the *meaning* of those symbols is not in the ink. The meaning is immaterial, and it only exists through interpretation. This shows that the semantic level, the level of meaning and thought, is not reducible to the physical level. We interpret those shapes as meaningful, but the meaning itself is not a physical object.

Someone might argue that information still requires a material carrier. This is true, but it does not follow that information is itself material. A sentence written on a whiteboard can be erased and rewritten elsewhere without losing its meaning. The meaning does not depend on the specific atoms of ink or plastic. It depends on a structure that can be instantiated in many ways. This shows that information is multiply realizable and not reducible to any particular physical system. This is why a drivers license is *not* constituted by plastic. Only the card that *represents* the drivers license is constituted by plastic.

The same is true for thoughts. Even if we say that thoughts are instantiated in brains, we are not saying that thoughts are brain matter. We are saying that brains process information in a way that makes thought possible. The thought is not a thing that can be weighed or touched.

This is why I believe that neither constitutionalism nor animalism can explain thought and perception. Constitutionalists treat thought as something constituted by material structure, but cannot explain how immaterial content arises from physical constitution. Animalists reduce thinking to a biological function, but fail to account for the semantic aspect of thought. If thinking and perceiving are forms of information, and if information is not a material thing, then we are not fully material beings. The part of ourselves that interprets, that holds meaning, that thinks and perceives, cannot be described entirely in terms of matter. It is better understood as a structure of information that makes sense of other information. That structure may depend on material processes to operate, but its nature is not material in itself.

VII. Conclusion

Theories of personal identity that attempt to locate the self entirely in material terms, whether through constitution or animalism, ultimately fall short of accounting for what it is to think and perceive. While constitutionalism provides a nuanced account of how persons may emerge from material organisms without being identical to them, it relies on a conception of constitution that still assumes material structure can ground the essence of a person. Animalism, in contrast, collapses the distinction entirely by claiming that we are nothing more than biological organisms that happen to think. But both views share a commitment to the idea that persons are material things.

Throughout this essay, I have tried to show that this commitment should be rejected. Drawing on Olson's sparse ontology, I argued that the things we name and conceptualise, such as statues, driver's licences, or persons, do not have to exist materially in order to be real in our understanding of the world. From this perspective, what matters is not what something is made of, but how it is interpreted. Building on this, I suggested that thinking and perceiving are best understood as forms of information, and that information itself is not a material entity. It depends on material systems for its expression, but is not reducible to any particular physical structure.

If this is right, then persons cannot be fully explained in terms of the matter that constitutes or composes them. The part of us that thinks, understands, and interprets cannot be accounted for

in material terms alone. It must be understood as something structurally distinct, a form of information that interprets other information. This view neither commits us to substance dualism nor to any mystical notion of the soul. It simply recognises that the ontology of thought and meaning cannot be captured by physical composition. What we are, fundamentally, is not a body, nor a body constituted as a person, but a structure of information—an informational pattern that interprets other information, and whose identity cannot be reduced to the material systems it depends on.

References

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