Are Persons Members of a Natural Kind?

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1 A quick answer to the question posed by the title is that they may be. Since the prevailing consensus - I think it is fair to say - regards persons not to be members of a natural kind, a longer answer is required. Sketching an outline of how that answer might proceed is the purpose of the present paper.

Members of natural kinds, e.g. quarks, electrons, gold molecules, viruses, human beings etc., form natural divisions in the fabric of the universe. I shall ignore the voices that might be raised at this point against the notion of natural kinds or for, at most, a few basic natural kinds, e.g. quarks and electrons. Rather I shall address the more prevalent view that the concept of a person does not represent a natural division in the fabric of the universe. If that view turns out to be wrong then the austere view will have a ready response.

The consensual position I am interested in finds clear expression in the work of Colin McGinn:

I have been speaking of terms for mental states and types of event, but parallel considerations apply to psychological sortal predicates, i.e., 'person' and restrictions thereof. In fact, what we already have implies that persons do not comprise a natural kind. For (as I take it) a person is precisely an individual sufficiently richly endowed with mental traits, and if these do not qualify as natural kinds, nor can persons. Persons have no real essence; their essence is nominal, and analytically defined. In this respect, the concept of a person does not coincide with that of a human being, though they may be *de facto* co-extensive: for, by contrast with persons, to qualify as a human being an individual must instantiate the appropriate empirical real essence – genetic structure, evolutionary origin, and the like. The relation between personhood and humanity is a contingent one, analogous to realization; and the contrasts so far remarked seem to hold equally of persons. God did not have to make persons out of human beings nor beliefs from patterns of synaptic connexions; but he had no choice in the making of human beings and heat and lightning. (McGinn 1991:135-6.)

The following simple argument can be extracted from this passage (I have framed it in terms of concepts; of course, if the argument is sound, their ontology would come under scrutiny):

P1. Mental concepts do not represent (members of) natural kinds.

P2. The concept of a person is a complex of mental concepts.

Therefore,

C3. The concept of a person does not represent (members of) a natural kind.

To turn this into an argument for the position that persons are members of a natural kind P1 requires rebuttal. I do not seek to accomplish that task here, merely to show what it would require. In fact I think that such a rebuttal can only arise in the light of a future cognitive science. This view is reached in the next section after setting out the stalls belonging to either side in the debate. P2 is then discussed in more detail. Since the view that persons are not members of a natural kind arguably underpins the more traditional debate stemming from Locke on the individuation of persons in terms of psychological connectedness, the balance of the paper makes the connection between the possible rejection of C3 and our view of the personal identity issue.

2 Why should mental terms ('believing', 'desiring', 'perceiving' etc.) not be construed as expressing concepts of natural kinds? According to McGinn, in order for mental terms to refer to members of a natural kind there must be psychophysical laws relating mental states to physical states; for to be members of a genuine natural kind mental states must have real essences, and those can only be physical states. (McGinn 1991: 127.) More schematically, for it to be true that a mental state ψ (a propositional attitude or a sensation) has a physical real essence φ it must be the case that a creature cannot instantiate ψ without thereby instantiating φ and *vice versa*. But McGinn, who follows Kripke on this issue, holds it conceivable that instances of φ and ψ can come apart, therefore the physical state φ cannot, 'as a real essence must, determine the existence and identity conditions for ψ', and therefore mental terms do not denote 'physically circumscribable natural kinds'. (McGinn 1991: 127-8.)

Now intuitions of conceivability are notoriously unreliable. So McGinn argues that the modal intuition is based on the more reliable claim of the multiple-realizability of the mental by the physical (hereafter MR). It is MR which establishes the lack of psychophysical laws and hence prevents the instantiation of psychological natural kinds. He supports MR further by claiming that it only requires reflection on our common sense psychology to appreciate that mental states have no empirical depth. Hence reference to mental states is not constituted via implicit reference to kinds of intrinsic physical states but by reference to behaviourial regularities and introspection. In other words, mental terms refer to members of nominal kinds. (McGinn 1991: 146-52. A comparison with Dennett's instrumentalist view is worth drawing here.)

One might be just as wary of intuitions of MR as one is of intuitions of conceivability. (See Bechtel & Mundale 1997.) But suppose, for the sake of present purposes, we accept both MR and its use as a defence of the view that there are no psychophysical laws. Does this mean that we must draw the conclusion that there are no psychological natural kinds? Fodor draws the opposite conclusion: there are both physical natural kinds and independent psychological natural kinds. Distinct psychological and physical natural kinds are evidence for Fodor of the fact that the world is divided up in different ways: 'not all the kinds (not all the classes of things and events about which there are important, counterfactual supporting generalizations to make) are, or correspond to, physical kinds'. (Fodor 1981: 144.) Fodor's argument is intended to explicate the purpose of science: it is not to 'find some natural kind of physics coextensive with each kind predicate of the special science. It is, rather, to explicate the physical mechanisms whereby events conform to the laws of the special sciences'. (Fodor 1981: 138.)

So the controversy boils down to what the correct story is that we should be telling about mental predicates and psychological kinds. Instrumentalists (nominalists), like McGinn and Dennett, believe that mental predicates pick out nominal kinds. Realists, like Fodor, believe that mental predicates pick out genuine psychological natural kinds. According to a popular view in cognitive science these psychological natural kinds involve functional/representational states. They are constituted by physical states, but only in virtue of those particular causal properties of the physical states that determine the relevant psychological kind. The advocate of psychological natural kinds must navigate a fine line. On the one hand, mental states cannot be related to all the causal properties of the physical states, otherwise the mental states would be reducible to physical states; in other words, if McGinn were right that psychological kinds have to be physically circumscribable we would have little reason for thinking of them as distinctively psychological natural kinds. (See also Kim 1993: since kinds are determined by their causal properties and the causal properties of putative psychological kinds belong to their underlying physical features, psychological kinds will be concomitantly diverse, viz. not proper kinds; MR, rather than implying the autonomy of psychology, undermines it.) On the other hand, mental states cannot be related too loosely to the causal properties of physical states, i.e. not just anything can realize a psychological state, for then they would amount to merely nominal kinds. In short, different realizations of mental states must have just the right causal powers.

There are no grounds to rule out the psychological natural kind account *per impossibile*. Constrained as mental states must be both by related mental states and by inputs from and outputs to the environment, they may have the appropriate causal properties. We just do not know at the moment what the right view about the reference of psychological terms is. The crucial point from the preceding is that realism about psychological kinds, *pace* McGinn, is an empirical hypothesis which only a completed cognitive science will be able to vindicate (or otherwise).

3 Suppose mental states do not belong to natural kinds. Perhaps persons are nevertheless members of a natural kind. Or suppose mental states do belong to natural kinds. Perhaps persons do not.

I can think of no reason why either of these options is appealing. If persons are natural kinds yet their main constitutive features are not, one would have to produce an alternative criterion of personhood, which seems *prima facie* implausible. And, if mental states are natural kinds, there seems no reason why, if persons are just 'individuals sufficiently endowed with mental traits', then what one concludes about mental traits should not be transmitted to persons

As mentioned previously Dennett's view has affinities with that of McGinn. Dennett has detailed how richly an individual has to be endowed with mental traits to count as a person. He counts six necessary conditions for personhood:

(1) Stance dependence

(2) Rationality

(3) Intentionality

(4) The capacity to reciprocate

(5) Verbal communication

(6) Self-consciousness

(1) – (3) are mutually dependent. According to the intentional stance view Dennett advocates, individuals are to be regarded as systems, whose behaviour, in order to be predicted and explained, is assumed to be fully rational, and then predicated beliefs and desires (intentional states). Although Dennett believes that beliefs and desires are only posited once the appropriate stance is taken to an individual, beliefs and desires are nevertheless objective (i.e. reliable posits) once the appropriate stance has been taken.

(1) – (3) are not sufficient conditions for personhood. Persons belong to that class of intentional systems that also display (4) – (6). The 'higher features' are dependent on the 'lower features'. Persons necessarily reciprocate the intentional stance taken towards them. That is to say, persons are second-order intentional systems: they believe, desire, etc. that others believe, desire, etc.. Furthermore, persons necessarily communicate with each other. Adopting a Gricean intentional account of language, persons can be said to be third-order intentional systems: they intend that others believe that they intend a piece of behaviour to produce a specific response. Finally, persons are necessarily selfconscious: they have the ability to examine their own beliefs and desires.

I only have a quarrel with (1). I think that a realist interpretation of personhood remains an option. (Some may conclude from the appearance above of the concept of a person as a cluster concept – or at least not a primitive concept – that it cannot be a natural kind concept. I conclude rather that the interlocking nature of the conditions is more suggestive of membership of a natural kind than a merely nominal kind.) Dennett, perhaps counter-intuitively, concludes that (1) – (6), although necessary, are not jointly sufficient. Why does he conclude this? It is because (1) – (3) introduce normative presuppositions. None of us actually fulfil them. Individuals can only ever aspire to the ideal of full rationality. If (1) – (6) were sufficient conditions for personhood then 'they would not ensure that any actual entity was a person, for nothing would ever fulfil them'. (Dennett 1978: 285.) So we cannot set a standard for personhood that is not arbitrary; to emphasize: persons are not natural kinds but nominal kinds. But it is just not clear that we do need to presuppose an ideal standard of rationality. Perhaps certain organisms do fulfil (2) – (6) because they have sufficient rationality, i.e. they actually have beliefs and desires related to each other in such a way as to ground rationality. On such a view (2) – (6) would provide both necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood. I acknowledge that there may be borderline cases for which we would not know whether to ascribe personhood, but the problem of vagueness is associated with many putative natural kinds, not just persons.

4 There are two questions that one might address concerning the concept of a person. Firstly, one might address the question of what criteria are to be used to distinguish persons from other types of things. Secondly, one might address the question of what it is that distinguishes one person from another person. The second question might be considered prior to the first question in so far as it might be argued that the concept of a person is such that only by addressing the issue of what distinguishes one person from another person can one fully understand what distinguishes a person from other kinds of thing. I think this may have matters the wrong way round.

Considering persons as nominal kinds would supply a motivation for standard debates concerning the individuation of persons, e.g. in terms of psychological connectedness: we have to turn to our own intuitions about what should count as the same subject of consciousness. But if persons do turn out to be members of a natural kind, in virtue of sufficient psychological conditions such as those outlined above and realized by physical states having the relevant causal properties, then we might do well to look to cognitive science rather than to our intuitions about the mental for whether some entity qualifies as being a person (or otherwise).

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