

Might I have had another life?

abstract submission for the VII International Ontology Congress

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October 6, 2006

We all think, I hope, that our lives might have been different. Presumably, some of us even believe that they might have had lived the life of another person, living or dead. While of great moral and social importance, it seems difficult to make philosophical sense of such pre-theoretical opinions.

A relation close and in many ways analogous to the one between me and my life is the one between me and my body. My body will be burnt or buried after my death – not me, I hope. I may wish to have another body and body switch seems a coherent and fascinating metaphysical speculation. Some rational people believe in resurrection and some actors have body doubles.

There is an important pattern here, which allows for generalisation.

We have, first, the case of a substance and the process traced by it in space and time, or alternatively, the process and the substance undergoing it. Second, we have the case of the statue and the lump of matter constituting it, differing in their modal and temporal persistence conditions. We have, third, ordinary wholes composed of ordinary parts according to the laws of classical extensional mereology. Fourth, we have species or kinds and the groups of individuals sharing their essential properties making them up. Fifth, there are types and tokens instantiating them. Sixth, there are universals, e.g. the colour red, and their particular instances. Seven, we have abstracta and the concreta, or relative concreta of which they are abstracted.

The formal similarities between our seven variants of constituency in the broadest sense and our taste for desert landscapes strongly suggest some sort of reductive project. In my talk, I will try to gather them under some substantive notion of abstraction.

Characteristics:

1. ontological priority: processes, matter, parts, exemplars, tokens, instances and concreta are ontologically more basic.
2. dependency relations: substances, forms, wholes, species, types, properties and abstracta depend on their processes, matter, parts, exemplars, tokens, instances and concreta.
3. essential features: properties, abstracta, types, species, wholes, forms and substances could not be what they are and have *different* instances, concreta, tokens, exemplars, parts, matter and processes.
4. individuation: processes, matter, parts, exemplars, tokens, instances and concreta are individuated and identified with recourse to their substances, forms, wholes, species, types, properties and abstracta.

Standard view: substances, forms, wholes, species, types, properties and abstracta are, or may be represented by, equivalence classes of their processes, matter, parts, exemplars, tokens, instances and concreta.

Problem: the constitutive relation is not transitive: you can construct Sorites cases.

1. substance/process: coming to exist and ceasing to be are often fading in and withering out:

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ontological vagueness.

2. form/matter: forms can gradually change their matter: Theseus ship.
3. whole/parts: wholes change their parts: Tibbles shedding its hairs.
4. species/exemplars: species evolve and new species come into being: Darwinian evolution vs. Aristotelian essentialism.
5. types/tokens: typehood depends on extrinsic and contingent, often intentional, features: Kaplan's black box.
6. universals/instances: Goodman problems for resemblance nominalism.
7. abstracta/concreta: abstracta change

You can, of course, model them as equivalence relations if the relation itself makes essential reference to the type. But not only do you not account of ontological priority, but you also do not explain the ontological dependency ties. Neither do you account for the following fact:

1. property transferal: processes, matter, parts, exemplars, tokens, concreta and instances *inherit* some of their properties from their substances, forms, wholes, species, types, abstracta and properties.

Better view:

1. Properties are parts of (the sum of) their instances and convey to them some of their properties (higher-order properties, adverbials).
2. Abstracta are parts of (the sum of) their concreta and convey to them some of their properties (numerosity e.g.).
3. Types are parts of (the sum of) their tokens and convey to them some of their properties (super-types).
4. Species are parts of (the sum of) their exemplars and convey to them some of their properties (essential determinations).
5. Wholes are parts of (the sum of) their parts and convey to them some of their properties (parthood properties).
6. Forms are parts of (the sum of) their matter and convey to them some of their properties (persistence conditions).
7. Substances are parts of (the sum of) their process and convey to them some of their properties (identity conditions).