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978-0-521-88049-7 - The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical  
Realism

Lynne Rudder Baker

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

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[More information](#)

## 1

*Beginning in the middle*

Reality comprises everything there is. It is not the province solely of specialists, but is well known to all. Everything is part of it: the gardener and her tulips, the prisoner and his chains, the cook and his food processor are all real things that should be included in a complete account of what there is.<sup>1</sup> The aim of *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* is to present a theory that focuses on the familiar objects that we encounter every day – flowers, people, houses, and so on – and locates them irreducibly in reality.

Let us begin with a distinction between manifest objects of everyday life (roses, chairs, dollar bills, etc.) and the underlying objects that we can hope that physics will tell us about. Suppose that the underlying objects are collections of particles. I want to defend a metaphysics that gives ontological weight to the manifest objects of everyday life. This view is an alternative to contemporary metaphysical theories that take ordinary things to be “really” just collections of particles. Such theories then have to answer the question – How do we account for the fact that, if your lover and your prize roses, say, are “really” just collections of particles, they seem to be a person and a plant, and do not seem like just collections of particles? One attempted answer is that we simply choose to employ concepts like “person” and “plant” to refer to certain collections of particles. In contrast to such a “conceptual” account of ordinary things, I want to provide an “ontological” account that is nonreductive with respect to the manifest objects of everyday life.

By saying that I want to provide an “ontological” account of ordinary things, I mean that I include in ontology – the complete inventory of what exists – the objects that we daily encounter (passports, fish, etc.). The words “fish” and “passport” are not merely predicates; they express properties.

<sup>1</sup> As I shall explain, things are included in a complete account of what there is in virtue of being of one primary kind or another. (See chapter 2.) The gardener, the prisoner, and the cook are all members of the primary kind *person*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

A fish or a passport has the property – essentially, as I'll explain in chapter 2 – of being a fish or a passport. *Fish* and *passport* are primary kinds. Ontology includes not just physical particles and their sums, but also fish and passports. Moreover, I take everyday discourse about ordinary things not only to be largely true, but also to mean what speakers think it means. Unless there is some reason to do otherwise, I take what we commonly say (e.g., “It's time to get your passport renewed,” or “The fish today is fresh”) at face value. I do not systematically reinterpret ordinary discourse in unfamiliar terms, nor do I suppose that ordinary discourse is defective or inferior to some other (imagined) regimented language. Sentences about ordinary things mean what ordinary speakers think they mean, and such sentences are often true. If I am correct, then the ordinary things that we commonly talk about are irreducibly real, and a complete inventory of what exists will have to include persons, artifacts, artworks, and other medium-sized objects along with physical particles.

Let me make two terminological points. (a) I shall use the term “irreducibly real” and its variants to refer to objects that belong in ontology: objects that exist and are not reducible to anything “else.” So, in my usage, someone who says, “Sure, there are tables, but a table is just a bunch of particles,” takes tables to be reducible to particles and hence takes particles, but not tables, to be irreducibly real. A complete ontology – comprising everything that is irreducibly real – on my view will include manifest objects like tables.

(b) I shall use the term “the everyday world” and its variants as labels for the target of my investigation. The everyday world is populated by all the things that we talk about, encounter, and interact with: inanimate objects, other people, activities, processes, and so on. It is the world that we live and die in, the world where our plans succeed or fail, the world we do or do not find love and happiness in – in short, the world that matters to us. My aim, again, is to give an ontological account of the shared world that we encounter and to argue that a complete inventory of all the objects that (ever) exist must mention the medium-sized objects that we are familiar with: manifest objects of the everyday world belong to irreducible reality.

Many contemporary metaphysicians reject this project at the outset: Why bother, they ask? There is a longstanding tradition in philosophy that downgrades manifest things. Although that tradition may be traced back at least to Plato, it is influential today. Some contemporary metaphysicians reject ordinary things because they take irreducible reality to be exhausted

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Beginning in the middle*

by a completed physics; some reject ordinary things because they take commonsense objects to be too sloppy – they gain and lose parts; they have no fixed boundaries – to be irreducibly real. Many of today’s philosophers take concrete reality to be nothing but fundamental particles and their fusions, or instantaneous temporal parts, and/or a few universals, and see no ontological significance in ordinary things like trees and tables.<sup>2</sup>

There is an important respect in which today’s anti-commonsense metaphysicians differ from Plato. Plato used the idea of the Forms to answer questions that arose in the everyday world: What makes this person just or that painting beautiful was its participation in Justice Itself or Beauty Itself. The Forms, though in a timeless realm inaccessible to the senses, were not entirely cut off from the world that we encounter. Indeed, they were used to explain how the everyday world appeared the way that it did. Today’s anti-commonsense metaphysicians, by contrast, have no truck metaphysically with the everyday world: What they say about the underlying objects sheds no light on manifest objects, or explains why they appear as they do. Manifest objects are to be understood in terms of concepts and language, not in terms of irreducible reality.

Opposing the anti-commonsense tradition (both its Platonic and contemporary versions) is another one – a tradition that treats manifest things as irreducibly real. Again, by saying that manifest things are “irreducibly real,” I mean that ordinary things are not reducible to, or eliminable in favor of, anything else and hence that medium-sized objects must be included in any complete ontology. With roots in Aristotle, the tradition that takes ordinary things to be irreducibly real has included such recent philosophers as the classical American pragmatists and G. E. Moore. However, this “commonsense” tradition is far from dominant today.<sup>3</sup> As I have already suggested, I want to carry this commonsense tradition

<sup>2</sup> I have in mind philosophers like David Lewis, David Armstrong, Theodore Sider, and Peter van Inwagen. (I count Van Inwagen in this group because, although he countenances organisms, he takes organisms to be fusions of particles; indeed, on his restricted view of fusions, any fusion of particles is an organism.)

<sup>3</sup> There have been recent signs of resurgence, however. See, for example, Crawford L. Elder, *Real Natures and Familiar Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Ordinary Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Michael C. Rea, “Sameness Without Identity: An Aristotelian Solution to the Problem of Material Constitution,” *Ratio* 11 (new series) (1998): 316–328. Some aspects of his *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) suggest that Saul Kripke would also be sympathetic, but he is so cautious in his commitments that I hesitate to claim him as an ally.

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Lynne Rudder Baker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

forward by presenting and defending a comprehensive metaphysics of the things that we daily encounter. But why? Why do we need a metaphysics that takes ordinary things to be part of irreducible reality? Why not stay with the prevailing anti-commonsense tradition in analytic metaphysics?

## WHY DO WE NEED A METAPHYSICS OF ORDINARY THINGS?

There are several answers to this question. Recall the distinction between manifest objects and underlying entities, conceived of as collections of particles. We have reasonably serviceable criteria of identity, both synchronic and diachronic, for most manifest objects of everyday life. Of course, there are problems (e.g., with the ship of Theseus). But fairly well understood practices, backed up by tort law, enable us to get along with our everyday attitudes toward manifest objects. However, we do not, in general, have comparably serviceable criteria of identity, either synchronic or diachronic, for the collections of particles that might be thought to coincide with these manifest objects.

The identity conditions of the underlying objects – various collections of particles – depend on the identity conditions of the manifest objects. We have no idea about the identity of the underlying entities independently of the manifest objects with which they presumably coincide. If manifest objects are “really” just collections of particles, this deficiency in our grasp of identity conditions for the underlying objects threatens the rationality of our everyday attitudes and practices.

Our attitudes and practices concern manifest objects to which the attitudes and practices are directed. If A borrows B’s chair, A’s obligation is to return the chair, a manifest object for which we have identity conditions. B wants *it* (the chair) back – regardless of the fact that it is now made up of a different collection of particles after A scratched it. The rationality of our attitudes and practices requires that we identify objects over time, and the only objects that we can identify are manifest objects, not collections of particles. So, holding that manifest objects are just collections of particles puts our everyday attitudes and practices concerning them at risk of irrationality.

A promising way to remove this threat of irrationality is to come up with a way to correlate the manifest objects with their corresponding underlying objects that respects their coincidence, as well as their distinctness, and allows the underlying objects to piggyback on the manifest

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Beginning in the middle*

objects for their (rough) identity conditions.<sup>4</sup> And this is just what my metaphysical theory of ordinary objects attempts to do.

This basic motivation for a metaphysics of ordinary things suggests further reasons to take ordinary objects to be irreducibly real: Taking manifest objects to be irreducibly real provides the most straightforward explanation of experience and its probative value. If ordinary objects are irreducibly real, we can straightforwardly explain the reliability of our sensory evidence; descriptions directly based on experience may be metaphysically (maximally) accurate. Anti-commonsense metaphysicians who deny that ordinary objects are irreducibly real, by contrast, must also deny that descriptions of reality based on experience are ever metaphysically (maximally) accurate. Indeed, according to the anti-commonsense tradition, the metaphysically most accurate descriptions of what we actually experience are unrecognizable to most of us. For example, in the anti-commonsense tradition, the most metaphysically accurate description of someone's being hit head-on by an oncoming car in the wrong lane may well be in terms of intersecting trajectories of two combinations of particles arranged carwise<sup>5</sup> – combinations for which we have no identity conditions except in terms of manifest objects like cars. The commonsense tradition, by contrast, allows us to understand the everyday world without reinterpreting ordinary experience in alien ways.

Another reason to take ordinary objects to be irreducibly real is that the everyday world, populated by ordinary things, is the locus of human interests and concerns. If we want to have rational debate about moral, political, social, and legal issues, we have reason to pursue a metaphysics of ordinary things. It would be useful to have reasons grounded in irreducible reality, and not just in our concepts, to back our moral positions. For example, I do not want to appeal just to our concepts to decide one way or the other whether destroying pre-implantation human embryos in stem-cell research is tantamount to murder. (And fortunately, the view that I propose does ground an answer to this question in irreducible reality. See chapter 4.) Similarly for moral debates generally: for example, debates about animal rights, assisted suicide, and treatment of prisoners.

<sup>4</sup> This way of putting the point was suggested to me by Gary Matthews, who notes that the suggestion is just Aristotle's in modern dress.

<sup>5</sup> The anti-commonsense philosophers help themselves to terms like "carwise" – terms that presuppose the ordinary things whose existence they reduce to something else or deny altogether.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

This book is not a book on ethics, still less on public policy. I am not claiming that a metaphysics of ordinary objects will settle any moral debate, but it does open up ontological space to consider ethical issues in light of what is irreducibly real in the world around us. The whole arena of human concerns is completely invisible to anti-commonsense metaphysics, which relegates issues of human concern to concepts of little moment to metaphysics. If reality is to bear on *any* moral, social, political, or legal issues, then it will have to include ordinary objects like persons. So, anyone who considers irreducible reality relevant to issues of human concern has a good reason to pursue a metaphysics of ordinary objects.

Finally, we also have reason to take ordinary objects to be irreducibly real because they figure ineliminably in successful common causal explanations of everyday phenomena. Here is an argument:

Premise (1): Any objects and properties that are needed for causal explanations should be recognized in ontology.

Premise (2): Appeal to ordinary objects and properties is indispensable in causal explanation.

Conclusion: Ordinary objects should be recognized in ontology.

Premise (1) is supported by the general principle that anything that has effects is real. This is a converse of “Alexander’s Dictum,” according to which “to be real is to have causal powers.”<sup>6</sup> (See chapter 5.) Premise (1) is relatively uncontroversial.

Premise (2) is justified by countless examples from ordinary life as well as from the social sciences. The evidence that ordinary things have causal powers rests on the success and reliability of a huge class of causal explanations that appeal to properties of ordinary things. For example: Use of stamps with too little postage caused a letter to be returned to the sender. A slump in automobile sales caused the automakers to lose money. The riots caused a conservative reaction. All these are legitimate causal explanations: They are instances of counterfactual-supporting generalizations. They could well be cited in research papers in economics, political science, or sociology. And they all appeal to ordinary things and ordinary properties as being causally efficacious.

<sup>6</sup> Jaegwon Kim, “The Nonreductivist’s Troubles With Mental Causation,” in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 336–357. Kim endorses Alexander’s Dictum.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Beginning in the middle*

Finally, there are no other explanations in terms of molecules or atoms that better explain the phenomena (a letter's being returned to sender, carmakers' losing money, a conservative reaction). So, rather than getting better explanations of such phenomena from underlying objects and properties, we would simply lose sight of what we wanted to understand. Causal explanations in terms of ordinary objects and properties explain phenomena that we want to explain. Ordinary things figure indispensably in causal explanations and hence belong in the ontology. (For a detailed account of nonreductive intentional causation by ordinary things, see chapter 5.)

In sum, we have overwhelmingly greater reason to believe in the irreducible reality of ordinary objects and properties than to believe in any theory that denies that they are irreducibly real.<sup>7</sup> The evidence of our senses, of which the commonsense tradition avails itself, trumps arcane arguments leading to anti-commonsense conclusions cut off from anything we can confirm in experience. We know about ordinary things firsthand: we encounter them, we manufacture them, we interact with them.<sup>8</sup> Our knowledge of collections of simples or fundamental particles is much more meager, and much more distant, than is our knowledge of ordinary things.<sup>9</sup> So, we have many reasons to pursue a metaphysics that takes ordinary objects to be irreducibly real.

These reasons to take ordinary objects to be irreducibly real do not contravene physics. Quite the contrary. As we shall see, the idea of constitution allows stable ordinary objects to be ultimately constituted by constantly changing sums of particles, without being reducible to the sums that constitute them. (See especially chapter 9.) Persistence at the level of ordinary objects is consistent with fluctuation at the level of atoms or subatomic particles. Nor is it anti-scientific to suppose that we need

<sup>7</sup> This point is familiar from G. E. Moore.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to deny that there are illusions and hallucinations; it is only to say that irreducibly real objects can be experienced (under conditions that epistemologists specify). Even if a Cartesian Evil Genius were logically possible, we would have no reason whatever to affirm his existence, and much reason to deny it. I discuss this in "First-Person Externalism," *The Modern Schoolman*, forthcoming (2007). Also, see my "Social Externalism and First-Person Authority," *Erkenntnis*, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Theodore Sider takes the irreducible existents to be instantaneous temporal parts. An instantaneous temporal part physically cannot be experienced. The closest we can get to this reality is to a nondenumerable infinity of instantaneous temporal parts. See Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).



Cambridge University Press

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Lynne Rudder Baker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

causal explanations beyond those offered by natural science.<sup>10</sup> Our ordinary experience generates questions whose answers cannot be given in the language of natural science. Consider, for example, causal explanation of soldiers' being deployed inside a wooden horse. Homer had a causal explanation using terms that referred to manifest objects. We have no better explanation today; we would not even think to look to physics to explain the soldiers' deployment in the Trojan Horse. We might look to (macro-level) physics to explain how the horse was built, but not why it was built or how it was used.

Finally, let me address a commonly heard argument against a metaphysics of ordinary things – an argument from parsimony. The premise is that recognizing ordinary things needlessly bloats ontology. We can do just as well, it is said, with an ontology that contains only particles and their sums (and perhaps sets). So, parsimony dictates that recognizable ordinary things not be in the ontology.

But parsimony is not the correct virtue to appeal to unless one *already* has a coherent and comprehensive view. I shall try to show that the most coherent and comprehensive view of the everyday world countenances the irreducible reality of ordinary things. The basic reason to pursue a metaphysics of ordinary things is that appeal to ordinary things is needed for a coherent and comprehensive metaphysics that secures the rationality of our practices and attitudes toward the things we encounter. Thus, we have good reason not to take manifest objects “really” to be just collections of particles. That would be to take manifest objects, which we encounter first-hand, to be “really” we know not what.

Some philosophers may be unmoved by such considerations. So let me leave it at this: Parsimony is not the only intellectual virtue. A metaphysical theory should help us understand reality and our experience of it. It is difficult to see how understanding is served by the suggestion, for example, that it is never the case that, ontologically speaking, there is exactly one cat in the room. It is even more mysterious to add that we shouldn't worry about this since we still may truly say that there is exactly one cat in the room.<sup>11</sup> Reality as experienced is strange enough; metaphysics should not make it even more so. The ultimate test of a metaphysical theory, after

<sup>10</sup> The domain of my view here is the natural world – the world of ordinary things. This view is neutral about the existence of anything supernatural. I do not take this neutrality to be in any way anti-scientific, just “anti-scientistic.”

<sup>11</sup> Cf. David Lewis, “Many, But Almost One,” in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 164–182.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88049-7 - The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Beginning in the middle*

coherence and clarity, is a pragmatic one: What are its consequences? Does it make sense of what it set out to illuminate? This is the bar at which I shall rest my case.

## ID PHENOMENA

One prominent feature of the everyday world is that it is populated by things – such as pianos, pacemakers, and paychecks – whose existence depends on the existence of persons with propositional attitudes. I call any object that could not exist in a world lacking beings with beliefs, desires, and intentions an “intention-dependent object,” or an “ID object.”<sup>12</sup> ID objects that we are familiar with include kitchen utensils, precision instruments, credit cards, and so on. ID properties are properties that cannot be instantiated in the absence of beings with beliefs, desires, and intentions; and similarly, for ID events and ID phenomena generally.

Many, if not most, social, economic, political, and legal phenomena are ID phenomena. For example, the event of writing a check is an ID event, because there would be no such thing as writing a check in a world lacking the social and economic conventions that presuppose that people have beliefs, desires, and intentions. (Writing a check is a fundamentally different kind of phenomenon from moving one’s hand, and still more different from one’s hand’s moving.) Most human activities are ID phenomena – both individual (getting a job, going out to dinner, designing a house) and collective (manufacturing automobiles, changing the government, etc.). They could not exist or occur in a world without beliefs, desires, and intentions.

Other communities may be familiar with other kinds of ID phenomena; but all communities recognize many kinds of ID phenomena – e.g., conventions and obligations.<sup>13</sup> ID properties stand in contrast to nonID properties – e.g., being a promise as opposed to being an audible emission, being a signature as opposed to being a mark on paper, being a dance step as opposed to being a foot motion. The audible emission, the mark on paper, the foot motion could all exist or occur in a world lacking beings

<sup>12</sup> Gary Matthews suggested the term “ID phenomena” for phenomena whose occurrence or existence depends on there being entities with propositional attitudes.

<sup>13</sup> In earlier writings, I used the expression “intentional object” to refer to ID objects. Although I characterized what I meant by “intentional object” carefully, I am now using the technical term “ID object” (or “intention-dependent object”) in order to avoid confusion with uses of “intentional object” associated with Brentano and Meinong.