



Who cares if we're not fully real? Comments on Kris McDaniel's *The Fragmentation of Being*

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Abstract In part of *The Fragmentation of Being*, Kris McDaniel discusses the possibility that we—persons—are not fully real, and the normative upshot of this. The broader metaphysical context is a view on which different things have different degrees of being and what is discussed is the possibility that persons do not have the maximal degree of being. McDaniel thinks that this has a problematic normative upshot: we would not matter. I do not agree. Here I go through some reasons for thinking that the possible metaphysical view discussed does not have the normative upshot that McDaniel thinks it has.

Keywords Kris McDaniel · Existence · Modes of being · Nihilism · Mattering

1 Introduction

Most of Kris McDaniel's *The Fragmentation of Being* is devoted to laying out and defending a metaphysical framework where one can, in a theoretically significant way, distinguish between different modes of being, and where one can distinguish between what exists *to the fullest extent* and what does not. Connecting these two elements, McDaniel holds that “the degree of being enjoyed by some entity is proportionate to the naturalness of the most natural mode of being enjoyed by that entity”.¹ Some modes of being are fundamental, and some things have a fundamental mode of being. At the other extreme, some things are mere *beings by courtesy*: they exist but do not have any fundamental mode of being. It is a

¹ McDaniel (2017), p. 170. All references below are to McDaniel (2017) unless otherwise specified.

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wonderful book—it is full of interesting ideas, the key ideas are carefully developed, and McDaniel traces many significant connections both to contemporary and to historical discussions. However, I will here focus on some issues where I am in disagreement with McDaniel.

In one chapter of the book, the one these remarks will focus on, McDaniel turns to the question of what mode of being *we* have? We are persons. Do persons exist to the fullest extent? Or are we mere beings by courtesy? As McDaniel makes clear early in the chapter, he thinks these questions matter evaluatively. He thinks a natural and reasonable “evaluative conception” of ourselves, one which cannot be “lightly surrendered”, requires that we do exist to the fullest extent.² In a striking passage, he says.

We take ourselves to be beings that matter. We are persons, and persons count. Among other things, this implies that persons are to be counted. If we are beings by courtesy, a more objective ontological scheme would not countenance us. Fundamentally, we would not be counted. We would not count.³

As he notes, this reasoning may seem to equivocate on “counting”. But he goes on to give more proper arguments for the conclusion that, as he puts it here, we do not “matter”. The arguments are to the effect that there is a certain link (henceforth: *the Link*) between on the one hand the questions of metaphysics that McDaniel discusses, concerning different degrees of being and on the other hand mattering. Specifically, mattering requires a certain degree of being. I am skeptical of McDaniel’s arguments that the Link obtains, and I am skeptical of the idea that the Link obtains.

Having argued for the Link, McDaniel turns to, in the rest of the chapter, consider what arguments can be marshalled for the full reality of persons. He considers ideas from McTaggart and from Heidegger, and, at some more length, arguments relying on the principle that “only fully real entities can enjoy perfectly natural properties and relations”.⁴ Given this latter principle, one can show that persons are fully real by showing that persons enjoy some such properties and relations. The question is which properties and relations these might be. McDaniel considers shape properties and spatial relations, causation and causal powers, the property of having qualia (and generally, having certain emergent mental properties which can be thought to be perfectly natural). He spends the most time on the last suggestion, which seems the most promising. One question is whether the property of having qualia is indeed perfectly natural; another is whether “it is persons who instantiate the qualia”.⁵ It may seem that the answer to the latter question is obviously yes, but another possibility is that four-dimensionalism is true and qualia are had by person stages, and persons are then sums of person stages. Having examined this at some length,

² p. 171.

³ p. 171.

⁴ p. 178.

⁵ p. 181.

McDaniel turns to the possibility of appealing to haecceitistic properties, like the property of being Kris McDaniel. Toward the end of the chapter, McDaniel turns to what he calls “practical arguments for full reality”, where a practical argument for P in McDaniel’s words “has as [a] premise that the truth of P is a necessary condition for an aspect of our normative practice to make sense”.⁶ McDaniel considers different practical arguments and notes their seeming limitations.

The paper is structured as follows. In Sect. 2, I discuss McDaniel’s arguments for the Link, or, in his words, for the claim that we “matter” only if we are fully real. In Sect. 3, I distinguish between some different things McDaniel might mean when he says that we do not “matter”. Section 4 discusses some other possible arguments for the Link. Section 5 in a different way addresses the connections between metaphysical and normative matters, discussing an argument against reductive naturalism presented by McDaniel. Section 6 focuses on the question whether even our existence (let alone our *full* existence) is needed for us to matter in the relevant sense, and brings up the relevance of this to what McDaniel focuses on. As may be evident from these summary, there is no linear progression between the sections. They are only united by a common theme: what is the connection between metaphysical and normative matters?

2 McDaniel’s arguments

In this section, I will assess McDaniel’s arguments for the Link.

McDaniel makes use of a Brentano-style account of intrinsic value, where the notion of correctness plays a central role. To illustrate the idea, McDaniel mentions the following Brentanian accounts of intrinsic goodness and intrinsic badness:

something is intrinsically good if and only if an act of love that takes that thing as its object is correct;
something is intrinsically bad if and only if an act of hate that takes that thing as its object is correct⁷

As stated, accounts like these may seem to lie open to immediate counterexamples. If someone threatening to do something awful to Jones’ family unless Jones performs an act of love/hate toward something, X, which intuitively is not intrinsically deserving of love/hate, then Jones’ performing that act of love toward X is intuitively correct. But as properly understood, these accounts are not vulnerable to such counterexamples. To defend the accounts as stated against such apparent counterexamples one must either rely on a technical notion of correctness (so even if Jones ought to love X under the circumstances, this love isn’t “correct”)

⁶ pp. 189, 190. The general form of the argument would appear to be: some aspect of our normative practice makes sense only if P; therefore, P. Unless certain restrictions are imposed, this form of argument seems to lead us astray in some cases. Suppose some aspect of our practice turns out to be such that the truth of a sexist or racist claim P is necessary for that aspect to make sense. But that is hardly a fine argument for P; rather, it is an argument to change our ways.

⁷ p. 173.

or include an intrinsicness condition also on the right hand side. In the literature, “fitting” is often used instead of “correct”. Given this alternative formulation, the counterexamples arguably lose what intuitive force they have. The examples just show that sometimes one ought all things considered to have a certain attitude even if that attitude is not fitting, or, in the relevant sense, “correct”.

The Brentanian framework itself can of course be criticized. But I think that even taking this general framework for granted, there are natural ways to resist McDaniel’s arguments.

McDaniel focuses on the attitude of *attending to*, and discusses what it is correct to attend to. If it is correct to attend to only what is real, then if persons are not real it is not correct to attend to persons. McDaniel’s suggested view is that “there is one object-directed attitude that is maximally correct if and only if its object is fully real: the attitude of attending to”.⁸ McDaniel says that given this view, “If we are mere beings by courtesy, then we are not ourselves fit objects for our thoughts”.⁹ And the thought appears to be: if we are not fit objects for ourselves to attend to, then we are not fit objects for any thoughts and hence we are not fit objects for us to love or care about.

However, speaking of what it is correct to attend to *simpliciter* is somewhat artificial, if not downright odd. It is much more natural to consider what it is correct to attend to for a given purpose. Some things may be correct to attend to for the purpose of limning the metaphysical structure of reality. Other things may be correct to attend to for other purposes, like various evaluative or normative ones, such as questions about how to act; and attention for such purposes seems to be the most relevant to loving and caring. Maybe, insofar as questions about what it is correct to attend to simpliciter make sense, such questions are best thought of as most similar to questions of the first of the two kinds distinguished, the ones about the metaphysical structure of reality. But it is fully consistent with this that there are things such that although it is not correct to attend to them simpliciter, it is correct to attend to them for such-and-such specific purposes.

In order for the point about attention to carry the weight it would need to in order to support McDaniel’s argument, it would need to follow from it that for any attitude one can adopt towards an object which in fact requires attending to the object, it is only correct to adopt this attitude toward fully real objects. I do not see how this further claim could follow. As noted earlier, McDaniel puts the upshot of his arguments in terms of mattering. Even if we are not fit objects for attention, we could matter, in a quite natural sense, for we could be fit objects of love and care. And we can be such that our interests ought to be taken into account.

McDaniel also makes what on the face of it is a different suggestion, saying “one might hold that any sub-act of a propositional attitude that has content is correct to the extent that the object of that act is fully real”.¹⁰ He does not attempt to argue in

⁸ p. 174.

⁹ p. 174.

¹⁰ p. 174. “On the face of it”: if the sub-act is identified as an act of attending then the suggestion is not a different one after all.

favor of this seemingly separate claim, and I don't find it immediately plausible. Moreover, even if this suggestion is correct, a version of a point I made above is relevant. Call a sub-act of the relevant type *S*. As before, even if *S* is not correct, in the sense of fitting, when its object is not fully real, it can be that an agent sometimes ought to perform an act of type *S* whose object is not fully real. Maybe a moral agent ought sometimes to have propositional attitudes whose contents are about something not fully real, and a necessary means to that is for her to perform an act *S* whose object is less than fully real. Indeed, maybe we are fit objects for love and care even if the acts of loving and caring require sub-acts which are not fitting.

At one point, having mentioned how for medieval philosophers metaphysical and evaluative issues go hand in hand, McDaniel mentions says that “[t]he idea that the direction of our cognition should be towards the fundamental still informs contemporary metaphysics”.¹¹ He quotes Ted Sider to illustrate:

Structure has an evaluative component. The goal of inquiry is not merely to believe many true propositions and few false ones. It is to discern the structure of the world. An ideal inquirer must think of the world in terms of its distinguished structure; she must carve the world at its joints in her thinking and language. Employers of worse languages are worse inquirers.¹²

But, in connection with themes I have already brought up, note that Sider speaks specifically of the goal of *inquiry*, and of ideal and worse *inquirers*. And one can well hold that what goes for me qua inquirer is different from what goes for me qua moral thinker. Maybe thinking in terms of—say—my children makes me a worse inquirer (if my children are not “fully real” in the sense McDaniel characterizes); but not thinking in terms of my children still makes me a worse *parent* and *moral agent*.

3 Kinds of mattering

McDaniel says that if we are merely beings by courtesy then we are not “beings that matter”. It may be worth distinguishing between two kinds of theses in this general vicinity.

It may be natural to think that if we do not matter, then our pleasures and pains, and the satisfaction of our desires, etc., do not matter. But that does not immediately follow. The pleasures and pains may matter even if their subjects do not.

One kind of view on which we are not “beings that matter” is a view on which our pleasures and pains, our plans and projects—the things we feel and the things we do—still matter. The pains, pleasures, plans and project have normative significance just like we naturally think they do. It is only that it is not important who is the subject of these things. Compare Parfit's (1984) famous view that personal identity does not matter. Parfit does not question that specific things we

¹¹ p. 173.

¹² Sider (2009), p. 401; quoted in McDaniel, p. 173.

care about matter. What fails to matter, on Parfit's view, is only *who* feels the pleasures and pains, *whose* plans are realized, etc.

On a different kind of view, if we are not “beings that matter” then by the same token our pains, pleasures, plans and projects do not matter either. Not only is it not important who is the subject of various experiences, etc., but the pleasures, pains, etc. do not matter in themselves either.

No doubt more can be said to distinguish the two views outlined, but I hope this brief characterization suffices for present purposes. To have names for the views, let me call the former the *Parfitian* view and the latter the *nihilist* view. It should be clear that the nihilist view threatens to be more radical than the Parfitian view. If it only is the Parfitian view which is correct, then what we do and feel generally matters as before; it is only that tracing who does it and feels it turns out to be of no significance.

I don't think McDaniel is explicit regarding what sort of view he has in mind. But he does mention Buddhists and Hume as thinkers who have accepted the view on persons he describes, and these thinkers have arguably only accepted the Parfitian view.¹³ And he does think that the full reality of states of affairs in which we partake is not sufficient for us to matter in the requisite way.¹⁴ So maybe it is only the Parfitian view he has in mind.

Is the Parfitian view a stable resting place, in the sense that if we are only beings by courtesy, that view and not the more radical view is the upshot? I take it that by McDaniel's own lights, the Parfitian view is a stable resting place only if the pleasures and pains themselves, or the satisfaction of our preferences, or whatever are the specific things we take to matter, exist to some appropriate degree. McDaniel does outline an argument for why qualia are perfectly natural. They would then satisfy a necessary condition for mattering. But such an argument would immediately yield only that qualia—maybe pleasures and pains, under certain conceptions of what pleasures and pains are—satisfy a necessary condition for mattering; it would not help show, e.g., that preference satisfaction matters.

My doubts regarding McDaniel's reasoning, discussed in the previous section, apply regardless of which view he has in mind. I do not think that his arguments establish even the Parfitian view. Specific evaluative attitudes toward people—e.g. loving and caring—may be perfectly in order even if we are not fully real.

4 Holes, fictional characters, and us

Above I criticized McDaniel's arguments for The Link. But one may think that even if those arguments fail, surely there are reasons to believe the Link. McDaniel might simply appeal to examples. He might for example say that if we are merely beings by courtesy then we have the same ontological status as holes and fictional characters (to mention some examples of beings by courtesy which McDaniel

¹³ p. 174f.

¹⁴ p. 192.

mentions). And surely, it may be thought, that comparison should give us pause: for holes and fictional characters do not matter. However, were McDaniel to argue this way—and to stress, I do not mean to ascribe this argument to him—then the proper retort is that the relevant difference between us on the one hand and holes and fictional characters on the other is that we have interests and desires, feel pleasure and pain and so on, and these other things do not. Sherlock Holmes may have some properties and figure in some truths, but it is not literally true that he has interests and desires, etc.. That, and not difference in degree of being, is what accounts for the normatively relevant differences between us on the one hand and holes and fictional characters on the other.

Things might in principle stand differently if McDaniel were to hold that if we are mere beings by courtesy, and so do not have full reality, it is less than fully true that we have interests and desires, etc. But be that as it may, McDaniel rejects the idea of degrees of truth.¹⁵

5 The possible non-fundamentality of normative properties

In the course of discussing practical arguments for our full reality, McDaniel brings up, and seemingly endorses, an argument focusing on other matters.

Suppose a form of reductive naturalism is true according to which moral properties are identical with non-fundamental properties that can be designated by recognizably non-moral predicates. Since these properties are non-fundamental, our normative vocabulary could very easily have designated other properties without missing a joint in reality: fundamentally speaking, nothing is really right, wrong, good, or bad, and so on... Once we view morality in this way, the importance of morality itself seems greatly diminished. Can our moral practices survive the realization of their fundamental insignificance?¹⁶

Note how this argument again concerns matters related to the Link: it concerns a supposed relation between a metaphysical feature (fundamentality, or lack thereof) and normative importance.

My main reaction to this argument should be unsurprising given what I earlier said: why should we take the metaphysical fundamentality of a property to be a guide to its normative significance? Normative vocabulary can be used to designate many different properties. Even if some of them but not all mark joints in reality, why should that mean that it is less appropriate to use concepts designating those properties to guide one's actions? Metaphysical significance does not translate into normative significance. The talk of "fundamental insignificance" is a bit treacherous. What is assumed is that the properties are not fundamental. Maybe there then is a sense in which they are metaphysically insignificant. But whether they are normatively insignificant is a different matter.

¹⁵ p. 197.

¹⁶ p. 191.

Notice that what McDaniel in effect does in the passage quoted is to lay out a certain kind of problem and propose a solution. The *problem*—or to be careful, supposed problem—is one that for example I have discussed at some length elsewhere, and which Tristram McPherson has labeled the problem of “alarming symmetry”.¹⁷ Normative vocabulary can be used to designate many different properties. Just because we label certain properties “right” and “good” does not by itself mean that there is any objective reason to focus on them: others could equally well have designated other properties “right” and “good” while using these expressions for normative and evaluative purposes in the way we do.¹⁸ Even if our “right” and “good” designate objective properties, the symmetry may remain and that can seem worrying: the importance of what is right and what is good can seem diminished. The suggested *solution* is to appeal to the possibility that our “right” and “good” designate fundamental properties. My worry, mentioned above, concerns this solution. (Note that another worry about this solution is that alternative normative expressions might also designate fundamental properties. If so, the alarming symmetry remains.) If a solution like McDaniel’s is rejected, that only serves to make the alarming symmetry problem more pressing.

6 Existence

Independently of McDaniel’s framework, one might raise questions about the normative relevance of existence. Is existence normatively relevant at all? It is, to put it mildly, natural to say yes. If we don’t exist, then there is nothing there to matter. Whatever to say about modes and degrees of being, and the relevance of such metaphysical questions to evaluative and normative issues, the relevance of being and non-being to such issues seems plain.

However, consider some different ontological views given which we do not exist. Maybe a mereological nihilist view is true and there are no complex objects, but only partless “simples”. There are no tables but only simples arranged tablewise. And there are no persons but only simples arranged personwise. There is no one object, an “I”, which performs acts of thinking; instead thinking is an activity performed collectively by the simples. Or maybe a radical “stage” view is true and there are no persisting objects but only entities not extended in time. There is no object, an “I”, which persists and performs acts of thinking. Instead thinking is relay race, performed by a succession of time slices. Or, more radically, a more full-fledged ontological nihilism is true, and there are no objects—not even simples. Instead the world is perspicuously presented in a pure feature-placing language, without any reference or quantification. Instead of “I am thinking here and now”

¹⁷ See Eklund (2017) and McPherson (2020).

¹⁸ Of course, “reason” may be tied to “right” and “good” in such a way that a link is guaranteed. That makes the alarming symmetry problem harder to state but doesn’t immediately mean that the problem goes away: we can imagine those using alternatives to “right” and “good” also using an alternative to ‘reason’, so that they can justify their practice to themselves by saying that they have “reason”, in their sense, to focus on what they focus on.

one should say: “it is thinking p-ly t-ly” (where the adverb-like expressions are there in place of expressions referring to locations and times).¹⁹

The positions just described are all radical positions. But do they have radical normative consequences? Should I care less about myself and loved ones if it turned out that we do not exist, but instead the facts are as stated by one of these ontological theories? I do not know how to argue for one view over another here, but for what it's worth, my own sense is: essentially, no. Even if these are genuinely different ontological views, the differences in the perspectives on the world which they offer don't matter normatively. Maybe things will need to be put differently depending on which theory is correct, but the differences are without practical significance. What I might have described as my love for persisting person X would, if I were to become convinced of one of these views, have to be reconfigured in terms of connected successions of simples performing various collective actions, or in terms of a relay of successive X-slices, etc. But the love itself would not cease to be rational. When I imagine one of these radical metaphysical views being true, I do not start to feel less normatively significant. Nor do I start worrying about the significance of my children, etc. Instead, I rethink the nature of what is significant: where I might have thought that what was significant was some entities and their persistence, I now think that the loci of significance are not entities but the connections between various episodes (or *however* one should put things if nihilism is true, given that there then are no entities at all, and hence not even such things as episodes, or loci for that matter). Normative matters do not depend on the rather abstruse differences between the metaphysical views under consideration.

If one of the radical metaphysical views mentioned is true then my loved ones do not exist and neither do I. But they contrast with other kinds of views given which my loved ones do not exist, or are not what I thought them to be. Consider the possibility that my loved ones are robots without consciousness, or are mere hallucinations conjured up by my fevered brain. To my mind these latter scenarios do have a normative relevance that the metaphysical views first brought up do not. Properly stating the difference between the two classes of cases would be a delicate matter, but roughly speaking, the difference is that in one class of cases the normatively relevant stuff—the pleasant and the painful, the satisfying and the frustrating—would still be going on (the differences between the views only concerns its metaphysical packaging), whereas in the other class of cases, what's normatively relevant is simply missing.

Relating back to the distinction between the Parfitian view and the nihilist view (nihilism in the sense of normative nihilism!) mentioned in section 3, I do not see that these metaphysical theories even provide rational reason to accept the Parfitian view. Whether a more person-centered view is justified or not is to be determined on properly normative grounds and is not determined by metaphysics.

What happens to the issues discussed by McDaniel, in connection with the Link, if existence indeed is unimportant in the way suggested? One may think that these

¹⁹ For some discussion of these views in the literature, see van Inwagen (1990) on mereological nihilism, Sider (2001) on the stage view; and Hawthorne and Cortens (1995) and Turner (2011) on ontological nihilism.

issues immediately go away: if the existence of entities is not needed for normative significance, then clearly the mode of being of entities is not crucial for normative significance either. But someone like McDaniel could in principle argue that they just take on a different form. Consider, say, the mereological nihilist view. Maybe the counterpart, within the mereological nihilist setting, of the question of whether we are fully real is the question of whether the simples and the relevant relations holding between them are fully real. It is harder to make any sense of McDanielesque questions about metaphysical status given a thoroughgoing ontological nihilism, for within that setting there are no entities such that any normative issues hinge on the full reality of those entities. One can still in principle distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental truth, but since there are no entities, the fundamentality of a truth does not in any way relate to the fundamentality or otherwise of entities involved in the truth. The framework McDaniel develops in his book is not focused on this sort of thing.

If, indeed, not even ontological nihilism disrupts our ordinary normative outlook, then McDaniel is wrong to see the mode of our being as central to this outlook. I have, of course, not argued for the truth of this antecedent. All I have emphasized in this last section that there are perspectives on these matters that fundamentally differ from that presupposed by McDaniel.

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