

## DION'S FOOT

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Suppose a certain man, Dion, has his foot amputated, and lives to tell the tale. That tale involves a well-known metaphysical puzzle, for most of us assume that there was, before the operation, an object made up of all of Dion's parts except those that overlapped with his foot--"all of Dion except for his foot", we might say, or Dion's "foot-complement". Call that object Theon. (Anyone who doubts that there is such a thing as Dion's undetached foot-complement may imagine that 'Theon' is a name for Dion's undetached head. Surely there is such a thing as Dion's head? And surely Dion could, in principle, survive if his head were detached from the rest of him and kept alive?) It seems obvious that Theon, like Dion, continues to exist after the operation, for you cannot destroy an object merely by changing its surroundings--merely by removing something that was never a part of it. The puzzle, then (which might be called the problem of undetached parts), is how Dion and Theon are related after the operation.

The most common answer to this question is that Dion and Theon come to occupy just the same region of space and to be made of just the same matter after the operation. The next-most-popular answer is that Dion and Theon are made up of temporal parts, and while those of their temporal parts that "occur" before the operation only partly overlap, Dion and Theon have the very same post-operative temporal parts. Much as two roads can merge and have spatial parts in common, Dion and Theon merge and have temporal parts in common. Less popular accounts of the relation between Dion and Theon involve relativizing identity to concepts or times, and denying that there is such a thing as Theon.

Michael Burke has recently proposed an intriguing new solution (or resurrected an ancient one) to the problem of undetached parts. [1] He argues that, despite appearances, Theon--Dion's foot-complement--ceases to exist when Dion's foot is removed. The reason (leaving out many details) is this. Dion is a person both before and after the operation; Theon, however, is not a person. But every person is essentially a person, and every non-person is essentially not a person. Thus, if Theon were to survive the operation, he would be a non-person at one time and a person later on, which is impossible. Hence, Theon must perish.

I want to explore two difficulties with this account. The first centers on the claim that Theon is not a person. Burke denies that Theon is a person on the grounds that personhood is

a “maximal” concept, meaning that no proper part of a person is itself a person: since Theon is a proper part of Dion, and Dion is a person, Theon is not a person. But it is one thing to say that personhood is maximal, and quite another to explain how this could be so. How could being a part of another person prevent something from being a person itself?

Burke says that a person is an organism that, at some time during its existence, either has or has the potential to acquire certain mental capacities--rationality and consciousness, perhaps. Thus, if Theon is not a person, the reason must be either that he is not an organism, or that he is never rational and conscious (and could never become rational and conscious).

It is true that Theon is not an organism before the amputation. And the reason why he is not an organism has to do with the fact that he is a part of another organism, Dion. But it would be surprising if Theon failed to be a person solely for that reason. If this were all that disqualified Theon from personhood, he would be a non-person despite being psychologically just like a person. For Theon has the same brain as Dion, and thus presumably the same thoughts. It seems likely that Theon believes himself to be a person, since Dion believes this. The difference would be merely that Dion’s belief is true and Theon’s is false. In that case, most of the conscious, rational beings who think they are persons are mistaken--for if there is such a being as Theon, there are far more rational, conscious proper parts of human organisms than there are “whole” human organisms. And if it is so easy to be mistaken about whether one is a person, I doubt that you and I have any reason to believe that we are persons. For all I know, I could be a proper part of a whole organism and therefore a non-person. But if there are many non-persons psychologically indistinguishable from persons, and if one could never know whether one was a person anyway, why should anyone care whether one was a person? This absurd view would deprive personhood of any philosophical interest.

So it is hard to see how Theon could fail to be a person, in any interesting sense of that term, simply because he is not an organism. The alternative is that Theon is not a person because he is not rational or conscious, and lacks even the capacity to become rational or conscious. This would be even more surprising than the view that Theon is rational and conscious but not a person, for Theon has, as a part, a fully developed human brain in perfect working order. The states of that brain mediate between the stimulations of Theon’s sense organs, his movements, and other internal states of him in just the way that the states of Dion’s brain do--Dion and Theon in fact share the very same brain states, sensory stimulations, and movements.

Burke chooses the second option, denying that Theon thinks or feels or acts. That is because thought, sensation, and action, like personhood, are maximal concepts: you cannot think or feel or act, Burke says, if you are a proper part of something else that thinks or feels or acts. This is an astonishing claim. How could the merely relational property of being a proper part of Dion prevent Theon from being rational or conscious? How could it prevent him from speaking English, or wanting a bath, or feeling pain? This can hardly be squared with current thinking in the philosophy of mind. A being that was exactly like Theon but not a part of another rational, conscious being--something that differed from Theon only in its surroundings--would be rational and conscious. Even if the content of one's intentional states can depend on one's surroundings, no current materialist theory of consciousness or intentionality is consistent with there being two physically indistinguishable beings, one of which was as rational and conscious as you or I, and the other of which was incapable of any thought or awareness at all.

Quite aside from this awkward problem, it is not clear how the "maximality principle" supports Burke's view. Burke uses the principle that no person (or thinking being) could be a proper part of another to argue that Theon is not a person because Dion is. But one could just as easily use that principle to argue that Dion is not a person because Theon is. As we have seen, Theon's intrinsic features, and the state of his nervous system in particular, would seem to make the premise that Theon is rational and conscious just as plausible as the premise that Dion is rational and conscious.

Even if you think that Dion's being a whole human being somehow makes him intrinsically better suited to being a subject of thought and consciousness than Theon, Dion may have other rivals that do not share Theon's defects. There may be a being made up of all of Dion's atoms and one more--an atom in the outer layers of Dion's skin that is nevertheless not a part of Dion, for example. Dion would be a proper part of that being, which we may call Leon. Thus, Dion would be a person only if Leon were not a person--only if Leon were not rational or conscious. But Leon would be just as "whole" as Dion is, and no intrinsic difference between them could make it the case that Dion was rational and conscious and Leon was not. And if there were such a being as Leon, Leon himself would presumably be a part of a slightly larger being who would be equally well suited to be rational and conscious. Of course, if we continue to consider larger and larger beings in this way, we shall eventually get into beings that no longer seem to be rational or conscious: eventually we may come to consider a being composed of a

human being and his socks, for example (though exactly what feature of such a being would prevent it from being rational or conscious will not be easy to say). Nevertheless, no one being that has Theon as a proper part will be better suited, intrinsically, to be rational and conscious than any other such being. Thus, if no proper part of a person is itself a person, it would seem that there are no persons at all. Likewise, if rationality and consciousness are maximal properties, then nothing is rational or conscious.

Someone might try to avoid this consequence of the maximality principle by denying that there is such a being as Leon, or anything else enough like Dion to count as a “whole human being.” For each object that fails to be a person because it is a proper part of something else, there is never more than one candidate for the office of being the person of whom that being is a part. Dion simply has vague boundaries: there are atoms that are neither definitely parts of him nor definitely not parts of him. That would mean that there are atoms that do not compose anything (or at least atoms that don’t definitely compose anything). Burke has expressed doubts about whether just any atoms compose something. [2] But if there are atoms that don’t compose anything, there is little reason to believe that there is such an object as Theon in the first place. In fact, such an object would be quite problematic: if Theon existed, but there were nothing composed of just Theon’s particles plus a few more, then nothing, it seems, could explain why Theon was made up of just those particles rather than those plus a few more--why he leaves off at the arbitrary place where he does.

Of course, any philosopher who believes that there are such things as foot-complements, heads, and other undetached parts of human beings that have “thinking parts” faces the problem of what to say about those objects. If they are rational and conscious, as they appear to be, then none of us is ever really alone: we each share our thoughts, our meals, and our bed with a large number of other thinking beings, some of whom are parts of us and some of whom, perhaps, have us as parts. It is the contrast with this uncomfortable view that gives the maximality principle its attraction--even if we can’t understand how the principle could be true.

But there is an alternative to the maximality principle that is perfectly intelligible. It is the view, familiar to those who deal in the ontology of temporal parts, that we count people, or thinking things, as “one” whenever one of them is a part of the other. [3] Thus, even if there are, strictly speaking, a great many persons or thinking things sitting in your chair just now, when engaged in the ordinary business of life we say truly that there is just one, for we count people not by identity, but by an overlap relation. To say that you are alone is to say that every

person in your vicinity is either a part of you or has you as a part--or, better, shares your thinking parts. This semantic hypothesis accounts for our ordinary judgments about how many people there are without making any problematic claims about what it takes to be a thinker. Since Burke's view relies on the assumption that proper parts of thinkers are not thinkers, however, it is not available to him.

Let me turn now to what appears to be a second difficulty with Burke's account of Dion and Theon. Dion, Burke says, is essentially a person, and Theon is essentially a non-person; that is why Theon perishes when Dion's foot is detached from him. Dion and Theon belong to different sorts or substantial kinds. Part of the idea that person is a substantial kind is that the concept of a person determines the criterion of identity for all and only persons. Thus, if Theon were to survive the operation and come to be a person, he would start out having the persistence conditions for non-persons (or, more precisely, the persistence conditions for some sort, the members of which are not persons) and end up with the persistence conditions for persons, which are presumably different from and incompatible with those. But obviously a thing cannot exchange its persistence conditions for new and incompatible conditions part way through its career.

The trouble is that after the operation, when he lacks a foot, Dion is intrinsically just like Theon was before the operation. (To be sure, Dion may have some scar tissue that Theon lacks. But it is hard to see how that could make any difference in the present context.) Thus, we have two intrinsically indistinguishable objects belonging to different sorts, with different and incompatible persistence conditions. The only difference between Dion as he is after the operation and Theon as he is before it is a difference in their surroundings: Theon has a foot attached to him and Dion doesn't. But that merely relational difference could hardly explain why they are able to survive different sorts of alterations.

As it happens, this is much like Burke's reason for rejecting what I called the most popular view about the case of Dion and Theon, namely that they come to coincide spatially and materially when Dion loses his foot. [4] Burke objects to coincident objects on the grounds that there would be no intrinsic difference between them that could account for their difference in sort, or their different criteria of identity. If a copper statue coincided with a statue-shaped piece of copper that would outlive the statue if it were crushed, there would be nothing to explain why the piece of copper but not the statue could survive being crushed--or, to put it differently, why the piece of copper is a piece of copper and not a statue.

This argument seems to provide an excellent reason for denying that Dion after the operation and Theon before it could belong to different sorts with different persistence conditions. If the piece of copper and the copper statue cannot have different persistence conditions without differing intrinsically, how do Dion and Theon manage to do so? To put it the other way round: If you can have two intrinsically indistinguishable objects belonging to different sorts in different places, why not two intrinsically indistinguishable objects of different sorts in the same place?

The problem is quite general, and has nothing to do with the particular claim that persons are essentially persons. If there is such an object as Theon, then Burke's theory requires that it cease to exist when Dion loses his foot because there is some sort of thing that Dion essentially is and Theon essentially is not. Thus, Dion and Theon must have different persistence conditions. (Otherwise it would be hard to see why losing a foot should destroy Theon but not Dion.) But again, Dion as he is after losing his foot is intrinsically just like Theon was beforehand, leaving nothing to account for their difference in persistence conditions.

Thus, even if the first difficulty can be overcome, and Burke's account is internally coherent, his view appears to have no advantage over its main traditional rival.

## NOTES

1. "Dion and Theon: An Essentialist Solution to an Ancient Puzzle", Journal of Philosophy 91 (1994), 129-139. See also "Tibbles the Cat: A Modern Sophisma", Philosophical Studies 84 (1996), 63-74, and the article cited in note 2.
2. "Preserving the Principle of One Object to a Place: A Novel Account of the Relations Among Objects, Sorts, Sortals, and Persistence Conditions", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54 (1994), 591-624, at p. 617. (The usual definition of 'compose' is that some things, call them the xs, compose something y just in case each of the xs is a part of y, none of the xs shares a part with any other of the xs, and every part of y shares a part with one or more of the xs.)
3. See, for example, David Lewis, "Survival and Identity", in A. Rorty, ed., The Identities of

Persons (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). I discuss this view at greater length in “Why I Have no Hands”, forthcoming in Theoria.

4. ”Copper Statues and Pieces of Copper: A Challenge to the Standard Account”, Analysis 52 (1992), 12-17. See also “Dion and Theon”, 135, and my “Composition and Coincidence”, forthcoming in Pacific Philosophical Quarterly.