

What Are We?

Eric T. Olson

University of Sheffield

Abstract: This paper is about the neglected question of what sort of things we are metaphysically speaking. It is different from the mind-body problem and from familiar questions of personal identity. After explaining what the question means and how it differs from others, the paper tries to show how difficult it is to give a satisfying answer.

1 The Question

What are we? That is, what are we metaphysically speaking? What is our basic metaphysical nature? What are our most general and fundamental properties? I claim that this is a real and important question. It is different from the traditional mind-body problem and from familiar questions of personal identity. It is frequently neglected. And it is fiendishly difficult to answer.

Let me first explain what the question means. I won't try to define the daunting phrases 'basic metaphysical nature' or 'most general and fundamental properties'. (I doubt whether that would be a worthwhile project.) I will try to explain what I mean by example. We can break the large question of what we are into a number of smaller and more specific ones.

What are we made of? I don't mean our chemical composition--what sort of physical matter makes us up. I want to know whether we are made of matter at all. Or are we made of something other than matter? Or partly of matter and partly of something else? Come to that, are we made of anything at all? Is there any sort of stuff, material or otherwise, that makes us up?

If we are indeed made of matter or of anything else, what matter or other stuff makes

us up? Most materialists--those who think we are made up entirely of matter--say that we are made of all and only the matter that makes up our bodies: we extend all the way out to the surface of our skin (which is presumably where our bodies end) and no further. But a few take us to be considerably smaller: the size of brains, for instance. Someone could even take us to be material things larger than our bodies (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

What parts do we have? Or do we have any parts at all? This is not the same as what we are made of. Philosophers who agree about what we are made of--not only about what sort of stuff, but what particular stuff--may still disagree about our parts. They may disagree, for instance, about whether we have temporal parts (see §8 below). They may even disagree about what ordinary spatial parts we have (see e.g. van Inwagen 1981 and Lowe 2000: 15-20).

Are we substances? By a substance I mean a metaphysically independent being, as opposed to a state or aspect of something else. A dent in a car, for instance, is not a substance. It is not a part of the car: you can't take it away from the car, or move it to another car, as you could with a wheel. The dent seems to be a state or an aspect of the car--a way that the car is. But the car is not a way that the dent is. Nor does it appear to be a state or an aspect of anything else: there is nothing, it seems, that stands to the car as the car stands to the dent. The car is a good candidate for being a substance. The question, then, is whether you are like a car or like a dent. Are you a state of something other than yourself? Or an event or process that something else is undergoing, like the car's cooling off? Is there something--an organism or a lump of matter, perhaps--that stands to you as the car stands to its dent?

Do we persist through time? Do we literally continue existing for seventy years or more--or is the sober truth that we exist only for a moment? Some say that you appear to persist only because you are instantly replaced by a being so much like you that no one can tell the difference--not even that being herself, for she inherits all your memories and other mental features. Could they be right?

This is the sort of thing I have in mind when I ask what we are metaphysically speaking. There are many more such questions: what our persistence conditions are, for instance, and which of our properties are essential to us and which are accidental. An answer to these questions would tell us what we are.

So much for the 'what' in our question. What about the 'we'? Which beings is it whose basic metaphysical nature I am asking about? By 'we' I mean we human people--where a human person is roughly someone with a human body. (I assume that we are people. But this is not a substantive point. Anyone who disagrees can still ask what we are, and can explain what the question means in a different way.) I don't mean non-human people, if there are any. I am not asking about the metaphysical nature of people as such. I am asking only about ourselves.

That is because for all I know different sorts of people might have radically different metaphysical natures. Perhaps there could be angels or gods. Full-blown artificial intelligence might be possible, so that there could be inorganic artefacts with the same mental features as we have. These angels, gods, and inorganic artefacts would all count as people--assuming, anyway, that being rational, intelligent, and self-conscious suffices for being a person. But I doubt whether they would have the same basic metaphysical nature as we have, or for that matter the same as each other. For all I know, some people are composite material objects, while others are simple immaterial ones. In other words, I don't know whether there is any one metaphysical sort of thing that people as such necessarily are. Or if there is, we cannot know it until we have either ruled out the possibility of gods, thinking machines, and the like, or else shown that despite appearances people of all these sorts would have to have the same basic metaphysical nature. Because I would rather not try to settle these matters, I ask only about the metaphysical nature of us human people.

Here are two alternative ways of putting my question, or perhaps different versions of it. First, we can move from the material to the formal mode, and ask what sort of things we refer to when we say 'I'. More generally, what sort of things do our personal pronouns

and proper names refer to? Second, we can ask about the nature of the beings who use those words--the ones holding the inquiry. What sort of beings think our thoughts and perform our actions? What sort of thing is now reading this sentence, and what sort of thing wrote it?

It is natural to suppose that these different formulations of the question all come to the same thing. I am whatever I refer to when I say 'I', just as Mars is whatever people refer to when they say 'Mars'. And I am whatever thinks my thoughts and performs my actions--what else could make them my thoughts and actions? But the questions are not strictly equivalent. As we shall see, some even say that they have different answers.

In any case, the question of what beings think our thoughts and speak our words is in a way more fundamental than the question of what things our personal pronouns and names refer to. We need to know what thinking, speaking beings there are before we can work out which of them are the referents of words like 'I'.

2 Some answers

In understanding a question it often helps to see what would count as an answer to it; and often the answers are easier to grasp than the question itself. So here are some accounts of what we might be.

One view is that we are animals: biological organisms. Some philosophers hold this view, but not many. No one denies that there is something right in saying that we are animals. If nothing else, we at least have animal bodies. But to have a body that is an animal is not to be an animal yourself. Not, anyway, unless you are the same thing as your body--which many philosophers, even materialists, deny.

Could we be material things but not animals? Well, we could be parts of animals: brains, perhaps, or parts of brains. Or we might be temporal parts of animals: you might be spatially the same size as your animal body but temporally shorter, in that the animal extends further into the past or future than you do. Many views are possible about what

spatial or temporal parts of animals we might be. These two views can also be combined: we might be temporal parts of brains (Hudson 2001: ch. 4).

Some philosophers deny that we are either animals or parts of animals, yet insist that we are nonetheless material things. They say that we are things made of the same matter as our animal bodies. The thinking behind this is that the same matter can make up two different objects at once. Specifically, the matter making up a typical human organism also makes up a certain non-organism; and these non-organisms are what we are (see §6 below).

Hume once said that we are ‘bundles of perceptions’ (1978: 252). Our bodies may be made of matter, but we ourselves are not. We are made up of mental states and events. Our parts are not cells or atoms, but memories and dreams. We are events rather than substances—rather like theatre productions.

An ancient view has it that we are simple (partless) immaterial substances. We are not made of matter, or perceptions, or anything else (Swinburne 1984, Zimmerman 2003).

There is even the seemingly paradoxical view that there is nothing that we are. We don't exist. There is nothing for our personal pronouns to refer to, and nothing thinks our thoughts. The atoms we call yours may be real enough; perhaps even the thoughts and experiences we call yours exist; but those atoms or mental states are not parts or states of any thinking being (Unger 1979).

There are other accounts of what we are, but that will do for present purposes. None of these views by itself purports to answer all my questions. They are at best partial accounts of what we are. The view that we are animals, for instance, does not by itself tell us whether we persist through time: for that we should need to know whether animals persist, and here there is room for disagreement. Still, each of the views tells us a good deal about what we are.

3 How the question differs from others

I take it that the question of what we are must have an answer. One of these views, or another one that I haven't mentioned, must be true. There must be some sort of thing that we are. Some sort of being is now reading this paper, or else nothing is. Likewise, when we use a singular personal pronoun like 'I' or 'she', we either refer to something or we don't. If we do, then that thing (or those things, if we refer to more than one thing) must have some basic metaphysical nature or other: it must be material or immaterial, simple or composite, a substance or a non-substance, momentary or persisting, and so on. If we don't refer to anything, that is presumably because there are no human people to be referred to.

The question of what we are is not one of the philosophical problems most of us learn about as students. But it probably won't seem completely new either. It sounds a bit like the traditional mind-body problem, and a bit like familiar problems of personal identity. How exactly does it relate to those problems?

The mind-body problem is usually taken to comprise questions about the nature of mental phenomena, such as belief and consciousness, and how those phenomena relate to non-mental matters, such as brain chemistry. Our question, by contrast, is about the nature of the subjects of mental phenomena: the beings that believe or are conscious. The two are of course connected: some accounts of what we are may rule out some views on the mind-body problem, and vice versa. But the questions are not so closely connected as one might suppose. We could know a good deal about mental phenomena and their relation to the physical and still know little about the metaphysical nature of mental subjects. If all mental events turned out to be physical events in another guise, for instance, that might rule out our being immaterial substances (though not everyone agrees: see Chisholm 1989). But it would not tell us whether we are organisms, brains, bundles of perceptions, or even whether we exist at all. Having a 'theory of mind'—an account of the nature of mental phenomena and their relation to the physical—would not tell us what we are. Likewise, knowing our basic metaphysical nature is likely to tell us

little about the nature of the mental: knowing whether we are organisms or brains or bundles of perceptions won't tell us the nature of belief or consciousness. So the question of what we are is not the mind-body problem.

How does our question relate to problems of personal identity? The most familiar problems of personal identity are the personhood question and the persistence question. The personhood question asks what it is to be a person. What is necessary and sufficient for something to count as a person, as opposed to a non-person? What have people got that non-people haven't got? The persistence question asks what it takes for us (or for people in general) to persist through time. What sorts of adventures is it possible, in the broadest sense of the word 'possible', for you to survive? What sort of thing would necessarily bring your existence to an end? What determines which past or future being is you?

The question of what we are is more or less completely unrelated to the personhood question. What qualifications a thing needs in order to count as a person is one thing; what sort of things actually have those qualifications—organisms, bundles of perceptions, or what have you—is another.

Suppose for the sake of argument that something is a person if and only if it is, as Locke proposed, 'a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places' (1975: 335). I take this to be a paradigmatic answer to the personhood question. Yet for all it says, 'thinking intelligent beings' might be material or immaterial, simple or composite, persisting or momentary. (How could something momentary 'consider itself as itself in different times and places'? Well, a thing might consider itself as existing at different times even if it doesn't, just as a poor man might consider himself rich.) Those who take us to be organisms, or bundles of perceptions, or immaterial substances, or any of the other things mentioned in the previous section all take those things to be thinking intelligent beings. Locke's definition, by itself, does nothing to help us choose among them. It fails to answer any of the questions that an account of what we are must answer.

It doesn't even tell us whether we exist at all--that is, whether anything satisfies the conditions for being a person. One could have a view about what it is to be a person without having any idea what sort of things we are metaphysically speaking. (This is more or less Locke's own position.)

To know what it is to be a person is therefore not to know what we are. Likewise, to know what we are is not to know what it is to be a person. Suppose for the sake of argument that we are human animals. That does not imply that to be a person is to be a human animal--even assuming that we ourselves are people. It is consistent with there being Martians or gods or angels who are people but not human animals. Nor does it imply that all human animals are people: it is consistent with the view that human animals in a persistent vegetative state don't count as people. The same goes for any other view of what we are. An account of our metaphysical nature implies virtually nothing about what it is to be a person.

The definition of personhood stands to the metaphysical nature of human people much as the definition of blackness stands to the chemical nature of the black objects on our planet. We could know what it is for a thing to be black (to have certain reflectance properties, say) without knowing anything about the chemistry of terrestrial black things. And we could know that all terrestrial black objects contain carbon without having a definition of blackness. The fact that all terrestrial black things contain carbon would imply nothing about what it is for a thing to be black. It is consistent with there being both carbonless black things and non-black things containing carbon.

What about the persistence question--what our identity over time consists in? It is also different from the question of what we are. What it takes for us to persist may be one aspect of our metaphysical nature. Knowing our persistence conditions would tell us something about what sort of things we are. But it wouldn't tell us much. An account of our persistence conditions will not by itself tell us whether we are material or immaterial, or what parts we have, or whether we are substances. What it takes for a person to

persist through time is one thing; what sort of beings have those persistence conditions, or indeed whether any do, is something else.

Take, for instance, the popular view that our identity through time consists in some sort of psychological continuity: you are that future being that in some sense inherits its mental features—beliefs, memories, desires, and so on—from you; and you are that past being whose mental features you have thus inherited. Never mind the precise nature of this inheritance—whether your mental life has to be ‘continuously physically realized’, say (Unger 1990: 108f.), or whether we need a ‘non-branching’ clause to deal with cases where two past or future beings are psychologically continuous in the relevant way with you as you are now. Suppose for the sake of argument that our identity over time consists in non-branching, continuously physically realized psychological continuity. Would that tell us what we are?

Not by itself it wouldn’t. It may have implications about what we are. It may rule out our being immaterial substances: it is hard to see how any sort of physical continuity could be necessary or sufficient for the persistence of an immaterial substance. It may also imply that we are not organisms, for it seems possible for any organism, even a human animal, to persist without any sort of psychological continuity at all (see §5 below). The information that we are neither immaterial substances nor organisms really would tell us something about what we are. But it would also leave a lot open. Moreover, the psychological-continuity view does not actually say that we are not immaterial substances or organisms, and the implication might be disputed.

The psychological-continuity view therefore gives at best a radically incomplete picture of what we are. Even if we can derive some of our most general and fundamental properties from that view, few of those derivations will be straightforward, and even then the picture will be fragmentary. Yet that view is a paradigmatic answer to the persistence question. Saying what it takes for us to persist does not tell us what we are. The reverse also holds: we could know a great deal about what sort of things we are without knowing our persistence conditions.

So the question of what we are is different from the more familiar questions about mind, body, and personal identity. That may explain why it is often neglected. It is common practice to defend an account of our identity over time at great length without saying a word about what we are, except perhaps to rule out our being immaterial substances (Nozick 1981: ch. 1, Parfit 1984: part 3, and Unger 1990 are just three notable examples of this). When the matter is addressed at all, it is frequently little more than an afterthought (e.g. Shoemaker 1984: 112-14).

4 The thinking-animal problem

I have tried to explain what I mean by the question of what we are, and how it differs from other, more familiar questions. All we need now is an answer. What are we?

Well, I wish I knew. Every account of what we are that I can think of appears to face grave objections. I cannot argue in detail for this claim here (see Olson 2007 for that), but in the remainder of this paper I will give some examples of the troubles afflicting some of the most likely accounts of what we are.

Take the view that we are biological organisms: 'animalism'. It sounds reasonable enough on the face of it. The alternatives--that we are brains, or temporal parts of animals, or immaterial substances, or what have you--sound farfetched by comparison. There is even what looks like a powerful argument for animalism: the 'thinking-animal problem' (Carter 1989, Olson 2003).

Nearly everyone agrees that there are human animals. Better, there are around six billion human animals walking the earth--the same as the number of human people. For each of us there is a human animal, and for every human animal (barring perhaps a few pathological cases) there is one of us. Those animals are very like ourselves. They sit in our chairs and sleep in our beds; they do our work and read books and think about the future. They seem to be so like us, both physically and mentally, that it is hard to tell the difference. That makes it hard to maintain that we are anything other than animals.

Consider the animal you would be if you were any animal--'your body', if you like. That organism would seem to be conscious and intelligent. It has just the sort of brain and nervous system that ought to enable it to think--the same one as you have. It has the same surroundings as you, and the same history. It shows all the same behavioural evidence of intelligence and conscious awareness as you do. How could something have all that, and yet fail to be conscious or intelligent? In fact the animal appears to be mentally just like you. Every thought or experience of yours would seem to be a thought or experience of the animal's. What could account for any mental difference between you? That makes it look as if the animal is you. How could you be anything other than the being that thinks your thoughts?

Consider what it would mean if you were something other than the animal. The animal thinks. And you think. So there would be two beings thinking your thoughts: the thinking animal, and you, a thinking non-animal. More generally, every human person would share her thoughts with an animal numerically different from her. Every thought would have two thinkers. There would be twice as many rational, intelligent, self-conscious beings as we thought. If being rational, intelligent, and self-conscious suffices for being a person, there would be twice as many people as we thought. And how could you ever know which thinker or person you are--the animal or the non-animal? You may think you're the non-animal. But wouldn't the animal have the same grounds for believing that it was the non-animal? It would of course be mistaken. How would you know that you are not making this mistake? Even if you're not the animal, it is hard to see how you could have any grounds for believing that you're not.

Those who think that we are something other than animals--and who claim to have grounds for their view--have three possible responses to this reasoning.

First, they can say that there is really no animal that you could be. Despite appearances, there is no such thing as your animal body. Perhaps the only material things are simple particles, or masses of matter that never change their parts; or maybe the entire material world is unreal. If there are no such things as animals (and if we can

know this), then there is no problem about knowing that you are not an animal. This would be a metaphysical solution to the thinking-animal problem.

A second response is to accept that there is an animal located where you are, but deny that it thinks as you do. It will not be easy to explain why a human organism with a healthy nervous system in normal circumstances should be unable to think. And surely there would have to be such an explanation; it couldn't just be a fundamental, 'brute' fact about human animals that they cannot think, in the way that it might be a brute, unexplainable fact about electrons that they are negatively charged. In any event, if human animals don't think, there is again no problem about knowing that we are not human animals. This would be a psychological solution to the problem (Shoemaker 1999, 2004, Baker 2000; see also Olson 2002a).

Third, non-animalists can accept that there are human organisms, and that they think as we do, but argue that it is nonetheless possible for us to know that we--the referents of our personal pronouns and proper names--are not those animals. This would still leave us with the repugnant view that every human thought has at least two thinkers--and thinkers of different metaphysical kinds, no less--but it would at least solve the epistemic problem of how we know what sort of things we are. Accordingly, we might call it an epistemic solution to the problem (Noonan 1998, forthcoming; see also Olson 2002b). (According to this view the question of what we are, or what our personal pronouns refer to, has a different answer from the question of what beings think our thoughts. It implies that I am not the being that thinks my thoughts, but rather one several such beings.)

There is no other way of solving the thinking-animal problem--apart from accepting animalism, that is. I suspect that most of us will find these three lines of thought--the metaphysical, psychological, and epistemic solutions--unattractive. That looks like a good reason to suppose that we are animals, and a serious problem for any alternative to animalism.

5 Familiar objections

So what's wrong with saying that we're animals? Well, it is widely held that we have properties incompatible with those of animals: different persistence conditions, for instance. Many philosophers believe that some sort of psychological continuity is both necessary and sufficient for us to persist through time. Your cerebrum might be transplanted into another head, so that the one who ended up with that organ had your memories and was psychologically continuous with you as you were before the operation. The orthodox view is that she would therefore be you: you would go along with your transplanted cerebrum. But no sort of psychological continuity is either necessary or sufficient for a human organism to persist. No human animal would go along with its transplanted cerebrum: the animal we call your body would stay behind with an empty head if its cerebrum were removed (Olson 1997: 114-119). So this popular view of personal identity over time implies that you are not an animal. Not only are you not essentially an animal; nothing that is even accidentally or contingently an animal would go along with its transplanted cerebrum.

Others say that we have different essential properties from those of human animals (Baker 2000: 59). Each of us has certain mental properties, such as the capacity for first-person thought, essentially. (If having those mental properties is what it is to be a person, this amounts to saying that we are essentially people.) The claim is not merely that we could not exist as people if we lacked those mental properties, but that we could not possibly exist at all without them. But no biological organism has any mental properties essentially. Every human animal starts out as an embryo with no mental properties, and may end up in a persistent vegetative state in which it lacks even the capacity to acquire any. The claim that we have certain mental properties essentially is therefore incompatible with our being animals. Animalism entails that all our mental properties are merely accidental and temporary features of us.

Many philosophers take considerations like these to be a conclusive refutation of

animalism. But they are not the ‘grave objections’ I alluded to earlier. Every interesting metaphysical claim has unwelcome consequences, and as unwelcome consequences go these seem to me pretty mild. Couldn’t we just be wrong about who would be who in imaginary brain-transplant cases, just as we can be wrong about who would be who in other bizarre cases (amnesia, brainwashing, duplication) where the usual patterns of evidence break down? And how can we be so confident that we have mental properties essentially? Compared with the thinking-animal problem, these objections sound like quibbles.

6 Constitution

To my mind, the most serious objections to animalism have nothing to do with brain transplants or essential properties. The real worry is that there might be non-animals thinking our thoughts. That would make it hard to see how we could ever know that we are animals. In other words, animalism itself may face its own analogue of the thinking-animal problem. That would leave animalists no better off than their opponents. I will discuss two possible sources of this trouble.

In §2 I mentioned the view that we are not animals, but rather non-animals sharing their matter with animals. This means that it is possible in general for the same matter to make up two or more objects (substances) at the same time. This general view is sometimes called constitutionalism, on the grounds that most of those who hold it say that whenever two things are made of the same matter, one of them ‘constitutes’ the other.

A number of metaphysical puzzles about material objects support constitutionalism (Thomson 1983, 1998; Baker 2000). Suppose we take a lump of clay and model it into a statue of Boris Yeltsin. The lump and the statue don’t seem to be the same thing. The statue seems to come into being when we make the lump Yeltsin-shaped, but the lump seems to exist before then. And even if the lump and the statue have precisely the same

career, it seems that either could outlive the other. The lump would outlive the statue if we squashed it: that would destroy the statue but merely change the lump's shape. If we broke an arm off the statue and burnt it to ashes, then replaced it with a new arm made of different clay, the statue would outlive the lump. But a thing cannot outlive itself. If this is right, no lump is identical with any statue. Yet the statue and the lump in our story are made of the same matter at the same time. The lump, as the jargon has it, would constitute the statue. Constitutionalism would be true.

Although constitutionalism is formally consistent with animalism, the two views sit uneasily together. Constitutionalism leads us to expect every human animal to stand to something as a clay statue stands to a lump of clay: something that would outlive the animal if it were squashed, and which the animal would outlive if one of its hands were cut off and burnt to ashes. It would be surprising, anyway, if there were a lump of clay constituting the clay statue of Yeltsin but no lump of flesh (or mass of matter, or aggregate of atoms, or some such thing) constituting Yeltsin himself. Such a combination of views would seem unprincipled, like holding that statues of men are constituted by lumps but not statues of women (but see Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1997: 87-88, 99-100).

Now suppose you are an animal. And suppose you stand to a lump of flesh, or some such thing, as a clay statue stands to a lump of clay. This lump of flesh would be physically indistinguishable from you for as long as it constitutes you. It would have the same brain and nervous system as you have, and the same surroundings. It would show the same behavioural evidence of intelligence and conscious awareness as you do. That suggests that, while it constitutes you, the lump would be conscious and intelligent-- indeed, it would be mentally just like you. Every current thought or experience of yours would be a thought or experience on the part of the lump now constituting you.

This would be an serious problem for those who believe that we are animals. For how could you ever know that you are the animal, and not the lump that shares your every thought? Even if you were the animal and not the lump, it seems that you could never

have any reason to believe that you are. For that matter, it is a problem for anyone who takes us to be anything other than lumps of flesh. And although philosophers have held many strange views about what we are, I have yet to meet one who thinks that we are lumps of flesh.

Animalists--and others--are committed to there being a solution to this problem: a way of knowing that we are not lumps of flesh. There would seem to be just three possible solutions, analogous to the three solutions to the thinking-animal problem.

One is to deny that there are any lumps of flesh or masses of matter or anything else made of the same matter as we are. That would be a metaphysical solution to the problem. Given that lumps of flesh or masses of matter constitute animals if anything constitutes anything, this would mean rejecting constitutionalism altogether, thus giving up an attractive account of the lump-and-statue story and many similar cases.

The second possible solution is to accept that lumps of flesh constitute us, but deny that they think in the way that we do: a psychological solution. But it is not obvious what could prevent a lump of flesh physically indistinguishable from one of us from thinking. And if there were an explanation of why no lump of flesh can think, anti-animalists--in particular those who say that we are material things constituted by animals--might be able to use it to explain why animals cannot think, thus depriving animalism of its principal support.

Finally, one might accept that there are lumps of flesh, and that they think as we do, but argue that we can still somehow know that we are not those lumps: an epistemic solution. But it is hard to see how this would go. Nor is it clear that it would benefit animalists in the end: if they can argue that we could know we are not the lumps sharing our thoughts, anti-animalists might be able to argue in a similar way that we can know we are not the animals that think our thoughts, once more undermining the support for animalism.

The problem for animalism may be even worse than this suggests. If human animals are constituted by lumps of flesh, we might expect the animals themselves to constitute

thinking beings that persist by virtue of psychological continuity, or beings that have certain mental properties essentially. Although no one has ever proposed an acceptable general account of when one material object constitutes another (apart from never, that is), most of those who accept constitutionalism find it obvious--so obvious as to require no further argument--that normal human organisms constitute beings that persist by virtue of psychological continuity, or that have certain mental properties essentially. If they are right, the only way to defend animalism would be to argue for an epistemic solution. But that looks hopeless. Even if we could know that we are not the thinking lumps of flesh that constitute us, I cannot imagine what grounds we could have for supposing that we are not the essentially mental beings we constitute, if there are such things.

7 Thinking Heads

Here is another example of the same sort of general trouble. Consider your head. It has a brain and sense organs, just as you have. It shows the same behavioural evidence of intelligence and conscious awareness as you do. That suggests that your head is conscious and intelligent, indeed that it is mentally just like you. Your head is not physically identical with you, as a lump of flesh constituting you would be. But it is hard to see why that should stop your head from being conscious and intelligent. Presumably it would be conscious and intelligent if the rest of you were cut away and replaced with appropriate life-support machinery. How could its being attached to the rest of you, by itself, prevent it from thinking?

If your head were able to think just as you do, this too would be a serious problem for those who think that we are animals. More generally, it would be a problem for anyone who takes us to be anything other than undetached heads--and no one thinks that we are heads. For how could you ever know that you are the animal (or whatever), and not the head that shares your every thought? Even if you were the animal and not the head, it

seems that you could never have any reason to believe that you are. And if your head thinks your thoughts, it is likely that many other parts of your animal body do as well: your brain, for instance, and your upper half. Every part of the animal that includes your brain would be a candidate for being you.

Once again, animalists (and more generally those who deny that we are heads) are committed to there being a solution to this problem: a way of knowing that we are not thinking heads. Again there appear to be just three possibilities. One is to deny that there are any undetached heads--or brains, or upper halves, or any other proper parts of us that include our brains. We may accept that some of your particles are 'arranged capitally', but we must deny that they make up a head, or anything else. That would mean abandoning beliefs that we learned at mother's knee--a drastic measure (van Inwagen 1981, 1990). Second, we might accept that there are such things as heads, but deny that they think as we do (Burke 2003). But again, there is no obvious explanation of why this should be so. Finally, we might accept that our heads think as we do and argue that we can still somehow know that we are animals (or whatever) and not heads.

As before, the second and third strategies threaten to play into the hands of the anti-animalists: if our heads cannot think, or if we can somehow know that we are not our thinking heads, then anti-animalists may be able to argue in the same way that human animals cannot think, or that we can somehow know that we are not the animals that think our thoughts.

8 The Messy View

I have tried to articulate a general metaphysical objection to animalism. There is reason to believe that there are non-animals thinking our thoughts, and it is hard to see what grounds we could ever have for taking ourselves to be animals rather than these thinking non-animals. Human animals may be excellent candidates for being us--the referents of our personal pronouns and the subjects of our thoughts and actions--but

they may not be the only candidates: lumps of flesh constituting us, and our heads or brains, may be candidates too. And analogous problems arise on any sensible account of what we are.

Nor are lumps of flesh and undetached heads the only entities that animalists (and others) need to worry about. We might have temporal parts. It may be, for instance, that for each day of your life there is a part of you that is just like you are during that day, but exists at no other time. This is a consequence of the ontology of temporal parts, or 'four-dimensionalism', currently much in vogue. (Most of those who reject the constitutionalist's account of lumps and statues take this line, saying that every persisting object is composed of temporal parts, and that the statue of Yeltsin in our story is a temporal part of the lump: see e.g. Sider 2001: 154-161.) If there is a temporal part of you that extends from midnight last night until midnight tonight, this would be just as troublesome for animalists and others as undetached heads and lumps of flesh would be.

Animalists and others will hope to give metaphysical, psychological, or epistemic answers to these objections: they will hope that the troublesome entities are unreal, or that they exist but cannot think as we do, or that they think as we do but we are nonetheless able to know that we are the animals and not any of the troublesome entities. (They might say different things in different cases: that there are no lumps of flesh constituting us, that undetached heads and brains exist but cannot think, and that day-long temporal parts of human animals think as we do, but we can nonetheless know that we are not such things, for instance.)

But suppose these hopes are in vain: suppose there really are non-animals as well as animals thinking our thoughts, and that we can never know that we are the animals rather than the non-animals. In that case we could not say that we are animals. What then? Ought we to conclude that we are not animals, but rather thinking lumps of flesh, or essential thinkers constituted by animals, or heads, or temporal parts of animals? Well, no. Those views face an analogous problem: if for all we know we might be thinking lumps of flesh or heads or day-long animal segments, then for all we know we

might be thinking animals. If we can't know that we're animals, we can't know that we're not animals either.

That would be a mess. We couldn't say that we are animals, because all sorts of non-animals think our thoughts too. Neither could we say that we are non-animals, because animals also think our thoughts. But if we are neither animals nor non-animals, what are we? (It's no good saying that we don't exist either, if all sorts of beings think our thoughts. Clearly if anything thinks my thoughts, I do; and if I think, I exist.)

In that case the question of what we are would have no straightforward answer. There would be no one sort of being that thinks my thoughts: many beings of different sorts would think them. And there would presumably be no one sort of being that our personal pronouns and proper names refer to either: human animals, lumps of flesh, undetached heads, and what not would be equally good candidates for being the referent of the name 'Olson'. Perhaps that name would not refer at all. Or maybe someone who said something like 'Olson is hungry' would say many different things at once, one for each candidate for being me. Or maybe the term would have indeterminate reference: it would definitely refer to something, but it would not definitely refer to an animal, or to a lump of flesh, or to a head, or to any other particular thing.

Should I be an animal, then, or not? We could not answer either yes or no. Perhaps the best answer would be that, while it is not definitely true that I am an animal, it is not definitely true that I am not an animal either. Likewise, if there is a lump of flesh now constituting this animal, it is not definitely true either that I am a lump of flesh or that I am not a lump of flesh. And so on, for all the other beings that think our thoughts. It is indeterminate whether we are animals, lumps of flesh, undetached heads, or any of the other thinking beings we have been considering. We might call this the messy view of our metaphysical nature.

How bad would the messy view be? Well, suppose it were indeterminate whether we are animals or heads. Then it would be radically indeterminate how big we are: whether we are the size of animals or the size of heads. It would be just as true to say or believe

that I weigh five pounds and would fit into a hatbox as it would be to say that I weigh 150 pounds and am nearly six feet tall. Or if it were indeterminate whether we are animals or day-long temporal parts of animals, it would be indeterminate whether we persist for seventy-odd years or for only a day. It would be just as true to say that I am less than a day old as it is to say that I am forty-something. Or if it were indeterminate whether we are animals or lumps of flesh, it would be indeterminate whether we could survive being squashed, or losing a hand. It would be just as correct to say that losing a hand would kill me instantly as it would be to say that it would only make me smaller.

Of course, it may still be customary to say such things as ‘Olson weighs 150 pounds’, ‘Buggins is older than he looks’, and ‘Bloggs has been more cautious since she lost her hand, and not customary to say ‘Olson weighs five pounds’, ‘Buggins may look 40, but he’s less than a day old’, or ‘Bloggs is more cautious than her predecessor—you know, the one who died when she lost her hand in the mincer’. (Nor would it be customary to say such things as ‘it is indeterminate whether Olson weighs 150 pounds or five pounds’.) But though it may be customary to say the things we ordinarily say and not customary to say the outrageous things we might say instead, on the messy view the customary sayings are no more true than the outrageous ones.

Few of us will find the messy view appealing. But we can avoid it only if all the problems about different sorts of beings thinking our thoughts have a metaphysical or psychological or epistemic solution. And the prospects for such a solution do not look especially bright. Many of the candidate solutions are hardly more appealing than the messy view itself. At any rate I am not confident that the problems can be solved in a satisfactory way that leaves an unambiguous answer to the question of what we are. That is why I said I don’t know what we are.

In any case, the matter turns on large and difficult questions of ontology, the philosophy of mind, and epistemology: Are constitutionalism or four-dimensionalism true? What are the parts of a living organism? What does it take for a thing to have mental properties? What is the nature of self-knowledge and self-reference? Only when

we have answered these questions can we know what we are.¹

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