

Eric T. Olson
University of Sheffield
e.olson@shef.ac.uk

Thinking Animals and the Reference of 'I'

In this essay I explore the idea that the solution to some important problems of personal identity lies in the philosophy of language: more precisely in the nature of first-person reference. I will argue that the “linguistic solution” is at best partly successful.

1. The puzzle of the thinking animal

Animals, including human animals, do not persist through time by virtue of psychological or mental continuity. No sort of mental continuity is either necessary or sufficient for a human animal to persist. Not necessary: each human animal started out as an embryo, and may end up in a persistent vegetative state; and no embryo or human vegetable is mentally continuous with anything. A human animal can persist without any sort of mental continuity. Not sufficient: If your cerebrum were put into another head, the being that ended up with that organ, and he alone, would be mentally continuous with you. But the surgeons would not thereby move a human animal from one head to another. They would merely move an organ from one animal to another. A human animal can be mentally continuous—with a continuous physical basis to boot—with something other than itself (Olson 1997: 73-88, 114-119).

It is widely held, however, that some sort of mental continuity is necessary or sufficient for us to persist. We therefore have a property that no animal has. It follows that we are not human animals. That is, none of us is numerically identical with a human animal.

This raises a problem. Presumably there is a human animal intimately connected with you: the one sometimes called your body. The psychological-continuity view implies that that animal is not identical with you. Yet it would appear to be rational and intelligent. At any rate it has a normally functioning adult nervous system. It is physically indistinguishable from you. It has the same surroundings and history. What more does it take for a thing to be able to think? What could prevent the animal from thinking? So there would appear, at least, to be two rational, thinking beings within your skin: a person with psychological identity conditions, and an animal with non-psychological identity conditions.

In that case there are two thinking beings wherever we thought there was just one. You are never really alone: a watchful animal always accompanies you. Worse, how could you ever know which one you are? You may think you're the person. But whatever you think, the animal thinks too. So the

animal would seem to believe that it is a person, with psychological identity conditions. It has all the same reasons for thinking so as you have. Yet it is mistaken. If you were the animal and not the person, you'd still think you were the person. So for all you know, you're the one making the mistake. For all you know, you don't have psychological identity conditions. For all you know you aren't even a person.

Come to that, why isn't the animal a person? It satisfies all the usual definitions of the term. Could there really be rational, intelligent, morally responsible non-people, empirically indistinguishable from real people? But if the animal is a person, then there are two people (or persons) sitting in your chair and reading this. Not all people would have psychological identity conditions. That would undermine the original assumption that we have psychological identity conditions.

Call this the puzzle of the thinking animal. In fact it is three problems. If, as the psychological-continuity view implies, you are not the animal located where you are, then there would seem to be more thinking beings than we thought: the overcrowding problem. Second, it is hard to see how you could ever know which thinker you are, the animal or the person (the one with psychological identity conditions): the epistemic problem. Third, the situation seems to rule out any acceptable account of what it is to be a person. If human animals are intelligent but aren't people, then only half of the beings with our mental lives count as people. Yet if they are people, then only half the people have the identity conditions that the psychological-continuity view says they have. Call this the personhood problem. I will focus especially on the epistemic problem.

2. Thinking heads and person-segments

The problem of the thinking animal is my main concern in this essay. It will be useful, though, to compare it with two more puzzles.

Many philosophers believe that we are made up of arbitrary undetached parts. Roughly, any subregion of the region of space you occupy contains a material object of its own. And even if we don't have arbitrary spatial parts, nearly everyone believes that we have such apparently non-arbitrary parts as heads and brains.

This raises a problem. Consider your head. Your head isn't you: it is smaller than you are. Yet it has a brain and is hooked up to a nervous system and sense organs just like yours. It interacts with a surrounding community of thinkers and speakers, has an appropriate evolutionary history, and so on. It would presumably be able to think if the rest of you were cut away. Shouldn't that make it rational, intelligent, and self-conscious even now?

If so, then there are two different thinkers wherever we thought there was just one: a person and a head. (Since they overlap, we may not want to call them "wholly distinct". But they are numerically different.) Far more

than two, in fact, for if there is such a thing as your head, there are other parts of you that include your brain and raise the same problem. How could you ever know which one you are? You may think you're the person: the whole human being. But whatever you think, your head thinks also. So your head would seem to believe that it, too, is a whole person. It has all the same reasons for thinking so as you have. Yet it is mistaken. If you were the head rather than the person, you'd still think you were the person. For all you know, you're the one making the mistake.

Come to that, why isn't your head a person? It would seem to be "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places," to use Locke's famous words. Isn't that what it is to be a person?

So the belief that there is such a thing as your undetached head raises an overcrowding problem, an epistemic problem, and a personhood problem analogous to those that arise on the psychological-continuity view. Call this the puzzle of the thinking head.

Many philosophers say that we have temporal parts. For every time when you exist, there is a concrete object--a part of you, and not merely a part of your history or career--located at just that time.

This too generates a puzzle. Consider the temporal part of you that extends from midnight yesterday until midnight tonight: your "today part". Your today part isn't you, since you extend much further into the past and, with any luck, into the future. Yet it has a normal adult brain and nervous system. It is physically indistinguishable from you as you are now. It has the same surroundings and evolutionary history. Shouldn't that make your today part rational, intelligent, and self-conscious? Doesn't it have the very mental properties you have today?

If so, there are two numerically different thinkers sitting there and reading this: a person and a day-long "person-segment". Far more than two in fact. How could you ever know which one you are? You may think you're the person. But whatever you think, your today part thinks as well. So that segment would seem to believe that it, too, is a whole person. It has all the same reasons for thinking so as you have. Yet it is mistaken. If you were the segment rather than the person, you'd still think you were the person. For all you know, you're the one making the mistake. Come to that, shouldn't the segment's mental properties make it a person? This is the puzzle of the thinking person-segment.

Those who think that our identity consists in psychological continuity and that we have arbitrary spatial parts and that we have temporal parts--not an unusual combination of views--face all three problems.

3. Metaphysical and psychological solutions

Each puzzle starts with a natural assumption about what sort of thing you are. It then purports to identify something that most of us are convinced

that we aren't--an organism with non-psychological identity conditions, a spatial part of an organism, or a temporal part of an organism--and points out that that thing would seem to be psychologically and epistemically indistinguishable from you, to the point of having the same beliefs about itself as you have about yourself, and the same grounds for them. This leads to no end of trouble. Most acutely, it threatens our assumptions about what we are. For all anyone can know, he might be one of the inconvenient rivals. Some of our deepest convictions about ourselves--that psychology is relevant to our identity through time, that we extend all the way out to our skin, and that we persist for many years, for instance--appear to be entirely unwarranted. Worse: even though there are beings of the sort we take ourselves to be sitting in our chairs and thinking our thoughts, we can have no way of knowing whether we are those beings.

I take this to be absurd. The reason, you may think, is that the puzzles themselves are absurd. Generations of philosophers have accepted the psychological-continuity view, the existence of undetached heads, and the ontology of temporal parts. Why does no one (or almost no one) worry about the problems I say they give rise to? Because no one ever thought of them? Not likely. Presumably no one thought they were worth troubling about. Not that their consequences aren't troubling. The supposed puzzles have been ignored because they are all based on some obvious mistake--a mistake so elementary that no competent philosopher would ever make it.

If there is some elementary mistake in the puzzles, I have been unable to find it. As far as I can see, they all begin with widely held assumptions and lead by impeccable logic to absurd conclusions. If we cannot accept those conclusions, we must deny some of the assumptions. Here are two ways of proceeding.

One strategy is to deny the existence of the unwanted entities. Perhaps you are the animal located where you are. You have the identity conditions of animals. Unless we are badly mistaken about what those conditions are, you would stay behind if your cerebrum were transplanted, and you may one day be an unthinking vegetable. The psychological-continuity view of personal identity is completely wrong. Nor do you coincide with anything that has psychological identity conditions. The only thinking being sitting in your chair is a human animal. We might call this a metaphysical solution. It says that the problem of the thinking animal is based on the false assumption that there are beings with psychological identity conditions. (An alternative metaphysical solution would be to deny the existence of human animals. The only thing sitting in your chair has psychological identity conditions.)

A metaphysical solution to the problem of the thinking head would be to deny the existence of undetached heads. Some of your particles may be "arranged capitally"; but they don't compose any larger thing. There is nothing made up of just those particles. (It is no help to say that

undetached heads "aren't genuine objects", or are "merely conceptual parts" of human beings, whatever that may mean. At least that doesn't by itself solve anything. If such things exist at all, and can think, they are thinking things numerically different from you.) Not only are there no undetached heads. We have no parts that can think as we do: no brains, and no parts that include brains.

The natural metaphysical solution to the problem of the thinking person-segment is to deny the existence of person-segments. There is no material object sitting in your chair that came into being at midnight last night and will cease to be at midnight tonight. We have no temporal parts. We "endure" rather than "perdure", as the jargon has it.

A second strategy is to admit the existence of the troublesome entities, but deny that they can think in the way that you and I can. The animal associated with you can't wonder what thing it is. That is presumably because it can't think at all. (Let the occurrence of any propositional attitude count as thinking.) Since you know that you think, you can know that you are not an animal. That would also explain why the animal isn't a person. This is a psychological solution. It says that the problem of the thinking animal is based on a false assumption about the mental properties of human organisms. Likewise, we could deny that your head or your brain or any other proper spatial part of a human being can think; and one might, I suppose, deny that the temporal parts of human beings can think.

4. Unpopular implications

With the possible exception of rejecting temporal parts, the metaphysical solutions are unpopular. It is easy to see why.

If we are animals, no sort of mental continuity is either necessary or sufficient for us to persist. Psychological considerations are entirely irrelevant to the identity of a person (or at any rate a human person) over time. Personal identity is a matter of biology. Our identity conditions are not importantly different from those of worms. Centuries of traditional thinking go out the window.

If there are no such things as undetached heads or brains, then our ordinary beliefs about the ontology of concrete objects are badly mistaken. It must become a serious question whether there are such things as hands, or tables, or planets, or indeed any familiar material objects at all. The mind boggles.

The psychological solutions are no better. It is easy enough to say that human animals or heads or person-segments can't think. It is another thing to explain why they can't. And an explanation seems needed. If one material thing has the rich mental life that you have while another has no mental life at all, or at best a mental life that is radically impoverished in comparison with yours, we expect there to be some further qualitative difference between them that accounts for their mental difference. I have

never seen a good explanation of why a being with the same brain, the same sense organs, and the same sort of surroundings and history as a thinking being should nonetheless be unable to think.

Not that it hasn't been tried. It is sometimes said that thinking is a "maximal" concept: by definition, no thinking thing can be a proper part of another thinking thing. That is why no temporal or spatial part of you can think.

This seems unlikely. The claim that some thinking beings might have smaller thinking beings as parts may be false, but it surely isn't false by the very idea of thinking. Most psychologists and philosophers of mind would be surprised to learn that the concept of belief or perception had a maximality constraint built into it. It looks like an ad hoc stipulation. And no stipulation can prevent a thing from thinking.

In any case, the maximality of thought can no more explain why your head can't think than stipulating that slaves aren't human explains why they lack human rights. It doesn't explain why being a part of a thinking thing prevents a thing from thinking. In fact it doesn't even entail the supposed fact that undetached heads or temporal parts of human beings cannot think. It entails that if whole human beings can think, then their heads can't. But it also entails that if heads can think, human beings can't. And it provides no grounds for choosing between these alternatives. It also does nothing to solve the problem of the thinking animal.

A more interesting suggestion is that animals can't think because they have the wrong identity conditions. Shoemaker (1999: 295-303) has argued that the nature of mental properties entails that mental continuity must suffice for anything with such properties to persist. Since this is not true of any organism, no organism could have mental properties. But material things with the right identity conditions can think, and organisms can "constitute" such things. Even if this is right, however (and I think it is unlikely: see Olson forthcoming), it is hard to see how it could be generalized to solve the other puzzles.

In any case, the problem of the thinking person-segment admits of no psychological solution. Virtually all "four-dimensionalists" say that a persisting being has a temporary property at a time by virtue of the fact that a more-or-less momentary temporal part of it located at that time has that property without qualification. A temporally extended being thinks at a given time because the temporal part of it located at that time thinks. This is the four-dimensionalist solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics (see e.g. Lewis 1986: 202-204). Without thinking stages or segments, there could be no thinking beings at all. This may not imply that your today part can think. But it does imply that everyone has many temporal parts of brief duration that think.

5. A linguistic solution

The metaphysical and psychological solutions to the puzzles are for the most part radically at odds with orthodox philosophical thinking. And there appears to be no psychological solution to the problem of the thinking person-segment. Surely there must be a better way to solve the puzzles?

Let us consider a linguistic solution. The idea is that the problems arise only if we make naïve assumptions about the semantics of certain ordinary expressions. We can solve them by adopting the right philosophy of language.

Such an account of the "overcrowding" aspect of the puzzles is well known (Lewis 1976). The claim that the ontology of temporal parts implies that there are far more people or thinking beings than we thought is said to rely on the naïve assumption that there is only one way of counting. It assumes that we always count numerically distinct things as two.

This, the idea goes, is a mistake. If there are things other than you that share your brain and your thoughts, no matter. Whenever two or more beings relate in the way in which you relate to your today part, we "count them as one" for ordinary purposes. There may be an uncountable infinity of numerically different beings sitting here and thinking these thoughts-- "counting by identity", that is. But we don't always count by identity. When I say, in the ordinary business of life, that I am alone in the room, I don't mean that everyone in the room is numerically identical with me. I mean only that everyone in the room relates to me in some intimate way that doesn't imply strict identity: that everyone in the room shares my thoughts, for instance. We have no ordinary beliefs about the number of numerically different people. Why should we? What matters in real life is how many people (or thinking beings) there are who don't overlap and share their thoughts. So the view that each of us shares his current thoughts with an uncountable infinity of temporal parts is consistent with everything we ordinarily say and believe about how many thinkers there are.

This works as well for the problems of the thinking animal and thinking head as it does for the problem of the thinking person-segment. We simply count you, your thinking animal, and your thinking head as one. Counting in the ordinary way, there is only one thinker there.

It would be an exaggeration to say that this entirely solves the overcrowding problem. Never mind our ordinary, non-philosophical beliefs. The thought that there are twice as many numerically different rational beings in our midst as the census-takers report is a very strange one. The thought that there are infinitely many such beings is a good candidate for being absurd. The supposed fact that this is consistent with everything the unphilosophical man in the street believes makes it no easier for the rest of us to believe. In any case, this clever idea does nothing to explain how you can know which of the various beings who think your thoughts you are. And it does nothing to explain why those beings are not people, if indeed they are not. It does nothing to solve the epistemic and personhood problems.

Here we can appeal to a more ingenious linguistic solution. Harold Noonan has developed it most fully (1998, 1999, 2001), though similar thoughts have occurred to others as well (e.g. Chandler 1969, Feldman 2000: 111f., Heller 2000: 378). The idea is that the epistemic problem arises only if we assume that any being that says or thinks 'I' thereby refers to itself. That may be what we learned at our mother's knee. But it too is a naïve assumption. Noonan says it is false.

Consider the human animal associated with you. How do you know you're not it? Well, plainly, you are the being you refer to when you say 'I'. But when the animal says 'I', it doesn't refer to itself. It refers to you. That is because you are a person and the animal isn't, and personal pronouns like 'I', in their paradigmatic uses at least, refer only to people. 'I' doesn't simply refer to whatever utters it. It refers to whatever person utters it. When a non-person says 'I', that pronoun refers to the person who shares in that utterance. (Presumably there will always be such a person. Any non-person that speaks English shares its thought and speech with a person.) And first-person thoughts share their content with the first-person utterances that express them. So the animal associated with you doesn't mistakenly believe itself to be a person and not an animal. When it thinks, "I am a person," it believes truly that you are a person. No one is mistaken. The belief that one is a person and not an animal is guaranteed to be true, no matter what being has it.

Why isn't the animal a person? Noonan says it is because a person is by definition an object of first-person reference: a being that refers to itself by saying 'I'. People are the things that the personal pronouns denote. That's why we call them personal pronouns. But why doesn't the animal refer to itself when it says 'I'? Noonan's answer, apparently, is that the animal doesn't refer to itself when it says 'I' because it isn't a person. But its not being a person was merely its not referring to itself when it says 'I'. The personal pronouns don't refer to human animals because those animals aren't people, and they aren't people because the personal pronouns don't refer to them. If that is all there is to it, this is no explanation at all. We might as well say that there is no reason why animals aren't people. But then there is no reason to suppose that the animal associated with you refers to you rather than to itself when it says 'I'.

Presumably Noonan means to say that a person is by definition something that has psychological persistence conditions (among other features, perhaps). More precisely, it is a being for whose persistence some sort of mental continuity is both necessary and sufficient. Translated into the language of the temporal-parts ontology, the claim is that a person is by definition a maximal aggregate of psychologically interconnected person stages. For short, a person is a psychological continuer. Since human animals are not psychological continuers, they aren't people, and so their first-person thoughts and utterances don't refer to them, but to the people

who share in those thoughts and utterances.

So if you are a psychological continuer and not an animal, you can know that this is the case. As a competent speaker of English you know at least implicitly that the word 'I' refers only to people, and that people are by definition psychological continuers. And you know, of course, that you are whatever you refer to when you say 'I'. From this you can infer that you are a person and a psychological continuer. You can infer that you are not the animal on the grounds that animals are not psychological continuers, and so not people, and so not among the referents of the personal pronouns.

If you are a maximal aggregate of psychologically interconnected person-stages and not your today part, you can know this too. Your today part is not a person because it isn't a psychological continuer. (Mental continuity is insufficient for it to persist.) So when you say 'I', you don't refer to your today part. So you are not your today part. If you have temporal parts at all, a maximal aggregate of psychologically interconnected person-stages says 'I' whenever you do; and the semantics of that pronoun imply that that is what it denotes. Since you are whatever you refer to when you say 'I', it follows that that is what you are.

Applying the linguistic solution to the problem of the thinking head requires a minor amendment (Noonan 1999). Something about the meaning of 'person' prevents proper spatial parts of human beings from counting as people. (Just what feature this might be is not obvious. It won't do to say that a person must be a maximal rational being, for again that doesn't tell us whether the head or the whole human being is the person.) Then you can know that you are not your thinking head because you know, as a competent speaker of English, that undetached heads aren't people, and that the personal pronouns refer only to people, and that you are whatever you refer to when you use a first-person pronoun.

The linguistic solution claims to solve all three problems at once. It makes no contentious metaphysical or psychological claims. And it seems to be the only hope for the ontology of temporal parts. It has plenty of allure. But does it work? In particular, does Noonan's proposal about the reference of 'I' solve the epistemic and personhood problems?

6. First-person speech in indirect discourse

Noonan's proposal may seem to fail on its own terms.

When someone says or thinks something of the form 'I am F', he is saying or thinking that he himself is F. That is how we report first-person speech and thought indirectly in the third person. The phrase 'he himself' (sometimes just 'he') is the third-person equivalent of 'I' or 'me'. It is well known that my saying or believing that I am F is not the same as my saying or believing that Olson is F or that the author of this essay is F, even though I am Olson and the author of this essay. (I may have forgotten who I am.) Likewise, someone's saying that he himself is F is not the same as his saying

that Jones is F or that the man who is thus and so is F, even if he is Jones or the man who is thus and so.

Now consider the human animal associated with me--or my today part, or any of the other beings who think with my brain and whose existence generates the puzzles. Call him Rival. Suppose Rival utters the sentence 'I am hungry'. He thereby says that he himself is hungry. That is how we report first-person speech indirectly in the third person. But then Rival is referring to himself in the first person. By uttering 'I am hungry' he is saying that he, Rival, is hungry; hence when he says 'I' he refers to himself. Since by hypothesis Rival isn't a person (a psychological continuer), that goes against Noonan's claim that personal pronouns refer only to people. In that case the linguistic solution fails. For suppose Rival says 'I am a psychological continuer'. He would thereby say that he himself is a psychological continuer--which he isn't. He would falsely believe that he is a psychological continuer. And if Rival is mistaken in thinking that he is a psychological continuer, I have to wonder whether I am mistaken in thinking that I am.

Since Noonan denies that Rival ever refers to himself in the first person, he must deny that Rival says that he himself is hungry when he says 'I am hungry'. His 'I' refers to me and not to him. What is Rival saying, then? How should we report what he says in the third person? He isn't just saying that I am hungry, or that Olson is. Those are not first-person statements. (You could say that I am hungry by uttering the sentence 'Olson is hungry'.) And Rival is clearly speaking in the first person. One of the characteristic features of first-person judgments is that they can motivate action. The belief Rival expresses by saying 'I am hungry'--unlike the belief he would express by saying that I am hungry, or that Olson is--will motivate him to eat.

Perhaps Rival is saying not that he is hungry, but that the person associated with him is--that is, the person who shares in that speech-act or thought. More generally, when Rival utters something of the form 'I am F' he thereby says that the person associated with him is F, or that he himself is associated with a person who is F. But then again Rival is referring to himself in the first person. He isn't saying that he is F, but rather that he is associated with a person--exactly one person, perhaps--who is F. But he is referring to himself all the same. This is not a view about the reference of 'I', but about the meaning of predicates attached to that pronoun.

This is not Noonan's view. And for good reason. If Rival means that he is associated with a person who is F when he says 'I am F', then presumably I too mean that I am associated with a person who is F when I say 'I am F'. Rival and I speak the same language. (We had the same teachers.) How could we mean different things by the same words? But then it would be impossible for me to say that I am a person. In fact the proposal looks incoherent. If 'I am F' always means that one is associated with a person who is F, then the statement that one is associated with a person who is F

means that one is associated with a person who is associated with a person who is F; and so on, ad infinitum.

I think we can defend Noonan's account against this objection. When Rival says 'I am hungry', the idea goes, he is saying that he himself is hungry. But the phrase 'he himself' doesn't refer to Rival. It refers to the person associated with him, namely me. If 'I' refers only to people (psychological continuers), then other personal pronouns, including 'he', must also. 'I' and 'me' belong together with 'you', and 'he', and with 'who' and 'whom'.

This sounds more paradoxical than it need be because we have been calling Rival 'he' even though (we supposed) he isn't a person. If we are careful to use all personal pronouns to refer only to people, as according to Noonan we do with 'I', we can put the proposal like this: when Rival says 'I am hungry', it is saying that he himself is hungry--where 'he' refers not to Rival but to me. Although Rival's assertion is true if and only if the person associated with it (Rival) is hungry, it is not saying that the person associated with it is hungry. Otherwise it would again be referring to itself in the first person. Nor is Rival saying that it itself is hungry, for the same reason. When Rival says 'I am hungry', it says that he himself (Olson) is hungry, and not that it itself (Rival) is.

This is strange. Noonan will reply that that is because in ordinary life--when we're not doing philosophy--we don't talk about the thoughts and speech-acts of the non-people who share their brains with us. Nor do we give them names. We simply ignore them. Outside of the seminar room, a sentence like 'Rival says he's hungry' would be about a person referring in the first person to himself, and never about a non-person referring in the first person to a being numerically from it. (Or it might be about a dog. The fact that we commonly call dogs 'he' is inconvenient for Noonan. But I won't press it.) If there really are beings numerically different from ourselves with which we share our brains and our thoughts--that is, if the puzzles do not all have metaphysical or psychological solutions--then the world is stranger than we thought. It shouldn't surprise us, then, if our language is also strange.

7. On being a person

I turn now to more serious troubles. First, Noonan's solution to the personhood problem is utterly implausible. Why isn't your head a person? Not because it isn't rational or self-conscious or morally responsible. We are supposing that it has the same mental properties as you have. (To think otherwise is to advocate a psychological solution.) Your head fails to be a person, Noonan says, merely because it is too small. Or rather because it is attached to a neck, trunk, arms, legs, and other parts. If it were detached and kept alive artificially, it presumably would be a person. It doesn't count as a person because it has the wrong neighbors. Why isn't your today part a

person? Not because it lacks the right mental properties. Not because it is too short: it would be a person if it weren't preceded or succeeded by other person-stages psychologically continuous with it. It doesn't count as a person because it has the wrong surroundings.

No one but a philosopher trying to avoid the puzzles ever thought that there could be intelligent non-people psychologically indistinguishable from people. No one ever thought that a being could fail to qualify as a person merely because of what happens at other times and places. No one ever thought that rational, intelligent, self-conscious, morally responsible non-people might study philosophy, fall in love, worry about the future, and have all of the other psychological, behavioral, and moral qualities that we think of as distinguishing people from non-people. Still less would anyone say that there actually are many such non-people--indeed that people make up only a minute fraction of the rational beings who walk the earth. If nothing else, we can see this by considering those definitions of 'person' that philosophers who aren't temporal-parts theorists actually propose. They all say that to be a person is to have certain psychological or moral features--or to have had them, or to have the potential to acquire them. Your today part and your head, if there are such things, are people in this intuitive sense (barring a psychological solution to the puzzles). The linguistic solution would deprive personhood of any moral or psychological significance. Noonan's "people" are an artificial and gerrymandered class.

The problem is not merely that the proposed account of personhood is ad hoc, but that it has nothing to do with what ordinary speakers mean by 'person'. Yet the linguistic solution to the epistemic problem says that we all implicitly intend our personal pronouns to refer to people in Noonan's sense. Remember: I can know that I am not my today part, Noonan says, because I know as a competent speaker that the word 'I' always refers to people and that a person must be a psychological continuer (a maximal psychologically interconnected aggregate of person-stages, on the temporal-parts ontology). If no ordinary speaker implicitly intends his personal pronouns to refer to people in that sense, this is just false.

One might argue that Noonan's proposal is still the best view to adopt if the puzzles have no metaphysical or psychological solution. Suppose we really are composed of arbitrary temporal or spatial parts, and that many of those parts have the same mental features as we have. Still, we say that the average person lives for about seventy years and weighs over 100 pounds and has hands and feet as parts. We don't say that many adult people exist for only a day, or weigh just ten pounds and would fit into a hatbox. If there are in fact rational, intelligent beings with those odd properties, the most charitable interpretation of our linguistic behavior may be to suppose that they don't fall within the extension of our word 'person'. If it sounds odd to say that being a person is an extrinsic property, that is because no one but a few academic philosophers ever contemplated the

possibility that human beings might have a lot of rational proper parts. Again: if we turn out to live in a strange world, we shouldn't be surprised if our language is also strange.

That may be. If you accept the metaphysical and psychological claims that give rise to the problems of the thinking head and person-segment, I suppose you ought to accept something like Noonan's linguistic proposal, if only because the alternative is even worse. (Though again, whether that solves the problems is a moot point.)

The trouble is more serious, though, for the problem of the thinking animal. Perhaps ordinary speakers would hesitate to call rational person-segments or undetached heads people. But only a desperate philosopher would hesitate to call rational human animals people.

8. Sophistical proofs

In any event, the linguistic solution to the problem of the thinking animal faces more troubles. The claim that we are human animals and not psychological continuers ("animalism") is a respectable philosophical view. Noonan's proposal would make it trivially self-contradictory. The very linguistic considerations that are supposed to enable us to know that we are psychological continuers would enable us to prove that animalism is false. The demonstration would be this:

We are whatever we refer to when we say 'I'. The word 'I' refers only to psychological continuers. Thus, we are psychological continuers. But human animals are not psychological continuers. Hence, we are not animals, q. e. d.

That we are whatever we refer to when we say 'I' is an indisputable fact about what it is to be a reflexive pronoun. (Even Noonan agrees that an utterance of that word will refer to at least one of the beings that produces it.) And it was part of Noonan's proposal that we use 'I' and the other personal pronouns to refer only to psychological continuers. Moreover, this must be something that as competent speakers we at least implicitly know. If I didn't know whether my 'I' referred to a psychological continuer or to an animal, I should have to wonder whether I am a psychological continuer or an animal. I should be stuck once more with the epistemic problem, and the linguistic proposal would solve nothing. And all parties to the debate accept that human animals are not psychological continuers. Thus, for anyone who reflects carefully on the way we use the personal pronouns, this demonstration ought to be uncontroversial.

But no one, not even Noonan, ever thought it was that easy to refute animalism. The supposed proof is sheer sophistry. In that case, though, the reasoning that was supposed to enable us to know that we are psychological continuers and not animals is flawed in the same way. Presumably the proof

fails because nothing in the semantics of the personal pronouns restricts their reference to psychological continuers. But then Noonan has no linguistic solution to the problem of the thinking animal.

What of the linguistic solution to the other puzzles? Doesn't it make the view that we are person-stages or undetached heads trivially self-contradictory? Well, maybe it is. It may simply be incoherent to suppose that we are day-long person-segments or undetached heads or brains rather than whole human beings, even though those segments, heads, and brains exist and have the same mental properties as whole human beings. Perhaps we may legitimately dismiss those proposals on the grounds that that isn't what we mean by 'we'. At any rate they are not respectable in the way that animalism is.

9. Knowing whether we exist

Reflection on this problem turns up another: the linguistic solution to the problem of the thinking animal would call our own existence into doubt. It is a serious metaphysical question whether there are any psychological continuers--that is, whether anything in the world persists through time by virtue of psychological continuity. Those who reject psychological-continuity accounts of personal identity deny it. No one ever thought that there are psychological continuers coinciding with us, but they aren't people, and they aren't us. Of course, there may be psychological continuers for all that. But insofar as it is open to doubt whether there are, it is open to doubt whether there are any people in Noonan's sense. And if it is part of the way we use the word 'I' that it must refer to people in that sense if it refers to anything, then it is open to doubt whether it refers to anything. And since we are whatever we refer to when we say 'I', it is therefore open to doubt whether we exist. Noonan's view implies that if there are no psychological continuers, there are no such beings as you and I. We can know that we exist only if we can know that we are psychological continuers. But isn't it obvious that we exist, and debatable whether we are psychological continuers?

I don't mean to dismiss outright any view that calls our existence into doubt. Many great philosophers doubted or denied their own existence: Parmenides, Hume, and Russell, for instance. But they didn't doubt their own existence for Noonan's reason. They doubted the existence of any thinking, speaking beings. We may not agree with them; but that we don't exist is clearly the right conclusion to draw from the premise that there are no thinking beings.

On Noonan's view, though, I have to wonder whether I exist even if I know that something thinks those thoughts and makes those utterances that we call mine. Nothing that I know guarantees that any of the thinkers of "my" thoughts is me. For the linguistic facts guarantee that I am a psychological continuer if I am anything, and for all I know the thinkers of my thoughts are

all non-psychological continuers. But surely any reason to suppose that there are rational, intelligent beings that think our thoughts is a reason to suppose that we think those thoughts, and hence exist. If so, then it cannot be part of the meaning of the personal pronouns that they refer only to psychological continuers. Noonan's linguistic solution is false.

This trouble does not affect Noonan's proposed solution to the other puzzles, for if there are day-long person segments or undetached heads that aren't people, then there are guaranteed to be people of which they are parts. It is their very relation to those people that prevents the rivals from being people themselves.

10. Linguistic solutions to epistemic problems

Perhaps an even more ingenious linguistic proposal can avoid this trouble. Suppose we use the personal pronouns in such a way that they refer to psychological continuers if there are psychological continuers to be referred to, and otherwise to people in the intuitive sense: to rational beings, let us say. Something is a person in the relevant sense if and only if either it is a psychological continuer, or there are no psychological continuers and it is rational. This is a sort of "best-candidate" theory of personhood: the best candidates for being people, provided they are good enough, count as people. If there are psychological continuers, they are people, and rational animals are not people. But if there are no psychological continuers, and rational animals are what come closest to satisfying our beliefs about what people ought to be, then they are people. We can know that there are people in this sense if we can know that there are rational beings. If this sense of personhood fixes the reference of the personal pronouns, then we can know that those pronouns refer to something, and hence that we exist. Or at least we can know this if we can know that there are rational beings thinking our thoughts.

I am not sure what to say about this suggestion, other than that it has no plausibility whatever. But never mind. It raises a deeper and more interesting issue. The problems of the thinking animal, thinking head, and thinking person-segment are at least partly metaphysical and epistemic problems. They arise because certain metaphysical views appear to entail the existence of many rational beings other than ourselves, beings that relate to us in a way that appears to deprive us of any reason to suppose that we aren't they. And how could linguistic considerations solve problems of metaphysics and epistemology?

Noonan's view implies that whether the problems arise depends on how we speak. If we speak as we thought we did--if the word 'I' refers to whatever thinking being utters it, for instance--then there are problems. If we speak as Noonan says we do, using the personal pronouns to refer only to a special subclass of speakers, the problems do not arise. So even if we in fact face the problems, we could avoid them by changing our language. And

is it not curious to suppose that we could solve metaphysical and epistemic problems merely by changing our language? If there is something that as things stand we can't know, how could changing our language, by itself, enable us to know it? It might make it impossible to state a question. But it can't answer the question. Nor can it "dissolve" the question in the sense of showing that it was in some sense grounded in confusion, for the question can be put intelligibly in another language.

Perhaps the problem--the epistemic problem, I mean--has a linguistic aspect. Someone who asks, Which thing am I? might be asking which thing she refers to when she says 'I'. And understanding the way we use the personal pronouns might help one to know which thing that is. Moreover, different rules about how the personal pronouns refer could make it harder or easier for us to work out what they refer to. But this doesn't seem to be what we mean when we ask what things we are. Which things we refer to when we say 'I' would change if our language changed in certain ways. But changing our language would not change which things we are.

In any case, the problem has a non-linguistic aspect as well. (You might say that there are two epistemic problems, a linguistic and a non-linguistic one.) Someone who asks, Which thing am I? might be asking which thing thinks those thoughts and speaks those words--the ones he calls his. And Noonan's linguistic proposal offers no answer to this question. Even if it enables me to know that I am not a human animal or an undetached head or a day-long person-segment, it cannot enable me to know that the thinker of these thoughts is not an animal or head or segment.

In fact Noonan's denial that the referent of my 'I' is whatever thinks these thoughts raises an even more embarrassing question: Am I the thinker of these thoughts? On his view there are three possibilities. First, the thinker of these thoughts may be something other than me: an animal or a head or a person-segment, for instance. Second, the animal coinciding with me may think numerically the same thoughts as a certain psychological continuer. In that case there is no unique thinker of these thoughts. Nothing is the thinker of these thoughts, for the same reason as nothing is the planet between the earth and the sun. Third, the unique thinker of these thoughts may be a psychological continuer. The animal and other rivals think numerically different but exactly similar thoughts. In that case I am the thinker of these thoughts. But if those rivals really do exist and can think, I have no way of knowing which of these is the case. I have no way of knowing whether I am the thinker of these thoughts. At any rate I can't know that the third possibility is the case. Noonan's linguistic solution is powerless against this problem.

The problem arises for the linguistic solution to all three puzzles. The psychological-continuity view of personal identity, the existence of undetached heads, and the ontology of temporal parts all imply that you have no reason to suppose that you are the thinker of your thoughts. (If

anything, it looks unlikely that you are.) Whether this counts as a reductio ad absurdum of the linguistic proposal or merely an amusing side-effect depends, I suppose, on how attractive one finds those metaphysical hypotheses.

11. Conclusions

Let me try to sum up. If you think that we have rational spatial or temporal parts, such as heads or day-long segments, you face a number of problems, the most serious, perhaps, being how we can know that we are not those parts. If Noonan's linguistic proposal were true, then in a way we could know that we are not those beings, but things with the spatial and temporal extent that we take ourselves to have (assuming that there are rational beings with that extent). More precisely, we could know that the referents of our personal pronouns refer to such beings. So the linguistic proposal does help with the epistemic problems of the thinking head and thinking person-segment.

But it is not a complete success. It does not enable one to know that the thinker of one's thoughts or the author of one's speech is the sort of thing we think it is. So in another way the linguistic proposal, even if it were true, would not enable us to know which things we are. It also requires an utterly implausible account of what it is to be a person. And it has the astonishing implication that that account in some sense informs our use of the personal pronouns. (This is of course in addition to the surprising idea that the first-person pronouns don't generally refer to their speakers.) The linguistic solution to the problems of the thinking head and person-segment carries a cost. That may be a reason to have a look at the alternatives: metaphysical and psychological solutions.

Applied to the problem of the thinking animal, however, the linguistic solution looks hopeless. Again, if it were true it would in a way enable us to know that we are psychological continuers and not animals. But it is pretty clearly not true. The idea that rational human animals are not people in any ordinary sense merely because they have the wrong identity conditions is frankly incredible. It would show the view that we are something other than psychological continuers--animals, for instance--to be self-contradictory. And it appears to imply, absurdly, that it is an open question whether we exist, even assuming that there is something—a unique thing, no less--that thinks our thoughts. So it looks like anyone who denies that we have the identity conditions of human animals ought to deny that those animals can think.

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