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PROBLEMS FOR ANIMALISM

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No one has done as much as Eric Olson — in *The Human Animal*, numerous papers, and his most recent book, *What Are We?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) — to chart the range of metaphysical positions one might adopt in order to resist the argument for animalism I will be discussing; and no one has so thoroughly tallied up their various costs and benefits.

My comments have two parts. I begin by laying out the argument that seems to me to be at the core of Olson's thinking about human persons; and I suggest a problem with his reasons for accepting one of its premises. The premise is warranted by its platitudinous or commonsensical status; but Olson's arguments lead him to conclusions that undermine the family of platitudes to which it belongs. Then I'll raise a question about how Olson should construe the vagueness that would seem to infect the boundaries of human animals.

I. Olson's Master Argument

Eric Olson, in *The Human Animal* and elsewhere, invites us to consider the following deceptively simple argument, an "Argument for Animalism". Here is a version adapted from his concise presentation of the argument in a recent paper. Suppose you are "alone" (as we would ordinarily say) in a room:

(a) There is a human animal in the room (a thing with biological, not psychological, persistence conditions).
(b) If something is a human animal in the room, it is thinking (after all, it has a brain in its head, just like you do, and that brain is doing exactly what your brain is doing).
(c) You are the one and only thinking being in the room (if there were many, all thinking the same thoughts, how could you know which one is you?)

Conclusion:

(d) You are a human animal (a thing with biological, not psychological, persistence conditions).

Olson's argument is an instance of the following argument schema:

(A) There is a human-shaped *F* in the room.
(B) If there is a human-shaped *F* in the room, then it is thinking.
(c) You are the one and only thinking being in the room.
Conclusion:
(D) You are an *F*.

Several terms besides "human animal" can be substituted for "F" to yield premises with at least some plausibility.

(i) "Mere Body": Does an animal continue to exist after it dies? Presumably not; but something does, a body that was there before death and that has the same history as the animal. Call such things "bodies"; plug that in for "F". (Randall Carter has pressed the point that this substitution for "F" has just as much plausibility as Olson's.[1])

(ii) "Psychological Person": Is there something now shaped like this body but that would survive the transfer of the cerebrum? If so, and if an animal can't, then there is another candidate, call it a "psychological person"; plug that in for "F", and the premises again have some plausibility. Sydney Shoemaker accepts the premises and conclusion of an argument having this form, with "psychological person" taking the place of "human animal". Because he also accepts the original (a) (there is a human animal in the room), he concludes, on the basis of (c) and the fact that nothing with psychological persistence conditions can be identical with a human animal, that the human animal in the room does not think. So he rejects (b), affirming instead: animals don't think — at least not *human*

[1] W. R. Carter, "Will I Be a Dead Person?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999), pp. 167-71.

animals (and in fact he'll extend the moral to other animals with a sufficiently complex psychology — complex enough so that it seems plausible to ascribe psychological persistence conditions to something in the vicinity of the animal's body).[2]

(iii) "Mere Hunk of Matter": Chisholm asks us to consider a version with "mere hunk of matter" in place of "F" (this is a slight fudging of Chisholm's actual argument — he doesn't explicitly link his notion of a mereologically stable "stand-in" or "*ens nonsuccessivum*" with that of a "mere hunk of matter", though they may plausibly be identified).[3] But he turns the argument on its head, making it into a reductio of the corresponding (B); and in fact he turns (A) and (c) and not-(D) into an argument for dualism.

Here's the schematic Olson-style argument with "mere hunk of matter" in place of "F":

(a*) There is a mere hunk of matter in the room, one that is shaped like your body (it is an aggregation of particles that recently was and soon will be scattered).
(b*) If there is a mere hunk of matter in the room, shaped like your body, it is thinking.
(c) You are the one and only thinking being in the room.
Conclusion:
(d*) You are a mere hunk of matter (something that was and will be scattered).

Chisholm accepts (a*) and (c). He avoids the conclusion by denying (b*). He uses (a*) and (c) and the denial of (d*) to argue against Olson's conclusion (d), and in favor of the view that you're either a tiny particle or a monad. (Olson says that this is the most impressive sort of argument for dualism of which he knows; and I am inclined to agree — though I am looking for a better one.)

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[2] Shoemaker's latest thoughts on these topics appear in his book, *Physical Realization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[3] Roderick M. Chisholm, "Is There a Mind-Body Problem?", *The Philosophic Exchange* 2 (1978), pp. 25-34.

II. Chisholm's *entia successiva* argument

I want to consider whether there is something self-undermining about Olson's use of the Master Argument for Animalism. I find it useful to begin by comparing his argument to an argument of Chisholm's for a very different conclusion — an argument that makes use of Olson's (c) and bits of the "hunk of matter" argument to reach the denial of Olson's conclusion.

Chisholm reasons roughly as follows:

1. If you are a human animal [i.e., (d)], then there is a mere hunk of matter in the room shaped like an animal only if the mere hunk of matter in question is thinking [i.e., (b*)].

Justification: the matter is shaped just like the animal, it has a brain in its head, etc. (Compare Olson's defense of (b): the animal thinks if the person does.)

2. There is a mere hunk of matter in the room, one that is shaped like a human animal (and that recently was and soon will be scattered) [i.e., (a*)].

3. So you are a human animal [i.e. (d)] only if the mere hunk of matter in question is thinking. (1 & 2)

4. You are the one and only thinking being in the room [i.e., (c)].

5. You are not a mere hunk of matter [denial of (d*)].

6. Therefore the mere hunk of matter is not thinking [denial of (b*)]. (4 &5)

7. Therefore you are not a human animal (nor, for that matter, any other "gross physical object" that can gain or lose parts, since the argument may be repeated for all such things) [i.e., not-(d)]. (3&6)

Because Olson is committed to (a), (b), (c), and justifies (b) by claiming that anything intrinsically just like you is thinking if you are, he must accept versions of (B) that substitute something for "F" that is inconsistent with being a human animal but that would apply to something sharing its matter with the human animal in the room (if it applied to anything). He accepts Chisholm's Premise 1, and similar principles with "hunk of matter" replaced by "mere body" (in the sense I've stipulated), or by "psychological person", or by any other plausible candidates. Consequently, he must reject the corresponding versions of (A) with these substitutions. So, Olson concludes, there are no mere hunks of matter, bodies, or psychological-persons — at least, none shaped just like me.

The impossibility of coincident objects of these sorts (and considerations of general theoretical neatness) draw him towards a view he calls "biological minimalism" (the only composites are organisms — a view first articulated and defended by van Inwagen, and endorsed by Trenton Merricks)[4]. At the very least, Olson must resist the idea that there are undetached proper parts of me that are big enough to "become me" or that could "come to constitute all of me" were some other part removed; there just can't be any such things. They're mere hunks of matter if they are anything, most of them (the exception being organs or biological systems that could come to constitute all of me, but that have a kind of unity and life of their own). Being mere hunks of matter, if there were such things, they shouldn't be the kinds of things that would cease to exist because of merely extrinsic changes — changes in what's attached to them. Olson is forced to conclude that there aren't such things.

So what happens to Olson's argument for animalism if he accepts restrictive principles of composition, like biological minimalism — principles that imply that there are no such things as brains (but doctors have seen them!) or rocks (but Dr. Johnson kicked

[4] See Peter van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), and Trenton Merricks, *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

one!) or clouds (but we flew through one on the way here!) or…? It seems to me that accepting these conclusions would undermine an important aspect of Olson's Master Argument: namely premise (a), the one affirming the existence of an animal in the room.

What sort of support can one adduce for this premise? Why do I think there is an animal here? Or, better, why does Olson think this, with respect to himself, when he is alone in a room?

I think it's safe to say that Olson's main reason is: Because it's obvious, it's the sort of thing we all believe, it's a prime candidate for one of the "deliverances of common sense" — a belief that is "innocent-until-proven-guilty" and also something that would take a lot of proving to be found guilty. ("Common sense" here needn't be a name for any special faculty or way of coming to know something, and I don't think it's a term Olson ever uses; what I mean by it is just an epistemic status, having to do with how obvious something seems, and how widespread this seeming is.)

Is there some other source from which (a) could acquire its justification? I do not think the source of Olson's warrant for (a) can be anything like "Biology is a great science, it's statements are likely true; and they imply that there are organisms; so human animals exist." The fans of hunks of matter could cite mechanics and its subject matter; the fans of psychological persons could cite psychology, and the expectation that, given a lot better neuroscience, psychologists would be able to predict things about the preservation of a person's memories through cerebrum transfer, and would naturally describe their findings in terms of the things that a person would remember after such an ordeal. Any support Olson could adduce from biology could be countered by scientifically respectable considerations for alternative versions of the (A) schema that Olson must reject.

So I think it must be (a)'s status as part of "common sense" that justifies (a). But we have precisely the same sorts of reasons for believing in organs like the brain or the liver; in rocks and tables; and in mere masses of various stuff-kinds (which we talk about when we use mass terms, like "the water in the glass" or "the acid in my stomach" or "the ice in the sculpture" or, most saliently, "the matter in my body"). If we've been forced to accept biological minimalism, or some other restrictive view about composition which says

that we're wrong about vast numbers of these things, that should have some effect upon our confidence in (a).

Put it this way: grant Olson that you have no immaterial parts, and that you are located in the vicinity of your whole body; and grant that thinking isn't something a plurality could do, so that you must be an object made of the parts in the vicinity of your body. Now, what kinds of physical objects are there in the world, what are the candidates for a kind of thing you could be? Olson says, "Well, at least we all know this much: there are animals." But, antecedently, one would have said one knew that there were lots of different kinds of macrophysical things in our environment: lumps of clay and statues and rocks and organisms and organs and parcels of matter and… All these are, one would have thought, things that we can tell exist simply by looking around. But once this conviction is shaken, and we've absorbed the idea that most of the "physical objects" we "see" around us do not exist… why should merely "seeing" animals all around us give us confidence that they exist?

III. The Vagueness of Animals

Finally, I offer an argument intended to provoke Olson into saying something about vagueness.

A human animal is a lot like a cloud when you look closely. And, on one way of thinking about such vague objects, one of Olson's key principles (embodied in premise (c)) seems to provide an argument against animalism:

1. Animals are vague objects — and that means there are ever so many different hunks of matter with equal right to be identified with each animal (a crucial component of both semantic indecision and epistemicist theories of vagueness).

2. If I am an animal, then there are ever so many different hunks of matter with equal right to be identified with me. (From 1)

3. If there are all these hunks with equal claim to be me, then either each of them is conscious or only one is.

4. But they can't each be conscious (there's only one thinker here, not many — one of Olson's guiding principles).

5. And it's implausible to suppose that just one is conscious, but all the others not (another Olson-ish claim).

6. So it is false that there are all these hunks of matter with an equal right to be identified with me. (From 3, 4, 5)

So I am not an animal. (From 2, 6)

Olson's response would, I think, be to deny 1 (and its consequence, 2): the vagueness of the boundaries of an animal cannot be a matter of there being many hunks of matter that are equally good candidates for being the animal.

Because he wants only one object where you are located, he is not free to treat this vagueness as semantic indecision among many things with only slightly different spatiotemporal boundaries. Nor could he adopt Timothy Williamson's epistemicism, since it too requires many good candidates in (nearly) the same place at the same time. [5] So far as I can see, this only leaves two options: There is just one thing there, and it is super-precise (Merricks takes this route); or there is just one thing there, and it fades out, objectively (van Inwagen's conclusion).

I find this worrisome, because the types of vagueness that infect "animal" — both the vagueness in the spatial boundaries of an animal's body, and the vagueness in the

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[5] Williamson, *Vagueness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); John Hawthorne points out that epistemicism with respect to the (presumably) vague term "person" requires many overlapping candidates in "Epistemicism and Semantic Plasticity", *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 289-322.

temporal boundaries of the origins and ends of an animal's life — *feel* like the same kinds of vagueness infecting "ship", "mountain" and so on. And these do not seem like cases that are best dealt with by positing super-precision (with exactly one object, its parts somehow very different from all the other collections of parts that *almost* make up a ship, a mountain, etc. — note that this is much worse than Williamson's variety of super-precision), nor by positing objective fade-outs.

Both super-precise lone candidates and lone candidates with objective fade-outs are incompatible with the idea that the vagueness can be "resolved" by linguistic revision; or that there is nothing wrong with people who draw these boundaries in slightly different places. Both super-precision and objective fade-out are incompatible with these ideas, unless we are idealists of a sort — and both Olson and I have been properly brought up; we'll have no truck with idealism! I am sure Olson will have something interesting to say about these worries, and I look forward to hearing it.

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