

BIG-TENT METAPHYSICS

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Eric Olson won the hearts of my graduate students by dedicating his book “to the unemployed philosophers.” (The students subsequently got fine jobs, but it’s the thought (or rather the sympathy) that counts.) As appreciated as the dedication was, however, I doubt that it was responsible for the wonderful reception that Olson’s book, *The Human Animal*, has had. Rather, the cleverness of his arguments, the vigor with which Olson writes, and the new interpretations of old thought experiments and arguments have deservedly captured a great deal of philosophical attention in the past ten years. Despite the fact that I hold significantly different views from Olson’s, I am happy to be here today to help celebrate the tenth anniversary of his important book.

One of the things that Olson’s book has inspired me to do is to reflect on how we ought to pursue metaphysics. I want to talk about this reflection, which has led me to what I call ‘big-tent metaphysics.’ Perhaps Olson, along with most mainstream metaphysicians, will not share my enthusiasm for big-tent metaphysics; but I think that he (and they) should.

Let me begin by mentioning two points of agreement between Olson and me: First, I agree with Olson that psychological continuity does not suffice for the persistence of you or me. But this agreement does not lead me to Olson’s Biological Approach. It certainly does not follow from rejection of a psychological-continuity theory of personal identity that a “radically nonpsychological account of our identity” is at all adequate to understand what kind of beings we are. (p. 16) If it did, then a world with organisms that lacked all mentality would be ontologically no different from our world.

Second, I agree with Olson that we are animals; we are fully animals, not even animals with a special non-animal part (like an immaterial soul). Although we are fully animals, continuous with the animal kingdom, we are not *merely* animals. That is, our being animals is not the end of the ontological story about us. We are most fundamentally persons. (As a terminological point, I take ‘human being’ to denote human *persons*.) The

brains and vocal cords of certain animals developed in such a way that they gave rise to a new kind of being—a person capable of thinking of herself from a first-person perspective. This first-person perspective is, I believe, what makes possible all the unique features of human beings—ability to deliberate about possible courses of action, to decide how we want to live, etc. These features, being unique to us, are not shared by other species, but they are what make us persons the kind of beings that we fundamentally are. Being a person is an *ontologically* significant property. We are constituted by animals, but most fundamentally we are persons.

I disagree with Olson that our persistence conditions derive from our being animals. We could continue to exist without being animals. Why couldn't I survive having my lower-brain functions taken over by a prosthetic device? If I could, and if enough other parts of my body were replaced by inorganic parts, I would still exist but would no longer have a carbon-based body, and hence no longer be an animal. And it would be totally ad hoc to claim that I no longer existed. If you made any such claim, I'd certainly take you to court.

To sum up the metaphysical contrast between Olson's Animalist view and my constitution view:

On Olson's Animalist view, there is a particular animal *x* such that I am identical to *x*, and *x* has the property of being a person now. I am an animal essentially, and a person contingently. On Olson's view, whether or not I am a person is irrelevant to whether or not I exist.

On my constitution view, there is a particular person *x*, such that I am identical to *x*, and *x* is constituted by a particular animal now. I am a person essentially, and an animal contingently. On my view, I could not ever exist without being a person.

What is Big-Tent Metaphysics?

Olson's book raised for me a question whose relevance to Olson will become apparent momentarily: Should metaphysics be a narrow-gauge enterprise that excludes most of what

we all ordinarily take to be part of reality? Should metaphysics be sealed off from all practical and moral concerns? If so, why? I take metaphysics to be the study of fundamental reality. And I take fundamental reality to include all the objects and properties whose omission from ontology would render an account of reality incomplete.

According to Big-Tent Metaphysics, there exist many different kinds of things; each kind of thing has a nature, and the nature of any kind of thing includes what distinguishes that kind from other kinds and what is most significant and most distinctive about that kind. (Maybe from reading Plato at an impressionable age, I have retained the idea that reality and value go together: What something most fundamentally is should ground what is most significant about it.)

Big-Tent Metaphysics looks to a metaphysics of Fs to tell us the *nature* of Fs, what is *distinctive* or unique about Fs, and what is *significant* about Fs. What we consider to be real should not be independent of what we consider to be important. Else, why bother with metaphysics?

What Would Olson Say?

I'm pretty sure that this is not the way that Olson thinks of metaphysics. (Most metaphysicians seem to be of the pup-tent persuasion.) Olson wants to keep what is distinctive about us and what is most significant about us out of metaphysics. He does not discuss what is distinctive about us at all, and he consigns what is significant about us to a sphere of practical concerns outside the purview of metaphysics altogether. I'll illustrate Olson's indifference to what is ontologically distinctive about us by his discussion of human life, and I'll illustrate his banishment of what is significant about us from metaphysics by his discussion of *being the same person as*.

Olson's Conception of a Human Life

On Olson's Biological View, we are fundamentally organisms; but our being organisms does not reveal what is unique about us. There are numerous different kinds of animals. On my view, what's unique about us are the features that make us persons, not just animals—features that depend on the first-person perspective (like wondering how one is going to die

or evaluating one's own desires). Neither these features nor the first-person perspective that makes them possible have any ontological significance at all, on Olson's view. Indeed, Olson takes mentality in general not to matter to our identity: He says, "[P]sychology is completely irrelevant to personal identity." (p. 97) Indeed,

Perhaps we cannot properly call that vegetating animal a person since it has none of those psychological features that distinguish people from non-people (rationality, the capacity for self-consciousness, or what have you). If so, that simply shows that you can continue to exist without being a person, just as you could continue to exist without being a philosopher, or a student or a fancier of fast cars. (p. 17)

What distinguishes "people from non-people" is thus, according to Olson, of no more ontological significance than what distinguishes students from non-students, or fanciers of fast cars from non-fanciers of fast cars. According to him, the continued existence of you or me depends on biological continuity: "one survives just in case one's purely animal functions—metabolism, the capacity to breathe and circulate one's blood and the like—continue." (p. 16) It is noteworthy that these animal functions are not unique to members of the *homo sapiens* species.

Olson gives persistence conditions for organisms in terms of lives. He says that an "organism persists just in case the metabolic process that is its individual biological life continues to impose its characteristic organization on new particles."¹ (p. 137) A little later, he adds, "I say that a past or future being is you just in case it has your biological life." (p. 139)

Olson's conception of life in terms of organisms is both too broad and too narrow to be adequate for understanding human life. It is too broad since it does not make a place for what is distinctive about human lives. We have the same kind of metabolic processes as many other kinds of animals. It is too narrow since it defines human life wholly in terms of its biological aspects.

The word 'life' by itself is incomplete until we know what kind of thing that we are talking about. A *person's* life is a personal life, and the personal life of a human being has

¹ "The individual biological life of a particular living organism is a special kind of event, roughly the sum of the metabolic activities the organism's parts are caught up in." (p. 136)

biological aspects. A purely biological life, however, is the career of an organism. If the organism constitutes a person, then what would have been a biological life on its own becomes subsumed by, or incorporated into, a personal life.²

On my view, a person-constituted-by-an-organism does not have two lives, but one integrated personal life that has biological as well as nonbiological aspects. The connection between an injury to one's organs and one's resulting dread of a long recovery is a causal connection *within* a personal life.³ Biological life is what is continuous throughout the animal kingdom. But if I am right, biological life is only one aspect of personal life.⁴ In a strict and philosophical sense, your life is a personal life that includes your successes and failures, and loves and losses, as well as your high cholesterol. To equate human life, in a strict and philosophical sense, with biological life severely truncates what we intend to talk about strictly and philosophically. A wholly biological conception of your life is simply not adequate.

In short, Big-Tent Metaphysics does not relegate what is unique about us to some second-rate realm of the merely practical, but rather welcomes it into the domain of basic reality.

Being the Same Person

Olson explicitly divorces practical and moral concerns about persons from the identity of persons. (p. 70) In his view, it is only the identity of our biological aspects that belongs to metaphysics. Yet, what is significant about us—our rational, prudential and moral concerns—are tied to being a person, indeed to psychological continuity, not just to our being animals. According to Olson, as we have seen, there is nothing metaphysically important about being a person. Persons qua persons don't have persistence conditions. He writes, "*Being the same person...* is not a metaphysical relation." (p. 69) To say that A is the same person as B is to use 'same person' in a practical sense, with no metaphysical

² Nonhuman persons, if there are any, may have personal lives with no biological aspect at all.

³ Before a fetus comes to constitute a person, there is biological life; but there is no personal life.

⁴ Since organisms constitute persons, and not vice versa, persons are of a higher primary kind than organisms. Hence, it is not the case that a personal life is an aspect of biological life, except perhaps derivatively.

implications. For example, A is the same person as B if B is the future person to whom A's prudential concern is rationally directed. (p. 68)

Although Olson does not endorse relative identity, on his view, it is possible that I exist at *t* and at *t'* and am a person at *t* and at *t'*, and am the same animal at *t* and *t'*, but not the same person at *t* and *t'*—as long as we understand 'same person' not to imply identity, but only psychological continuity.⁵ Olson suggests that we could say, "roughly speaking, *x* is now the same person as *y* is later on just in case *y* is then psychologically continuous with *x* as she is now." (p. 69) So, there is not a single relation 'being the same *F* as' that has as instances both 'being the same animal as' and 'being the same person as': On Olson's view, 'A is the same animal as B' entails that A is identical to B; 'A is the same person as B' does not.

Olson makes this point because he is concerned to deny the so-called Transplant Intuition that seems to imply that I am identical to the being in the future who is psychologically continuous with me. Olson wants to deny that the person who inherits my cerebrum is me (since she is a different animal), but he wants to account for the Transplant Intuition by arguing that the person who inherits my cerebrum (though not really me) is the person I should care about and is the person who is morally responsible for my bad deeds. According to Olson, "Someone is now responsible for an earlier action if he is now psychologically continuous with the agent as he was when he performed the action (in the absence of the usual excuses)." (pp. 59-60) Olson goes on to add that "this principle is inconsistent with the claim that one is accountable only for one's actions." (p. 60)

But it is incoherent to suppose that a person who is not me is responsible for my misdeeds, no matter what apparent memories the other person has. It is a fundamental principle of morality that I am morally responsible for my deeds and not for yours. Olson's way of rejecting the Transplant Intuition is morally untenable. Since I agree with Olson that psychological continuity does not suffice for identity, I have no truck with the Transplant Intuition. But I think that it is deeply wrong to divorce identity from moral responsibility, or from what we care about. That's why I advocate Big-Tent Metaphysics.

⁵ Suppose that there is a human animal who exists before and after a cerebrum transplant. He is the same animal before and after, but not the same person before and after, on Olson's view.

Olson says, “Being the same person is a moral or practical relation, and there is no reason to expect it to have the same formal features as identity strictly so called.” (pp. 68-9) So, on Olson’s view, my being me in the future is not a matter of my being the same person in the future that I am now; it’s not even a matter of my being a person at all in the future. Olson is right, of course, that we often use ‘same person’ in a sense that does not imply identity—as when we say of someone who becomes a political radical, “He is not the same person that he used to be.” But we also use ‘person’ to imply identity, as in the phrase ‘personal identity.’ And, I believe, it is the latter that is the strict and philosophical use of ‘person’. But not Olson, who says: “[W]henever it is natural and pragmatically justified to treat someone as if he were a certain person, then he is that person.” (p. 64) But being ‘that person’ has no metaphysical significance whatever. There is a complete severance of reality from practical concerns. This is further evidence that Olson is Small-Tent Metaphysician.

Olson is not blind to the importance of practical concerns. Even behind the (disliked) Transplant Intuition, he says, there is a truth. “And a very important truth it is; [he says] “to anyone but a metaphysician it is more important than the truth about who is numerically identical with whom.” (p. 69) This remark raises the question: Why would anyone want to be a metaphysician if what counts as metaphysical is wholly cut off from what anyone except metaphysicians cares most about? *Metaphysically* speaking, on Olson’s view, we are animals, and that’s that. Big-Tent Metaphysics has room in metaphysics for what is significant about us and for what we care about.

A Word about Constitution

I was going to make some comments on my view of constitution, but I’ll omit this section in order to save time to reply to Eric’s comments. My view is worked out in *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and expanded in excruciating detail in *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

In conclusion: Whether a constitution view, a biological approach, a substance dualism or something else is the correct metaphysics of persons, there is no doubt that Eric

Olson has done a lot to make the biological approach one to be reckoned with. And his achievement is secure whatever the fate of Big-Tent Metaphysics.

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