

--forthcoming in *Abstracta*. Presented at the APA Pacific Division Book Symposium on Eric T. Olson's *The Human Animal*, April 2007

Big-Tent Metaphysics

Lynne Rudder Baker
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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.

As the title of his book indicates, Olson's view is that we (we human persons) are human animals. What human persons most fundamentally are, according to *The Human Animal*, are organisms. Olson defends a Biological Approach, according to which what we are most fundamentally are animals; the opposing view that he attacks is the Psychological Approach, according to which what we are most fundamentally are what I'll call 'psychological continuants'—beings whose persistence is determined by their memories, temperament, character, and other psychological features.

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 (in the sense of qualitative indiscernibility) 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 person'.) 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 to become a better person, to devote yourself to your children or to your work. 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.

Although I agree with Olson that we are animals, Olson says our identity conditions derive from our being animals. I say that they do not. If you started replacing various parts of my body with inorganic parts, there would come a time when this body (this organism) would no longer exist. Would it follow that I no longer existed? Surely not: I could have been awake during the replacements—perhaps talking away about my past. I could have continued talking after the conclusion of the last operation at which a computer chip took over my lower-brain functions that regulate the inorganic substitute for metabolism, circulation, etc. 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.

(I really don't like bizarre thought experiments, but this one is not altogether implausible. Already, we have amazing prosthetic devices and inorganic replacements for many parts of organisms. (Think of cochlear implants that allow deaf people to hear, or implanted computer chips that allow paralyzed people to move a cursor on a computer screen by thinking about it.) The line between what is organic and what is inorganic is fading: 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.)

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, an ontology that didn't mention chairs, flowers, and persons would leave out kinds of things that are really there. And this point is not vitiated by the claim that we can still use the words 'chairs', 'flowers', and 'persons' in true sentences even if such things are not ontologically significant. The question I am raising does not concern what we may truly or appropriately say, but rather concerns what is to be included in basic reality.

There exist many different kinds of things; each kind of thing has a nature (essential kind-properties), 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.) What something most fundamentally is determines its existence conditions, and these need not supervene on its intrinsic properties. Some existence conditions are functional and relational (e.g., those of genes) and some are intentional as well (e.g., those of artifacts like dialysis machines).

On my view, an adequate account of what something most fundamentally is will reveal what is distinctive about things of that kind, how they differ from things of other kinds of things in the universe. Second, what something most fundamentally is grounds much of what is significant about things of its kind, what gives it what value it may have. What we consider to be real should not be independent of what we consider to be important. Else, why bother with metaphysics? In short, 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. The point of metaphysics, from a Big-Tent point of view, is to understand the nature of things, and what is distinctive and significant about them.

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.) In the first place, he doesn't pose his question in terms of Fs (animals or persons, say) but in terms of us, of what we are. He does give an account of what we most fundamentally are—human animals. But the reason that I suspect he would reject this Big-Tent

Metaphysics is that he 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 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, as we have seen, we are fundamentally organisms; but our being organisms does not reveal what is unique about us. There are numerous different kinds of animals. What's unique about us are the features that make us persons, not just animals. On my view, the features unique to us are features that depend on the first-person perspective—e.g., features such as wondering how one is going to die, or recognizing and evaluating one's own desires, or inquiring into the kind of being that one is. 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 (or animals or human animals) 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 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. The life of x comprises all the events that x is a part of, and what kinds of events x can be a part of depends on what kind of entity x is. So, instead of asking what life in general is, we should consider what a particular life (say, your life) is. On my view, what you are most fundamentally is a person. Your life is the

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)

career of a person, you. Your life includes what you do and what happens to you during the time that you exist: you fall off your bicycle, you go to school, you have your wisdom teeth pulled, you get a job, and so on.

Your life is the life of you, who are indisputably a person. A person's life cannot be metaphysically understood just in terms of biological functioning. Despite our use of the word 'life' for both personal and biological lives, a person constituted by a human organism does not have two lives.² Rather, a person's life is a personal life, and the personal life of a human being has biological aspects. A purely biological life 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.³

So, 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.⁴ Biological life is what is continuous throughout the animal kingdom. But if I am right, biological life is only one aspect of personal life.⁵ In a strict and philosophical sense, your life is a personal life that includes your successes and failures,

² I could use the more technical vocabulary of *Persons and Bodies* and say that the person has a personal life nonderivatively and a biological life derivatively and that the organism has a biological life nonderivatively and a personal life derivatively.

³ Nonhuman persons, if there are any, may have personal lives with no biological aspect at all.

⁴ Before a fetus comes to constitute a person, there is biological life; but there is no personal life.

⁵ 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.

and loves and losses, as well as your high cholesterol. A wholly biological conception of your life is simply not adequate.

We have seen that philosophers like Olson think of life—in a strict and philosophical sense—exclusively in terms of biological life, where biological life is understood in terms of the integrated functioning of organs. But my use of the word ‘life’ for a personal life like yours or mine is not just stipulative or metaphorical. I am not just using ‘life’ in a loose or popular way. Although the word ‘life’ does have a strictly biological use, as evidenced by debates about whether viruses are alive, it also has a nonbiological use, as evidenced by your thinking of the kind of life you want to have. Also, note that when people speak of life after death, they need not be thinking of biological life; and they are not using ‘living’ in a loose and popular way.⁶ We’d be taken aback in a bookstore to find a new life of Napoleon and discover that it focused on the functioning of his organs. So, it is clear that the word ‘life’ is used both with and without restriction to biology.⁷ To equate human life, in a strict and philosophical sense, with biological life severely truncates what we intend to talk about strictly and philosophically.

Big-Tent Metaphysics does not relegate what is unique about us to some second-rate realm of the merely practical, but rather

⁶ In John 10:10, Jesus is quoted as saying, “I’ve come to bring life, and to bring it more abundantly.” He clearly is not talking about biological functioning.

⁷ Some philosophers have entertained a conception of life that is not an organic or biological at all. For example, in their influential article, “Eternity” (*Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429-458), Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann say, that “anything that is eternal has life.” p. 431. And some materialists at least countenance the possibility of conscious life without biological properties. Richard Boyd says that “there seems to be no barrier to the functionalist materialist’s asserting that any particular actual world mental event, state, or process could be--in some other possible world--nonphysically realized.” Moreover, Boyd suggests that the “possibility that certain kinds of actual world token mental events, states or processes might be realized in some other possible world even if the body of the subject no longer exists.” Richard Boyd, “Materialism Without Reductionism: What Physicalism Does Not Entail” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*, Ned Block, ed. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980): 101 (67-106)

welcomes persons and their lives, as well as the lives of other kinds of organisms.

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 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 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.⁸ 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.

⁸ 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 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 and from what is significant. That's why I advocate Big-Tent Metaphysics.

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]henver 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 willfully wholly cut off from what anyone except metaphysicians cares most about? What we rightly care about are the moral and practical relations that presuppose psychological continuity, but Olson’s Biological Approach disconnects these from our identity or from anything else of metaphysical interest. Metaphysically speaking, on Olson’s view, we are animals, and that’s that.

Not only do we have distinctive abilities not shared by other kinds of animals—such as the ability to evaluate our desires in light of the kind of person we want to be—but these distinctive abilities are what are significant about and to us. Big-Tent Metaphysics has room for essential features like the first-person perspective that ground what is significant about us.

A Word About Constitution

As I said near the outset, on my view I am fundamentally a person-constituted-by-a-body. Let me make a couple of comments about constitution, to clear up some misunderstandings. When Olson says, We can't understand how exact intrinsic duplicates can have different persistence conditions, he must be assuming what I explicitly deny—that persistence conditions cannot be relational or intentional. But more important, when he represents (I'd say 'misrepresents') the constitution relation as involving intrinsic duplicates, he suggests that there are two separate objects. But if x constitutes y at t , then x and y are not separate objects at t . Nor are they identical. Constitution is a kind of unity that is not identity. The idea of unity without identity goes back to Aristotle.

Many opponents of constitution (I include Olson here) simply refuse to acknowledge constitution as a relation of unity. If I'm a person and my body is a person, why aren't there two persons here? The answer is that there is one instantiation of personhood—I am a person nonderivatively; my body, in virtue of constituting me is a person derivatively. (This is worked out in several articles and in my book, *Persons and Bodies*; since it continues to be misunderstood, it is further defended in excruciating detail in my forthcoming book *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*.)

Conclusion

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.

University of Massachusetts Amherst
1/25/07