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What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology, by Eric T. Olson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp vi + 250. H/b £23.99.

In his invigorating new book, Eric Olson investigates what we are, metaphysically speaking. ‘By “we”,’ he says, ‘I mean you and me and the people we know—we human people.’ (p. 8) Olson emphasizes that his inquiry is not anthropological or linguistic, but metaphysical. He asks what we most fundamentally are, not what we conceive ourselves to be. Olson takes the metaphysical question ‘what sort of beings think our thoughts and perform our actions?’ to have priority over the linguistic question, ‘To what do our personal pronouns and proper names refer?’ (p. 11, p.132).

Olson canvasses a number of important accounts of our metaphysical nature: animalism, constitutionalism, the brain view, the view that we are temporal parts of animals, the bundle view, immaterialism, nihilism, along with some ‘minor views’. After a mostly balanced presentation and critical examination of summary versions of these accounts, Olson concludes his book with a more freewheeling discussion of his own opinions on what we are and on theories of composition.

The book is engagingly written in a conversational style. Olson has some vivid analogies, e.g., ‘Your hylomorphic soul is supposed to stand to you as a dent stands to a dented car or a knot stands to a knotted rope.’ (p. 174) And he makes up inventive labels for the positions he discusses; to take just one among many, Olson calls Chisholm’s suggestion that we might be tiny physical particles ‘Lilliputian materialism’ (p. 176)

Olson’s favored view (or one of them) is animalism, a view that he defended in The Human Animal (Oxford, 1997). Animalism is the thesis that ‘each of us is numerically identical with an animal. (pp. 24-5) ‘[O]ur having mental features of any sort [is] a temporary and contingent feature of us.’ Olson goes on to say that ‘any of us could exist at a time without having any mental properties at that time, or even the capacity to acquire them.’ (p. 44)

The chapters on Souls and on Nihilism are particularly rich. Olson treats

immaterialism with much greater respect than do most other materialist philosophers today. And he argues that nihilism (the view that we do not exist) is not easily disposed of: ‘Why should the truth be believable?’ (p. 210) He compares nihilism with solipsism and raises the possibility that nihilism is a ‘pathological view’—one that is psychologically impossible to accept consistently without going mad (p. 209). The discussion is quite thought-provoking.

Olson rules out many candidate accounts of our natures by what he calls ‘the thinking-animal problem’: ‘If there is a human animal located where you are, and it thinks just as you do, it is hard to see how you could be anything other than that animal, or how you could ever know that you are.’ (p. 211) Olson says that the thinking-animal problem is not only ‘an argument for animalism but also a challenge for any other account of what we are.’ (p. 211) (However, he shortly exempts nihilism and immaterialism from its reach. (p. 216)) But the thinking-animal problem is a problem only if the antecedent is true. Many nonanimalist views—constitutionalism, ‘compound dualism’, the bundle view, the brain view, etc.—are not committed to the antecedent.

Consider constitutionalism. Constitutionalism holds that we are constituted by human animals, with which we are not identical. Olson says that constitutionalists often complain that their critics do not understand the view. Complaint or not, Olson does not seem to understand constitutionalism. His situation is like that of a philosopher with a two-valued logic in a debate with an advocate of three-valued logic. Just as the trivalent logician can hold that there are two different ways for a proposition to be nontrue, the constitutionalist can hold that there are two ways for a pair of objects can be nonidentical. Thus, a pair of objects can exist separately or one can constitute the other. Olson simply does not acknowledge this ‘nonbivalent’ feature of constitutionalism.

As a result of presupposing ‘metaphysical bivalence,’ Olson insists that constitutionalists, since they hold that we are not identical to animals, should be taken to hold that we are not animals at all. (p. 24). He simply ignores a constitutionalist who argues that there are two ways of having a property—nonderivatively and derivatively—both of which can be clearly defined. According to the derivative/nonderivative

distinction, I am an animal derivatively in virtue of being constituted by something that is an animal nonderivatively. To be an animal derivatively is still to be an animal. Rather than arguing against the derivative-nonderivative distinction, Olson dismisses the constitutionalist's claim that we are animals derivatively (or as he transforms it into a semantic point, 'animals in some loose sense') as a 'mug's game'. (p. 24)

In his last chapter, Olson suggests that animalism, the temporal-parts view, and nihilism are the only viable accounts of our metaphysical natures. (p. 214) He further argues that theories of composition and theories of what we are are intimately connected: If we had a good theory of either, he says, we would thereby have a good theory of the other. I want to use an example of Olson's to cast doubt on his claim that 'a theory of composition would tell us what we are.' (p. 232)

Olson shows how mereological universalism (the theory of composition according to which any things however disparate have a sum) leads philosophers to four-dimensionalism. He proposes a reductio of three-dimensionalist universalism: Consider 'the particles that currently compose you.' Those particles—call them 'the *P*s'—existed a month ago, and assuming universalism, there's something that the *P*s compose at every moment. Call it '*M*' (for 'mass of matter'). Given that the *P*s cannot compose two things at once, it follows that you are *M*. But you are not a persisting mass of matter; you were not composed by the *P*s a month ago. So, if you are composed of particles (in that you are identical to a sum of particles), then three-dimensionalist universalism is false. So, instead of saying that you are composed of particles, some universalists are led to say that you are composed of particle-stages. In that case, you have temporal parts. (pp. 230-231) So, here we have a theory of composition (universalism) leading to a metaphysical view of what we are (a four-dimensional being with temporal parts).

Olson notes that constitutionalism offers an alternative: A constitutionalist may be a universalist and say that *M* constitutes you now, but didn't a month ago. However, Olson thinks that the alternative fails. To show this, he asks the constitutionalist what he takes to be a fatal question: "Under what circumstances do particles compose something other than a mass [like *M*]?" (p. 231)

It's no wonder that he cannot find a good answer: He's asking a question that conflates constitution and composition. Constitutionists who are mereological universalists hold that particles always compose a sum, and nothing but a sum. Sums are mere aggregates; they are not identical to any ordinary objects (like chairs, trees or people). Sums may constitute objects, but they are not identical to the objects that they constitute. You now are constituted by a human animal, which in turn now is constituted by a particular sum of particles. Last month, the same sum of particles existed but did not constitute you then.

Universalism-cum-constitutionalism does not bloat ontology beyond constitutionalism alone; sums are ontological 'freebies' that exist if their mereological parts exist. The important point is that constitution and composition are two different relations. It is a significant (though popular) misstep for metaphysicians to try to make do with composition alone. A theory of composition would tell us what we are only if what we are is identical to a mereological sum. In light of the fact that exclusive reliance on theories of composition leads to a wildly implausible metaphysics, it is a profound mistake to suppose that 'a theory of composition would tell us what we are.' (p. 232)

Olson's critical survey of ontological theories of our nature will be successful, I suspect, in a classroom. Focussing mainly on generic versions of views rather than on specific texts, Olson assembles familiar arguments and presents new ones. The discussions are clear and, with a few noted exceptions, evenhanded. What Are We? is a readable overview of accounts of what we are and is filled with many stimulating arguments.

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