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Philosophical Profiles

Eric Olson

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IN BRIEF

Philosophy has brought Eric Olson from the deserts of Eastern Washington State to Cambridge, and thence to the home of Stainless Steel and *The Full Monty*, where he is Professor of Philosophy at Sheffield University. He is known for his rejection of the orthodox view of personal identity associated with everyone from John Locke to Derek Parfit and his stubborn insistence that we are animals, a view which he has defended in numerous articles and his two books, *The Human Animal* (1997) and *What Are We?* (2007, both Oxford University Press). He enjoys running and currently his thoughts are turning to the topic of death, although the two are unrelated.

DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Eric Olson on 1 July 2016.

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a philosophical profile

SC: Hello, Eric Olson. What drew you to philosophy in the first place? Where did you come from, and how did you discover philosophy?

EO: Well, when I was growing up in the US, I didn't know what philosophy was. I'd never heard of philosophy really, or only as one of those abstruse university subjects that you hear about. And--what I did know I guess was science, because there were TV programs on science. You know all of those Nova programs and whatever else, and that was really good fun while I was growing up. And I enjoyed my science classes in school. So that was what I wanted to be, throughout my adolescence and my youth, I wanted to be a scientist of some sort. The only question was what sort. Was it going to be biology or chemistry or something like that? So, I went off to university way back in about 1981, or so.

And this was Reed, right?

I went to Reed College in Oregon, yes. That was just a mere six hours away, in the next state. And I signed up for lots of classes in chemistry and mathematics, and so on, and a few other things. One of the courses that every freshman at Reed was required to take was a humanities course. One of the many unique and special features of Reed College. And on the syllabus in the autumn semester, the very first semester—it was about the ancient Greeks—it starts out with Homer and then you read all these Greek tragedies, Aeschylus and *Oedipus* and Sophocles and so on, and Thucydides and Herodotus. And then it was Plato, and that was my first exposure to philosophy, actually—to real philosophy, anyway. And the text that we began reading was the *Apology*, with Socrates giving his defense at the trial where he was charged with corrupting the youth of Athens and so on. And it was sort of all about politics and morality and so on, and I found it a bit dull actually. But in the same volume, in the same little volume of Plato, there was a book called the *Phaedo* which was about the arguments for the immortality of the soul, and—

Very dodgy arguments.

Well yes, exactly, very dodgy arguments. And that's how I saw it at the time actually, but the mere fact that you could give rational arguments for, or for that matter against, the immortality of the soul, or whatever, was really fascinating. And I was really gripped by that; that seemed to me so much more interesting than any of the other stuff—certainly more interesting than the chemistry and the calculus and so on that I was trying to learn in my other classes. So that was the beginning, I suppose. A little bit later we read the *Republic*, and again, it was the doctrine of the Forms that I found really fascinating. And again, I was convinced that it was dead wrong, that Plato was a bit foolish, and it was this wild metaphysical theory and it couldn't possibly be right. And I thought I could show beyond any reasonable controversy that it couldn't possibly be right, and

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I'm sure my attempts—I mean, I haven't actually gone back and read the essays—but I'm sure my attempts were no better than those of freshman typically are. But I was really interested actually. I was much more interested in that than I had been in any of my other university subjects.

So you were a youth that was corrupted by Socrates.

I suppose so, yes, I've never thought of it that way. But, in a way, yes.

So was it essentially then that you realized you were going to go into philosophy? I mean did you have to make a phone call to your parents and apologize for the money they were spending?

Not right away, that sort of started a process of thinking and soul searching. I mean, I don't make decisions rapidly, particularly important decisions. I tend to mull them over and take as long as I possibly can. And it was the same in this case, I really wasn't sure. This sort of threw all of my life plans into doubt, but I wasn't quite ready to enter into something else. But at some point I think in the course of the spring semester, I did more or less decide that this was what I wanted to do, and I did have to break it to my parents, who took it very well I have to say. They were supportive—I mean, they weren't thrilled.

So, after that point, presumably, given that you wanted to refute everything that Plato said, he wasn't your earliest inspiration. Who was your earliest inspiration?

"Inspiration" in the sense of a philosopher I actually agreed with?

Yes, someone you said, "Oh, that person really has grasped something important."

I'm not sure actually. I like debating with Plato, but, as you say, I didn't really agree with him. One of the philosophers that I had to read in the spring semester, part of the same course that was required of all freshmen, was Hobbes, actually, Hobbes's *Leviathan*. And here was an argument for a very conservative view in political philosophy. And I wasn't conservatively minded at that time, but I could see the force of his arguments actually, and I could remember in seminar discussions with fellow students, defending Hobbes. You know freshmen are never conservative, in my experience anyway, certainly not at Reed, it was very unfashionable to be conservative. But I was defending Hobbes's—I found myself much to my surprise actually defending Hobbes to some extent anyway against the objections of my classmates—not that I was convinced by Hobbes's position, but I could see the merit in it anyway.

Well, and given the events of the past week of Brexit, Hobbes is looking good. It's funny, you read the *Republic* and then *Leviathan* in short order, two of the classics of political philosophy that nobody actually believes.

Yes, well, I'm not sure what works in political philosophy people do believe.

That's true. It was Rawls for a while, but I don't know what it is anymore.

Yes, I haven't studied any Rawls. I suppose Locke is a bit more popular, but I didn't actually read Locke's political philosophy until much later. And I haven't been all that

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interested in political philosophy actually. It's just that, for some reason, it never gripped me as metaphysics does.

Yeah, so, metaphysics—was it because of the *Phaedo* that you were drawn to personal identity, or was it a later class that convinced you that personal identity was the topic that you wanted to pursue?

No, that was much, much later, actually. I didn't get thinking about personal identity really until I was doing a PhD at Syracuse, and in fact it was quite late in my PhD. I had done most of my courses, so it was probably three years or so into my PhD, actually. And then Peter van Inwagen, who I was a big fan of at that point, gave a seminar about personal identity, and the main text of which was Peter Unger's book which was quite relevant at that time—*Identity, Consciousness, and Value*, I think it is, you know, that great thick white book. And that seemed to me all wrong, actually, and it was all about comparing various variations of the psychological continuity view of personal identity, and testing them against our intuitions of various very elaborate puzzle cases—science fiction stories basically.

The fun stuff!

That sort of thing, yes. So, it was about whether personal identity through time consists just in continuity of mental contents or whether your basic mental capacities had to be preserved—that's what Unger thought—or something like that, whether it had to be some sort of physical constraint, or whatever.

"Can we use a transporter?"

That sort of thing. Yes, and at some point it became clear to me that every one of the views that Unger was considering had the implication—which Unger never actually mentions—that we're not biological organisms, because no animal, no biological organism persists by virtue of any sort of psychological continuity, of any sort. Okay, so the person has to be one thing and the animal has to be something else, and that seemed to me very, very strange, how it seemed that the animal ought to be able to think and to be conscious and so on, and since I think and am conscious, I should be an animal. That I'm an animal had struck me as a fairly obvious starting point in the debates, and here was an entire book devoted to discussing the various merits of views, every one of which was incompatible with that assumption.

It's funny, the *locus classicus* of the modern debate is usually taken to be Locke, of course, and very early on, he distinguishes between "man," and "person." He says, "it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone that makes the idea of a man in most people's sense: but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it: and if that be the idea of a man, the same successive body not shifted all at once, must, as well as the same immaterial spirit, go to the making of the same man This being premised, to find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what person stands for" [Locke's *Essay*, Book II, Chapter XXVII, sections 8-9]. So, of course, he decides that man is an animal and person is something else. It's his famous definition of "a thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection and considers itself as itself in different times and places." So, it seems like most Lockeans, and I would count

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Derek Parfit in that school and presumably Unger, are focused on the *person*, and you come along and say, "Hey, we've forgotten about the *man*, and I think the man is who we are." Whereas Locke wants to say, "I'm easy, you can talk about the man, you can talk about the person, I'm not going to say either one of them is really me, it just depends on which circumstance you're interested in."

Well, those bits of Locke that you quoted don't actually imply that the man—or as Locke says the "organism"—is one thing and the "person" is something else. All they imply is that what it is to be a man or human being or human organism, is different from what it is to be a person. And I don't dispute that, I don't think anyone disputes that. I don't think the claim that angels or gods would be people, but not human beings, is incoherent. That claim may be false, maybe nobody's going to believe it, but it's not contradictory. So, I accept that what it is to be a person is one thing, and what it is to be a human organism is something else; but I still think that it's the same thing that satisfies both kinds. Okay, but Locke does elsewhere say things that imply—which he actually acknowledges—that the person is not the same thing as the man or the human being, that they can come apart, that the person could move from one human being to another human being.

Right. The prince and the cobbler—the first science fiction example.

I don't know if it's the first, but yes.

And also, "Is a man drunk the same as a man sober?"

Yes, all that wild stuff, that seems to have set the tone—

Right, it all went downhill from there according to you.

Well that's still the tone of so much discussion in personal identity. It's so much about wild stories and "who would be who?" in these wild stories. And that might be good fun, but it seems to ignore a lot of important metaphysical questions, such as whether you're an organism and if you're not an organism, what are you?

Now, some philosophers really like to get into the history of their debate, and sort of say, "Well, I'm advancing this view, and actually one of the pre-Socratics had this view and I'm just rediscovering it and embellishing it." Do you do that, I mean, since you became an acknowledged figure in the debate, do you feel like you should go back and say, "Well, here's my version of the history of it, and here's a forgotten figure," and this kind of thing? Or are you more of your time and you say, "I don't really care about the history. I'm more talking about contemporary figures like Parfit," or something like that?

I haven't gone back and looked at the history of the subject really very much in the way that, say, Ray Martin has done. Although, it's not because I think there's nothing we can learn from that debate. I think it's more because so much of the debate—particularly the debate on the nature of people and personal identity—is very foreign to the contemporary view, and it's mostly based on the assumption that a person, or a thinking conscious being could not be a material thing. And you don't find the view that a material thing could think or be conscious in Locke or in Hume or in Kant even, or in

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Reid, or in Butler, or any of those figures that figure in anthologies of historical sources. So they're all working on the assumption that a thinking, conscious being has to be some sort of immaterial substance, of a sort that Descartes and Plato believed in—that's how it seems to me anyway. At least, it's either that or there's no thinking substance, which seems to be what Hume thought. And that seems to me all completely wrong-headed. I mean, the idea that a thinking conscious being might be a physical object didn't really get taken seriously until the 1950s or 60s.

I have taken Locke to be an agnostic. I take him to say, "Well, I'm not sure there is such a thing as mind, but, you know, I'm not going to make a big fuss about it. It doesn't really enter into it right now." Well, when I originally read it, you do Descartes, then you do Locke, and you say, "Well, Descartes makes this distinction and Locke talks about material and immaterial, let's just assume that Locke believes there are two substances." But, when I read Locke again, it seems to me he doesn't really commit, and he says, "I'm not going to say if there is immaterial stuff, but..." So I think you could have a Lockean view or an interpretation of Locke where he's more amenable to what you're saying.

That's true, I'm sure, yes, you're right. Locke was, I think, trying to be agnostic about that. That's what I can remember Jonathan Bennett telling me when I was taking his seminars in early modern philosophy at Syracuse. But he doesn't really go into the metaphysics of thinking beings. He's not very interested in that, I don't think. Actually, I mean it's rather doubtful whether he's even doing metaphysics in that chapter. I find Locke actually quite exasperating, because he's got the view that the person is not the man, not the organism. He also seems to think that the person is not the immaterial thinker, if there is one. Okay, but he says nothing about what the person is. He doesn't even seem to be interested in that question. He doesn't even give any hint of any sort of positive view about the metaphysical nature of the person or a thinking being, and I find that really frustrating. So I don't find it very useful, philosophically, to go back and look at the details of what Locke says.

So, when you were rebelling against the Peter Unger book, when you were reading it, what was your major sticking point? Because, I was reading your piece "An Argument for Animalism," in *Personal Identity*, edited by Raymond Martin and John Barresi (Blackwell, 2002), and you come across a little bit like—well, there are certain figures throughout the history of philosophy who stand up for "common sense," like Reid, for example, is famously a defender of common sense, and someone like Bernard Williams more recently. And they say (to the common folk), "Well, you know, the philosophers have got all tangled up, and isn't this silly?" But I find when I introduce the topic to my students, and give versions of the prince-and-the-cobbler, except there's mad scientists doing it, I find that students instantly and overwhelmingly are perfectly in tune with the idea that Joe was in that body but now Joe is in this body. So, they go with the personality. So, it seems to me that it's a very common intuition. So, what was it in you that rebelled against it, what stuck in your craw? Because it seems to me a little disingenuous to say, you know, "Oh, it's only because people have been polluted by philosophy that they will have this intuition, and if we just stand by common sense..." when I've always found that most people seem to go easily with the Locke. It seems that you want to say, "Well, they're being fooled in

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some way. Their intuitions are being tweaked and if you ask the question in the right way, they wouldn't fall for it."

No, I wouldn't say that actually. I've had the same experience, when you tell the story that they use in the thought experiment, whether it's the brain transplant or the brain-state transfer, or the *Star Trek* teleportation, or whatever it might be, that people usually go the Locke-Hume way, they usually say that the person who ends up thinking and talking and acting and thinking like the original person is the original person and they ignore everything else. That's true; they don't learn that from dodgy philosophy teachers. Although, when I teach older adults, they're much more skeptical, actually. In fact, they're much more skeptical about these science fiction thought experiments in the first place, so in a way it's more difficult to teach the material to older adults, because I can't predict their reactions in the same way I can with undergraduates. So it's not that I think this widespread reaction is the result of their being corrupted or badly taught; it's just that it's only part of the story. I mean, it's natural to think that way because we tend to think in narrative terms and it's impossible to watch *Star Trek* without thinking that the man who materializes on board the Starship Enterprise is the captain himself, because, you know, that's how the story's told. I think the reason I distrust these thoughts is because when I think about the metaphysical implications, I find that I can't believe them—when you think about what would follow, metaphysically, from this assumption, you end up with something even worse, it seems to me. And of course, if you start by asking students, "Do you think you're a human being, a biological organism?" of course they say yes. And if you tell them that first, and then you give them the Lockean argument and point out that a Lockean argument has the implication that we're not biological organisms, they react quite differently, actually. Then they're much more hesitant to accept the consequence.

So that leads nicely into what I'm going to ask you next, which is what you would say is the central argument of your first book [*The Human Animal*], which was something of a bombshell at the time it came out.

Let me see if I can remember how it went. I think it was like this. Nearly everyone discussing personal identity endorses some sort of psychological continuity view, the sort of thing we've been talking about. This view, however, implies that we are not biological organisms. You don't move a biological organism from one head to another by transplanting a brain, right, or by transferring its mental contents through wires or anything like that. So, if any sort of psychological continuity view is true, you and that animal could come apart. But, of course, a thing can't come apart from itself, so you must be something other than the animal. That seems to me to be a very problematic view, because it seems to be possible for an animal to have mental properties, to be conscious, to have beliefs, preferences, and so on. If any biological organism can have any mental property, then a human being would have mental properties, would be thinking and intelligent, and so on. So, the psychological continuity view would have the implication that I am one of two thinking, conscious beings sitting here thinking these thoughts: there is the thinking animal and there is the thinking person. That looks like an absurd thing to say, I mean, how could I even know which of these two beings I was, how could I ever know that I was the one that would go in this transplanted brain rather than the one who stayed behind with an empty head. So, if I'm right in thinking that there are human animals, and that human animals have mental properties, it follows—

“ the psychological continuity view would have the implication that I am one of two thinking, conscious beings sitting here thinking these thoughts: there is the thinking animal and there is the thinking person. That looks like an absurd thing to say. ”

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or seems to follow anyway—that we're animals. And that means that personal identity through time is animal identity through time, so you go where the animal goes, contrary to three hundred years of what some people think of personal identity.

Okay, so you criticized Locke for not giving an account of what persons are. Suppose a Lockean were to push back a little and say, "Okay, but what we the Lockeans do is give incredibly detailed descriptions of the continuation conditions of a person. You don't do that for an animal." You seem to be resting on common sense intuitions about what it is for an animal to continue through time, or what even an animal is. Suppose I were to say, 'animals' strikes me as a very dubious concept. Of course it's one that we throw around all the time, and one that we use all the time. But, you know, philosophers are forever taking aim at common sense concepts, and saying, "Well, when you push them, there's nothing there, or it leads to inconsistencies." Do you think you owe an account of the continuation conditions of an animal right up front or do you think that we have enough of an idea of what it is for an animal to continue? And also, when it begins and ends? Because, for example in bioethics, when an animal begins is an important topic to settle, and when it ends, like, for example, what's the ending point of me—suppose I am an animal—what's the ending point of me? Is it when my heart stops beating; is it when my brain goes down? Well, but, there are still plenty of living organisms in me, I mean, there's a philosophy of what it is to be alive that raises all kinds of puzzles.

Well, okay, good. I think I've got a good argument for the claim that we are animals, or biological organisms. And there is a whole science devoted to the study of biological organisms—it's biology. And maybe biology is really full of problems, but it's certainly a flourishing science anyway. Now, it's true that there are lots of metaphysical questions about animals, and I haven't got answers to those metaphysical questions any more than anybody else does. I have opinions, but those opinions about the metaphysics of animals are independent of my conviction that I'm an animal. I suppose these questions about the metaphysics of animals arise for anyone who thinks that there are animals. It's not as if you could avoid these questions or that these questions would not arise if you thought that we were not animals. Because they certainly arise about the animals we're *not*, on that view. So, I don't think me saying that we're animals raises additional problems that you wouldn't get if you didn't hold that view. I mean maybe those questions about animal identity become more important or more interesting or more worrying if we're animals, than it would be if we were not animals. But it doesn't create those problems, it doesn't make them any more difficult to solve.

Now, the central argument, as you put it, and the one that you return to in another paper, "Was I a Fetus?" aimed at beginning philosophy students, is that we shouldn't say that there are two things thinking here: sitting in this chair, an animal that thinks, and me that thinks. Two thinkers, that's just unacceptable. Now, I think what most people, when they disagree with this, the example they would come up with would be, "Well, wait a minute, I'm a parent, and I'm a teacher. Are there two thinkers because of that? Or do we have to say that only the parent does the thinking, whereas the teacher doesn't?" What's your immediate response to that?

The parent is the teacher. Being a parent is a different *property* from being a teacher, but it's the very same *thing* that has both properties. Otherwise you would have a sort

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of substance dualism between parents and teachers—something like, something that would appear to be one human being who teaches in the classroom by day, and looks after our children by night—or has children, I should say—is really two beings, one who only teaches by day and doesn't parent by night, and one who parents but doesn't teach by day, and so on, in much the way that Descartes was committed to saying what looks to be one being that thinks and walks and talks and eats and so on is really two beings, one of which thinks but doesn't walk or talk, and one of which walks and talks but doesn't think. There might be a reason to think that it couldn't be the physical object that thinks, but there seems to be no reason to think that something couldn't be both a teacher and a parent.

But they certainly do both have different persistence conditions. I was actually a teacher before I was a parent, and will continue to be a parent, I hope, until the day I die, whereas I hope that I won't continue to be a teacher until the day I die. So, it seems to me that the important distinction between the parent/teacher confluence and the human/person confluence is that the human is the substance in some sense, because what you said is that there's no substance dualism between parent and teacher. They're just properties, as it were, of a more basic substance. Whereas you want to say that the animal is, in some kind of Aristotelian sense, a substance. Is that a misrepresentation?

Going back to what you said just a moment ago—I guess there were two things you were saying. One, you started by saying that teachers and parents have different persistence conditions. I don't think that's right. I don't think that if you stop being a teacher, a teacher ceases to exist. And likewise, when you become a parent, it's not as if some new thing comes into existence which didn't exist before, the parent. There's nothing that could happen to you that would destroy the teacher without destroying the parent or vice versa. You could cease to be a teacher, but a teacher would not cease to exist without the parent also ceasing to exist, and the person, and the interviewer and so on.

So, if we counted the number of teachers in the world, when I cease to be a teacher, there is one fewer teacher, but there's not one fewer parent, isn't that right?

Yes, but that does not mean that anything has ceased to exist. We could count the number of people in the room—maybe it's five—but when Peter leaves, then the number's only four. Okay, then there are only four people in the room, but that doesn't mean that anyone has ceased to exist.

Let me see if I can try a different approach. Do you believe in persons?

Do you mean do I believe that persons or people exist? Of course I do, yes. You and I are both people.

Okay. So, on what would you say a person's existence depends? You say for example it's perfectly possible that there could be angels or other heavenly beings who are persons but are not humans, so on what does the existence of a person depend?

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Maybe it depends on what sort of person it is. I mean, for a human person to exist there has to be a human organism, and maybe the organism has to be alive biologically speaking, though that's controversial. For there to be an angelic person, there has to be an angel, whatever sort of being that is, I don't know—I don't think about the metaphysics of angels. So you could say that for a person to exist, there has to be a being with the right sort of special mental properties, the ones that are distinctive of people, the ones that non-people haven't got. And it's true that nothing could be a person at a particular time without having those properties, I suppose that's right anyway—but it doesn't follow from that that a person stops existing if something stops having those properties, because you might stop being a person, but still exist.

So, you want to say that—it seems to me just as Locke says—that I'm an animal, and I'm a person. Why don't you have the "two thinkers" problem just as much as the Lockeans do?

Because I think the person and the animal are one, and not two, so there's only one thinker.

Okay, so when I say there's a person sitting in this chair, and there's an animal sitting in this chair—

Yes, and the teacher and a parent—

So, only one of those things is most basic, is the real thing.

No, no, when you say "those things," of course there's only one thing there, which has many properties. Now it may be that one of those properties is metaphysically more basic than the others, I'm not quite sure what that amounts to—that may be true. And maybe being an organism is metaphysically more basic than being a teacher.

But don't you have to say that? Because otherwise why can't I say, "I'm something, I know not what, here are some of its properties: it's an animal, it's a person, it's a teacher, it's a parent." You want to say, "But wait a minute, the animal one is the most important one."

Well maybe it's more important in the sense that you could not cease to be an animal but still exist. At least, I don't think an animal could cease to be an animal and still exist, although that's one of those questions about the metaphysics of organisms that are independent of whether you and I are organisms or not organisms. I'm convinced that we're organisms. I might still be uncertain about whether an organism could still exist without being an organism, though I doubt it. But that's an independent claim. It's not that I think that one of those entities—namely the animal—is more important than the other entities, the teacher, the parent, the person and so on—there's only one entity *there*. Maybe being an animal or being an organism is the more metaphysically interesting, or metaphysically important property. Does that make sense? I mean, you could stop being a teacher and still exist; you could stop being a parent and still exist; you could stop being a person and still exist, I suppose, if to be a person is to have special mental properties. I mean, the animal wasn't always a person, in that sense. There are other properties as well that you couldn't lose: being a material thing, for

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example, being located in space. Maybe those are less interesting just because they're less specific, but I haven't got a sort of general theory about which properties are most metaphysically basic.

Are you familiar with, in Fred Feldman's terminology, the "termination thesis"?

Yes.

I find his advertising deceptive, because what he says is, "There are people who argue that when we cease to think or we cease to have the properties that a person must have, we cease to exist. I am not one of these. I am a *survivalist*." And so, this sounds like he believes that there is life after death." But he goes on to say, "What it means to be a survivalist is that after we die, we continue to exist, as corpses." And it's like, at that point I think, "I've been sold a bill of goods," you know, that's not the survival that I was looking for.

Sure.

And he makes hay out of this discussion about Aunt Ethel. When Aunt Ethel dies something's left behind, that hospitals or whoever have to dispose of hygienically. When we point at this corpse what is it appropriate to say? He says, "I think it's appropriate to say, "That's Aunt Ethel," whereas espousers of the termination thesis have to say, "That is the remains of Aunt Ethel," or "That is something that is there to remind us of the now-departed Aunt Ethel," or something like that." Is that the kind of intuition that you're going for? Because I find it perfectly easy to say that I find the termination thesis more appealing. So, what would you say is your biggest weapon against that intuition?

Yes, well, of course—what happens to an animal when it stops—when it dies, whether it carries on as a corpse or whether it ceases to exist—that's one of the questions about the metaphysics of organisms that are independent of whether you and I are organisms or not—and again, it's also a question that arises for anybody who believes in organisms, whether or not they think that we are organisms. As it happens I disagree with Feldman about this, and I think the main reason is that when I ask myself, "what does it take for an organism to persist through time? What would it take to destroy an animal, that is, to cause it to cease to exist?" I can't think of a very good answer that's compatible with Feldman's view that an animal exists as a corpse after it dies. I'm also unconvinced by the arguments that Feldman gives for this view, the view that he calls survivalism. The main argument seems to be that that's how we talk, we say, "Yes, it's Aunt Ethel in the coffin, and that was buried here," and so on. It's true that we do say those things, but I'm not convinced that these sayings reflect any deep and subtle metaphysical conviction.

Because we can also say, "I scattered Aunt Ethel after she was cremated," and at that point, I'm pretty sure, he would say, "No, Aunt Ethel doesn't exist after you cremated her."

Right, yes, here's something else, I mean, think about someone who believes in life after death—a real survivalist you might say. Someone who thinks that Aunt Ethel is now in

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the next world, in heaven. Okay, this person would be just as inclined as the rest of us to say that Aunt Ethel's buried here, right, and this doesn't seem to be inconsistent. So, I don't think these ordinary sayings reflect any very deep metaphysical view.

So, what I was trying to get at is, what am I picking out when I say "me"? What am I referring to? You say the most obvious and almost trivially true thing you can say is that I'm picking out an animal. I want to deny that because, let's say I get a brain bleed or something and my cortex dies, but I don't even need a respirator, say my brain stem is working and it's keeping my lungs working, so you can take me off the respirator and unfortunately I continue to exist, as has happened in famous cases, I want to say at that point I'm gone. Get rid of that thing, don't waste any money keeping that going, because I'm gone. Would you say that's a mistake?

Yes and no, it depends on what you mean by saying "I'm gone." I would say you still exist, because the animal still exists, but when you say "me," you refer to the animal. It's the animal that's asking the questions, okay, but when you say, "I'm gone," you might mean your life no longer has any value. For all practical purposes it's just as if you no longer exist. There's no point—it benefits no one—to keep you alive, to continue feeding you and so forth. And I think I would agree that if this happened to me, there would be no point in keeping me alive, and I would not want to be kept alive in that condition, so I wouldn't want people spending any money to keep me alive, and so on. So, for all practical purposes I'm gone, even though actually I still exist. It's just that an existence in that condition has no more value to me than existing as a corpse, if Feldman is right.

So it sounds like what you think is that ethical issues like abortion or euthanasia are not to be settled by metaphysics, because you can't just say, "Oh, this is easy, because he doesn't exist anymore, so do what you will with that chunk of flesh." What you would say is, "No, no, I still exist and I am that chunk of flesh, but it just so happens that that chunk of flesh is of no value to anyone." So, it's not the metaphysical issue that's going to settle things easily, it's going to be that we have to have a question about value. We have to have a debate about what's valuable and what's important.

I agree with that, yes, I don't think metaphysics by itself settles any ethical questions. We have to do moral thinking as well. I mean, the metaphysics might put certain constraints on our moral thinking, for example, if we were organisms, you can't say abortion is okay because the thing in the womb is not a person, or not something that could ever come to be a person. So you can't say the person doesn't yet exist in the womb, that's a mistake, I think, if I'm right. But it doesn't follow from my claim that you existed as a fetus, that abortion is murder, for example. That's a further claim, a further ethical claim, and that needs more argument.

It strikes me that you use "person" in two different ways sometimes. There was a quote from this book [*Metaphysics: 5 Questions*, edited by Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (Automatic Press/VIP, 2010)], which is a book of interviews with various metaphysicians, and you are in here, and there was one quote of yours that I wanted to highlight. You said, "This line of thought convinced me that psychology was completely irrelevant to personal identity." So, it seems to me that you want to say two things. We've established that you believe in persons, you say there are such things as persons—well, you wouldn't say "things," but, there are persons.

“When you say, “I'm gone,” you might mean your life no longer has any value. For all practical purposes it's just as if you no longer exist... I think I would agree that if this happened to me, there would be no point in keeping me alive... So, for all practical purposes I'm gone, even though actually I still exist. It's just that an existence in that condition has no more value to me than existing as a corpse... I don't think metaphysics by itself settles any ethical questions.”

Sure, "such things as" I'm happy to say.

Right, but do you think that those things—persons—psychology's irrelevant to those, or would you agree, "Oh okay, I'll leave the identity conditions of persons to, I don't know, Lockeans, and what they say is basically okay, but where I disagree with them is where I say what I am. I would say I am at some most basic level an animal, rather than a person, although I will concede that I am also a person." When you say, "My theory of personal identity is animalism," that doesn't seem quite right. It means your theory of what I am most basically is an animal, whereas when people talk about "personal identity," perhaps you would want to say, "It's a little bit unfortunate that we use that term, because I don't think persons are what's most important, or what's most basic—I think animals are." But given that there is this term, "person," you say, "Okay, I believe there are persons too, and here are the identity conditions, and so on, I just don't think that that's me." So there are two senses of the term, "personal identity." There's personal identity as the field of what I am most basically, and then there's personal identity as, 'Well, given that there are persons (as well as animals) here's what you should say about what it takes for a person to continue through time.' Do you see what I'm saying?

So, the term "personal identity" can mean lots of different things, so there's a question about what it takes for a person to persist through time. My answer to that question is that it's what it takes for a human animal to persist through time, since that's what human people are.

Well, but, you also conceded that there could be non-human persons.

Yes.

So, given that they have in common that they are persons, but they don't have in common that they are humans, there must be persistence conditions for persons that are independent of humanity.

Okay, if there could be non-human people, then I would say that there are no persistence conditions for *people as such*. Because what it would take for an angelic person or divine person or whatever or demon—you know, a sort of immaterial person—to persist through time would be different from what it is for a human person to persist through time...

So, persistence conditions are tied to animals, at least in this field?

If something is both a person and an animal, then you might say it gets its persistence conditions from its nature as an animal, rather than its nature as a person, that's what I would say. Yes, I think actually most of my opponents who think that we're not animals would also say that if we were animals, then we would have animal persistence conditions. They seem to accept that.

Okay, I get it. So, for example, suppose if Data from *Star Trek*, even if we established that he's a person, he would have different persistence conditions from you and me. His persistence conditions would be the persistence conditions for an android.

“ if there could be non-human people, then I would say that there are no persistence conditions for people as such. Because what it would take for an angelic person or divine person or whatever or demon—you know, a sort of immaterial person—to persist through time would be different from what it is for a human person to persist through time. ”

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Yes, that's right. Yes, so it's very often assumed in setting out the problem of personal identity over time, that there is an answer to that question, "What does it take for a person to persist from one time to another?" It seems to me that very question is tendentious.

So would you say a better way to put it is, "What is it for a thing that is a person to continue to exist through time"?

That doesn't help, because the answer to that question might depend on what sort of person you're talking about. I would rather ask, "What does it take for us to persist through time?" or for human people, or whatever the relevant category is.

So, if you point at someone—this would be rude, and you would get ushered out of the hospital—but suppose you were to point at someone in a persistent vegetative state whose cortex has liquefied, as they discovered with Terri Schiavo when they did the autopsy—you point at that being and you say, "There's a person."

Well, that would be a bit like pointing at that being and saying, "There's a teacher," or, "There's a parent." I don't think she was a parent, but never mind. It would be more accurate to say, "This is something that was once a person, or a teacher, or a parent," or whatever.

Okay, so would this be a misleading way of putting things? Suppose I say, "Okay, there are conditions that establish what it takes to continue as a teacher or to continue as a person, and I'm going to call those "the persistence conditions for teacher-hood" or "the persistence conditions for personhood."" You would say that's just misusing the terminology, or just speaking metaphorically, in some sense?

I guess I'd say what it takes for a teacher to persist depends on what sort of thing a teacher is, what sort of thing metaphysically speaking a teacher is. So if it turns out that teachers are animals because we are animals and teachers are all human people, then what it takes for a teacher to persist is what it takes for a human animal to persist. But if there could be teachers of different metaphysical kinds, like teaching robots, say, or teaching angels, or whatever, their persistence conditions would be, I suppose, very different, from ours.

Yeah.

There was something you said earlier, actually, that I didn't agree with. You ascribed to me the view that we are more fundamentally animals and less fundamentally people, teachers, parents, and so on. I don't think that I want to agree—I mean I'm not quite sure what that means, but it doesn't sound right. I don't want to say that I'm less of a parent than I am an animal, or that my relation to the property of being a parent is looser than my relation to the property of being an animal.

But you could lose your teacher-hood, but you couldn't lose your animal-hood.

That's true, that's true, but I still have those two properties in the same sense. I really am a person, I really am a teacher, I really am a parent, and so on.

“ You ascribed to me the view that we are more fundamentally animals and less fundamentally people, teachers, parents, and so on. I don't think that I want to agree—I mean I'm not quite sure what that means, but it doesn't sound right. I don't want to say that I'm less of a parent than I am an animal, or that my relation to the property of being a parent is looser than my relation to the property of being an animal. ”

But one of them you couldn't lose without ceasing to exist.

That's true, I have one of the properties essentially and the other ones only accidentally. But that's not in itself as interesting as it might sound. I mean, there are plenty of properties that I have essentially that are of no interest whatsoever, such as not being a prime number, say. That's a property that I have and could not possibly lose, okay, but it's not one that my biographers will bother to mention.

Okay, let's move on to your second book so far, which is *What Are We?* (Oxford, 2007) with this nice Egon Schiele cover. I don't know 'nice' is ever the right adjective for Egon Schiele, but still. Would you say that your view has changed between *The Human Animal* and *What Are We?*, or would you just say that after *The Human Animal* you were attacked from various fronts, and you felt that need to respond on all fronts, but your view is basically the same? So, would you say that your view has changed or just your statement of the view has become more refined or something?

Well, I suppose there are some things that I said in *The Human Animal* that I'm not very sure about now, but I didn't write *What Are We?* because I changed my mind about anything, nor did I write as a response to my critics really. It was more because I wanted to discuss a more general question. *The Human Animal* was mainly an attack on psychological continuity accounts of personal identity, and an argument in favor of our being animals. And I wanted to discuss the more general question of what are we, what are the alternatives to our being animals, what are the possible views, what sort of thing might we be? And that's what *What Are We?* was about. So it starts with the view that we're animals and discusses the pros and cons of that, and then discusses what I took to be the main alternatives to that view.

Okay. So, what were the new alternatives that cropped up, that you discussed in *What Are We?*

I'm not sure whether they were new. I discuss the view that we are material—we are non-animals constituted by animals. That means that you are a material thing, you're the same size as the animal, you are actually visible and tangible and so on. You're physically indistinguishable from the animal, but you're still something different from the animal. So the same matter can make more than one material thing at the same time. That was one view.

Isn't that basically saying—because you're perfectly open to the idea that the same matter can make up more than one thing, if we use the term "thing" loosely, because it can be—the same matter can be a teacher and a parent and so on, so there's a teacher, there's a parent...

It can make a thing that's more than one kind. I'm not happy with saying that—even loosely—that there's more than one thing sitting here, namely a person and a philosopher, and a metaphysician, and a teacher and a parent, and so on.

That's the intuition that you will not back down on, "there can't be two things sitting in this chair."

“*The Human Animal* was mainly an attack on psychological continuity accounts of personal identity, and an argument in favor of our being animals. And I wanted to discuss the more general question of what are we, what are the alternatives to our being animals, what are the possible views, what sort of thing might we be? And that's what *What Are We?* was about.”

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Well whether there could be is a deep metaphysical question, but I don't think—I'm not happy with saying just, sort of casually, as if it were not controversial, that there are two things sitting—in me, namely a person and a philosopher.

So what's a "thing" then?

A "thing" is just a completely general count noun. I haven't got a theory about things; a thing is not an interesting kind.

But if I ask, "Is there a teacher sitting there?" You would say, "Yes." And, "Is there a parent sitting there?" and you would say, "Yes."

Yes.

Okay, so we're not counting things when we do that?

Well the move I would resist is saying that because there's a teacher there and a parent there, there are therefore two things there. That's double-counting those things.

Whereas the view that you've just talked about—the view of Lynn Rudder Baker, for example—you would say that they are saying there are two things there?

Yes. Well, actually, Baker wants to resist that, though it's not clear to me why she wants to resist—and I don't fully understand her view, I'm not sure that anyone does, actually—but certainly people, many philosophers such as (Sydney) Shoemaker, (Frederick) Doepke, Mark Johnston, do want to say, and say very clearly, that there are two things there. Baker concedes that the person and the animal are numerically different, although she wants to say that in some sense they're only one thing.

Couldn't you have a view sort of like yours, except you say, "My view is just like Eric Olson's, except I say the person is the one I am essentially, and the animal is not what I am—my animal property is contingent and my person property is essential"?

So it sounds like you're saying that I am an animal and a person, but I could stop being an animal and still exist, whereas I could not stop being a person and still exist.

Right.

So—and to be a person is to be intelligent and self-conscious, and to have certain special mental properties. So, in the Terri Schiavo case that you described, where a person loses those special mental properties, but her biological functions carry on, so, you know, breathing, circulation, digestion, all that stuff carries on without any artificial life support and so on. In those cases the person ceases to exist.

Right, life does not stop, but personhood does.

Now that seems like something different. I'm happy to say that you stop being a person, that is, you lose the property of personhood when that happens, but you carry on existing as an animal.

Eric Olson

And I would say therefore you carry on existing as a living animal.

That's not a view according to which being a person is essential to you.

Oh, I'm sorry, no—when I said “You carry on existing,” I misspoke. I mean, *something* carries on existing as a living animal, but *you* don't. You cease to exist.

Well, that seems to imply that the living animal is something different from me. Because, the animal has carried on existing—I've ceased to exist. If I were the same thing as the animal it would follow that I'd outlived myself.

“Something outlived me.”

Yes.

So, I guess that view would have to say that life is not a property of persons, it's a property of animals.

So that seems to imply that a person is not a living thing.

Yeah, and I think actually that comes up in discussions of God. It's not clear whether or not God is alive.

I'm sure that those who—that the theists think that God, if there is one, is not a biological organism, is not alive in the biological sense.

Yes.

Yes, that's right. It doesn't follow from that that human people are not alive in the biological sense. But if they are not alive in the biological sense then they certainly are not organisms, and probably are not material things at all.

Right. Couldn't you say, “They are material things, as long as they're housed in bodies, but when they're downloaded into the Matrix to preserve them for when they can be given robot bodies later on, then they are persons, but they're no longer humans”?

Yes, okay, whether that's compatible with your being an animal depends on whether it's possible to download a biological organism into the Matrix.

Well, you're no longer an animal at that point, but you're still a person.

Does the animal or the thing that was an animal still exist?

Yes, it just doesn't think anymore.

So couldn't you do it with some other—with a dog, let's say, or with a rose bush, could you download that into the Matrix?

No—well, only if it's conscious, which I hope rose bushes aren't, because then I would feel terrible. But, because what you're downloading is the consciousness.

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Maybe I'm not sure how this downloading works, but I suppose it works by extracting the information from my brain and putting it into the computer, into the Matrix, whatever that is. It seems to me that the organism might well still exist, it might no longer function cognitively, but it might be in a certain vegetative state like Terri Shiavo, so it looks like you haven't moved the animal into the Matrix, or what have you.

No, you haven't.

It follows that if you could put me into the Matrix, then I'm not an animal.

Right.

But nothing that was ever an animal could be in the Matrix.

No, something that was an animal is now in the Matrix.

So, but there's also something that was an animal that is still an animal and is never in the Matrix, but simply is a sort of human vegetable.

But if you could cut me down the middle, like Parfitt's 'My Division' cases, where he takes out hemispheres of brains—"The Triplets," two of them, their brains get destroyed, and one of them, his body gets destroyed, so you take half the hemisphere from the one whose body is destroyed, and you put each hemisphere into the intact bodies of the other two triplets, and then they go off in two directions...

All those cases—the animal that I say that you are stays behind, nothing interesting happens to it. So, it follows from that view, that you are not the animal.

Okay. Then, think of what happens with identical twins. You get a fertilized egg and it is, for all intents and purposes, one organism, then for whatever reason, it splits. This is one of the things that Catholic theologians worry over, because it seems to show that we don't begin at conception—some theologians would say, "Okay, we must begin after the point at which twinning is possible, because otherwise you get these problems." But, it seems like there's one organism, and then there's two organisms, and I want to say that's a little bit like what happens to me when I get downloaded. I get downloaded—the organism that was overlapping with me, as it were—or you could say I was that organism in all material senses, because that was the material realization of me—that continues to exist, but I continue to exist most basically as the information in the computer, or something.

I suppose what happens in the twinning case is the same thing as what happens when an amoeba divides in two. You start out with one organism and you end up with two organisms, and the biologists usually say that these are two new organisms—this is a case of reproduction, rather than a case of growth or splitting.

Yeah, I know, for example this is one of Fred Feldman's arguments that show defining death is very difficult because the original amoeba has exited from life without dying, because it no longer exists but it's wrong to say that it dies, so death is not merely exit from life...

Eric Olson

Yeah, but your suggestion seems to be that there are two things here which are physically indistinguishable, okay. If I were, as you put it, downloaded into the Matrix, one of them would become a human vegetable; the other one would end up in the computer.

Yeah, you would never have the two-thinkers issue though, because the one that's in the computer was always doing the thinking. Now, I guess you do have the problem, because then you would have to say whether or not the human vegetable just sprung into existence at the moment I exited it, in which case where was it before?

Well, according to the view you're proposing (not mine) the human vegetable would have to have never been intelligent to begin with.

Right.

That would be a sort of dualism, I suppose.

Which I wouldn't want to say.

Otherwise, you've got two thinkers, and you also need to say something about how it is that one of these two apparently indistinguishable objects has the power to move to the computer whereas the other one would merely—hasn't got that ability but would merely lose its mental powers if its brain contents were erased. What is it about one of these two objects that enables it to move to the computer, whereas the other doesn't?

I'm presuming the following is an easy case for you to rebut. Suppose I were to draw the analogy of chair of philosophy. I am currently the chair of a very tiny philosophy department. I won't be forever, but I will continue to exist. The chair of philosophy will no longer be me. The chair will exist, and I will exist. At the moment they coincide, but soon they will split and neither of them will cease to exist.

Well, if you think that it won't—I mean it sounds like you're saying that some one thing—that there is this thing, the chair of the department, which is now male, and next year it might well be female, let's say, and will move discontinuously from one body to another when the torch is passed, or when the initiation ceremony takes place, or whatever it is. That sounds like an extravagant metaphysical claim, and that too would imply—would seem to imply anyway—that there are two thinking beings there, the man, and the chairman.

Whereas you say there's just one. So, what—so what you would—would you deny then that there is one chair of philosophy that continues throughout the ages?

Yes, I would deny that.

So, you just say, there are a lot of chairs of philosophy.

Yes, a number of people sequentially have the property or the role of being chair.

So when we talk of, "The chair of philosophy has existed since the founding of the university," you would say, "Well, not really."

“ There are two things here which are physically indistinguishable, okay. If I were, as you put it, downloaded into the Matrix, one of them would become a human vegetable; the other one would end up in the computer.. you've got two thinkers, and you also need to say something about how it is that one of these two apparently indistinguishable objects has the power to move to the computer... whereas the other doesn't. ”

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You might mean the institution, or the role has existed, but there is no one, concrete being which has always held that role, which has changed sex and changed age and so on, and jumped discontinuously at regular intervals, or at least I wouldn't accept that without some metaphysical argument anyway. There are metaphysical views that have that implication, but I wouldn't accept it without becoming convinced of one of those general metaphysical views.

Okay. Now another view that you tackle in here, is a view that David Lewis famously contributed to the personal identity debate. He didn't come up with the metaphysical theory, but certainly he did a lot to argue for it, which is sometimes called "four-dimensionalism." What Lewis pointed out is that it helped to solve some puzzles. Famously there's a puzzle in personal identity involving fission, like with Parfit's case of the triplets, where, again, three triplets get into a horrible accident, two of them lose their brains, one of them loses everything but their brain, and we're assuming that the hemispheres are duplicates of each other, and we take them and we put one hemisphere in one intact body and the other in the other intact body. Now, do I survive? And the puzzle is that it seems that double-success counts as failure, because if only one hemisphere survived and we transplanted it, we would say, "I did survive"—well presumably you wouldn't, but the views that he was engaging with would say that I do, because certainly if you ask this person if it is Simon Cushing and he has survived, it would say, "Yes! It's great! Modern technology, thumbs up!"—whereas if both of them survive, then we say, "Oh no, either both of them are, or neither of them, or one of them is," and each of those views ends up being intolerable, so we get this weird problem that single success is success, but double success is a failure. Now, David Lewis's view is that you can have double-success be double-success, because actually there were always two people. It's just that a person is not something that only exists three-dimensionally. It's not as if right now all of me is here right now in this instant. Instead, what I am is a four-dimensional time-worm, as it were, and if it turns out that I split, well, it turns out that there were two time-worms that overlapped for a while, and that this thing that exists three-dimensionally right now, is a part of both of them, just as in conjoined twins, maybe their torso is a part of both of them. So, that view seems to lay open the possibility of division, or, there being more than one thing here in a non-objectionable sense. You want to say if there's two people sitting in that chair, the theory must be problematic, whereas this view says that no, you don't have to say that. You can say that two people can lay claim to this three-dimensional chunk without there being two people here as it were.

Okay, now, so, the—what you call four-dimensionalism is the view that persisting things are composed of temporal parts. So, for any period of your life there is actually a part of you, a physical, flesh-and-blood object that exists—just like you, except that it exists only during that period, right, so there's a being just like you that exists only during this interview. So, it began when the interview began and it will cease to exist just like that, when the interview ends and so on. Okay, and it's also combined with a sort of universal composition, so there is something composed of, let's say, your first half and my second half. So, this view would imply that there actually is such a being as the chair of your department, a flesh-and-blood being, that changes from male to female, that jumps discontinuously many times, and so on and so forth. And, yes, so this sort of ontology transforms all debates about the persistence and identity of concrete objects—personal

“What you call four-dimensionalism... would imply that there actually is such a being as the chair of your department, a flesh-and-blood being, that changes from male to female, that jumps discontinuously many times, and so on and so forth.”

identity among others—you've got all these entities, and for any view that you might have about personal identity, pretty much, apart from Cartesian views or something, there will be entities that satisfy that description. So there is actually a being sharing your current temporal parts which will come to an end when you stop being a teacher, for example, and so on. So, where am I going with this?

Is this a way to respond to your two-thinkers problem?

Yes, on this view there are all sorts of thinkers sitting here right now, because this current temporal part is a temporal part of gazillions of objects that diverge in the past, and that diverge in the future. So there's one that began when I began and coincided with me but then will jump from me to you right now, let's say.

I think Quine's view is that there's no sort of natural object, it's just up to us. There's an object that consists of the tip of my nose, and the sun of five million years ago or something like that, because, why not? But you could have a view that said, "Well, no, I want to say that the world carves itself up a bit, so let's say there really are people and how many people there are sitting in this chair is not something I know yet (and not something that is up to humans to decide), because it kind of depends if I twin in the future. So if I twin in the future then it will turn out retrospectively that there were two people sitting here, but if I don't, well, then there was only one, or, rather, what's sitting here was a part of only one."

Yes, so, to be a person on Lewis's view, is not just to be a being with the right mental properties, because there are all sorts of beings like that, with all sorts of weird and gerrymandered histories—you know, one that jumps from me to you, for example—it's got all the mental properties that I've got until it jumps to you, or when it acquires all the mental properties that you've got—but it's not a person. To be a person, you have to not just have the right special mental properties, but you have to be composed of what Lewis calls "person stages," very short-lived temporal parts that have—that bear the right relation to one another, so like a psychological continuity or connectedness, and there isn't any psychological continuity or connectedness in that case, between you and me. So we just ignore most of the thinking, intelligent beings. Certain special ones we call people and we give them names, like Simon or Eric, so questions about personal identity over time become, really, linguistic questions. The question is which of these many gerrymandered, four-dimensional objects do we call people, and which ones are the referents of our personal pronouns and proper names.

So isn't this a way to respond to your worry that we can't have two thinking things sitting there? We say, "Well, no, there's only ever one thing sitting there, the temporal part."

Okay, well okay, the epistemic question still arises, so there are millions and billions and trillions of intelligent beings sitting here and thinking, "What am I? Which one am I?" How could I ever know which one am I, which one I refer to when I say, "I"?

Well, but why do you have to? I think Lewis gives this analogy. In Flint—well, he doesn't give this analogy, but I'm making it more specific. In Flint, the two freeways, the 23 and the 75 come together for a spell and then they divide again, so I'm driving

“ On this view there are all sorts of thinkers sitting here right now, because this current temporal part is a temporal part of gazillions of objects that diverge in the past, and that diverge in the future... the epistemic question still arises, so there are millions and billions and trillions of intelligent beings sitting here and thinking, "What am I? Which one am I?" How could I ever know which one am I, which one I refer to when I say, "I"? ”

along the freeway through parts of Flint, and I say, "Am I on the 23 or the 75?" Doesn't really matter, I'm on both, and I wouldn't get caught up in asking "Which is it? Is it the 23 or the 75?" It's both.

Well, that's actually an answer to a different question. If you ask, "How many people are there here?"—or for that matter if you ask how many conscious intelligent beings there are here—of course you could say there are millions and billions and trillions. But you could also say there's one, because there's only one stage here, and so, for most ordinary purposes, we count them all as one, just as in that case you count both roads as one, if you asked, "How many roads do you have to cross to get from here to there?" you count them as one. So there's only one person here, but in a way it is one, but in another way there are lots and lots of them, lots and lots of intelligent beings. You can still ask which one and why, just as you might well ask if you're on that section of road where the two highways coincide, "Where does this road go to?" And you might say, "Well, it goes here and it also goes there," or you might say, "One of them goes here and one of them goes there." So, likewise, one of the conscious beings sitting here will go with the right hemisphere, let's say, and one of them will go with the left hemisphere. Where am I going to go? That question can still be asked. You might say in this case the answer is simply that there are two of us: one will go this way, and one will go that way; one will go right, one will go left. You can't say that generally. You can't say there are millions and billions and trillions of conscious beings sitting here and they'll all go different ways. Asking which one of them is me is pointless, because then I won't have any way to plan for the future. I mean, I won't know whether I'll be sitting here in five minutes' time or whether I'll be sitting in Flint in five minutes' time, or whether I'll cease to exist between now and then, because all of those—there are conscious beings sitting here to which those things happen. So, most of these candidates have to get ignored, so the four-dimensionalist needs some account of which of these many objects get picked out by our personal pronouns and proper names, and which ones get ignored.

Is that why you reject four-dimensionalism? Or, are you just saying it has puzzles that you think are worse than for your view?

I guess what I was trying to say is that the four-dimensionalism does not by itself answer all the questions, or solve the problems that arise about there being more than one thing being here. Okay, it implies that there's more than one, but it doesn't by itself tell you how to deal with that, or why it isn't as bad as it sounds—you need something else.

I just think it's a story that makes it less ridiculous-sounding that there should be more than one thinking being there. It seems, at least when you present this to an introductory audience, that "This view says that there are two thinking beings here!" as if that's a knock-down criticism, but can't a four-dimensionalist say, "That doesn't trouble me"?

Yes, well, four-dimensionalism at least gives you a principled explanation of why there are so many beings there. It tells you how many there are, why there are that number, and so on. It's a systematic ontology of material objects, okay. If all you say is that there are two things here, a person which will go one way, and an organism that will go the other way, and then you stop, you haven't given any systematic ontology of material objects, and you've said nothing about why there are those two objects, and why we

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should believe it, and so on. It raises all sorts of questions, and it seems rather arbitrary and hoked-up.

Okay, what about going back to twinning cases, like amoeba or something? So, what would you say, as an animalist, about what happens in the division of an amoeba, where after the split, let's say, you have exactly the same quantity of biological material. Has the original one ceased to exist?

I suppose so. That's what the experts on biological individuation say anyway, yes. It's better than the alternatives anyway.

So, in other words, you don't have to say, "There are two beings here." Okay, imagine now they can do ultrasounds right to the point of conception. So you go in the next morning after the conception has occurred and you spot the fertilized egg, and they put this in this little picture frame labeled "Baby's first picture." If there is no twinning, I look back, and I say, "Hey, there's me." Whereas if there *is* twinning, *neither* of the twins can say, "That's me." Is that right?

Well, let me say first: this is again a question of animal identity. It's a question that doesn't arise especially for me. Even if you weren't an animalist, you would face the very same question about the biological organism. So, I'm not sure why I have to have an answer for this question.

Well, it's just—for example, you have that paper "Was I a Fetus?" And one of the arguments you give in that is that, "Personal identity theorists have to say, "I was not a fetus because it wasn't conscious yet," whereas I can say "I was a fetus.""

Yes, and the question is probably more pressing for me, or more important for me than it is for a non-animalist. I suppose if you want to be realistic, I'm not convinced that I was ever a fertilized egg, because it doesn't seem to me that when the egg divides in two, and then into four, and so on, that you get a multi-cellular organism. I mean, think of it this way: when the fertilized egg splits in two, that cell ceases to exist, presumably, just like the amoeba does. But if the organism continues to exist, then you have two things in the same place at once, the organism and the cell. The organism must be something different from the cell, right, because the organism survived the division and the cell didn't, and I don't want to say that. As far as I know—and I'm not very confident about this, but this is what a lot of people who know more about this than I do, think—you don't get a multi-cellular organism until something like fourteen or sixteen days after fertilization, when the cells begin to specialize, when they start acting as a unit rather than just being sort of stuck together. And at that point, twinning can no longer take place, in the natural course of events, anyway. And, of course, it may still be possible to do some sort of surgery on this microscopic organism and get two living embryos out of it, and in that case what you said I suppose would still apply. If the surgery hadn't taken place, the person could later say, "Yes, that's me, my first picture." In the case where the surgery took place, neither of the resulting people could say that that was them. That's true, but is that a problem? I don't see how to avoid that.

Maybe I'm pushing up against sort of a cartoonish version of your view. But, cards on the table, I've always found the view that you rejected whole-heartedly, while

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there are puzzles involved, to capture [as Derek Parfit says] “what matters” in continuation. If it could be the case that you could download me into the Matrix, and I had a choice on my deathbed, I’d probably take it, and I’d probably think, “Hey, this is a good thing. And, I’ve got a chance of surviving, maybe.” Whereas, do you think that, were you in that situation, you might do it, but just as sort of an interesting thing that there would be something to remember you by, sort of as if there were an animatronic version of you that existed in the future? But you would say, “Oh, there’s no question, I’m a goner, because this organism is on its last legs”?

Okay, so, just to get it straight: what they’re offering is that they will somehow read off the information in my brain, and use it to create a person in the computer—in the Matrix, excuse me—who will then have a good life, is that right?

Or we could have another version, where we could say, you know, ‘My body is getting eaten away by cancer, and slowly they could replace’—I know you have inveighed against fanciful thought experiments, so I’m sorry, but—this seems actually more plausible, perhaps, that they invent little artificial cells, and each of the ones that gets eaten away by cancer, they replace it with an artificial one. Now, you’ve actually said that in cases like this, the animal is shrinking every time this happens, because an animal is not a human-made, synthetic thing. But suppose they gradually replace my cells one by one with these synthetic things until eventually there is no biological entity left, but there’s this thing that looks like me. If you look at it under a microscope you can see the little trade-mark engraved on it, you know, at a molecular level. But, this thing thinks it’s me, but it’s certainly not an animal.

It has a good life.

Sure—well, as good a life as I’m having now, and let’s hope better. Or maybe it would say, “Don’t give me your “life” talk anymore; I’ve progressed beyond that. I’m now an artificial being that doesn’t need to talk in terms of “life” or whatever.” But, at any rate, it’s an entirely artificial being that thinks it’s me. Would you say there’s no value in that? Or would you say, “Well, there’s something that exists, but it’s certainly not Simon Cushing. It’s just a simulacrum that is deluded in thinking that it’s Simon Cushing,” or what?

Well, I would say that it’s not Simon, and that it’s mistaken to think that it is.

You hurt its feelings.

If I’ve hurt it’s feelings, maybe I’ve been a bit indelicate, or maybe it’s too quick to take offense, because it might well be that, even though it’s not going to be you, having a sort of successor like that who will carry out your projects, and look after your family, and defend your political and philosophical views, and finish writing your books, and carrying on this interview series and so on and so forth, might well mean a lot to you. It can be very important. It’s not a trivial thing at all. It might have a lot of what matters practically, and you could possibly even argue that this being would be responsible for your actions and would be entitled to your bank account, your publication record, and so on, I don’t know. It wouldn’t be you.

“ I would say that it’s not Simon, and that it’s mistaken to think that it is... it might well be that, even though it’s not going to be you, having a sort of successor like that who will carry out your projects...might well mean a lot to you. It can be very important. It’s not a trivial thing at all. ”

I hope it does a better job with those things than I have.

But, maybe you would have a great deal of what is important, of what you want and wanted to continue existing when you wanted to stay alive. I don't want to rule that out.

So, it could besmirch my reputation, for example. Suppose it then went off and committed horrible murders. The view of Simon Cushing in the history books should be a negative one. "He started out so well, but then he went bad."

Yes, there are always risks like that, yes. But I think this is another case where the metaphysics does not by itself dictate the claims about value.

Isn't that what most people who have written on this topic care about though? Would you say that they're wrong to care about that, or it's fine to care about that, but there's this other topic that is perhaps, to you, much more interesting, and you think should be to them as well?

It's fine to care about value, but I think it's a mistake to try and twist the metaphysics to make it coincide with the claims about value in a neat and simple way, because it's never going to be very neat and simple anyway, and it seems a mistake to start with a plausible claim about value, and then have that lead you to a silly view in metaphysics. I'd much rather have a sensible metaphysical view, and a sensible view about value, and then see what I can do to make those compatible. I'm not convinced that there isn't any way of making them compatible. And there's quite a lot of work that's been done by Parfit and others based on the assumption that they don't always go together, that isn't too abstract.

Suppose you're selling an undergraduate on why they should have your view; suppose this is in the future where such simulacra are possible, and suppose the undergraduate is faced with a decision—again, a totally arbitrary, fanciful thought experiment—where they only have the funds either to keep a version of themselves with a dead cortex alive in perpetuity, or they can pay for this artificial version where their cells are gradually replaced. And, it seems like if they say, "Well, your animalism has convinced me, so I know that I should go for the former," then what you would say is, "Oh no, don't make decisions like that on the basis of metaphysics. It's entirely up to you which you choose. I'm just saying that in one case you *survive*, and in another case you don't. But, my view doesn't say which one should be more *important* to you."

Yes, yes, precisely, yes. If you want to know what you ought to do then you need to think about value.

So it seems like a lot of people would say this question, "What are we?" is interesting precisely because it seems like it would settle the issue of what we should care about, whereas you're saying, "No, it's independently interesting and it won't settle those issues."

Yes, I mean it might put constraints on questions about value, it might have implications about value, but it's certainly not going to settle all the value questions. I don't know of any metaphysical project which will by itself settle all the big questions about value.

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I mean, even if it could show that God exists, that would certainly have very important implications about what we ought to do and how we ought to live, but it wouldn't settle the question. There'd still be a lot of work to be done.

So meta-ethics shouldn't affect ethics?

That sounds right, yes, I suppose.

That's a relief because I was never any good at meta-ethics.

Not that it shouldn't affect it, but it shouldn't dictate anyway. I mean, it might have implications for ethics, maybe important ones, but it leaves you with a lot of work to be done, as it's not going to take the place of ethics.

Yeah, I mean, that seems right to me, in that you will occasionally get undergraduates who say, "Well, there's no argument that can show there are such things as rights, in fact, there's all kinds of arguments that show that they're very ontologically or metaphysically suspect, so, therefore, who cares about rights? There are no such things, so I can't violate them, so I'll do what I damn well please." Or, you know, they take arguments that show that there is no such thing as race: it is certainly not a category that is biological or anything like that, so, therefore, there's no such thing as racism.

There's another case of corrupting the youth with philosophy, I suppose.

Maybe we should side with Socrates's accusers after all. Okay, do you think you're more or less done with personal identity, at least for now, maybe you'll revisit it; and you'll want to move onto things like time, or is this your project for the long-haul?

That's a hard question. I have been trying to get away from it and do other things. I mean, I've been thinking about death, for example.

As one does as one gets older.

Yes, well, mostly about things that are connected to metaphysics, though not entirely. I'm still doing a bit of work on personal identity. I've recently published an article on what exactly it means to say that we're animals, and how this claim is often misunderstood. I've just had a visitor who's working on narrativist theories of personal identity, and so I got interested in that just from talking with him. So, I might write a paper about that.

Oh, you should watch my interview with Marya Schechtman, then.

Yes, it's that sort of thing, but I'm not really very interested in them, because I don't find them very clear, actually. But, I think I've said most of what I want to say about personal identity, and I'd like to move onto something else. I'm not sure whether this is a biographical question, or whether it's a philosophical question, whether you're asking, "Is there more work to be done?"

Well, it's both. Have the camps become a little too entrenched? I mean, that can happen after a while. I always find that when you get into a topic, it's great at the

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beginning, and then camps get established, and it becomes like one of those fractal pictures, where you keep looking closer and closer, and there's always more and more detail, and at some point the arguments are so tiny and detailed that we've lost the big picture.

I don't think it's quite got to that point yet, though that is always a danger. There are, I think, important views, like, for example, this constitution view, that are not fully understood. And I think these views are still a bit mysterious in a number of ways. And there might also be other views about what we are that I hadn't thought of, and which haven't been discussed at all. So, I think there is still more work to be done, though I'm not sure whether I'm the best person to do it, and I do sort of want to move onto something else.

Just when you thought you were out, they drag you back in. So, let's see—oh yes! Do you think that philosophy has a public role? I mean, philosophy, I think, is a little bit under threat. There are places where philosophy departments have been closed. Do you think this is a mistake? Do you think philosophy has become its own worst enemy and that there's a better way to do philosophy that is more engaged? Or do you think that the world should move to us and discover what is wonderful about philosophy?

Well, I suppose if there's one thing that philosophers are indisputably good at—the good philosophers anyway—it's asking awkward questions, and getting very clear about things, and drawing out the implications of various claims, and things like that. And I think that philosophers tend to be better at this than people in other disciplines, because that's our bread and butter, that's how philosophy works, by making subtle distinctions and being very clear and careful, and looking at other alternatives, and questioning, and not just accepting what's come down to us, but by being a bit irreverent and questioning basic presuppositions. So, it would be terrible, I think, if this sort of thing were lost.

Do you think there's an age that it should start? Do you think that philosophy should start younger? Do you think it can be taught to kids? For example, when I visit England, I see that there's a much larger variety of pop philosophy books in English bookshops, like Stephen Laws' books, which I think are really good, if you've seen those, *The Philosophy Files*, he called them originally, when the X-Files were popular. But, they're pitched at twelve-year-olds, or something like that. Or do you think that too much philosophy too early can corrupt you, or perhaps disable you?

I don't know, I really don't know actually, because I've never tried to teach philosophy to twelve-year-olds, and never seen it done, so it's a sort of experiment, I guess, and maybe there's not much point in speculating about it. So, I don't what the effect of teaching philosophy to twelve-year-olds would be.

There's some philosophy that I think is pointless to attempt, for example, political philosophy, because nobody has any intuitions. I think it's only when you've actually started to think about the world—

You can still ask twelve-year-olds, "Why are we obliged to obey the laws," for example, which we weren't consulted on, and so on. I mean, that's a good, sort of, introductory question in political philosophy. I think it would be good if more people learned a bit of

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philosophy. I mean, you only have to look at what celebrity-scientists say. They make all sorts of elementary philosophical blunders when you give them a microphone. If they had learned even a little bit of philosophy, they would be more careful.

For god's sake, somebody shut Richard Dawkins up. No, I agree with some of what he says. But—yeah, actually, I've found that when you read scientific studies, it's amazing how quickly they depart from the science. If you actually read the scientific studies, it's okay, it's very careful, very small. But, then, there's, sort of, various levels of reporting on it. There's the scientific journal, and they say, "Oh, this means that autism is lack of mirror neurons," or "There is a gay gene," or something like that.

Yes, as soon as you start interpreting the experimental data, or trying to say what these mathematical models actually mean in real life, in a way you're doing philosophy, I suppose, but—yes, you need to be very careful. It's easy to get carried away by some very colorful interpretation of this stuff. And, because scientists are held in such high esteem, people tend to take them at their word, and they don't question them. And, we philosophers know better, and, yet, had more people had been taught philosophy, they might know better as well.

But, as you said—you put it nicely in your piece in *Metaphysics: 5 Questions*—"both sides benefit from the other," you know, more physicians should do philosophy, and more philosophers should do the hard sciences.

Absolutely, yes, I think—particularly in metaphysics. Metaphysicians are often hampered by lack of knowledge of basic physics, for example.

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