

The Thinking Animal Problem and Person Pronoun Revisionism

HAROLD W. NOONAN

In his book (2007) Eric Olson makes some criticisms of a response to the problem of the thinking animal (also called the ‘two many minds’ or ‘two many thinkers’ problem) which I have offered, on behalf of the neo-Lockean psychological continuity theorist. Olson calls my proposal ‘personal pronoun revisionism’ (though I am not suggesting any revision). In what follows I shall say what my proposal actually is, defend it and briefly respond to Olson’s criticism.

The problem of the thinking animal, briefly, is that it seems indisputable that human animals, i.e., human beings, or at least, all normal healthy adult human beings, are thinkers. But so, by definition are persons. However, according to the psychological continuity theorist of personal identity, persons are not human beings (they differ in their persistence conditions). So the psychological continuity theory entails the existence of too many thinkers. Moreover, it creates an irresolvable epistemic problem: how do I know I am the person sitting here typing this thinking truly that he is person and not the coincident human animal thinking falsely that he is a person? Finally, if human animals, in addition to persons, are thinkers, they must be persons after all, since their thoughts have whatever complexity and sophistication any ordinary definition of ‘person’ could require – they have just the same thoughts, after all, as the persons with whom on the psychological continuity account, they ‘cohabit’, so the neo-Lockean’s attempt to identify the persistence conditions for persons collapses into incoherence, since he has to acknowledge different kinds of person with different persistence conditions – as it were person-persons and animal-persons.

My claims are:

- (a) that the most sensible thing for the psychological continuity theorist to do in response to the too many thinkers problem is (i) to distinguish the concepts of an object of first-person reference and a thinker of first-person thoughts and (ii) to say that when an animal coincident with but distinct from a person is a thinker of a first-person thought, not he, but the coincident person, is the object of the thought
- (b) that this is not a reductio of the psychological continuity theory.

My argument is as follows:

- (1) Persons and only persons are objects of first-person reference

I take this to be trivially analytic. If anything is a person it is capable of being an object of (its own) first-person reference and anything which is capable of being an object of first-person reference is a person. (Sometimes, of course, we pretend that something which is not a person is an object of first-person reference. For example, I put a sign on my door saying 'I am unlocked, please come in and wait'. Or the justifiably aggrieved (but rather bossy) Departmental Secretary puts a notice up in the lecturers' coffee room, purporting to be from the 'Cleaning Angel', which reads 'I do not exist. Wash up and dry your cups yourselves.')

- (2) All persons are psychological continuers

This is a formulation of the standard neo-Lockean view, I do not have to defend it here since I am only concerned to bring out its consequences.

- (3) Some normal healthy adult human animals are not psychological continuers

This is undisputed by neo-Lockeans, since it is an acknowledged fact of observation that all normal healthy adult human beings have had foetal stages to which they are not psychologically connected and some will have late vegetative stages to which they are not psychologically connected.

(4) All normal healthy adult human animals are thinkers of true first-person thoughts

This is what the animalist urges, rightly, I think, on the neo-Lockean as an evident common-sense truth. Some neo-Lockeans, notably Shoemaker, deny it.

From (1)-(4) follows:

(5) Some normal healthy adult human animals have first-person thoughts which are not about themselves but about psychological continuers with which they are not identical

By (1) their first-person thoughts must be about persons. So by (2) they must be about psychological continuers. But if the human animals in question are among those that are not psychological continuers, whose existence is certified by (3), they cannot be thinking about themselves, but, by (4), some of their first-person thoughts are true, so must have referents – hence their referents must be psychological continuers distinct from themselves.

(5), then, I claim, is what the neo-Lockean, the defender of (2), must say on pain of denying a trivial analytic truth, (1), or a plain fact of observation, (3), or an evident common-sense truth, (4).

But is this not a reductio of neo-Lockeanism? I do not think so. Olson makes much of the idea of what we mean by ‘person’ (and the plural term ‘people’) in the ordinary sense of the word. He writes:

if something were psychologically indistinguishable from you ... would you refuse to call it a person ... until you were told whether it persists by virtue of psychological continuity? That seems no part of what we ordinarily mean by “person”. If human animals really are psychologically just like ourselves, they will count as people in any ordinary sense of the word.... Human animals may fail to satisfy some specialized philosophical sense of “person”, owing to having the wrong persistence conditions or on some other trivial grounds. But they are surely people in the sense that informs our ordinary use of personal pronouns (2007: 16)

It would not help me if I were to submit to Olson’s insistence that being a (sophisticated) thinker suffices for being a person (even in the case of something which is not an object of first-person reference), since then I would simply face a too many persons problem as well as a too many thinkers problem. But this is all beside the point. The debate to which the neo-Lockean intends to contribute is about two questions: ‘What am I (fundamentally)?’ and ‘What are my persistence conditions?’ The primary formulation of these questions is first-personal. The word ‘person’ as it is used in this debate (and its synonym ‘self’) is merely intended to allow a non-indexical formulation of these questions. So ‘person’ in the philosophical debate simply means object of first-person reference. (1) is trivially true. (And for what it is worth, I think, would be so regarded by the man in the street (though I doubt that he would so regard the formulation

using ‘people’ in place of ‘persons’). So although he would not wait to call something a ‘person’ until he knew whether it was a psychological continuer, he would hesitate to call something a ‘person’ if he believed it never referred to itself (at least in thought) in the first-person, ADD: AND WOULD NOT HESITATE TO CALL IT A PERSON IF HE BELIEVED IT WAS AN OBJECT OF FIRST-PERSON REFERENCE.)

So the substantive point at issue is the neo-Lockean claim (2), which is the claim that (as a matter of conceptual necessity) objects of first-person reference are psychological continuers. Following out the consequences of this (given empirical facts and common-sense truth) leads to the surprising conclusion that there are more thinkers than common-sense acknowledges and that some of these are not objects of their first-person reference (and so are thinkers that are not persons if we interpret ‘person’ one way, or are persons that are not objects of first-person reference if we interpret it another way). But it is hardly news that neo-Lockeanism leads to this unless, like Shoemaker’s version, it offends common-sense at a different point. Locke himself distinguished between thinking substances, which he thought were probably immaterial, and persons, and so had to acknowledge the existence of thinkers distinct from persons that were not objects of first-person reference – that is, could not think of ‘themselves as themselves’ in different times and places; he worried about their fate on the Great Day, when all hearts will be opened. Butler and Reid homed in on this duality of thinking substances and person in their critiques of Locke. And, of course, as Olson acknowledges, the four-dimensional version of the psychological continuity account endorses a multiplicity of thinkers that are not objects of first-person reference and requires what Olson calls personal pronoun revisionism. Anyway animalism has its own conflicts with common-

sense: in the restricted ontology it endorses, its denial of the transplant intuition, and its acceptance of the consequence that if your brainstem is replaced by an inorganic substance gradually, bit by bit (Olson 1999:141), without interruption of consciousness throughout, or your cerebrum removed for transplantation, the result is a new rational conscious being, which is not a human being, or else a series of thoughts and sensations that are not the thoughts of anyone (Olson 1999:141-2).¹ (It should be noted also that the too many thinkers problem also arises in the case of non-human animals. The transplant intuition is as strong in the case of dogs as it is in the case of human beings and it is as obvious that dogs think as that men do. So someone who endorses the transplant intuition in this case also faces the problem of too many thinkers. But what Olson calls the epistemic problem and the personhood problem do not arise since dogs are not self-conscious and we have no words related to ‘canine animal’ as ‘person’ and ‘people’ are related to ‘human animal’. So the challenge in this case reduces to the insistence that those who endorse the transplant intuition must say that there are two thinkers where Fido is – and that this is wrong.)

But, it may be said, the thing that is wrong with my response to the problem of too many thinkers is that it creates a mystery. How can a normal healthy adult human being, capable of sophisticated first-person thought, not be capable of referring to himself in the first-person in such thought when the psychologically indistinguishable person is?

¹ Animalists also need to say something about the reduplication problem. Bernard Williams first posed this problem as an objection to psychological continuity accounts of personal identity, in particular, ones that certified the intelligibility of reincarnation. But opponents were quick to ask why the objection, if good, did not apply equally to his own account of personal identity. Williams never gave a very convincing answer. Williams was an animalist or, at least, maintained a position that entailed animalism (though he never called himself an animalist, of course). His stated position was that persons were bodies (and he gave organisms as examples of bodies), and he certainly did not think that in addition to the bodies that were persons there were normal healthy adult human animals that were not persons (and were either not bodies or were bodies that were not persons).

How can the human animal lack this capacity which its psychologically indistinguishable twin possesses?

But to ask this question is to misunderstand the proposal. The neo-Lockean claim is that it can be established by conceptual analysis that the following is a de dicto necessary truth:

Only psychological continuers are objects of first-person thought

It follows that if A is a human animal, who is in fact not a psychological continuer, the following is a de dicto necessary truth:

If A is not a psychological continuer A's first-person thoughts are not thoughts about A.

It does not follow, even though A is not in fact a psychological continuer, that the following is a necessary truth:

A's first-person thoughts are not thoughts about A.

Nor does it follow that A is necessarily or essentially something whose first-person thoughts are not about itself – no de re necessity follows. This is because it is no part of the neo-Lockean story that A could not have been a psychological continuer. To say that A is not a psychological continuer is to say something about A's history, and A could have had a completely different history.² The sense in which it is established by the neo-Lockean account that A lacks the capacity to think 'I'-thoughts about itself is just that, qua something which is not a psychological continuer, its 'I'-thoughts cannot be about itself, just as qua someone who never marries, it can never be true of Miss Jones that she

² Or not, if a Kripkean argument for the necessity of origin can be defended. In which case there is no possible world in which A is a psychological continuer and so A could never have referred to himself in the first-person way in thought. But now there is no mystery: this incapacity is explained by the neo-Lockean argument for the de dicto necessity of (2), together with the Kripkean argument for the necessity of origin.

is a bride, or qua someone who never has been and never will be Prime Minister I cannot ever be correctly referred to by the Queen as ‘my first Minister’.

Discomfort may remain. According to my version of the neo-Lockean account it is not possible for something that is not a psychological continuer to be an object of its own first-person thoughts, no matter how sophisticated its thoughts are.³ But why, it can be asked, should this be so? However, the explanation is simple: to be a psychological continuer is to have a certain kind of history: a certain kind of past, present and future. It is like being a past and future Prime Minister. But whether something is a thinker now and the level of sophistication of its present thoughts cannot depend upon its actual future, certainly not its actual future many years hence.⁴ So no matter how sophisticated a creature’s present thoughts they cannot ensure that it is a psychological continuer (or a future Prime Minister). Consequently, given the neo-Lockean thesis (2), they cannot ensure that it is an object of its own first-person thoughts.

The proper focus of scepticism about neo-Lockeanism should be on the contention that philosophical analysis can identify any persistence conditions at all for – any constraints at all on the past and future histories of – objects of first-person reference as such.⁵ Why, it can reasonably be asked, is the concept of an object of first-person

³ Actually, this is also trivially true on Shoemaker’s account, since on that account it is not possible for something that is not a psychological continuer to think (first-person thoughts) at all.

⁴ This is the point on which I agree with the animalist and disagree with Shoemaker. Of course, actual normal healthy adult human animals differ from psychological continuers in their pasts as well as their futures (they have foetal stages). But if we imagine hypothetical beings that are otherwise identical but differ from psychological continuers only in their futures (e.g., because they come into existence fully formed), Shoemaker would still deny that they were thinkers, because of their differing futures. In fact, he would deny that human beings permanently coincident with persons were thinking things (just as he would deny that Goliath was Lump). I think the permanently coincident objects are identical and I do not think that merely future differences can determine whether something is now a thinker. Hence my agreement with the animalist.

⁵ The persistence conditions, or criterion of diachronic identity, for a kind of thing *K* can be given in the form ‘If *x* is a *K* then for any times *t* and *t*’, if *x* exists at *t* and *t*’ then *Rxtt*’ and there is no *R*’ not entailed by

reference in this respect not like the concept of something red or something weighing five pounds or a rolling, moving thing with size and weight? That is, why can quite different kinds of thing with quite different kinds of persistence condition not be objects of first-person reference (see Noonan 1978: 351)?

This is a very good question. The only answer, I think, is the transplant intuition, which has to be accommodated.

University of Nottingham

Nottingham, NG72RD, UK

harold.noonan@nottingham.ac.uk

References

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R such that if *x* is a *K* then for any times *t* and *t'*, if *x* exists at *t* and *t'* then *Rxtt'*. Notice that this requires no mention of identity.