

Who Doesn't Have a Problem of Too Many Thinkers?

I. The Problem of Too Many Thinkers

Animalists accuse the advocates of psychological approaches of identity of having to suffer a Problem of Too many Thinkers.¹ Eric Olson, for instance, is an animalist who maintains that if the person is spatially coincident but numerically distinct from the animal, then provided that the person can use its brain to think, so too can the physically indistinguishable animal. However, not all defenders of psychological views of identity assume the spatial coincidence of the person and the animal. Jeff McMahan and lately Derek Parfit claim we are roughly brain-size, composed of just those parts of the human animal that directly produce thought.² They claim to avoid the Problem of Too Many Thinkers because it is the brain-sized person who truly thinks, while the animal thinks only in a derivative sense in virtue of having a thinking proper part. Waiting in the wings are some dualists who claim that all materialist accounts fail to avoid the Problem of Too Many Thinkers. One such dualist, Dean Zimmerman, insists that wherever there is an ordinary material thing like a brain, there is also a mass with distinct persistence conditions and thus the threat of two material thinkers.³ Zimmerman contends that only positing an immaterial thinker can avoid the problem.⁴

Animalists might respond that in their sparse ontology there are no brains, just atoms arranged brain-wise, a fortiori, no brain-size thinkers embedded within animals.⁵ But if insisting that we're brainless wasn't bad enough, animalists will still face a conjoined twins scenario that raises the specter of a Problem of Too Many Thinkers. This scenario involves twins who share neither a brainstem nor any anatomy below it, but possess one and the same cerebrum or atoms arranged cerebrum-wise.⁶ It will be very hard for animalists to deny that there are two animals in such a scenario. And if the animal is the subject of thought, then it appears that there will have to be two animals sharing their thoughts. If we identified ourselves with our brains, as McMahan and Parfit do, then there will only be one subject of thought, despite that subject being a proper part of two animals.

However, there is a different kind of conjoined twins that also presents a Problem of Too Many Thinkers for the advocates of the brain-size view of persons. Even more surprising is that it poses the same problem for dualists - or at least for those dualists like Zimmerman, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, William Hasker and Peter Unger who maintain that the mental activities of souls are dependent upon brains.⁷ This no doubt will surprise readers for it is typically thought that whatever other problems dualists have, they avoid the too many thinkers objection that troubles materialists.⁸

This paper will begin with a discussion of a case of conjoined twins that provides animalists with a Problem of Too Many Thinkers. The subsequent section will present a second case of conjoined twins that will reveal that advocates of the brain-sized view of persons are also plagued by the same problem of an extra thinker. The final section will show how such conjoined twins even bestow upon dualists their own version of a Problem of Too Many Thinkers.

II. Why Conjoined Twins Pose a Problem of Too Many Thinkers for the Animalist

In the scientific literature can be found a description of aborted conjoined twins (Cephalothoracopagus Janicep) that shared one cerebrum but had two brainstems. Each brainstem likely maintained autonomic physiological control over what could count as a distinct living animal body - there being two pairs of arms and legs being, two cerebellum, two sets of lungs, two stomachs, two livers, and so on.⁹ It seems plausible that even if such twins did not engage in minimal thought before they were aborted that it was metaphysically possible for such twins to have lived long enough to think. Given that van Inwagen and Olson's animalism individuates human organisms on the basis of the brainstem being the biological control center that unifies a single life, the just described conjoined twins would be two organisms sharing a cerebrum. If sentience was a possibility for such twins, and if organisms are considered the subject of thought, then there could be two thinkers sharing the same cerebrum and thus apparently thinking the same or similar

thoughts. The very puzzles of too many thinkers that supposedly embarrass psychological approaches to personal identity would reappear for animalists even though the conjoined twins were not spatially coincident organisms. The reason these problems emerge in non-spatially coincident pair of organisms is due to their sharing one cerebrum which is the organ that realizes consciousness. Any pain one twin felt, the other would be using the same cerebrum to feel. Neither could ever know if she were the organism to the left or the right of the other.¹⁰

The animalist can point out that such a scenario is uncommon. But metaphysics is concerned with all possible worlds. There could be a world that was populated with only such conjoined twins. And Olson himself admits when discussing dissociative disorders that we shouldn't make an exception for weird cases and then claim that in normal scenarios that human persons are identical to human organisms. He writes: "But if an animal with a split personality could house two or more such non-animal people, we should expect your animal (which I take to be normal and mentally unified) to house *one* non-animal person."¹¹

III. Why Conjoined Twins Pose a Problem of Too Many Thinkers for Brain-Size Persons

McMahan and recently Parfit have pressed this Problem of Too Many Thinkers for animalists. They believe that their brain-size account of persons avoids the extra thinker because the twin organisms would have a single person as a proper part. However, their relative advantage over other materialist accounts of the person due to the Cephalothoracopagus Janicep twins is offset by cases of conjoined twins with partially overlapping brains. The Hogan girls, Krista and Tatiana, are such an example.¹² They share part of their brains and this leads to what seems to be a sharing of some thoughts. If one is pricked by a needle drawing blood, the other winces. If one drinks something delicious, and the other verbally expresses her pleasure. Their family discovered that Krista likes ketchup while Tatiana didn't because Tatiana tried to scrape away the condiment off her mouth that had only passed Krista's lips. The girls' relatives has even suggested that their shared

thoughts go beyond the sensual. If one is looking at the television while the other's line of vision doesn't include the television, the latter might still laugh at something that stimulated only the eyes of the former.¹³

It doesn't seem that the girls ever suffer ambiguous self-reference, each twin unaware whether she is Tatiana or Krista.¹⁴ There are instead two minds engaged in a sort of "telepathic eavesdropping". One would say "ouch" when the other was pinched out of sight because the message would be sent via the shared parts of their brains. It seems likely that that McMahan and Parfit would say there were two persons here since there was only a little overlap as a good deal of the thoughts of each was inaccessible to the other. But if McMahan and Parfit have to admit the sharing of thoughts between two conjoined organisms with brains that partially overlap, the complete sharing of brains is not that embarrassing, or not that much more embarrassing for the animalist. So the case of Cephalothoracopagus Janicep twins of the previous section doesn't provide the brain-size person account of the person with much of an advantage over animalism. And that slight advantage can be removed by our tweaking the overlap scenario.

McMahan and Parfit must contend with a problem of the partially overlapping cerebra becoming spatially coincident and sharing all their parts. An analogy might be illuminating. Imagine two roads that overlapped for some distance and then diverged. Next, imagine the diverging parts destroyed by an earthquake. It seems the result is there are then two spatially coincident roads. Nearly everyone thinks a single road can become smaller without going out of existence if a natural disaster destroys a stretch of the road. So why shouldn't overlapping roads be likewise capable of becoming smaller? It would be difficult to treat this as a case of two things fusing out of existence for such destructive fusion usually involves two different (roughly) equal size chunks of matter coming together to form a larger entity. But our roads are merely becoming smaller, losing their own matter rather than combining their matter with that of another.

Assuming that brains can be reduced in size like roads, then if roads can come to completely overlap, brain-size persons should be able to as well. It would be arbitrary to insist that one person survives and not the other. But it is unappealing to claim that a new person fuses into existence for this isn't a case of two objects merging their matter and forming a larger entity. Rather, this just involves someone losing parts of their anatomy that we would uncontroversially deem the shrinking of a person in the absence of overlap. So it seems that even McMahan and Parfit would have to admit that two thinkers can come to have their thoughts generated by exactly the same neurology.¹⁵ Therefore it appears that Hogan-like twins take away any relative advantage that the Cephalothoracopagus twins of section II provided for their brain-size account of persons approach.

The twins are described as “Hogan-like” for it seems plausible that the actual Hogan twins don't share enough of their brains for us to maintain that if their unshared parts were removed that each person would share the thoughts of the other for there may not even be enough remaining brain for cognition to continue.¹⁶ But a different case can be envisioned that would qualify as two partially overlapping thinkers being reduced to a condition of sharing all their thinking parts. The two people survive the process of coming to have the same cerebral parts because they initially have far more overlapping parts than the Hogans. That the result would be the same two persons in existence will seem even more plausible if allow the remaining cerebral parts the neural plasticity to come to perform certain cognitive functions that they didn't earlier.

IV. Why the Hogan-like Twins Pose a Problem of too Many Thinkers Even for Dualists

Ironically, Hogan-like twins pose a Problem of Too Many Thinkers even for the most common form of contemporary dualism. Hogan-like twins would have brains that initially overlap but not enough to the point where it would be said that they were one person. But they could lose their overlapped parts just as two overlapping roads could lose their divergent parts. So if twins somewhat similar to the Hogan girls each had their brain connected to a distinct soul, then the

reduction of the brain to just the overlapping parts would bring it about that the two souls would each be connected with the same brain matter.¹⁷ If souls are dependent upon brains to think¹⁸ there then wouldn't be anything thought by the one soul not thought by the other.¹⁹ If this was to be explained in terms of Hasker and Zimmerman's emergent dualist account then it would seem that the same brain structures come to preserve distinct souls. If instead God paired souls with brains as Plantinga envisions, then the two souls would come to interact with the same brain structures. And if souls and brains were initially disposed to interact because of a pre Big-Bang primeval unity as Unger conjectures, then the imagined twins could come to have the same reduced brain structures with the propensity to interact with distinct souls. So even the dualist will apparently suffer a Problem of Too Many Thinkers.²⁰ Moreover, the inability of the two souls to think differently would eliminate the possibility of libertarian free will if that requires each person possessing a capacity to act differently from the other connected to the same brain structures.

One way that dualists (or advocates of an account of brain-size persons) might try to avoid their own versions of the Problem of Too Many Thinkers is by insisting that a person would not survive attached to that reduced brain – or at least couldn't continue to think due to the operations of that maimed brain. If that were so, then the reduction of the non-overlapping parts of any conjoined twins wouldn't result in two persons having the same brain parts. But dualists can't sustain this claim if the same amount of brain matter lost would not doom a single person if there was only one brain initially involved rather than two overlapping brains. If such a single person can survive the brain becoming so much smaller, why can't two overlapping persons persist where their brain are reduced to the same size that a single individual could survive?

A second response of the dualist would be that if there was enough brain matter to support a person after the removal of the different parts then that implies that there was only one person before – though that person earlier just possessed a divided mind. But readers could just imagine

extending the earlier non-overlapping parts to such a degree that there would be so much distinct and inaccessible thought that the percentage of shared to non-shared mental life would rival that of the Hogan twins whom were deemed distinct persons.

Thus it doesn't look promising that dualists or the advocates of brain-size persons will avoid The Problem of Too Many Thinkers. Thus they can't claim to be able to better deal with that metaphysical quandary than their two leading rivals: the animalist account that identifies the human organism and person, and the psychological account that claims the human person and organism are distinct but spatially coincident.

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¹ Although not the first to level the charge, Eric Olson (2007) has most vigorously pressed the attack. Shoemaker (1999) coined the phrase "The Problem of Too Many Minds." "The Problem of Too Many Thinkers" is preferable so as to include the possibility that a single mind can be shared by two thinkers.

² Parfit (2012), McMahan (2002), McMahan and Campbell (2010).

³ Zimmerman (2003).

⁴ Zimmerman (2010) also believes materialists are plagued by Peter Unger's (2004, 2007) "Problem of the Many" entailing numerous thinkers.

⁵ Olson (2007), van Inwagen (1990).

⁶ McMahan and Campbell (2010) have provided the most sustained critique along these lines.

⁷ Plantinga (2006) Zimmerman (2010), Unger (2007) Swinburne (1986), Hasker (2001).

⁸ This attitude is exemplified by Zimmerman (2010) and Unger (2007).

⁹ Biswas et al. (2001).

¹⁰ This would produce an animalist version of the epistemic puzzle that Olson (2007) alleges plagues the psychological approaches to personal identity.

¹¹ Olson (2007), pp. 57-58).

¹² Dominus, (2011).

¹³ "Their brain reveals what looks like an attenuated line stretching between two organs, a piece of anatomy their neurosurgeon, Douglass Cochrane, of British Columbia Children's Hospital, has called *a thalamic bridge*, because he believes it links the thalamus of one girl to the thalamus of her sister. The thalamus is a kind of switchboard, a two-lobed organ that filters most sensory input and has long been thought to be essential in the neural loops that create consciousness. Because the thalamus functions as a relay station, the girls' doctors believes it is entirely possible that the sensory input that one girl receives could somehow cross that bridge into the brain of the other." Dominus (2011).

¹⁴ Dominus (2011).

¹⁵ McMahan actually believes the reader is likely to be slightly smaller than the brain. This might mean that if the brain could ever be reduced in size then it could become spatially coincident with the person. This would provide a different route to the spatially coincident thinkers.

¹⁶ See note13.

¹⁷ The Hogan twins would have pain that they relayed to the other. The twins conceived here would share the initial sensations of pain for they are realized in the structure shared by both. The imagine twins would also initially have brain structures not shared by the other. These would be the parts later removed.

¹⁸ This dependency would explain the absence of any recollected thought form the period when brain injuries rendered people temporally comatose.

¹⁹ The exception might be different contents of thought involving the first person pronoun.

²⁰ It was the absence of libertarian free in overlapping thinkers that played a major role in Unger's abandoning materialism (2004). Plantinga and Hasker are also libertarians.