

## **Persons as Proper Parts of Organisms**

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Defenders of the Psychological Approach to Personal Identity (PAPI) insist that the possession of some kind of mind is essential to us. We are essentially thinking beings, not living creatures. We would cease to exist if our capacity for thought was irreversibly lost due to a coma or permanent vegetative state. However, the onset of such conditions would not mean the death of an organism. It would survive in a mindless state. But this would appear to mean that before the loss of cognition and the destruction of the person, the organism and the person were spatially coincident entities – two beings composed of the same matter at the same time and place. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of positing spatially coincident material entities is that it would seem to result in there being one too many thinkers. Since the person can obviously think, the organism should also have such a capacity as a result of possessing the same brain as well as every other atom of the person. This means that there now exist two thinking beings under the reader's clothes!

Jeff McMahan and Ingmar Persson independently proposed that the problems presented by spatially coincident thinkers could be avoided by treating the person as a proper part of the organism.<sup>1</sup> The organism would then only think in a derivative and unproblematic way as a result of having a thinking being as a part. There wouldn't be two distinct thinkers, atom for atom the same. Instead, there would be two entities of different size. The smaller one, the person, is described as the minimally sufficient subject of thought. The much larger entity, the organism, has its cognitive properties derivatively because it has the person as a part. My contention is that the Persson-McMahan solution just amounts to moving around the bulge in the metaphysical carpet. The earlier problems of person/organism spatial coincidence will reappear with

person/cerebrum coincidence.

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Persson's "solution" is premised upon an understanding of the person as the smallest part of the organism that can support thought. Or, perhaps more accurately, the person possesses that part but is not to be identified with it.<sup>2</sup> The part in question is the upper brain, the cerebrum, or speaking more strictly, it is "certain processes occurring in the cerebrum that are minimally sufficient for thoughts and experiences."<sup>3</sup> McMahan clearly states that the person is but a part of the organism and not spatially coincident with it. He suggests that the person is to be understood as either identical to a functioning part of the brain or dependent upon it.

Persson and McMahan contend that the organism only thinks in a derivative sense. To help the reader get a grasp on this idea, Persson supplies an analogy. Just as a ball can be said to be touching another object because a portion of it is, the organism can be said to think because it has a part that does. The helpful analogy McMahan offers is that of the horn and the car of which it is a part. There might be two noisy entities, the horn and the car, but there is really only one noisemaker, the horn. Likewise, there is really only one "thoughtmaker," the person. We are not to judge that there are two *independent* thinkers. These two subjects of thought are not independent thinkers because it is not true of the organism that it is capable of having thoughts independently of whether the person has them. The organism is only in such mental states as a logical consequence of the fact that the person is in them. The person, on the other hand, could think without the organism. This would take place if only the cerebrum was kept functioning and all the other body parts replaced. Such a scenario would occur during a brain transplant

procedure when the cerebrum has been removed from one skull and not yet placed in another.

Perhaps the cerebrum could be sustained in the interim period, or indefinitely, as a thinking brain in a vat.

Not only will readers have to accept that the organism thinks derivatively because it has the person as a part, they will also have to allow that the person has derivatively certain properties as a result of being part of the organism. Persson and McMahan's theories make the person much smaller than commonly thought. The average adult person is not really somewhere between 5 and 6 feet tall, 100 and 200 pounds. Instead, most people consist of just a few inches and pounds of grey matter. Taking this claim literally means that a person couldn't have pains in his feet. Nor does a person non-derivatively walk. As Persson writes, "I am walking should be read as analogous to I am flying because I am in an airplane that is flying." This isn't the best example since the person is not part of an airplane but is instead an occupant in a niche.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the queerness of this can be mitigated somewhat if a conception of "having a derivative property" can be spelled out in a way so that it doesn't matter whether the individual's relationship to the airplane is one of occupant to niche rather than part to whole. Or there may be other examples of nonfallaciously ascribing properties of the whole to the part.

There may be a different problem with understanding the person to be a small part of the organism due to its being the minimally sufficient subject of thought. A similar pattern of reasoning may make the organism smaller than biologists now conceive it to be. The counterintuitiveness of this position suggests that Persson and McMahan may be in error regarding the size of the person and its relation to the organism. They understand the person as

the minimally sufficient thinker in part because the person could survive if all but certain portions of the brain were destroyed. The problem is that the organism could also be pared down and survive as a much smaller creature than it is currently taken to be. Olson and van Inwagen maintain that a whole brain transplant is the transplant of the organism, though a maimed one, because the vital biological controls are located in the brainstem.<sup>5</sup> So if we are to understand the person as the subject minimally sufficient for thought, perhaps then by analogy, we should understand the organism as the subject minimally sufficient for life. But does this mean then that the organism only derivatively possesses feet and kidneys? That's preposterous. The organism is much larger than the brain, it is just that it can be reduced in size to the bare minimum essential for life. Thus it would be a mistake to confuse the organism with the smallest possible form that it can take. Have McMahan and Persson made a similar mistake in regards to the person? If so, a person could then be six feet and two hundred pounds, though that same person could be reduced in size to just essential cerebral parts. However, there may be a difference between the organism and the person that McMahan and Persson can draw upon. The extremities of the common sense person - ears, fingers, feet etc. - are not involved in cognition. But the same extremities of the organism are caught up in life processes. That difference may justify treating the person as smaller than is commonly thought, but warrant continuing to maintain the organism is the same size as the body.

There is another problem with the McMahan/Persson's attempt to escape the problems of spatially coincident objects. This difficulty manifests itself more clearly in McMahan's writings since he points out that if the organism can think then it would also be a person, though

contingently so, and if the being that was essentially a person was alive, then it would also be an organism, though contingently one. That would mean there were two organisms and two persons where we would like there to be just one of each, thus “violating the assumption that there can be no more than one of a particular kind at a given place at a given time.”<sup>6</sup> McMahan writes about the statue and lump - the favorite example of philosophers who defend two spatially coincident entities - that parallel duplication arguments “could be formulated to show that the statue is (contingently) a hunk of bronze and the hunk of bronze is (contingently) a statue.” But now notice that even if McMahan (and Persson) can avoid the problem of spatially coincident material objects in the case of persons and organisms, making the former a part of the latter, this “solution” can’t be generalized to other spatially coincident entities like the statue and the lump, the flag and the cloth, the table and the piece of wood etc. For instance, the statue can’t be considered a part of the lump. This inability of the part/whole “solution” to generalize beyond the case of the organism and the person should give us some reason to be wary of the claim that it has actually resolved the puzzles of the relationship of the person to the organism.

How ever well the difficulties of the previous passages can be dealt with,<sup>7</sup> there still remains the real problem for the McMahan-Persson account of persons as proper parts. Their “solution” to The Problem of Too Many Thinkers actually amounts to just moving around the metaphysical bulge in the carpet. There will still be an unwanted thinker - it just won’t be the organism that is spatially coincident with the person. McMahan and Persson fail to see that they have just changed the pair of spatially coincident thinkers from the person and organism to that of person and cerebrum.

What is the relation of the person to the cerebrum? McMahan considers both that the person is identical to the cerebrum in certain functional states and that it differs from the cerebrum but it still dependent upon it and thus can be considered a part of the organism. He writes:

If, for example, the mind just *is* those regions of the brain in certain functional states, and if I am this mind, then I am in effect, this functional brain, which is itself a part of this organism; therefore I am a part of my organism. But even if the mind is not entirely reducible to the brain, it is still something that is generated by the operations of the brain and is a critical component of the systems controlling the functions of the organism. Hence it may be regarded as a part of the organism even if it is not so obviously a part as is an organ such as the brain.<sup>8</sup>

Let's first consider avoiding The Problem of Too Many Thinkers by identifying the person with the cerebrum – or some of its parts functioning a certain way. The brain, or part of it, will have to possess the persistence conditions of the person or vice versa. Persons will either survive the loss of their capacity for thought, which McMahan doesn't allow, or the brain will not survive the loss of its functional capacity to produce consciousness. If the latter is the case, the permanently comatose would have no brain or, more precisely, the crucial part of the brain that subserves consciousness would no longer exist.<sup>9</sup> But since McMahan believes that there are dead organisms, I would think that he would hold that there are 'dead' or nonoperational brains.<sup>10</sup> That would make it impossible to identify the person and the functional brain. But even if McMahan and Persson were to deny that the organism or brain continues to exist when "nonfunctional," the problems of spatial coincidence

emerge one level down with lumps of tissue and aggregates of atoms etc. These can't possibly be identical with the spatially coincident thinking being. An aggregate has its parts essentially, a cerebrum and a person do not.

However, if the person is not identified with the crucial part of the cerebrum, then there is the danger that the former thinks derivatively in virtue of having parts that do. And this would place persons in the same (sinking?) boat as organisms. And it would also violate Persson's explicit account of the person as "something that nonderivatively or primarily thinks and has experiences..."<sup>11</sup>

Persson and McMahan may believe that they avoid the above problem of the person thinking derivatively even if they don't identify the person and the properly functioning cerebrum because the person is not understood as composed of the cerebrum *and another part*. This would prevent the cerebrum from being a proper part of the person. Persson even mentions that he is assuming Parfit's sense of reductionism.<sup>12</sup> Parfit claimed that all reductionists maintain that "a person's existence just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events."<sup>13</sup> (Persson, of course, can't mean to include the parts of the body other than the brain.) Parfit explains that some reductionists identify the person with the brain, others maintain that a person is distinct from the brain and such psychological events. On the latter account, the person *has* a brain and thoughts etc., but doesn't exist separately from that brain as nonreductionists (dualists) maintain.

I don't think the Parfit-inspired account offers the right kind of help. It perhaps allows Persson and McMahan to avoid conceiving of the person as a derivative thinker because the



cerebrum is not a proper part of the person, there being no other part(s) that together with the cerebrum compose the person. But it doesn't avoid or dissolve The Problem of Too Many Thinkers. Even if we assume that the person is not identical to the cerebrum nor contains it as a proper part, if the person can think in virtue of the cerebrum's physical capabilities, then the cerebrum would also be a thinking entity. Perhaps the relation between the person and cerebrum is then one of constitution rather than identity or whole to part. If so, since the cerebrum is atom for atom the same as the person, then it too can think.<sup>14</sup> Even if the spatial coincidence of the person and the cerebrum does not involve the constitution relation, there are still two beings composed of the same matter. If the physical properties of one enables it to think, the other spatially coincident entity should have the same cognitive powers. Thus whether the person is constituted by the brain, supervenes upon the brain in some manner, or has the brain as a component, the old problem of two thinking subjects remains. The only difference is that the two thinkers are just realized by different size portions of matter than in the original formulation of the problem.

I am also worried that Persson and McMahan's accounts fall prey to informal fallacies of composition and division for it is not that clear to me that they can have the person and the organism derivatively possess each other's properties. McMahan's analogy is of the car which is noisy because its horn is. There really aren't two noisemakers. That sounds very plausible. McMahan then claims that he avoids The Problem of Too Many Thinkers because the organism thinks thoughts derivatively in the harmless way that the car is noisy because its horn is. Just as there isn't a problem of two noisemakers, there likewise won't be a problem of two thoughtmakers if the organism just

derivatively thinks the thoughts of the person. This might seem to work for claims like “I have a headache” or “I am 200 pounds.” The organism would derivatively be plagued by a headache and the person would derivatively weigh 200 pounds. But The Problem of Too Many Thinkers may reemerge with the person thinking “I am *essentially* a person” and the organism thinking the same thought derivatively. The organism will be thinking something false since it is not essentially a person. For the organism to have a false thought while the person thinks a true thought, the former must be referring to itself. The different indexical referent of the person and organism indicates different contents which means that there will have to be more than one thought rather than a pair of derivative and nonderivative thinkers of the same thought.

Why didn't McMahan and Persson recognize that they were only pushing around the metaphysical bulge in the carpet when they sought to offer a solution to the problem of the organism and the person being spatially coincident thinkers? I'm not sure. Perhaps they didn't realize the problem would reappear because they were so concerned with denying that the *organism* is the immediate (non-derivative) subject of thought.

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<sup>1</sup>McMahan, Jeff. *Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*.(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 88-94. Persson, Ingmar. “Our Identity and Separability of Persons and Organisms.” *Dialogue*. Vol 38. (1999) pp. 521-533. Persson puts forth this thesis in a more tentative manner than McMahan. He recognizes that there are considerable linguistic intuitions that support the organism as the reference of the first person pronoun. Such usage supports the rival theory, The Biological Approach to Personal Identity (BAPI), which maintains that we are essentially living beings, not thinking entities. While I believe that there are some good reasons for believing that the reference of the first person pronoun is the organism, I would not put as much metaphysical weight on our linguistic practices as Persson does. (529-29.) People don’t speak consistently about death and irreversibly noncognitive states.

<sup>2</sup>Persson is not very clear about the relationship between the cerebrum and the person. While I would conjecture that he understands the person to *possess* the cerebrum rather than be identical with it or when its crucial parts function in a certain way, the lines quoted below could be construed as suggesting otherwise. He writes that parts of the cerebrum “own” the mind, “processes occurring in C (the cerebrum) are minimally sufficient for thoughts and experiences,” “a human animal can be said, in a derivative sense, to think and have experiences, in virtue of having parts (in which processes occur) which primarily do the thinking and experiencing” (522) “We, - i.e. the referents of our personal pronouns – are identical to these subjects, to which our

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minds essentially belong...” (524) “If we were to identify ourselves with that in our brain which has a certain capacity, the personalist identification of us with that which has our capacity for consciousness would seem a better bet than the animalist identification of us with that which has the capacity to direct vital functions.” (527)

<sup>3</sup> Persson. “Our Identity and Separability of Persons and Organisms.” Op. cit. p. 522.

<sup>4</sup> The distinction between the part/whole and the occupant/niche relationship is clarified in Barry Smith and Achille Varzi’s “The Niche.” *Nous*. 33:2 (1999) pp. 198–222.

<sup>5</sup> Olson, Eric. *The Human Animal: Identity Without Psychology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). pp. 131-135. Van Inwagen, Peter. *Material Beings*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) pp. 167-181.

<sup>6</sup> McMahan *Ethics of Killing*. Op cit. p. 90.

<sup>7</sup> McMahan and Persson might have to “go eliminativist” about statues and lumps, flags and cloth, hills and lumps of dirt etc. since there is no reason to preserve one of each of these pairs of spatially coincident entities and not the other, and the two members of each pair cannot be identified with each other. Such reasoning can be found in Trenton Merricks’s *Persons and*

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*Objects* (Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 31-55.

<sup>8</sup> McMahan. *The Ethics of Killing*. Op. cit. p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> McMahan. *The Ethics of Killing*. Op. cit. pp. 90-95.

<sup>10</sup> McMahan. *The Ethics of Killing*. Op. cit. pp. 29-31.

<sup>11</sup> Persson. "Our Identity and Separability of Persons and Organisms." Op. cit. p. 521.

<sup>12</sup> Person. Op. cit. p. 531. note #1

<sup>13</sup> Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.) p. 211

<sup>14</sup> For the problems with constitution and coincidence, see Eric Olson's "Material Coincidence and the Indiscernibility Problem." *The Philosophical Quarterly*. 51. no. 204 (2001) and "Composition and Coincidence." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. 77. no. 4 (1996). Olson and van Inwagen think that their Biological Approach to Personal Identity (BAPI) avoids the problem of spatially coincident thinking beings by treating "person" as a phase sortal. The organism is the person, though she has the property of personhood contingently, just as she may have the property of being a student, Christian, European etc. However, it isn't clear to me that the BAPI

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can avoid its own version of the Problem of Too Many Thinkers. I have seen a description of aborted conjoined (cephalothoracopagus) twins that shared one cerebrum but had two brainstems (and two cerebelli, two lungs and other duplicated organs.) *Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 18, 2001, pp. 289-290. Given that van Inwagen and Olson's BAPI individuate organisms in terms of brainstems, the just described conjoined twins would be two organisms sharing a cerebrum. If such twins engaged in minimal thought before they died or if it were metaphysically possible for such twins to live long enough to think, 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 thoughts. The very puzzles of too many thinkers that supposedly embarrass the Psychological Approach to Personal Identity (PAPI) would reappear for the BPAI even though the conjoined twins were not spatially coincident organisms. The reason these problems reappear for the non-spatially coincident pair of organisms is that they would be sharing one cerebrum which is the organ that realizes conscious life. Any pain one twin felt, the other would be using the same cerebrum to feel. Now let's assume that advocates of the BAPI can explain how two organisms using the same cerebrum can each think and refer just to itself. The dilemma for the BAPI appears then to be that however it is capable of avoiding the problems that arise from positing two thinkers with one cerebrum will be available to the advocate of the PAPI who posits the spatially coincident organism and person sharing the same cerebrum. This type of conjoined twins, two organisms with a shared cerebrum, may actually cause the BAPI more trouble than the equally peculiar case of the dicephalus, conjoined twins consisting of allegedly a single organism with two cerebrums. McMahan and Persson put forth

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the dicephalus as an example of two persons that are part of a single organism to subvert the claims of organism/person identity advocated by van Inwagen and Olson. To see how the BAPI might respond to the McMahan/Persson dicephalus, see my “Countering the Appeal of the Psychological Approach to Personal Identity.” *Philosophy* 79 2004 pp. 445-472.