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Pour citer cet article : **Tondino, T. (2011), « The 'Is' in Animal-ism », *Ithaque*, 9, p. 107-129.**

URL : <http://www.revueithaque.org/fichiers/Ithaque9/07Tondino.pdf>

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# The 'Is' in Animal-is-m

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## Abstract

*Eric T. Olson argues for a position in personal identity called Animalism. Olson's definition of 'what we are' is what the biological community currently defines as the 'human animal'. While Olson argues his definition is determinate and anti-relativist, I object by maintaining that his definition is fundamentally soft relativist. This is accomplished by asking : 1) why favour the biological definition over other cultural definitions ? – and by arguing : 2) that nothing stops the biological definition from changing ; 3) that the biological definition is classificatory and not ontologically explanatory ; 4) that biology may drop the concept 'human animal' leaving no definition of 'what we are'. Finally, I look at which ontological decisions Olson makes and ask if there is any hope for Animalism and for the human philosopher with no proven ontology. In my conclusion, I follow Olson's surprising admission by suggesting that I have no idea what we are.*

## Introducing Personhood

Eric T. Olson rarely mentions the word 'person'. One might be tempted to suggest he seems uncomfortable with it. As soon as he begins to use 'person', he shifts to the words 'human animal' and the personal pronoun 'I'. He writes : "I don't want to argue about what it is to be a person. I don't find it an interesting question<sup>1</sup>". This is not

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<sup>1</sup> Olson, E. T. (2007a), *What Are We ? A Study in Personal Ontology*, p. 44.

to say that he avoids ‘personhood’ entirely : “I say that you and I and the other people who walk the earth are animals [...] A human person is roughly someone who relates to a human animal in the way that you and I do, whatever that is<sup>2</sup>”.

In “An Argument for Animalism” Olson remarks : “In every actual case, the number of people we think there are, is just the number of human animals. Every actual case in which we take someone to survive or perish is a case where a human animal survives or perishes<sup>3</sup>”. And elsewhere :

I am not convinced there is any one metaphysical sort of thing that people in general are or must be. Or if there is we cannot know it until we have [...] ruled out some of the items on [the following] list – gods, thinking machines, [angels, robots] and [corporations like Apple Computer Inc.]<sup>4</sup>.

In other writings, Olson seems to struggle with the idea that persons have certain mental capacities, that they may be what Locke would call them : “thinking intelligent beings”<sup>5</sup>. ‘Person’ for Olson, is a matter of linguistic convention and he frequently conveys the extent to which there seems to be little agreement on what the word ‘person’ entails.

Sometimes, he is more direct : “There are six billion people because there are six billion human beings – human animals, members of the species *Homo sapiens*”<sup>6</sup>. If it were up to Olson alone, my hunch is that he would simply re-define ‘person’ as exactly what biology calls *Homo sapiens*. To Olson, a human animal is defined by the biological community as a being which begins somewhere around 16 days after conception (organogenesis) and ends at death. For the time being, I will ask that we set aside the question : *What is a person to Olson ?* – with a promise to return to it occasionally and work in a new direction following his lead to “limit the inquiry to ourselves<sup>7</sup>” – the human animals.

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<sup>2</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003a), “An Argument for Animalism”, p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>4</sup> Olson, E. T. (2007a), *What Are We ? A Study in Personal Ontology*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Locke, J. (1975), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, first published in 1694, p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003a), “An Argument for Animalism”, p. 346.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, E. T. (2007a), *What Are We ? A Study in Personal Ontology*, p. 9.

## Category Mistakes and Verbal Disputes

Olson is slightly revisionist regarding philosophical terminology, and it is easy to understand why. Many of us have found ourselves in a disagreement only to recognize that the definitions of our terms determine the nature of that disagreement. In recent years, the expression 'verbal dispute' has been coined to denote this linguistic frustration. One suggested resolution is to supply a new "neutral vocabulary".

Similarly, Frege's craving for an ideal philosophical, scientific and mathematical language exemplifies this way of thinking<sup>8</sup>. Frege, however, may not have been involved in a normative project regarding language – he was intent on distinguishing science from psychologism<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, the craving to limit our meanings is at least as old as philosophy itself. Even the Pre-Socratics and Plato were obsessed with the meaning of various words commonly taken for granted. At any rate there are arguably several good reasons, say, for naming only one tooth number 17<sup>10</sup>.

Olson's closing remarks in "Is There a Bodily Criterion" echo this craving transposed into *his* philosophical worldview regarding words like 'mind', 'body' and in other writings regarding the word 'self': "I suggest talk of people's bodies, is like talk of people's minds<sup>11</sup>". He adds: "[I]f the word 'self' has no agreed meaning, and leads us into troubles we otherwise could avoid, and if we could easily get on without it, there can be no reason, other than tradition, to continue to speak of the self<sup>12</sup>". He suggests philosophers would do well to move certain words out of the philosophical vocabulary and into, say, a poetic one. There might, nonetheless, be certain pre-scientific

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<sup>8</sup> Seymour, M. (2005), *L'Institution du langage*, p. 228-43. See 13 characteristics of Frege's Ideal Language.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> One of the many characteristics of science is linguistic and/or symbolic regimentation. Regimentation alone is insufficient. How and whether this applies to philosophy is another matter.

<sup>11</sup> Olson, E. T. (2006), "Is There a Bodily Criterion of Personal Identity?", p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> Olson, E. T. (1998), "There is no Problem of the Self", p. 657.

advantages to this – science, after all, must have grown out of natural language.

Debates naturally rage on about the possibility of idealizing language with the ramifications of attempting to *clean* our philosophical language thankfully spilling over into the political and ethical.

Verbal disputes are probably not always the result of category mistakes but I believe many are. This essay will include the suggestion that a good number of the problems of personal identity are indeed the result of category mistakes.

### **It's All Locke's Fault**

Well, not exactly. Olson points out that “9 out of 10 philosophers [...] do not think we are animals<sup>13</sup>”. He also lists many others from Plato onward who believed we are something other than animals. Paul Snowdon, another animalist, blames Locke for entrenching this idea in modern philosophy. To Locke, what we are is our memories<sup>14</sup>. This implies that if we lost our memories due, for example, to a brain injury, we would cease to exist. Snowdon argues that Locke's error was generated from his deep need to distinguish us from animals, which resulted in his “collaps[ing] the category human animal<sup>15</sup>”. But, perhaps we only need to amend this formulation, as Olson suggests, by saying humans are “very special animals<sup>16</sup>”. It is probably worth arguing that religious beliefs have had a lot to do with why we are not generally considered animals. To some people, what we are is our souls.

### **Third Person/First Person**

I would like to suggest that we can study aspects of Olson's work by working with the third person. He frequently uses ‘I’ or ‘you’ in his various arguments – e.g. the *thinking-animal argument*<sup>17</sup> – so it

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<sup>13</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003a), “An Argument for Animalism”, p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> Locke, J. (1975), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 335.

<sup>15</sup> Snowdon, P. (2009), “Paul Snowdon on Persons and Animals”.

<sup>16</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003a), “An Argument for Animalism”, p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> Olson, E.T. (2004), “Animalism and the Corpse Problem”, p. 266.

would seem possible to shift to a proper name, say, 'Jones'. I would like to suggest it is fair to proceed in the third person, albeit cautiously, since Olson's use of 'I', 'we' and 'you' is rather difficult to clarify anyway. First, second or third person is irrelevant to the problem at hand, i.e. are we animals? A note on typography: I will use Jones to refer to the person or animal; 'Jones' to the word itself; Jones' as the possessive case; and Joneses for the plural, e.g. many families named by 'Jones'.

### **'Is' is one slippery little word**

I begin my argument relating to 'is' here. Consider the proposition: *Jones is such an animal*. We can immediately distinguish what we might call the *is of metaphor*. Olson alludes to this<sup>19</sup> although he does not at any point posit that he has used the *is of metaphor*. Olson states that he is sometimes misunderstood as though he were saying we are animalistic in moral terms or that we are "merely animals<sup>20</sup>" as in: *Jones is merely an animal*.

Lynne Rudder Baker, for example believes this is an implication of Olson's Animalism. Animals, she suggests, are "brutish and we are not". She further stresses that "human animals constitute us but are not us<sup>21</sup>". For Baker: *Jones is constituted by a human animal. Jones is essentially a person*.

Olson counters that we are only contingently persons, in a similar way to being contingently philosophers or singers. For Olson: *Jones is contingently a person* to the extent that we define 'person' in whatever way we do contingently.

We may wish to employ the distinction which Olson attributes to David Wiggins between "substance-concept" and "phase-sortal" to help us clarify this matter work through the details of our puzzle over 'person'<sup>22</sup>. To Olson, the substance-concept is 'human animal' whereas 'person' is a phase-sortal<sup>23</sup>. To Baker the opposite is true.

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<sup>19</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003a), "An Argument for Animalism", p. 321.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>21</sup> Baker, L. R. (2001), *Persons and Bodies*, p. 12-18.

<sup>22</sup> Wiggins, D. (1967), *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Olson, E.T. (1997), *The Human Animal, Personal Identity Without Psychology*, p. 29-31.

This distinction between substance-concept and phase-sortal can also be found in Derek Parfit's work. He states: "Shoemaker assumes that what we are essentially is persons, while I regard it as acceptable to claim what we are essentially is human beings treating the concept *person* as a phased-sortal<sup>24</sup>". Here, Parfit is looking like he's become an animalist.

If there is a resolution to this dispute it seems to revolve around a combination of the word 'is' and the meanings of words that refer to us. The two elements cannot be easily detached. But, why is 'is' such a slippery word? At times it infers existence and at other times identity or sameness. Even the title of Olson's fascinating article "Is There a Bodily Criterion of Personal Identity?" is itself a riddle beginning with the word 'is'. Criteria are not the type of thing we ordinarily would think of as existing, but they must exist in some form of 'is'. Olson remarks: "It is inconvenient that the words 'identity' and 'same' mean so many different things: numerical identity, qualitative identity, individual psychological identity, and more<sup>25</sup>". I would suggest it's more than "inconvenient"; it's confusing.

In the above-mentioned article, Olson presents many attempts to formulate a "bodily criterion". A bodily criterion would be a formulation properly expressing that "we are our bodies". We can call the view that we are our bodies *bodyism*<sup>26</sup>. Judith Jarvis Thomson is a bodyist although at times it would appear she is more correctly described as an animalist. Occasionally she writes in reference to what seems to be the notion of immortality, thus showing her animalist tendencies: "What I want in wanting to survive is that *this body* [my emphasis] should continue to function in the ways in which living human bodies function when they support consciousness<sup>27</sup>". So she seems to be suggesting what she is, is *her living body*, which is fairly close to Olson's animalism and neither view seems incompatible with cherishing one's consciousness. For Olson, however, we are our *living bodies* whether we are conscious or not.

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<sup>24</sup> Parfit, D. (1999), "Experiences, Subjects and Conceptual Schemes", p. 218.

<sup>25</sup> Olson, E. T. (2010), "Personal Identity".

<sup>26</sup> Shoemaker, S. (1999), "Self and Body".

<sup>27</sup> Thomson, J. J. (1997), "People and their Bodies", p. 222.

There are three elements I would like to point out about Olson's powerful arguments against strict bodyism, i.e. that we are our bodies.

The first element is that to the extent that bodyism does not include the fact that we are alive, it cannot properly explain what we are. None of the bodily criteria Olson provides succeeds in satisfying him for this reason. They are insufficiently subtle to provide an ontology which can cover our bodies while we are alive and our bodies when they have become corpses.

The second, and most interesting element in my view is that in each bodily criterion there is the presence of that troubling word 'is'. This second element is inextricably linked to the first. A bodyist would claim: *Jones is his body*. To Olson, whatever Jones is, he cannot be his body because his body sometimes lives and sometimes does not. Furthermore, the idea that Jones is alive is fairly determinate but the idea that his body exists is sometimes indeterminate.

The third intriguing element is that if there were a bodily criterion, it would have a feature which we find in Olson's animalism, i.e. we are not defined by our psychological elements. Olson denies what is commonly referred to as the *psychological approach* which suggests what we are is to be found in psychological connections: *Jones is his psychological connections or continuity*. This problem is more complex than the problem of 'personhood'. Accepting that what we can mean by 'person' is a matter of convention seems somewhat intuitive. But we also have a very deep relationship to what is going on in our brains, making the intuition that we are our memories and our thoughts particularly strong. Our identities seem wrapped up in this inner collection of mental items. We call this view *psychological reductionism*, i.e. *Jones is his mental connections*. Notice that psychological reductionism is not dualistic to the extent that there may be only one physical being whose states are mental. Nor do we have to attach psychology to the problem of personhood since, being a part of the person club might require all kinds of surprising capacities, e.g. commercial incorporation.

Olson's thinking-animal argument, however, is a very persuasive argument against psychological approaches. It relies fundamentally on parsimony. His intuition is that only one thinker should suffice in the ontological explanation of our thoughts. This intuition Olson derives from the *too-many-thinkers problem*.



Some philosophers have argued that we could have more than one thinker in our heads. For example, it does not strike Roland Puccetti as a problem that more than one person or thinker is involved in our thinking. He argues that brain bisection demonstrates that we are two<sup>28</sup>. Others might argue that dissociative identity disorder (multiple personalities) also suggests that we could be many thinkers. To these philosophers, the too-many-thinkers problem might not be more than an intuition.

Olson's thinking-animal argument, however, relies on the idea that we could not be more than one being having identical thoughts ; otherwise we could not tell each other apart. In other words, the being which is having our thoughts and shares our location, is exactly one specific human animal. We could not know we are not that animal since there could be no other fact available to us to help draw any distinction<sup>29</sup>. Therefore it would seem that the possibility that we can have more than one 'personality' or be of 'many minds' does not affect the thinking-animal argument. Olson discusses this in depth in "Was Jekyll Hyde?" In this article he argues that "the number of human people is simply the number of properly endowed human animals<sup>30</sup>", i.e. one.

Others like Kathleen V. Wilkes, who holds a *cobabitation view*, might agree that decisions over persons and personalities depend on what we decide<sup>31</sup>. Nothing stops the definition of 'person' from changing with time. So perhaps, as Wilkes suggests, the number of people is equal to the number of functioning personalities<sup>32</sup>. Despite this conventionalism being similar to what I suggested in the introduction, my impression remains that Olson is arguing in favour of an identity of 'person' with 'human animal'.

Arguably, the landscape would change to some extent if we adopted this new definition. For one thing, pregnant-Jones would be two people. Still, adjectives could resolve ambiguities, e.g. there could be pre-natal persons and no one would deny that legal-persons such

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<sup>28</sup> Puccetti, R. (1973), "Brain Bisection and Personal Identity", p. 339-355.

<sup>29</sup> Olson, E.T. (2004), "Animalism and the Corpse Problem", p. 266.

<sup>30</sup> Olson, E.T. (2003b), "Was Jekyll Hyde ?", p. 328-348.

<sup>31</sup> Wilkes, K. V. (1988), *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments*, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

as Monsanto pose many problems. Perhaps Olson does not state emphatically that 'human person' should mean the exact same thing as 'human animal' because of complications regarding pre-birth and abortion.

Olson's primary goal however, is to discard the notion that what we are *is* our linked mental states. This implies *Jones is nothing mental*.

In "Animalism and the Corpse Problem", Olson reconstructs a counter-argument to his thinking-animal argument, which he claims is raised by Shoemaker and Baker. The argument is formulated as follows :

**A** : Assume Jones is an animal.

**P<sub>1</sub>**: Jones' death will cause a corpse (material object).

**P<sub>2</sub>**: Jones' corpse must exist before his death in that it exists as his body.

**P<sub>3</sub>**: Jones' body has the same thoughts Jones has.

**P<sub>4</sub>**: If Jones shares identical thoughts with another being, he cannot know he is not that being.

**P<sub>5</sub>**: Jones is his body and a body is not an animal.

**C** : Jones is not an animal<sup>33</sup>.

Again this counter-argument relies on the ambiguity of 'is', which I have suggested is the most intriguing element in Olson's search for an adequate bodily criterion. In the counter-argument above we should see that *Jones is an animal and is a body and is a corpse*.

Olson counters by arguing that the persistence conditions of these three things are different. But, arguably, there is a way to make the sentence *Jones is an animal and is a body and is a corpse* come out true. It is simply to recognize the 'is' involved is shifting. The confusion can be shown by the following example : *Jones is buried in the Cimetière de Passy*. We can see that Jones 'is' and 'is not' at the same time.

### **'Is' is the culprit**

Consider *Jones is a human animal*. Which 'is' are we confronted with ? The *is of definition* perhaps ? An example of this 'is' might be

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<sup>33</sup> Olson, E. T. (2004), "Animalism and the Corpse Problem", p. 265-274. Note my addition of 'Jones'.

found in the argument-provoking-expression which Edmund Gettier attributed to Plato: “knowledge *is* a justified true belief” or by knowledge *I mean* a justified true belief<sup>34</sup>. Extending to our example we could state that by ‘Jones’ *I mean* ‘a human animal’. But, the name ‘Jones’ does not sufficiently define the concept ‘human animal’ and so we may conclude the meaning of ‘Jones’ is not ‘a human animal’. If there is an *is of definition* it does not as of yet obviously apply.

It is similarly doubtful that the ‘is’ in *Jones is a human animal* is the *is of synonymy*. After all, ‘Homo sapiens’ is a synonym for ‘human animal’, but not for ‘Jones’. We can also quickly disregard the *is of simile* as in : *Jones is like a human animal*. The youthful colloquialism is a humorous bonus but can also be disregarded, as in : *Jones is like totally a human animal*.

We can try the *is of classification*. *Jones is a singer* might be like *Jones is a human animal*. Still, being a singer, as we have noticed, is more contingent than being an animal. We are singers temporarily. This seems to summarise the debate between Baker and Olson. For Baker, *Jones is a singer and a human animal* and both are involved in the constitution of Jones-the-person. For Baker, people exist, but for Olson, it is Homo sapiens that exist. For other philosophers, what *is*, is Jones’ mental continuity. Is ‘is’ culpable ?

### ‘Is-forms’

I will continue this research a little longer. Call these *is-forms*. Is predication formed by an is-form ? Is *Jones is a human animal* like saying *Jones is tall* ? To Olson, *Jones is a human animal* implies something in a more permanent sense. Jones may not have always been tall.

### Proper Names

Jones is free to change his name but can he change his being an animal ? Most animals have never had names so animal-Jones needs no name. I presume that before the development of language there would have been no ‘Jones’ so by ‘Jones’ perhaps, we only point to the animal as Olson seems to imply. For Baker, ‘I’ is what creates the

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<sup>34</sup> Gettier, E. (1963), “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge ?”, p. 121-123.

person-Jones in that a first person consciousness is what Jones is. To Olson, this leads to the too-many-thinkers problem.

'Is' is so perplexing that I suggest we are easily fooled when we shift from one usage to another. One might wonder just how often 'is' is the source of a verbal dispute and if this is precisely what is going on between Olson and Baker.

Possibly, and following Olson, the resolution of our *is-problem* is to be found in the *is of identity*. For example, David Jones is David Bowie and both denote the same human animal. David Bowie is the identical human animal that was once baptised David Jones and who was once a fetus. Who could argue with the statement : *Jones is Bowie* ? But what about : *Jones is his fetus* ?

Well, our solution is far from perfect. Beliefs about Jones might never coincide with beliefs about Bowie, otherwise Jones is 22-years-old, 63-years-old and a fetus.

Consider the following : either Jones ceased to exist when Bowie arrived or Jones is still there. On these grounds Bowie and Jones are thinking each other's thoughts and neither Bowie nor Jones can tell which of the two he is. This is analogous to the fetus problem raised in "Was I Ever a Fetus<sup>35</sup> ?" The question is : *did Jones just disappear* ?

Olson has a simple solution to this puzzle, which is to suggest that Jones "came to be" Bowie. Presumably, fetus-Jones came to be baby-Jones and to be David Jones, and so forth. Numerical identity functions in part by resolving this kind of naming dilemma. But, we seem to be stuck with a query : is there an *is of three-dimensions* and an *is of four-dimensions* ? To speak of Jones would seem to imply Jones' entire animal life as in *Jones is his world-line*. Could we ever meet Jones ?

Still, this idea of numerical identity is interesting. It does help us keep up with the Joneses. The Jones in *Men in Black*, i.e. Tommy Lee Jones is not the same Jones as is David Robert Jones. So we might infer from this that the *is of identity* is tied to numerical identity and to another is-form, i.e. the *is of ontology*.

By the *is of ontology*, I wish to imply that it is coherent to say simply that *Tommy Lee Jones is* in the sense of *exists*. Admittedly, the *is of ontology* in the expression *Tommy Lee Jones is*, seems very different from the *is of ontology* for the expression *the 'is of ontology' is*. Similarly, *Tommy*

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<sup>35</sup> Olson, E. T. (1997b), "Was I Ever a Fetus ?", p. 100-102.

*Lee Jones is Agent K in "Men in Black"* needs consideration. The *is of ontology* of 'is' is even more confusing. 'Is' itself *is*, at least in the way that words exist, whatever that is. Still, there does seem to be a clear sense in which words exist in a different way than do human animals. Is there an *is of numbers* versus say, an *is of physical objects*? Olson asks how anyone could completely deny the existence of numbers<sup>36</sup>? This would seem a very cumbersome system; however it is a perfectly natural part of our remarkable linguistic abilities.

What then is the *is of logical identity*? Frege does an interesting job of distinguishing two forms in his analysis of 'sameness'<sup>37</sup>. 'A is A' is less informative than 'A is B'. Frege pointed out that there is less cognitive value in '1=1' than in '1=2-1'. So, the statement *Jones is a human animal* must be more like this second variety. Otherwise, Olson's claim, "I am an animal" is a trivial tautology. It might be the case nonetheless, that the statement *I am an animal*, lacks some philosophical content. But, can *Jones is a human animal* be like 1=2-1?

We can perhaps return to the *is of numerical identity*. In other words: *Jones is numerically identical with that (specific) human animal*. We should keep in mind that we could use 'Jones' to denote the numerically identical animal that was once a fetus and who may one day lose his mental capacities. But Jones can only be numerically identical to the being he was or will be, whatever that is, and not to any human animal. As we have observed, we can see there is some sense to the statement: *by 'Jones' I refer to all the stages of Jones' human life*. So there seems to be a connection between the *is of ontology* and the *is of reference*, once we have considered this idea of numerical identity.

But what exactly is numerical identity and do we really want to accept it? If we do not accept numerical identity we are faced with a new problem – for every Planck instant of Jones there is a new Jones. There are simply trillions of slightly varied Jones-versions and none of them are identical. It does however seem strange to think of say, Will Smith meeting Tommy Lee Jones for a few seconds in an elevator and saying, "Hello Jones AXC45551. How are all of you Joneses doing? Oh, this is my floor... see you later Jones AXC87657." And this only leads us to more problems.

<sup>36</sup> Olson, E. T. (1997a), *The Human Animal, Personal Identity Without Psychology*, p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> Frege, G. (1980), "On Sense and Reference", p. 22-50.

1. What connects each of these Joneses ? Causality ?
2. Is there a basic ontological unit ? For example, is Jones just the set that contains trillions upon trillions of living-Jones-states and how is this compatible with all the minute particles that make up any individual Jones stage ?
3. If we follow David Lewis, even possible versions of Jones can be said to exist. *Jones is his possibilities !*

Olson relies heavily on numerical identity which he connects to persistence conditions. His work in recent years deals greatly with problems of time and the difficulties related to our deep inability to conceive of time in a satisfactory way. So this is far from being a problem entailed by animalism – it is a problem for 'is'.

'Is' is not always clearly connected to time, e.g. the *is of metaphor*. But any use of the *is of ontology* is stuck with an explanation of time. Modern physics has made interesting advances on the subject but to speak of 'is' in an ontological way is to talk of an individual over time – it seems at once to refer to now and to entail ties to the past. Therefore, one ought not to be embarrassed for being confused by 'is' because it appears everybody is. These problems lead Olson to conclude : “That is why I say I don't know what we are<sup>38</sup>”.

The title of Olson's book “What Are We ?” shows his fascination for metaphysics. Other than to simply say : *Jones is*, which is not far away from Heidegger's *Dasein*, isn't every other is-form just another way of describing Jones ? Can we ever get to the bottom of 'is' ? Is Olson only describing the 'is' of Jones in a different way to Baker ? My study of 'is' in animalism makes me wonder if I am only retracing steps.

### **On Collapsing Categories**

In this process of unpeeling the word 'is', the one striking element is that is-forms seem to require a basic logic to separate them. Are we in the presence of Aristotle's and Kant's categories ? Are the categories simply the possibility of understanding ? This is not to say that we are correct in how we use 'is' in every instance. Certain

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<sup>38</sup> Olson, E.T. (2007b), “What Are We ?”, p. 55.

categories may drop away with time. But, it is fair to suggest the logic of 'is' yields yes/no, true/false, fiction/non-fiction, numerical/qualitative, being/non-being, eternal time/dynamic time, sets/individuals, living/non-living, is/was/will be, cause/effect, possible/necessary/actual and so forth. I'm not saying these things are real beyond the linguistic framework, but I believe I am saying there is an argument for keeping them.

What we find in the analysis of is-forms seems to be our "form of life". We are perhaps engaged in a phenomenology of our own conceptual frameworks to the extent that we discover them in the logic of our experience and beyond. I say beyond because one of the elements of the framework, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, is the objective world that may contain no experiences. And though we posit this outer objective world we are reasonably justified in doing so. This is in effect the domain of many sciences. We need an objective framework as well as a subjective one. Otherwise we can make no sense of *Jones is seeing a series of red dots on a colour-field of green dots* in contrast with *Jones is being irradiated with a wavelength range of approximately 637nanometres*. Both are in the web of "how we play the game"<sup>39</sup>. So the question: *Does red exist?* implies the question: *Do you mean for Jones?* Similarly, the idea that red is the wavelength 630 to 740 nm makes no sense without evoking a subjective experience and an objective reality.

When reconsidering *Jones is a human animal*, we may recall Olson's use of "comes to be" regarding fetus-Jones and old-Jones. What is "comes to be"? I suggest it is the verb 'is' supported with the category 'past/present/future'. We could not make sense of the statement: *fetus-Jones comes to be old-Jones* without this category. I am not, however, suggesting that the arrow of time and causality are objective facts.

Parfit seems to be making this point in "Experiences, Subjects and Conceptual Schemes". The scheme he is referring to generates 'subject versus object'. His original motivations were ethical. The question he asks in *Reasons and Persons* is *would we have a better world if it there were no people?* But when he engaged himself in finding 'persons' he found 'is/was/will be'. And it is interesting to note that Christine

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<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1958), *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 38, §81.

M. Korsgaard<sup>40</sup> argues the exact opposite view based on her ethical position :

Suppose Parfit has established that there is no deep sense in which I am identical to the subject of experiences who will occupy my body in the future. [...] I nevertheless have reasons for regarding myself as the same rational agent. [These] reasons are not metaphysical, but practical.<sup>41</sup>

Korsgaard is arguing for the category I/not-I. She may also be saying there is nothing out there that will tell us to be moral any more than that we shall find the idea of ourselves as agents out there. Or again, there is no 'ought' in the *is of out there*. Is not, her concern, the *is of ought* ?

I think it is on these grounds that we cannot find certain features when we set about to analyze the concepts themselves. There is no 'I' because it is only a feature of a specific framework of understanding.

If we continue our earlier reflections, *Jones is a human animal*, implies that Jones' persistence conditions are unchanging. Olson's animalism is based on the idea that there is at least one non-negotiable condition of Jones-the-animal. This condition is that his remaining alive is necessary for him to persist. The link between fetus-Jones and old-Jones is that they share the same life. So we invoke the category living/non-living. As Olson argues : "The fetus or infant simply comes to be a person -- if it wasn't a person already<sup>42</sup>". Intuitively, how could we not recognize Jones after he has lost his mental capacities as the same joyous-Jones we knew ? We can switch to saying : *Jones is no longer the same man*, but it should be clear that our 'is' is slippery.

The decision to keep numerical identity and attach it to animalism leads Olson to what he calls the *biological approach*. Biologists have been responsible for classifying the various life-forms. Human animals are among these life-forms. What we are is what biologists say we are. Most biologists probably accept the category living/non-

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<sup>40</sup> Korsgaard, C. M. (no date), "Moral Animals".

<sup>41</sup> Korsgaard, C. M. (1989), "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency : A Kantian Response to Parfit", p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Olson, E. T. (1997b), "Was I Ever a Fetus ?", p. 105.



living. Assuming we have properly argued that *Jones is a human animal*, it is safe to say that biologists tell us what and when Jones is.

Now, I do not wish in any way to deny the value of biology as a science, nor would I accuse Olson of scientism. But while the claim that we are human animals is very interesting in biology, it might not be as interesting philosophically. Why? Because what makes the claim *Jones is a human animal* interesting for biologists is that Jones is not a canine animal. Each species is relative to another and we can measure differences between them. In short, what makes biology interesting is the activity of comparison and the conclusions drawn from this activity.

So the statement : *Jones is a human animal* has biological explanatory power. There are possible genetic manipulations as well as questions of what constitutes life versus death. The basic ontological unit of biology is the living cell, and so forth. But it may not be so clear that the statement *Jones is a human animal* makes as much sense in philosophy. Is Olson simply repeating in a less precise language what biologists are doing in a far more successful way? Should we not just let the biologists work and look for some other vocation?

I admit that I often wonder what the vocation of philosophy is. There is a sense that the philosopher's ultimate goal is to run out of questions; historically, and I say this light-heartedly, as soon as a philosophical question finds an answer a science is born and a philosopher vanishes into thin air. Nonetheless, many scientists and philosophers have suggested that asking oddly metaphysical questions is something to avoid. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy became preoccupied by statements which took the form "x is nothing other than..." So perhaps we are nothing other than human animals. The seemingly profound biologically-detached question *Sure, but what then is a human animal?* is just nonsense in the same way that the question *What occurred before the Big Bang?* is nonsense to Stephen Hawking. Many puzzles have evaporated with our scientific advancements. No one would think to ask why moonlight is so much faster than sunlight given that it travels to the earth in under two seconds while it takes over 8 minutes for sunlight to travel to the earth. It just seems to be an improperly asked question.

But which 'is' are biologists using? What does *Jones is a human animal* mean biologically versus ontologically? Perhaps the *is of biology* is an *is of classified scientific objects*.

Olson argues against Baker in his "Thinking Animals and the Constitution View" by saying we could eliminate all persons without losing one individual. But by the same argument, we could eliminate all human animals without losing one individual. Biologists need only conclude that we are something else. There is no clear link between which categories we use to create understanding and the ontology of the universe. We cannot simply point to our linguistic needs to uncover the riddles of nature. So, there may be no justifiable use of life versus non-life. Olson's relativism is dependent upon the biological culture of our time.

Furthermore, allowing that biologists would determine what we are might not lead to any kind of consensus. Some biologists might think we are human animals and others might think we are our genomes, our brains or our connectomes. Oddly, most of what is named in biology is what Olson would call arbitrary. He would argue there are no hands and no ears because these are not what Olson calls *proper parts*<sup>43</sup>. He would agree that we are made of our cells but not of our body parts. Olson would probably not agree with a good part of what biology does while classifying and naming. For example, we have no tooth number 17. The reason for this is it would imply you are your number 17 tooth-complement. But, you are you, not your number 17 tooth-complement. So your number 17 tooth-complement must not exist or it inhabits the same location as you do and you could never know which of you, you are. Indeed, there would be zillions of part-complement you versions<sup>44</sup>. This esoteric line of philosophical reasoning would probably bother the average biologist.

Consider :

1. Jones is nothing other than a human animal.
2. Jones is numerically identical to nothing other than this human animal.

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<sup>43</sup> Olson, E. T. (1995), "Why I Have No Hands", p. 182-197.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196-197.

My sense here is that Baker presumes Olson means 1) when Olson actually means to say 2). This is reflected by Baker when she states :

It is not the case that my continued existence *is nothing other than* [my emphasis] the continued existence of an organism... [A] first person perspective makes an ontological difference in the universe. It is beings with an 'inner life' of the kind that can produce 'the arts, the sciences, philosophy and civilization'.<sup>45</sup>

But which beings are those if not the animals we are ? So the 'is' is sliding from ontology to predication. We are not numerically identical to philosophers but we are identical with the animals that become philosophers.

Consider Spinoza's dictum : "One substance, many attributes". Would we attend Jones' funeral because he lost a tooth ? A hand ? No. We'd feel sorry for him and not for his hand. Olson is arguing that Jones stands independently of his non-life sustaining properties and I would add to this that keeping the *is of ontology* separate from the *is of predication* is to be found in our form of life. It would be like asking : Is red *nothing other* than the wavelength range of roughly 630-740 nm ? But, Jones' being numerically identical to a human animal does not preclude his potentially rich inner life. The rich inner lives of all animals do nothing to change their numerical identity.

With is-forms we specify a categorical scheme. Not recognizing this pre-selection causes verbal disputes and category mistakes. If I say *Jones is Jones*, I am not denying him a rich inner life or the capacity of art, science and philosophy despite the ease with which I ought to accept the tautology<sup>46</sup>. So what task does saying *Jones is a human animal* perform ? Well, neither example denies the rich potential qualities of Jones. On the day that : *Jones is no longer Jones* from the standpoint of numerical identity, it would seem we ought to attend his funeral.

Anscombe's unravelling of 'I' expresses this general problem. I do not see that her statement "'I' is neither a name nor any kind of

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<sup>45</sup> Baker, L. R. (2001), *Persons and Bodies*, p. 226.

<sup>46</sup> There are other readings for 'Jones is Jones'. See "War is war" in Wittgenstein, L. (1958), *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 221.

expression whose logical role is to make a reference, at all<sup>47</sup> is fully clear. What I am suggesting 'I' is, is a category bound to 'not-I'.

### The 'is' in thought experiments and narratives

Thought experiments can be analyzed by the way in which they rely on is-forms. If we drop a category we have a thought experiment. Like Anscombe, we can drop 'I/not-I' and see if we can imagine a society without it. Like Rorty, we can drop the idea of qualia by collapsing subjective/objective; these beings Rorty calls the Antipodians<sup>48</sup>. I have done something similar in another paper with true/false attempting to replace the category with assent/dissent; I call these aliens Ataraxians. We could similarly imagine societies without fiction/non-fiction. This is the source of Daniel Dennett's "The Self as Center of Narrative Gravity"<sup>49</sup>. His analogy regarding an object's center of gravity is strong. What Dennett seems to have in mind is an *is of narration*: *Jones is Jones' center of narrative gravity*. But how then do we distinguish between the *is of biography* and the *is of fiction*? Jones' self may be, in part, a fictional creation but it probably has some support in the ontological. Dennett argues "if you want to know what the self really is, you're making a category mistake<sup>50</sup>". The 'is' has that slippery feeling again: saying *Jones is his center of narrative gravity* seems to be a category mistake depending on how we use the word 'is'. Here, I am reminded of Olson's tendency to return to the human animal. Isn't Jones the human animal and not his abstract narrative center of gravity?

Arto Laitinen in "Sorting Out Aspects of Personhood"<sup>51</sup> makes some very interesting points about the contribution made to personal identity through recognition by others. This too is compatible with Olson's animalism. Wouldn't human animal monads die of loneliness?

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<sup>47</sup> Anscombe, E. (1975), "The First Person", p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> Rorty, R. (1979), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 70-127.

<sup>49</sup> Dennett, D. C. (1992), "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity", p. 1-11.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Laitinen, A. "Sorting Out Aspects of Personhood: Capacities, Normativity and Recognition" p. 248-270.

So what do we do with our intuitions regarding Tele-transporters, Brain-state-transfers, Brain-transplants, Head-grafting, and Cross-fades between Jones and Smith? Well, one might argue they are part of the *is of fiction*. Perhaps in considering them seriously we are making the error of not pre-selecting our categorical scheme by suggesting human animals can survive such things.

By saying *Jones is this human animal*, we say very little about the richness of Jones-the-person. So we naturally feel that we have over-abbreviated. Nagel, in an attempt to preserve an agnostic *physicalism*, did not try to deny the fundamental irreducibility of a bat's experience<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, suggesting that *Jones is a human animal* does not detract from the depth of his inner life. Of course *what it is like to be Jones*, depends to a great extent on his being a human animal.

## Conclusion

So what are Homo sapiens in the narrative sense of 'is'? Well, some human animals take photographs; like the ones taken by Eddington of an eclipse which supported Einstein's theory that space curves under the influence of gravity. We've created photographs of faces 20 metres across and detailed images that astound, shock and dismay. We've seen views of space from Hubble as well as expanses of manufactured landscapes of waste photographed by Ed Burtynsky. Human animals have watched from Earth, a sunrise on Venus and sunset on Mars. Homo sapiens have been thoroughly inspired by a young man in Tiananmen Square stopping 4 tanks and many were shaken by images of Phan Thị Kim Phúc running naked, burnt from napalm.

We have created deadly nuclear blasts and to this day allow for the starvation of children.

We have made films about warring human animals like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Das Boot*, *La Vita est Bella* and *Apocalypse Now*; filmed concentration camp footage of the darkest of days and shared in Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*, De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* and Renoir's *La Bête Humaine*.

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<sup>52</sup> Nagel, T. (1974), "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?", p. 435-450.

What other than a human animal was Rosa Parks, who refused to step to the back of a bus, adding momentum to a powerful movement for civil rights? Who created the music of that movement? What was Jimi Hendrix, when he played a most poignant version of *The Star Spangled Banner* on a screeching electric guitar, imitating bombs falling on Vietnam and bugle calls in ear shattering feedback? The genius of human animals is everywhere.

Mahatma Ghandi was a human animal who wanted his human animal friends to be treated with respect and have the right to determine their futures as other more privileged human animals. His method was to starve himself, the animal, harming no other animals. There have been many like him trying gracefully to be equally respected human animals.

Which Homo sapiens created the "Guernica"? Is Damien Hirst's "For the Love of God" not the skull of a human animal covered in diamonds? Van Gogh and Emile Nelligan were human animals.

Haven't we human animals gone places "no man has gone before" and done it from laptops in our living rooms? Have we not seen historical treasures from every corner of the Earth and had the possibility of visiting all of them? Watched aliens of every kind try to attack, avoid being abused or simply try to get home? Wasn't Armstrong a human animal walking on the moon?

Gene Krupa in 1937 playing wild jungle rhythms on *Sing, Sing, Sing* in Benny Goodman's band was a human animal and songs like *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, Louis Armstrong's *Hello Brother*, Aretha Franklin's *Respect*, Elvis Costello's version of the unforgettable *What's So Funny 'Bout Peace Love and Understanding?* and John Lennon's *Imagine* are the works of human animals.

Who made our cities, cars, and jets, bridges like the Golden Gate and monuments like the Statue of Liberty, the Pyramids and the Eiffel Tower.

Many human animals have open views on homosexuality and same-sex marriage in part because of films like *Philadelphia*, *Broke Back Mountain*, *Milk* and *C.R.A.Z.Y.*

Painters like Frida Kahlo and sculptors like Camille Claudel were human animals and many have extraordinary voices like those of Jane Austen, de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Mary Shelley, Billy Holiday, Josephine Baker, Wangari Maathai, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

And finally, I agree with Olson : I don't know what we are.

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