

Three Problems for Olson's Account of Personal Identity

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I take Eric Olson's account of personal identity to have two components. First there is his characterization of the problem of personal identity. Here's a paraphrase of some things Olson says on p. 23 of *The Human Animal*.¹

Olson's Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity

The problem of personal identity consists of trying to provide an answer to the following question: For anything that is a person at one time, under what possible circumstances is something – anything at all – that exists at some other time numerically identical with that person?

The second (and main) component of Olson's account of personal identity is his answer to the above question, which he calls The Biological Approach. Here's my formulation of The Biological Approach.

The Biological Approach to Personal Identity

For anything, x , that is a person at one time, and anything, y , that exists at some other time, y is numerically identical with x iff there is the right kind of biological continuity between x and y .

I want to begin by raising a problem for Olson's Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity. The problem has to do with a story that I'll call The Mummy.

¹ Olson, Eric, *The Human Animal* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

The Mummy

Once upon a time there was a man who lived a long and happy life. Then he died, and his body was preserved, as a mummy, for a million years. Eventually the mummy came to the attention of a powerful being, who gradually rearranged the particles that composed the mummy until they came to compose a living, breathing, human person, who happened to be a woman, and who had a psychology that was utterly different and discontinuous from the psychology of the man from the beginning of the story.

Here are two things about this story that I think are both true.

- (1) There is a single thing in The Mummy that is a man at the beginning of the story and a woman at the end.
- (2) The man from the beginning of The Mummy and the woman from the end of the story are different people.

But if we adopt Olson's Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity, then we'll be forced to say that any theory of personal identity according to which (1) and (2) are both true is automatically false. To me, this seems like a major strike against Olson's Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity.

I think what this case shows is that there really is some notion of *same person* that is relevant to the problem of personal identity, and also that this *same person* relation is distinct from the relation that holds between any x and y iff x is a person at t_1 , y exists at t_2 , and y is identical to x . I also think that if we try to characterize the problem of personal identity without somehow incorporating the *same person* relation, then we will have mischaracterized the problem. I'll return to this point shortly. But first I want to mention a problem for The Biological Approach.

One of Olson's most convincing arguments against The Psychological Approach to personal identity (according to which the key to personal identity is psychological continuity) involves what he calls The Fetus Problem. According to The Psychological Approach, nothing that is not psychologically continuous with you as you are now can be identical with you. But the unconscious fetus that was in your mother's womb way back when is not psychologically continuous with you as you are now. So according to The

Psychological Approach, you were never a fetus. This puts the proponent of that approach in the awkward position of having to say that one of the following two things is true.

- (3) When you came into existence, you replaced a fetus that was in your mother's womb before you.
- (4) Ever since you came into existence, you have been sharing space (and parts, and matter, and sometimes even clothes) with a thing that was once a fetus, that has never been a person, and that has always been distinct from you.

That's The Fetus Problem for The Psychological Approach. It's a problem that I wouldn't want to have. But as W.R. Carter has pointed out, there is a similar problem facing The Biological Approach.² For according to The Biological Approach, nothing that is not biologically continuous with you as you are now can be identical with you. But the corpse that will result from your death is not biologically continuous with you as you are now. So according to The Biological Approach, you will never be a corpse. And this puts the proponent of The Biological Approach in the awkward position of having to say that one of the following three things is true.

- (5) When you die, you will go out of existence, and you will be replaced by a brand-new object – a corpse – that was not there before.
- (6) When you die, you will go out of existence, and the particles that previously composed you will not compose anything (not even a corpse).
- (7) You are now sharing space (and parts, and matter, and even clothes) with a non-living entity that will one day be a corpse (your corpse, in fact) but that has always been distinct from you.

Some proponents of The Biological Approach will opt for (5), and Olson will presumably opt for (6), but to my mind, all three of these alternatives are unappealing. For it seems clear to me that you are a physical object, with the

² Carter, W.R., "Will I Be a Dead Person?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999), pp. 167-171.

persistence conditions for such objects; and that, moreover, when you die, you will continue to exist for as long as your body exists.

I will come back to The Corpse Problem, but next I want to talk about what I think is the best alternative to Olson's Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity. The alternative that I want to propose is based on the following three metaphysical assumptions.

- (A1) There are such things as instantiations of properties. (For example, there is the current instantiation of blueness by my shirt.)
- (A2) Instantiations come in episodes, which are event-like entities that can be extended in time. (My shirt has been instantiating blueness for a while now, and will continue to do so for some time to come.)
- (A3) It makes sense to talk about whether x 's instantiation of ϕ -ness at t_1 is part of the same episode of ϕ -ness as y 's instantiation of ϕ -ness at t_2 . (For example, we can ask whether my shirt's current instantiation of blueness is part of the same episode of blueness as its instantiation of blueness two weeks ago.)

Here is my proposal.

The Episodic Characterization of the Problem of Personal Identity (EPPI)

The problem of personal identity consists of trying to provide an answer to the following question: What are the circumstances under which an instance of personhood at t_1 is part of the same episode of personhood as an instance of personhood at t_2 ?

And here is how EPPI gets around the problem raised by The Mummy. EPPI allows us to say that there is a single thing throughout the story, but that the person at the end of the story is not the same person as the person at the beginning of the story. For EPPI allows us to say that the later instances of personhood in the story are not parts of the same episode of personhood as the earlier ones (despite the fact that the same object is involved in each case).

It seems to me that this is by far the most natural thing to say about what happens in The Mummy. And since EPPI allows us to say this, but Olson's

Characterization does not, I take this to be a huge advantage of EPPI over Olson's Characterization.

Meanwhile, the good news is that adopting EPPI would solve The Corpse Problem for the proponent of The Biological Approach. For a proponent of The Biological Approach who takes his theory to be answering the question posed by EPPI will say the following.

Bio EPPI

An instance of personhood at t_1 is part of the same episode of personhood as an instance of personhood at t_2 iff there is the right kind of biological continuity between those two instances of personhood.

Which means that such a proponent of The Biological Approach can say that the same thing that will be a corpse after you die (namely, you) is now a person, even though the episode of personhood that is going on in your vicinity right now will have ended by the time you become a corpse.

So much for the good news. Now I want to turn to a different problem for both The Biological Approach and The Psychological Approach – a problem that I don't think either view can really solve. And this problem is also based on a story.

The Salamander

Once upon a time there was a human person named Ned, who lived a long and happy life. Then, when he was 100 years old, Ned began to morph like a character in a bad movie, but very slowly, until, after six months of morphing, he had turned into a salamander named Sally. (Ned/Sally remained conscious throughout this whole process.) Sally lived a long and happy life as a salamander, crawling around under rocks and logs and eating whatever salamanders eat. Then, when she was very old for a salamander, Sally slowly morphed back into a human person. The eventual result was a woman known as Lucy, who was utterly different in every important way from Ned.

Here's why this example is a problem for The Biological Approach: The proponent of The Biological Approach must say that the relation between Ned and Lucy is personal identity. (After all, there is biological continuity between Ned and Lucy.) And here's why this example is also a problem for The

Psychological Approach: The proponent of The Psychological Approach must also say that the relation between Ned and Lucy is personal identity. (Because there is psychological continuity between Ned and Lucy.)

But it seems clear to me that this is not a story involving personal identity between Ned and Lucy. Whatever else we say about the story, we must not say that Ned and Lucy are the same person.

Notice that framing either The Biological Approach or The Psychological Approach as an answer to the question posed by EPPI will not help the proponents of those approaches with this problem. For the different instances of personhood involving Ned and Lucy in the story are both biologically and psychologically continuous.

I suppose that the best response for a proponent of either The Biological Approach or The Psychological Approach is to point out that all of the following things are true in the story:

- (8) The thing that is Ned persists throughout the story.
- (9) Ned survives the events of the story.
- (10) This is a story about a thing that begins its career as a person, that later becomes a salamander, and that eventually comes to be a person again.
- (11) Both Sally and Lucy really are identical to Ned.

But here's why I don't like this response. I agree that (8)-(11) are all true. And I don't mind calling the relation between Sally and me "object identity" or even "organism identity." Similarly with the relation between Lucy and me. Nor do I mind saying that I survive for a long time in the story, and also that I turn into a salamander and then back into a human being. But I am not okay with calling the relation between me and Sally *personal identity*. Nor am I okay with calling the relation between me and Lucy *personal identity*. If there is a relation worth calling personal identity (and I think there is), then it is not any relation that can relate me to a salamander. Nor is it any relation that relates me to Lucy in the story.

The upshot, for me anyway, is that both The Biological Approach and The Psychological Approach must be false. I don't know what the right view of personal identity is, but I'm convinced by this example that it's not either one of these two.