

# We Are Temporal Parts of Minimal Thinking Subjects

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The most important difference between animalism and its rival is that animalism contends that we are not essentially persons while the other theories contend we are.<sup>1</sup> The standard argument for animalism is the thinking animal argument. Thinking animal problem is the most powerful evidence for us to be inclined to animalism. However its rival, so called the neo-Lockeanisms, also have their efficient objections. They provide enormous mind experiments based on our strong intuition that psychology continuity is a sufficient and necessary condition for our persistence<sup>2</sup>. As long as psychology continuity is not such a determinant condition for animals to persist, they claim that we are not animals. Animalists have a good way to deal with this objection, and they indeed have done it, that this strong intuition is actually wrong and misled by the close connection of our being animals and being persons. We can infer from some trivial propositions to a startling conclusion, and a startling assumption to some reasonable conclusions. This is exactly what philosophers do; therefore denying this intuition is not absurd. But animalism has its own problem---thinking parts problem. Olson (2007) deems it as the biggest threat to animalism and inclines to solve it by falling into some radical composition theories, which deny the existence of thinking parts. However this choice will render the legitimacy of saying that we are animals in a query conversely. In this paper, we will conclude that the best explanation of what we are is that we are temporal parts of minimal thinking subjects by go through the problems of neo-Lockeanisms and animalism.

## 1. Neo-Lockeanism and thinking animal problem

Locke (1975) distinguishes human animals and persons. And as he pointed out, these two sortal concepts own different identity criterias and psychological continuity is the condition of personal identity. Thinking animal problem is that assume that you are sitting in a chair thinking, then there is an animal sitting in the chair thinking; and if you are not the animal, there are two thinking beings here. This problem raises a lot of

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<sup>1</sup> We will ignore the views that we are souls and we are nothing here. The former in the debates of what we are is a bit like radical skepticism in epistemology---they are totally logically possible, but we can never prove its truth or falsity. Nihilism is just against our common sense too much. We should never easily fall into these two views.

<sup>2</sup> This intuition is pointed out by Shoemaker (1984).

difficult questions, the most important questions are two: the ontological question and the epistemic question. If there are two thinking beings here---you and the animal, what is the relation between you and the animal? If a person and an animal both think the same thoughts, how can you know that you are the person but not the animal? The answers offered by neo-Lockeanists are often correlated with their objections to animalism because they are both some mind experiments based on the psychological continuity condition of 'us'. There are two standard theories with respect to this problem. One is that we are constituted by the animals, the other is that we are the thinking parts of animals: the brain or the thinking part of brain or the temporal parts of brain. We will investigate them below.

### 1.1 Constitutionalism and the first-person perspective

Constitutionalism claimed that an animal constitutes me, a human person, like a lump of clay in the clay-model problem constitutes the statue. Then we want to know why two things own exactly the same properties except modal ones are different. One answer to that is to adopt the temporal parts view; in this way the animal and I have different temporal parts. But then there are still permanent coincidence problems. It is possible that two half statues are made separately and then combined together; and after a while we slash the statue into ashes. In this case, the lump of clay constituting this statue has the same temporal parts with the statue. Therefore having different temporal parts are not enough for distinguishing a lump of clay from a statue. Then why is it enough for distinguishing a person from an animal? If constitutionalism is right, there must be some other properties that can distinguish the constituting thing (such as a lump of clay, an animal) from the constituted thing (such as a statue, a person).

Baker (2000) distinguishes two ways in which objects instantiate properties: derivatively and non-derivatively (aka not derivatively). In her view, an object has some property derivatively if and only if it has the property by being colocated with another object. This distinction has been widely used in later debates in what we are and other compositional issues. And then she contends that (1) 'first person perspective' is essentially owned only by persons, not by animals; (2) we have 'first person perspective' essentially. In this way, animals have 'first person perspective' non-derivatively, and we have 'first person perspective' derivatively. Therefore the person and the animal have a property in different way, thus have different higher-order properties. Once we accept the animal/person distinction, we will find (1) very reasonable. As to (2), when we ask 'what we are?' or use other self-referring sentences,

‘we’ or ‘I’ refers to ourselves or myself. If we are animals (essentially), we can only self-refer when we have become persons. Then how could this self-reference refers to the animal, but not the person. However, if this self-reference refers to the person, how could we be animals? In my opinion, the only response of animalists is that persons do not exist. There are only animals. This is the exactly view inclined by Olson (2007), but he used it to defend animalism from thinking-parts problem. We will see it in the next section. In the following subsection, we will investigate another neo-Lockeanism: we are the thinking parts or their likeness.

## 1.2 Brain view and its likeness

Some neo-Lockeanists do not like constitutionalism, they find there is another simpler way to solve the thinking animal problem. Which is that we are the brains or their likeness. This view solves the thinking animal problem directly by posing another similar problem to animalism---the thinking parts problem. Parfit (2012) later advances the view to the embodied mind view. The well-known objection to brain view mentioned by Olson (2007) is what Parfit (2012) calls the ‘*physical properties objection*’:

*‘On this objection, we have many physical properties which cannot be had by our conscious thinking parts, whether we claim this part to be a brain, or a mind, or a Lockean person. Since we have such physical properties, we must be human animals, rather than some parts of these animals.’* (Parfit (2012), p.20)

This objection is answered by the embodied mind view for we have these physical properties (such as I have black hair), only derivatively, if we are embodied persons. Besides, the embodied mind view is also supported by a kind of mind experiments that Olson (2015) calls the ‘*transplant problem*’. These mind experiments, as we said, are based on the strong intuition that psychological continuity (and physical continuity that most part of our brains remains) is a sufficient and necessary condition for our persistence.

However, despite that the threat of biological minimalism and biological conjunctivism, the embodied mind view has a more essential problem. The reason that many neo-lockeanists feel sympathy with the brain view is that we know that brain is the thinking organism in our body. And the ‘thinking-subject minimalism’ (Olson (2001), p.55) that we should equate us to the things which exactly do the thinking things. And as our arms do not think, neither do our stomachs and the brain-complements; we should not include them to us. However, if we obey this intuition, then we should not deem us as the whole brain, as

Olson (2015) pointed out. For our brain have parts that only controlling our respiration and motion and other non-thinking things. More than that, we have unconscious moments, in these moments only the unthinking parts of the brain works. If we are the embodied thinking parts of the brain, are we dead when we are unconscious and back to live when we wake up? If not, then it means that we are still alive even when we stop thinking. Then why we claim that we, the persons, are dead when we are in the vegetative state? Olson concludes that there are only two ways to solve these problems. One is combing this view with the temporal parts view, the other is accepting animalism and denying the existence of problematic objects. The former approach is defended by Hudson (2001).

## 2. Animalism and thinking parts problem

The biggest threat of animalism is the thinking parts problem, as Olson (2007) claimed. And to solve it, he led us to another even bigger treat. We will see why. Thinking parts problem is similar to thinking animal problem, just replacing the person by any proper parts of the human animal bigger than the brain. There are not many choices here to respond to the thinking parts problem for animalists. The most reasonable choice may be what Olson himself inclined to that denying the existence of these proper parts. Leave alone the practical problem that we have to change systematically our knowledge about the world and the way we are talking and thinking about things when we accept such radical composition theories. We will find these composition theories are actually not friendly to animalism at all.

There are two different choices by Olson (2007), one is the biological minimalism (posed by van Inwagen (1990)), the other is biological disjunctivism (posed by Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1997)). The former claims that ‘things compose something if and only if their activities constitute a biological life----a self-organizing event that maintains the internal structure of an organism.’ (Olson (2007), p.226) The latter claims that ‘things compose something if and only if they are either functionally united or rigidly bounded.’ (Olson (2007), p.227) But biological lives are ambiguous; this ambiguity is due to the ‘self-organizing’ concept. As embryos and animals are probably both self-organizing in different ways. The embryos persist by placentas while the animals persist by mouths and noses. Then why animals are objects but not embryos. If embryos are also objects, why brains are not objects? It persist by exchanging the blood with the body and just as embryos, and what is better, the cells consist brains will not replaced, not like the cells consist animals. And what about the cell itself?<sup>3</sup> It also persists by exchanging nutrients and energy

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<sup>3</sup> This idea owes to John Mayer.

with the outside. If cell is an object, then the zygote is an object as well. Then why we are not a clump of cells existing since the zygote? And more problematic is that imagining that I got a surgery and my heart was transplanted by an artificial one. Most people will agree that it is still me, the same human person. But by the biological minimalism, either it is nothing or a human person without a heart. Therefore not only the radical composition theories cannot solve the thinking parts problem, they pose even more problems for animalism. An essential new problem is that why we say we are animals existing since the moment we are born, but not beings existing when the embryos exist, or the zygotes exist?

It is not reasonable to say that we are animals because we persist by breathing and eating. At least it is no better than that we are persons because we persist by psychological continuity. Our bodies are changing all the time, why should we not count the changing from embryos to babies as the changing in the persistence of us? If we are not persons, then our being an animal, or a being exists since the zygote or the embryo seems to be a metaphysically arbitrary thing, which is definitely not the result that animalists want.

### 3. Temporal parts of minimal thinking subject

We have seen from above that we have no particular metaphysical reason to believe that we are animals. Then what should be the metaphysical criteria? In my eyes, Baker's first-person perspective is the only driftwood that we can rely on in the ocean of what we are. She gives a very reasonable argument that we can only use self-reference when we are person, and as it is persons that have the first-person perspective essentially, the self-references refer to persons and thus we are persons. And according to Baker (2000), persons 'exist as long as [their] first-person perspectives are exemplified' (Baker (2000), pp.132-41). We will call it first-person perspective condition. As we take the first-person perspective in the center role of what we are, we will hold the thinking-subject minimalism. But as we pointed out in 1.2, we have unconscious moments, during these moments, the first-person perspective are not exemplified. Does this mean that we are dead? If not, then why I still exist when I am unconscious, and what is more, why the person before I losing conscious is the same one as the person after I waking up. And as we pointed out in 1.2 as well, if we still exist when we are unconscious, then does the person in the vegetarian state still exist, as long as the only difference seems to be the length of the unconscious time? Olson may suggest that the best way to solve these problems is adopting temporal parts view. Temporal parts view is a friendly ontology theory to almost all theories of what are we, and a very useful one. If we are the

conscious temporal parts, the difference between the unconscious temporal parts of our sleeping and the unconscious temporal parts of the permanent vegetative state is that the self-reference never factually refers to the latter but always refers to the former.<sup>4</sup> We always say that ‘I fall asleep just now’, but we never say that ‘I am vegetative’.

If we are the temporal parts of minimal thinking subjects, what is the minimal thinking subject exactly? The radical answer is that it is just a bundle of thoughts. But as Olson (2007) pointed out that thoughts cannot think. But besides bundles of thoughts, the remaining choice----the thinking parts of brains----is also problematic. Assume that there will be thinking robots in the future; they have first-person perspective essentially. Are they one of us? According to that we are conscious temporal parts of the thinking parts of brains, they are not; but according to the first-person perspective condition, they are. I think we cannot identify the minimal thinking subject as any specific objects. We can identify it by definitions, just like we need not identify a set by enumerating all the members in it; we just need to identify the condition for objects to be in the set. Therefore we can identify that a being is the minimal thinking subjects if and only if it owns the first-person perspective nonderivatively.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have gone through the main theories about what we are by dividing them into neo-Lockeanisms and animalism. Animalism contends that we are essentially animals, not persons. To defend it, the only plausible way is to deny the existence of person, brains, the thinking parts of brains and so on. However, despite their violating our intuition strongly, composition theories adopting this idea causes new problems to animalism. And there is an essential problem in them, that we have no metaphysical reason to identify us as an animal. Therefore we have to go back to neo-Lockeanisms. We find out that Baker’s first-person perspective is the most robust condition for our identification, comparing to other Lockean conditions like psychological continuity. And from this condition we also need temporal parts view. In the end we find there is no specific objects qualified enough to be the minimal thinking subjects, and there is no need to find one either. We can just define the condition of being minimal thinking subjects, which is that owing the first-person perspective nonderivatively. So we are temporal parts of minimal thinking subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> There is counter-factual use of self-reference which referring to the temporal parts in vegetative state.

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