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Paper 1

Prompt: "How does the Generous Ontology threaten ordinary views of ethics, according to Olson? What are some ways in which the problem is similar to some problems we've already encountered? Do you think responses to those problems work in the case of the problem Olson raises? Why or why not? Be sure to give an argument for your view and consider some possible objections and replies to what you say!"

Review and Response: The Generous Ontology

Introduction

Mereology is a field in philosophy that deals with issues involving parts and sums. The *Special Composition Question* is a problem in mereology which asks under what circumstances a given amalgamation of stuff is considered to be an "ontologically distinct entity"—a thing unto itself, separate from its surroundings and all other things.

We walk around with schemata that help us solve this problem practically: when I hold a pen, for example, I know that the mass will move coordinately as a single object, and so it is helpful to treat that particular amalgamation of stuff as one distinct thing. Of course I can identify functionally different components of the pen by name—cap, nib, reservoir, duct, etc.—and these components seem to have been manufactured independently. It becomes conceivable that what I had taken to be a single, distinct thing is actually many things, assembled.

But the subdivisions allowed by language are not the only ones imaginable. The molecule-thin layer of ink that coats the walls of the duct but never reaches paper, for example, could be seen: as member to the body of ink being conveyed, just lost on its way; as part of the duct itself, a sacrificial stationary liquid phase that facilitates conveyance of the rest of the body of ink; as a unifying intermediate, contiguous with both the ink and the duct; or as something else entirely—a distinct part of the pen, existing between the flowing ink and the duct in space. The plastic body, too, could be subdivided at molecular resolution between regions of absolute chemical purity and impurity, resulting in spatial bounds resembling those of Swiss cheese. The pure polymer could be further subdivided into classes of chain-length. And all parts of the pen could be theoretically separated into individual molecules, or atoms, or nuclei and electrons, or quarks and hadrons—or dissections thereof—ad infinitum.

In this way, innumerably many other things seem to emerge from within a single pen. Some of these parts' surface boundaries are defined based on their functional purpose, and others are governed by no practical or meaningful heuristic at all. And so we are left with conflicting ideas: of the unified pen, and of its many fragments. The question remains which things among this set are deserving of ontological status.

One extreme answer can be called *Nihilism*, which holds that no amalgamation of stuff actually constitutes anything. Instead, the only things that exist are whatever fundamental, subatomic units of matter there may be: "monads," in one sense; the "little guys" at the

bottom. As such, all the objects that we reference by name and count are not ontologically distinct, since they can be broken down into those units.

A more moderate view might define a critical criterion for being. *Vitalism*, for example, holds that a given amalgamation of matter constitutes an ontologically distinct entity *iff* the constitutive matter is "caught up in a life together." This account allows that things like you and I, and trees and flowers—and perhaps surrounding microbes—all exist in the world and can be outlined by a spatial boundary; chairs and rocks, by contrast, are not themselves things—instead they are contiguous with the stuff that surrounds you and me, and trees and flowers, etc..

Unrestricted Composition is effectively the opposite of Nihilism, and it holds that "any old class of things has a mereological sum" (Lewis 1986); that is, every distinct permutation of the "little guys" at the bottom (and hence every distinct subset of the pen's matter, and indeed of all matter) constitutes an ontologically distinct thing. Unlike Nihilism and Vitalism, this view allows us to distinguish the various parts of the pen in a way that is compatible with our language and our intuition: the cap is indeed distinguishable from the body, and the nib is distinguishable from the duct.[1] Unrestricted Composition also grants cases where the amalgamated matter would not ordinarily be said to comprise a thing, as with the nib-duct sum, or the middle third of the plastic body, longwise. Some such cases are ones where the proper parts of the amalgamation do not touch, as with the union of the cap and the nib and the reservoir (excluding all ink), or the union of the pen ensemble with all the reservoirs I have ever discarded. But most importantly, Unrestricted Composition invites something approaching redundancy: the pen ensemble plus a single speck of dust on its body (or plus a molecule of atmospheric O_2 adjacent to it, or part of that molecule, or some infinitesimal region of space between the body surface and that molecule) is a different entity than the pen ensemble alone. Because there are innumerably many ways to increment or decrement the boundary of the pen at subatomic resolution, there seem to be innumerably many things in my hand that satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a pen; this result is called *the Problem of the Many* (Unger 1980).

Unrestricted Composition in Perdurantism

The same problem arises when we interpret Unrestricted Composition in the context of *Perdurantism*, which is a view that human persons persist through time in virtue of their having shape and size not just in space, but also in time; persons, by this view, are said to be "temporally extended." This composite framework—of Unrestricted Composition in the context of Perdurantism—is called the *Generous Ontology*.

If we accept Perdurantism's view that human persons persist through time in virtue of being comprised of four-dimensional stuff, and if we accept Unrestricted Composition's view that every distinct set of stuff corresponds to an ontologically distinct entity, then it follows that every distinct subset of four-dimensional stuff corresponds some distinct entity that also persists through time. Eric Olson (2010) calls these subsets of four-dimensional material "subpersons," and just as there seem to exist innumerably many entities in my pen in the example above, there also seem to exist innumerably many subpersons within my

[1] This latter example (more than the former) points to an additional complication: vagueness. Along what surface does the duct end and the nib begin? *Supervaluationism* addresses these kinds of questions, though I will not.

spatiotemporal worm. Consider further that many of these subpersons look, act, think, and feel a lot like I do (or have, or will), for at least a brief period, and further still that many of these subpersons might have been whole persons, if the circumstances had been different (imagining, e.g., that I had been resuscitated after flatlining). It seems that at least some of these subpersons deserve moral consideration.

But Olson explains that granting subpersons moral status poses problems for ordinary views of ethics. He offers several examples that ultimately amount to: almost every action that a person can do will cause harm to an infinity of subpersons, and if subpersons bear moral status, doing almost anything at all is grievous ethical misconduct (Olson 2010). Even behaviors that are generally considered productive and beneficial to society—like investing time, effort, and money in one's education—are unjust to the vast number of subpersons who come into existence after the decision has been made, who spend the whole of their existences doing the hard work, and who go out of existence before the benefits are realized.

We might also look at the plight of subpersons in terms of class conflict. Just as there were entities in my pen consisting in the union of discontiguous proper parts (e.g., cap, nib, and reservoir, from above), there also appear to be subpersons composed of discontiguous temporal parts of a given whole person; these "multi-subpersons" come into and go out of existence multiple times through the course of the whole person's life. Importantly, even within the confines of my own experience, there seems to exist a hierarchy of haves and have-nots: my 11:00 AM–1:00 PM multi-subpersons seem overwhelmingly to be the ones who have the benefit of eating lunch, while my 1:00–5:00 PM multi-subpersons go hungry; my runner-multi-subpersons are the ones who have to spend their entire existences in pain, while my post-run-multi-subpersons can enjoy ice cream with a clear conscience.

The Generous Ontology implies more than the existence of subpersons, comprised of subsets of a single individual's temporal parts: it also implies the existence of "crosspersons," comprised of subsets of multiple individuals' temporal parts. Just as Unrestricted Composition allows us to assert the existence of a sub-thing in the union of my pen's cap with its discontiguous nib, it also allows us to assert the existence of a cross-thing in the union of my red pen's cap with my blue pen's nib, or, more compellingly, in the union of my red pen's cap, with my blue pen's nib, with a rock in the Mojave. In the same way, the Generous Ontology allows us to assert the existence of a crossperson uniting the Dalai Lamas, for example; but, more troublingly, it also allows us to assert the existence of a crossperson uniting John F. Kennedy, through 21 November 1963, with Lee Harvey Oswald the following day and onward. Indeed, just as with subpersons, the existence of crosspersons complicates ethical accounting in non-trivial ways.

A threshold-based approach

We might seek to reconcile these ethical problems by rejecting that certain sub- and crosspersons are deserving of moral status. Unger (1980) observes the Problem of the Many in the context of counting clouds, and he seeks to reconcile the cloud's apparent singularity with its apparent multiplicity using the distribution of water-droplet densities through the sky. One solution is to define its boundary at some critical value of water density. Along the cloud's border, the inclusion of a single additional droplet of water would render the thing a non-cloud by the density criterion, and the omission of any droplet would render it incomplete.

In the context of the Generous Ontology, this strategy at least limits the number of sub- and crosspersons eligible for moral status; imagining some threshold of person-density (defined, e.g., by some critical level of consciousness), we can exclude from further consideration those which are too fleeting to have phenomenology, for example. Though controversial, the same sorts of threshold-based determinations seem already to be a central part of everyday ethical practice: the point in fetal development at which a near-human deserves moral status was recently defined in Ohio by the critical criterion, "having a heartbeat" (Rosenburg 2019). Importantly, though, it is unknowable whether satisfying this sort of criterion is actually requisite for personhood,[2] in the same way that, by analogy, no particular water density threshold actually captures the essence of being a cloud; rather, applying thresholds in this way is simply a convenient and practical approach to treating nebulous ethical quandaries.

A Holistic approach

Unger (2004) also observes the Problem of the Many in the apparent multiplicity of distinct minds that seem to exist within a single person's body, and the situation becomes more complicated still. For the same reasons that we were worried about having to enumerate every subsection of our temporal worm and call it a person, we should also be worried about having to enumerate every subset of our connectome and call it a mind. But it is plausible that, in identifying substituent parts of a thing as ontologically distinct, we neglect to consider how the interactions between the parts are necessary to the very nature of the whole. In the context of the mental Problem of the Many, this approach seems viable. It is unlikely that any subnetwork in the connectome would behave in the same way if it were independent of the rest of the connectome; by extension, any human mind requires all of its parts to be the thing that it is.

This same approach seems to resolve the problem Olson identifies in the Generous Ontology: only whole persons, not subpersons, are deserving of moral status because the whole person is the most complete; the whole person relies on all of her subpersons, operating interdependently, to be what she is. This solution is consistent with how we think about ourselves—as the whole, persisting person, rather than something instantaneous and fleeting.[3] When Olson seeks to distinguish some actual person ("I") from the lesser, corresponding sub- and crosspersons, he observes that, "I am engaging in self-awareness, but when my today-part has that thought, he is not; he is not thinking about himself as himself, but rather [...] about *me* as himself" (Olson 2010).

In some ways, Holism is related to the threshold-based approach; but where thresholds require that certain critical qualities for personhood be matched, Holism can instead require that those qualities be locally maximized. It is conceivable that events at and before birth (accumulation of cellular material and initial cell divisions, etc.), or perhaps later in cognitive

[2] What would that mean for people whose hearts are stopped during CABG surgery, or who might someday require artificial hearts?

[3] It is worth noting that the common experience of personal persistence may not be universal: schizophrenia has been associated with a kind of psychological discontinuity where the person regards past selves as if they were someone else (Selzer 1989); and hippocampal damage gave rise to an apparent experience of awakening from unconsciousness every thirty seconds or so, in Clive Wearing's case. Reported experiences like these invite questions about whether all persons can be said to persist through their lives. Perhaps different individuals persist differently; perhaps physio- and psychological events can meaningfully segment one's spatiotemporal worm.

development, give rise to some initial, instantaneous subperson which is required for personhood, and hence moral status. This initial subperson is continuous with all of the whole person's instantaneous subpersons to follow, and discontinuities along this path (as occurs in multi-subpersons or crosspersons) break some rule of interrelation between subpersons. The most complete person—the whole person—at any point in time is the one who maximizes these interrelated subpersons, and only that person is granted moral status (Olson 2010).

Making do, instead

The ethical calculus of sub- and crosspersons, even under an unresolved Generous Ontology, might still be doable; it might even be compatible with how real people actually do ethical calculus. Certainly, there is a sense in which human persons really do consider the relative impacts of an action on their present and future subpersons, perhaps weighted by those subpersons' proximity and extent. This kind of thinking may contribute to why people don't exercise or save for retirement as much as they should. Olson's concern—that doing anything at all is moral malfeasance, since it will do some amount of harm—is simply unrealistic; it is the nature of human impact to be partially positive and partially negative, once all is accounted for.

At no point does Olson assert that the implications of the Generous Ontology are fundamentally incompatible with our experience of the world; instead, much of his concern seems to be simply for the apparent infinity of cases to consider. But I imagine that many of these cases cancel out: perhaps the additional ethical calculus required to treat cross-persons can be simplified by ignoring the crossover entirely and treating the conjoined subpersons as individual cases; perhaps the result would be the same as the near-Nihilist would have it—we might only have to integrate over the instantaneous subpersons' interests.

Conclusion

Independently, Unrestricted Composition and Perdurantism seem to present pictures of the world that are compatible with our experience of it. The Problem of the Many is an important criticism when these ideas come together in the Generous Ontology, though its implications may not be as severe as Olson suggests. In either case, Holism seems to be a viable path to resolving the Problem of the Many in the Generous Ontology, not just because the ethical consequence is tenable, but primarily because its guiding principles are consistent with our lived experience of being whole, persisting individuals.

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