

What is the Essence of the Human Being? Graduate Seminar, Philosophy 513, Spring 2017

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The Seminar meets Tuesdays from 12 noon till 2.50 p.m. in 201 Marx Hall. The first meeting of the seminar will begin at 12 noon on February 7th, when we will see if we can postpone the starting time to 12.30 pm, to allow people to get lunch before the class.

Overview

Supposing, just supposing, that we had essences, how might we find out what they were? Not by conceptual analysis or "the method of cases", since our concepts are invariably governed by generic, not universal, application conditions. Not by consulting the best scientific account of the species kind we belong to, since the view that we are essentially human animals, or essentially members of *h.sapiens*, is at actually odds with other deliverances of established science.

How then?

A new method will be proposed, one which focuses instead on what we are *practically forced to believe* about our essence.

Along the way, we will cover such topics as:

- a. the problem with the Canberra Plan and conceptual analysis more generally,*
- b. the empirical weaknesses in the so-called "Kripke-Putnam" account of natural kind terms,*
- c. the ontologically uncritical character of the recent revival of essence,*
- d. the unsatisfactory upshot of counterpart-theoretic deflations of our supposed essence,*
- e. the relative uselessness of so-called "intuitions",*
- f. the main difficulty with being ontological trash,*
- g. the failure of "animalism", and of Lockean and Neo-Lockean accounts of our essence or substance kind,*
- h. why consciousnesses are not genuine persisting things,*
- i. the real source of the implausibility of reductionism,*
- j. the near incoherence of mental property and substance emergence,*
- k. the looming issue of "infinitarian paralysis" -- as it arises from the personite problem and other sources -- and just why the ingenious technical proposals for avoiding infinitarian paralysis (e.g. hyperreal and surreal infinite measures) miss*

*the central point,
and
1. whether hylomorphism could be at all helpful.*

As we proceed in the course, you will develop a growing sense of just how difficult it is to avoid these conclusions:

*(i) that we are malign beings, i.e. unable to act without causing a great deal of wrong,
(ii) that we are otiose, i.e. unable to rationally aim at improving reality overall and
(iii) that we are "anethical", i.e. incapable of being guided by any factually coherent and workable set of ethical demands, because there is none. (In a way, being anethcial is even more demeaning than being unethical.)*

The central theme of the course is that these repellent conclusions are only avoidable if a certain view of our essence, a view which is at odds with naturalism, is correct. Of course, that conclusion is likely to strongly condition the content of any viable ethics, and the nature of the normative political theory it supports.

Graduate Unit Work

As well as the seminar serving as a basis for pre-generals units in metaphysics and epistemology, there will be scope for a unit in value theory, and also for a history unit on certain issues in Locke and Hume, having to do with the supposed unity of consciousness.

Schedule

Week 1: Overview

Why the other “more interesting” associated topics of a narrative identity, a practical identity, an individual personality, etc. are in the end less interesting than the austere topic of numerical identity over time.

The objectivity of the question “Is that the kind of thing I could survive?” stands or falls with the objectivity of one’s essence.

Artifacts are ontological trash, i.e. each is such that in their close spatial vicinity there are a host of objects very similar to it, but with different conditions of persistence. The Ship Flip. The same applies to almost all the items in the ramshackle ontology of common sense. Those items are not “conventional entities”; neither our conventions nor our concepts nor our sensory schemata bring them into being. At most they highlight them and misleadingly privilege them over the other items in the trash heap.

Why being ontological trash would be bad for us: it threatens massive violations of the principle of ethical singularity, i.e. the proposition that the only being with a moral status within a person's spatio-temporal envelope is that person.

How might we not turn out to be ontological trash: we might be enduring substances with all of our essence present at each time at which we exist. (In contradistinction to say, extended events or processes.) What the distinction between endurance and perdurance actually was -- it was not 3d-ism versus 4D-ism -- and how the original distinction might help us here.

But what are the available essences for things to have. Unless there is a limited variety of available essences -- much more limited than that specified by the idea that an essence is just a set of properties had necessarily -- then enduring substances may also be ontological trash.

Why an Aristotelian account of the source of limited variety is not consistent with Neo-Darwinism. Relatedly: what is the principled basis of the phase-kind/substance-kind distinction? Is it a distinction science need make in a context-free manner?

Readings

“On Being Ontological Trash” on Blackboard

“The Personite Problem: Should Practical Reason be Tabled?” on Blackboard

Week 2: Why Analysis, Intuition and the Method of Cases Will Fail Us

The difficulties with the method of cases. Is the Williams Conundrum like the Ship Flip? The reasons why one's essence is not discoverable through a priori reflection, or by empirically filling in more general a priori principles, say in the fashion of Nathan Salmon's influential reading of Saul Kripke on non-trivial essentialism.

With Sarah-Jane Leslie “Concepts, Analysis, Generics and the Canberra Plan” on Blackboard

“Human Beings” J.Phil 1987 (The remarks on the method of cases and on the Williams Conundrum, in particular)

Ted Sider “Criteria of Personal Identity and the Limits of Conceptual Analysis”
“Relativism and the Self”

Surviving Death, Chapter 1 (Again, focus on the remarks on the method of cases and on “offloading” p 43-47.)

Barry Dainton and Tim Bayne “Consciousness as a Guide to Personal Persistence”

“The Taxonomic Arbitrariness of BLK Terms Implies that the Putnam Semantics for Natural Kind Terms is Either Trivial or Requires Clairvoyance”

Week 3: Are We Essentially Animals, Or Essentially Brains, Or Neurally Realized Executive Units, Or...?

Again, the difficulty of assigning features as essential or accidental looms, and is mirrored by the corresponding difficulty of identifying a kind as a substance-kind or as a phase-kind.

Eric Olsen “An Argument for Animalism” in M&B and on Blackboard,
“Remnant Persons: Animalism’s Undoing” on Blackboard
Derek Parfit “Why We are Not Human Beings”
Anne Conway *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*

Week 4. Where My Consciousness Goes, There Go I

Three forms of the theory

I am essentially

a consciousness, or
a bare locus, i.e. a subject wholly definable in terms of being at the experiential center of a consciousness, or
a persisting thing whose conditions of persistence can be stated in phenomenal, i.e. purely “inner” or subjective, terms.

There are no consciousnesses, and so no bare loci. And the appeal to purely phenomenal conditions of persistence, when clearheadedly pursued, leaves us without a distinction between persisting and seeming to have persisted. For example, memory, factively understood, is not a purely phenomenal state.

John Locke “On Identity and Diversity” *The Essay* Book 2: xxvii reprinted at p 24-36 of Martin & Barresi, on Blackboard.
Lynn Baker Rudder “The Difference that Self-Consciousness Makes”
Barry Dainton and Tim Bayne “Consciousness as a Guide to Personal Persistence”
“Why There are No Visual Fields, and No Minds Either” on Blackboard

Week 5: The Psychological Criterion/The Closest Continuer Theory

Lewis’s paper is the door that opens upon metaphysical horror, in particular his discussion of Methuselah, where he brushes by but does not notice the real problem.

Moreover, the relations presented as definitive of personal identity are themselves trashy, in an alarming way. An objection to all continuity theories is that they oddly ban mental acceleration, indeed there is an “ontological governor” on the speed of change which is very odd when fully understood.

Ted Sider “Temporal Parts”

D. K. Lewis “Identity and Survival” in Martin & Barresi

Robert Nozick “The Closest Continuer Theory” in Martin & Barresi
“Personites, Continuity and Maximality”

Week 6: The Problem of Personites

Why we might be malign, otiose and unethical.

“The Personite Problem: Should Practical Reason Be Tabled?”

Midterm Break

Week 7: Dispensing With Essences: Does Continuing to Exist Really Matter?

Could we rest instead with Parfit’s defense of his “Moderate View”, i.e. that it is not rational to care about identity over time but only about R, i.e. psychological continuity and connectedness. Parfit’s arguments for this view (from the fission case, from branchline teletransportation and from the combined spectrum) all fail. And there is another worry, namely that if R matters then *too much* also matters. This has to do with the trashiness of R.

D. Parfit *Reasons and Persons*, part 3

M. Johnston “Human Concerns without Superlative Selves” in M&B

D. Parfit “Why Our Identity is not What Matters” M&B

D. Parfit, Prize essay on Marc Sanders Foundation Website

www.marcsanders.com

First part of Lecture 5 of *Surviving Death*

Week 8: Was Parfit’s Silence Golden?

Parfit, like Nozick, did not endorse a Four-Dimensionalist Framework. Is that a way of avoiding the problem?

“Personites, Continuity and Maximality” on Blackboard

April 11th Week 9: Is there Something Special About Self-Consciousness, Even in a Naturalistic Framework?

Christopher Peacocke will visit the seminar to discuss his important book *The Mirror of the World: Subjects, Consciousness, and Self-Consciousness* and its relation to the personite problem. Readings will include Chapter 1- 4 of that book, Barry Dainton's review of it at Notre Dame Philosophy Reviews, and "Do Emergent Subjects Defend Their Territory?" Those who want deep-background should read Saul Kripke "The First Person".

The core of the discussion: Isn't a version of the personite problem likely to arise for C.P.'s subjects if they have the reductive individuating conditions described on pages 65-6. A way to see this is to run a physical spectrum *a la* Parfit on the persistence of "integrative units", not to argue for reductionism as Parfit does, but rather to display how the cross-time unit conditions for integrative units will be trashy, so that the units themselves are trashy. Here the absence of an ontological speed-governor is relevant.

Week 9: All Objections Answered*

- (i) Personites do not have a moral status because they do not have mental states (They must have mental states, if their constituent stages are to be candidates for mental continuity.)
- (ii) Personites do not have a moral status because they do not pick themselves out by using the first-person pronoun (So what? We can give classes of personites plural pronouns that they can self-consciously use.)
- (iii) Personites do not have a moral status because each is a proper part of a being with a moral status. (The invoked principle is clearly false, for we would recognize the moral status of a person embedded within another larger person.)
- (iv) One's personites have implicitly consented to one's own choices. (This applies only to those personites who were around at the relevant choice, not those who came into existence afterward. Furthermore, the former personites' consent, if it was such, was not informed by knowledge of their interests.)
- (v) Because one's personites have just the same desires as one does they do not have different legitimate interests. (Personites are typically in a condition of "false consciousness"; their desires do not track their real interests. Where interests and desires conflict, interests trump desires in practical reasoning.)
- (vi) Talk of the interests of personites versus those of their surrounding persons is massive over-counting because personites are ontologically derivative on persons. (They are not, any more than the sum of my left ring finger and my left pointing finger is ontologically derivative on the sum of my fingers.)
- (vii) Moral status is radically response-dependent in the sense of only extending to those we actually can be led to recognize as having a moral

status. And as a factual psychological matter we won't actually grant personites a moral status. (The invoked principle of radical response-dependence would vindicate visceral racism, if we happened to be slightly less imaginative and compassionate than we in fact are.)

- (viii) All that matters in grounding ethical reasoning are the sheer amounts of hedonic positivity and hedonic negativity, and not how many beings with a moral status are undergoing the hedonically positive or hedonically negative experiences. Just like mass, hedonic positivity is not summative over parts and the whole they make up. (Hedonism gives an incomplete account of the sources of practical reason. The ethical import of interest *satisfaction* is not captured by its qualitative hedonic accompaniments.)
- (ix) We can save something like our ordinary ethical outlook if we work with principles based around psychological continuity rather than identity. (The resultant two-tiered system is unfair as between persons and personites, and it anyway fails when it comes to aggregative ethical questions.)
- (x) The personite considerations are in effect a proof that 2 is false and hence that maximality is a necessary condition of having a moral status. (There are personites that are maximal!)
- (xi) There are restricted principles of composition, i.e. of forming wholes from parts. So not every collection of things form a genuine whole. These principles of composition operate on more basic entities to make it the case that persons exist, but personites do not. (Those principles would have to be relatively fundamental ontologically speaking. It is implausible that our accidentally evolved and relatively innate scheme of individuation tracks ontologically fundamental divisions, unless, of course, the substantial selves that we are happen to be disclosed to us in self-conscious reflection.)

Week 10: Are We Otiose?

Three Sources of Infinitarian Paralysis: the Reverse Pascal Argument, the Infinitarian Multiverse, the Problem of Personites. (My slides from the conference)

Nick Bostrom "Infinite Ethics"

"Extra Good Without More Good"

Selected Videos from the Princeton Conference on Infinite Value

"Why Did the One Not Remain Within Itself?"

Week 11: Enduring Substances

5D-ism. Substances that simply leave a particular footprint in space-time, a footprint which is conditioned by what contingently happens to them, need not be ontological trash so long as they are unique in their spatio-temporal envelope. A constraint which requires a limited variety of essences.

With Sarah-Jane Leslie, “Against the Limited Variety of Essences”

Week 12: What We Might Be

One “simple” essence we could have. Difficulties with Emergence. What determines our embodiment? The “thinner” simple essence.