

Michael B. Burke
Is My Head a Person?

0. Introduction

Is the head of a whole-bodied human person itself a person? Are the head and other brain-containing parts of whole-bodied human thinkers themselves thinkers? There is pressure to answer such questions affirmatively. That pressure creates a problem, especially for those of us with conservative metaphysical inclinations. If we succumb to the pressure, we depart from ordinary ways of speaking and thinking. And we find ourselves propelled toward such radical theories as mereological essentialism. But the currently available means of resisting the pressure are themselves radical, problematic, or both. I offer a novel, conservative solution. Making the (unfavorable) assumption that human persons are wholly material, I explain why their heads and other brain-containing parts are neither persons nor thinkers. And I do so without sacrificing the broadly Aristotelian metaphysic implicit in ordinary ways of thinking.

1. Terminological Preliminary

Those who discuss the status of brain-containing person-parts ask, variously, whether such parts are “persons,” “thinkers,” “conscious beings,” or “rational, conscious beings.” Not infrequently they use the first or second of these terms to mean something like the fourth. I will use the term ‘person’ in its ordinary sense, not in any stipulative sense, and will offer no clarification of it, except to say that I assume that no nonthinking part of a thinking person is itself a person, even if *some* nonthinkers, such as human embryos, *are* persons. I will use the term ‘thinker’ in a special (Cartesian) sense, to mean ‘conscious being who perceives, believes, desires, emotes, wills, and reasons, one whose perceptions, beliefs, desires, emotions, volitions, and reasonings are as complex as those of a normal, adult, human person’. I will not use the term ‘rational, conscious being’, but will take those who do to mean roughly what I mean by ‘thinker’. Finally, I will use ‘part’ to mean ‘proper part’.

2. The Argument that Creates the Problem

The problem is created by the existence of an imposing argument for the personhood, or at least the thinkerhood, of the brain-containing parts of (normal, adult) human persons. For the sake of concreteness, let’s consider the (normal, adult) human organism

Percy, whom I'll assume to be a thinker and a person,¹ and two of his brain-containing parts: Heddi, which is Percy's head (or *one* of his heads, if some parts of heads are heads themselves), and Finn, which is the complement of Percy's left index-finger. (The "complement" of a part, relative to some one of the wholes of which it's a part, is the part of that whole which consists of all of the whole except that part.) So, *Percy* is a whole-bodied *person*; *Heddi* is *Percy's head*; and *Finn* is one of Percy's ten *finger-complements*.

The argument for the thinkerhood of brain-containing person-parts is straightforward. As we will see in section 3, it has provoked a variety of radical responses and has lent support to efforts to relativize or graduate identity. Applied to Finn, the argument is this:

The thinkerhood or nonthinkerhood of a being depends solely on its microphysical properties (i.e., the qualities and interrelations of its microphysical parts). Its purely relational properties are irrelevant. But Finn differs negligibly in its microphysical properties from the thinker Percy. And Finn is virtually identical in its microphysical properties to Finn*, the thinker its cells would compose if the finger of which Finn is the complement were suddenly annihilated. Therefore, Finn is a thinker.

To apply the argument to Heddi, we would change 'negligibly' in the third sentence to 'in no relevant way'. (The brain, or perhaps just the cerebrum, is the seat of thought.) And at the end of the fourth sentence, directly after 'annihilated', we would insert 'and if the head that remained were kept alive and functioning by medical technology'.

The argument is applicable to *all* brain-containing thinker-parts. And if it is supplemented with the premise that thinkerhood (in the special sense specified in section 1) entails personhood, it leads to the conclusion that such parts are persons as well as thinkers.

The argument seems potent, at least when confined to the *thinkerhood* of the parts. But even thus confined, it presses us to accept something that seems absurd: that we all share our bodies with other thinkers. So we have a problem.²

¹ Some will want to say that the organism Percy *constitutes* a person, but is not identical with one. For the purposes of this paper, I need not and will not object to that view. But I have objected to it elsewhere. In Burke 1997b, I sought to remove its principal motivation by showing that to identify persons with their bodies, or with the human organisms with which they are coextensive, is not incompatible with accepting a psychological criterion of personal identity. (One might deny the thinkerhood of Percy on altogether different grounds. One might contend that it is only some *part* of Percy that thinks – his brain, for example. Any such contention should be rejected, for reasons that will emerge in section 7.)

² There is a related problem, Peter Unger's "problem of the many," that arises when we ask whether

3. The Existing Solutions

My purpose is to present a novel solution, not to quarrel with those already on the scene. But to provide perspective, I will survey the solutions with which mine must compete, and briefly indicate their drawbacks. All of the solutions to be discussed presuppose, as does mine, that human persons are wholly material.

Let me acknowledge at the outset what is acknowledged too seldom in such surveys: The writings surveyed are masterful treatments of the problems of material constitution. I am indebted to them for my understanding of many points. Whatever the merits of the ideas to which I critically advert, the writings by no means reduce to – and their value is by no means limited to – those ideas.

(a) Olson

Eric Olson (1995) would have us deny the very *existence* of Heddi and Finn. Unlike more thoroughgoing eliminativists, such as Unger (1979) and Heller (1990), Olson does believe in persons; but like van Inwagen (1981; 1990, 81-97), Olson denies that persons have such parts as (undetached) heads, brains, hands, and hand-complements. The only person-parts he recognizes are elementary particles. According to Olson, we need to deny the existence of Heddi, Finn, and the like precisely because we would otherwise be forced to accept the repugnant conclusion that such parts are “rational, conscious beings” (182). We would be forced to accept this, Olson says, because (a) such parts have what it takes “internally” to be rational, conscious beings, and (b) “... a thing cannot fail to be rational or conscious simply because of its relation to some *other* thing [such as a finger] – simply by having the wrong neighbours” (183).

Olson’s solution might seem *ad hoc*, since the only reason he offers for denying the existence of macroscopic person-parts is the utility of that denial in forestalling their claims to thinkerhood. However, as van Inwagen has shown (1981), the denial also forestalls Tibbles-type problems, so there is some independent motivation for it. Still, the denial represents a radical departure from ordinary ways of thinking. I will show how we can comfortably deny the thinkerhood of brain-containing parts without denying the *existence* of those parts. (Elsewhere, in my 1994b and 1996, I offer a conservative solution to the Tibbles-type problems that motivated *van Inwagen’s* denial.)

there is a precise set of particles such that Percy is definitely composed of just those particles. Unger’s problem will not be addressed. But the solution I offer to the problem posed by certain *parts* of Percy is compatible with the principal solutions available to the problem of delineating the *whole* of Percy. In particular, it is compatible with the supervenient and epistemic accounts of vagueness, and also with the competing view (which I favor) that persons are vague objects. For a superb discussion of Unger’s problem, see Lewis 1993.

(b) Merricks

Trenton Merricks (1998a; 1998b; 2001, Ch. 4) focuses on the property of consciousness. Like Olson, he holds that consciousness is an intrinsic property, one that Finn could not lack simply in virtue of its relation to Percy's left index-finger. But despite the fact that Finn differs little from Percy (and hardly at all from Finn*) in its microphysical properties, Merricks, like Olson, would find it absurd to think that Finn and the other brain-containing parts of Percy constitute a "mighty host of conscious ... objects" (Merricks 2001, 95). For Merricks, what such cases show is that even though (human) persons are wholly material, the psychological does not supervene on the microphysical, not even globally.

What, then, *does* account for the difference between Percy and Finn with regard to consciousness? Merricks simply doesn't say. He says that normal, adult, human organisms are conscious and that their parts are not, but he denies that it's in *virtue* of their parthood that the parts fail to be conscious. (In his [2001], he decides that there *are* no undetached super-cellular parts, only detached ones, but denies that the former fail to exist in *virtue* of their undetachment.) Is the correlation between consciousness and nonparthood a brute fact? Is it the result of divine ordination? Or what? Merricks says only that it's "mysterious" (1998b, 845). It will be hard to take his view seriously until he has more to say about the mystery.

(c) Geach

A third solution is to concede that many person-parts are persons, but to avoid a *multiplication* of persons by relativizing identity to sort. One might acknowledge that Heddi and Finn are persons but insist, *a la* Peter Geach (1980, 215-18), that Heddi, Finn, and Percy are the *same* person (and the same thinker), although different lumps of person-stuff.

I doubt that this solution is coherent. If Percy and Heddi are the same one person, how much does that one person weigh? Might we say that he weighs 80 kilos *qua* person with a head, trunk, and limbs, but only 10 kilos *qua* person with merely a head? Presumably not. An entity can have a property "*qua*" *F* only if the entity *is F*. But the terms 'person with a head, trunk, and limbs' and 'person with merely a head' are undeniably contrary. (In this they differ from, say, 'person' and 'hunk of person-stuff'.) In any case, the Geachian solution relies upon a theory of identity that few identity theorists accept. I will show how we can deal with Percy-parts without surrendering the absoluteness of identity.

(d) Lewis

A fourth solution is to concede that Percy contains many *different* persons, but to make this concession less disagreeable than it initially seems. David Lewis (1993, 33-34) is willing to allow that the many hair-complements of a cat are themselves cats, and to agree that no two of them are completely identical, but he would add, invoking Armstrong's theory that numerical identity comes in degrees (Armstrong 1978, 37-38), that a cat and the many slightly smaller cats it contains are *almost* completely identical, because they almost completely overlap. Lewis remarks, "The cats are many, but almost one. By a blameless approximation, we may simply say that there is one cat on the mat." It appears that Lewis is willing to take the same line with regard to persons (24).

There are several grounds on which to object. First, many of us will be reluctant to allow that numerical identity comes in degrees. Second, some of us will find it implausible that Percy contains within himself a host of persons, even when it is added that those persons differ numerically from Percy and from one another only slightly. Third, there is the point stressed by Eric Olson (1995, 192-96): If we allow that brain-containing person-parts are persons, we must also allow that persons never know just who they are. Neither Percy, Heddi, nor Finn would have any way of knowing which person he is. Finally, and most seriously, Lewis acknowledges that his solution is inapplicable to cases, such as that of Percy and Heddi, where the overlap between whole and part is far from complete.

Lewis also offers a second, alternative account (28). He considers it acceptable to say that the hair-complement of a cat fails to be a cat simply in virtue of being "almost all of a cat with just one little bit left out" (Lewis 1993, 28). Perhaps he would also consider it acceptable to say that the hair-complement fails for that reason to be conscious. I call this an alternative *account*, rather than an alternative solution, because Lewis doesn't attempt to make the account acceptable to those who find it *unacceptable*, especially as applied to consciousness. If personhood and consciousness are indeed maximal (in a sense soon to be defined), what is needed is what I hope to provide: an understanding of why that should be so.

(e) Carter

Finally, there is the solution I associate with W. R. Carter. Actually, it's more aptly termed a position than a solution, since it contains no suggestion for mitigating its counterintuitiveness. It involves acquiescing in the threatened multiplication of persons, and then *heightening* the paradox by noting and accepting an apparent consequence of that multiplication: that persons cannot survive the loss of any of their parts, not even such small parts as fingers.

Although I attribute this position to Carter, I know of no one publication in which Carter endorses all of its elements. In Carter 1983, he declares his belief in a variety of undetached person-parts, including brains, leg-complements, and finger-complements. In a much later article (1997), he argues that brain-containing person-parts must, if they exist, be counted as persons, but nowhere in that article does he take a stand on whether brain-containing person-parts exist. In both articles, Carter claims that the existence of such parts would argue strongly for the conclusion that persons perish when any of their parts do. As regards Percy and his finger-complement, the argument (briefly and roughly) is this: Assuming that Finn exists, Finn is a person. But since Finn is *part* of Percy, not *identical* with Percy, Finn and Percy are *different* persons. Suppose now that Percy has lost the finger of which Finn was the complement. If both Percy and Finn have survived that event, they are two persons composed of just the same cells and occupying just the same place, which is absurd. But if only one has survived, surely it must be Finn, since Finn is the closer predecessor of the post-loss person. (Carter 1997, 374)

Of course, such arguments drive us toward mereological essentialism, the doctrine that every part of a thing is essential to its identity. And Carter does indeed warn (1983, 126-27, 142) that there may be no good alternative to accepting that doctrine, one very much contrary to his own intuitions (126).

4. Maximality

So much for my survey of the existing solutions. I will offer a conservative alternative to those solutions, one on which consciousness, thinkerhood, and personhood are maximal. So I will begin with a definition of maximality. On the usual definition, personhood is maximal just in case necessarily, no part of a person is itself a person. (Reminder: I use 'part' to mean 'proper part'.) This definition makes maximality claims needlessly and inadvisably strong. Although it's plausible to deny the personhood of those person-parts whose personhood is here at issue, it would be risky to claim that *no* person-parts are persons. It would be riskier still to claim that it's *impossible* for person-parts to be persons. Perhaps somewhere there are multicellular persons composed of unicellular persons. Or, if there aren't, perhaps there *could* have been. Although Quine (1981, 92-93) claims that the innumerable table-like entities nested within an ordinary table are not themselves tables, I doubt that he'd deny the possibility of making a Brobdingnagian table from a large number of Lilliputian tables.

Except for those few theorists who are mereological essentialists, maximality can more usefully be defined as follows: kind/property/term/concept *C* is *maximal* just in case necessarily, no identity-sufficient part of a *C* is itself a *C*. (Of course, 'a *C*' is short for 'an object that belongs to the extension of *C*'.) Something is an *identity-sufficient* part of

a *C* just in case the particles composing the part would immediately compose *that very C*, if the complement of the part suddenly (as a rare, uncaused quantum event) ceased to exist. For example, Finn is an identity-sufficient part of the person Percy, for if the finger that is Finn's complement suddenly disappeared (ceased to exist), the particles composing Finn would then compose Percy. (What the relationship would be between Finn and the diminished Percy is controversial.³) Heddi, too, is an identity-sufficient part of Percy: Upon the sudden disappearance of Percy's head-complement, the particles composing Heddi would, if only briefly (or with the prompt employment of advanced life-support technology), compose Percy.⁴ So personhood is maximal, in the sense defined, only if neither Finn nor Heddi is a person so long as it's part of Percy. Of course, this is the desired result.

Now consider a giant, multicellular person composed of tiny, unicellular persons. If the whole of the giant, except for one of the unicellulates composing him, suddenly disappeared, the particles composing that unicellulate would indeed compose a person, but not one identifiable with the giant. Thus the unicellular parts of the giant person fail to qualify as *identity-sufficient* parts. So their personhood is not inconsistent with the maximality, in my sense, of personhood. Again, this is the desired result.

5. Initial Arguments for the Maximality of Personhood and Thinkerhood

Heddi and Finn are neither persons nor thinkers. That's because (1) they are identity-sufficient parts of the person Percy, and (2) identity-sufficient parts of persons are nei-

³ There are *several* accounts, however, that are compatible with the means I will offer of denying the personhood (and thinkerhood) of Finn. Three examples: On the single most widely accepted theory of material constitution (see, for example, Baker 2000), the disappearance of the finger would cause Finn suddenly to *constitute*, but not suddenly to *be*, the person Percy. I have offered an alternative theory of material constitution (Burke 1994a, 1994b), one that avoids coinciding objects. On my theory, the disappearance of the finger would cause Finn to cease to exist. That's because Finn is a nonperson, because nonpersons are *essentially* nonpersons (in my view, persons include embryonic animals capable of *maturing* into thinkers), and because Finn would *become* a human if it survived the disappearance of the finger. Finally I'll mention a temporal-parts account, on which the disappearance of the finger would cause Finn to "become" Percy, in this sense: the post-disappearance temporal part of Finn would be numerically identical with the post-disappearance temporal part of Percy. (See Lewis 1993, 24-25.)

⁴ Compared to the sudden, uncaused disappearance of one's head-complement, decapitation by guillotine is more jarring and results, consequently, in greater immediate change in the intrinsic properties of one's head. But even guillotining does not immediately terminate consciousness. At least, this is what some evidence suggests. For some of that evidence, as well as a medical explanation of why consciousness, perception, and thought might continue not just for a fraction of a second but for seven seconds or more, see Abbott 1994, 203-5.

ther persons nor thinkers. For the commonsensical (1) I will give no argument. My purpose is not to refute the radical views (such as those of Olson and Carter) on which (1) would be denied, but to provide a conservative defense of (2) and, thereby, a conservative basis for denying the personhood and thinkerhood of Heddi and Finn.

So, what reason is there for believing (2)? Let's start with personhood. The first thing to say is that it certainly appears that our *concept* of personhood is maximal. Its maximality is evident in what we do and do not count as *instances* of the concept. When determining whether to ticket Percy for driving in the lane reserved for cars containing at least three people, the traffic officer will not count the likes of Heddi and Finn. Nor will the divorce court, when considering Percy's claim that his wife is an adulterer. Nor will the census taker. In general, we simply do not count person-parts as persons.

Some say that ordinary counts of persons can be construed as counts of *distinct* persons, and therefore need not be taken to reflect a view of the status of person-parts. (See Olson 1997, 264.) But even if they are right (which is far from clear), there remains the point that we don't count person-parts as persons even in the sense of *regarding* them as persons. The maximality of our concepts of personhood and thinkerhood is evident in what we ordinarily do and do not *view* as persons and thinkers.

Here's evidence, if any is needed, that we ordinarily view heads neither as persons nor as thinkers. During the spring of 2001 there was a period of two or three weeks during which colleagues and viewers of Neil Cavuto, a Fox TV business-news anchor, jokingly discussed Cavuto's head. The main issues were whether his head is unusually large for his frame and, if so, whether its magnitude contributes to or detracts from his sex appeal. Although there were frequent references to Cavuto's head, I heard no one refer to his head with a personal pronoun. Nor did I hear anyone express concern that Cavuto's head (as opposed to Cavuto himself) might be offended by the sometimes unflattering references to it. Indeed, viewers would have been baffled if someone *had* done so.

What about *larger* brain-containing parts, such as Finn? Well, it's doubtful that we ordinarily *think* of such parts. True, we might say, "Although Percy's finger is broken, the rest of him is fine." But when we do, it's doubtful that we are thinking of "the rest of him" as a single object. Perhaps we're just thinking and reporting that his other *parts* are fine, or that his only injury is to his finger. However, if we *are* thinking of the rest of him as a single object, we evidently are not thinking of it as a person, since we never add, "Happily, that slightly smaller person was uninjured." Moreover, we would be perplexed if someone else *did*. We would be equally perplexed if the reference were to "that slightly smaller thinker," even if Percy were famous for his intellect and were referred to frequently as a thinker.

My first point, then, is that we regard person-parts neither as persons nor as thinkers. I take this to evidence the maximality of our concepts of personhood and thinker-

hood. Now for a second point: It would be surprising if those concepts were *not* maximal. It would be surprising because maximal concepts (or the terms that express them) are handier for referring and counting, and because (as noted in Burke 1997b, section II) we have no practical need for *nonmaximal* concepts of personhood and thinkerhood. We have no such need because there is no practical need to attribute thoughts or other mental states to person-parts. Any part of Percy that has beliefs has the same beliefs that Percy has, except that its first-person beliefs might (or might not) refer to a different subject and its introspective beliefs might (or might not) refer to numerically different but qualitatively identical mental entities. In any case, we would make just the same prediction of the part's behavior whether we based the prediction on *its* beliefs or on Percy's. Suppose we look toward Percy's 10-kilo head, Heddi, and say, "Any listeners who weigh less than 30 kilos should now wriggle their noses." Even if Heddi is a listener, a believer, a desirer, and an agent, we would expect the same nonresponse from Heddi that we expect from Percy, since Heddi believes itself to be the 80-kilo man Percy. In general, attributing personhood or thinkerhood to Heddi would in no way enhance our ability to predict Heddi's "behavior."

Furthermore, the attribution would give us no practical reason to change our behavior toward Heddi. We wouldn't bother to greet Heddi separately, if only because the courtesy would go unappreciated: if Heddi has beliefs, it believes itself to be Percy. (Moreover, there is no way for Heddi to discover its mistake.) Nor would we bother to minimize harm to Heddi when punishing Percy for strangling Fred. (If Percy and Heddi are both thinkers, then it's plausible to say, as Carter would, that amputating Percy's hands would destroy Percy without destroying either Percy's hands-complement or Heddi.) We wouldn't bother because we would think Heddi just as guilty as Percy, and not merely because of its equally malicious intentions. It would be reasonable to say that Heddi actually carried out its intentions, using hands under its control. (If Heddi is a thinker, Percy's hands are as responsive to Heddi's will as to Percy's.) In general, there would be no practical reason to behave differently toward Heddi, if we came to view Heddi as a person or a thinker, because in continuing to behave appropriately toward Percy we would, for all practical purposes, be behaving appropriately toward Heddi.

Let's recapitulate. Given what we ordinarily do and do not regard as persons and thinkers, it appears that our concepts of personhood and thinkerhood are maximal. Since we have no practical need for *nonmaximal* concepts of personhood and thinkerhood (and since maximal concepts are preferable for referring and counting), it would be surprising if our concepts were *not* maximal. We may reasonably conclude that our concepts of personhood and thinkerhood *are* maximal. Furthermore, we may reasonably infer that the *properties* of personhood and thinkerhood are maximal. (More on the latter point momentarily.)

The arguments of this section suffice, not to *prove* the maximality of personhood and thinkerhood, but to create a *presumption* in favor of their maximality. In sections 7 and 8, we'll see that the philosophical argument against their maximality fails to *overcome* that presumption; indeed, we'll see that there's a weighty philosophical argument that *reinforces* it.

6. Reply to an Objection

I will state the objection only as it applies to personhood, but both the objection and my response apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to thinkerhood. The objection might be formulated thus: Suppose for the sake of argument that our concept of personhood is indeed maximal. It doesn't follow that personhood itself is maximal. Perhaps persons (or human persons) form a natural kind. And perhaps our concept of persons is not a fully accurate representation of that kind. Perhaps our conception of the property of personhood is partly a *misconception*. Furthermore, Kripke and Putnam have argued persuasively that the extension of terms denoting natural kinds is properly determined not by reference to the ordinary employment of those terms, and not by philosophical argument, but by extralinguistic, extraphilosophical facts ascertainable only through scientific inquiry. The facts cited in section 5 would be relevant if the issue were the content and extension of our *concept* of personhood; but they are out of order, as are the philosophical arguments awaiting us in sections 7 and 8, when the issue is the nature and extension of personhood itself.

Well, the existence of natural kinds is, of course, disputable. And even if there *are* natural kinds, it's not clear that persons, or even human persons (as opposed to humans generally), form a natural kind. But suppose they do. It is still unlikely, even from the perspective of Kripke and Putnam, that scientifically ascertainable facts are dispositive with regard to *all* questions concerning the extension of personhood. Consider animals, which, arguably, form another natural kind. There is an exciting new genealogical definition of animality, one that promises nonarbitrary decisions for such "borderline" cases as sponges and Mesozoa (Slack *et. al.* 1993, 490, 492). But while the new definition would enable us to decide on the animality of those borderline cases, it provides no more guidance than the older biological definitions on certain matters of interest to philosophers, such as when in the process of animal reproduction there first appears a new animal, or whether dead but undecomposed animals are still animals. The scientific definitions enable us to distinguish animals from plants and other kingdoms of living things, but not from *precursors* of animals or *remains* of animals. Nor do they rule on the animality of the brain-containing *parts* of animals. There is little prospect, if any, of a strictly scientific resolution of these questions – or of the question of interest to us. Even if persons form

a natural kind, some candidates for personhood will have to be evaluated by philosophers. As always, philosophers will be guided by anything of relevance that science has to say. But they will be guided as well by the rich perspectives embodied within ordinary ways of thinking, and by philosophical arguments concerning the merits of those and competing perspectives.

7. The Differences between Percy and His Brain-Containing Parts

We don't view Heddi and Finn as thinkers. And there is no practical reason for us to start doing so. But is there good reason to believe that they nevertheless *are* thinkers? Let's focus on Finn, since (if there actually *is* such a thing as Finn, which I won't dispute), Finn's claim to thinkerhood may seem stronger than Heddi's. The principal argument for Finn's thinkerhood is the one previewed in section 2. It's the argument that drives Olson, Merricks, and Carter toward their radical positions. (See section 3.)

The thinkerhood or nonthinkerhood of a being depends solely on its microphysical properties (i.e., the qualities and interrelations of its microphysical parts). Its purely relational properties are irrelevant. But Finn differs negligibly in its microphysical properties from the thinker Percy. And Finn is virtually identical in its microphysical properties to Finn*, the thinker its cells would compose if the finger of which Finn is the complement were suddenly annihilated. Therefore, Finn is a thinker.

The argument fails. It fails because there are differences between Percy and Finn (and similar, equally pronounced differences between *Finn** and Finn) that are far from negligible. Indeed, there are differences that can plausibly be held to ground a difference between the two with regard to thinkerhood. Those differences derive largely from their microphysical differences. The latter are consequential, although small taken in themselves.

'Percy' is our name for a certain human organism. It is undisputed (in the context of our discussion) that at least one thinker *overlaps* Percy (partially or completely). We have been assuming that Percy (or, if preferred, a purely physical person *constituted* by Percy) is *one* such thinker, if not the only one. That assumption will now be justified. As we are about to see, Percy's claims to thinkerhood are stronger than those of his parts, even if we set aside the arguments of section 5. So Percy is indeed a thinker.

Continuing to take Finn, the complement of Percy's left index-finger, as representative of brain-containing Percy-parts, I will now cite six differences between Percy and Finn, differences that can plausibly be thought to ground a difference between the two with respect to thinkerhood. (The sufficiency of the differences will be defended in sec-

tion 8.) For ease of expression I'll use personal pronouns when referring to any thinker, although it's an open question whether all thinkers are persons.

(1) Percy, unlike Finn and every other Percy-part, is an organism. (It is generally acknowledged, I believe, that organicity is maximal, even if personhood and thinkerhood are not. See, for example, Olson 1997, 261.) This difference is relevant if only because of the leading role that Percy's organicity would play in explanations of each of the *other* differences.

(2) All who think with Percy's brain (be they one or many) have I-thoughts ascribing the very same nonreferential properties. Many of those I-thoughts are true of Percy but false of Finn. Examples: "I am called Percy"; "I am (or my body is) an organism"; "I am a full-bodied human person"; "I am wearing a ring"; "I weigh 80 kilos, not 79.8 kilos." Conversely, none is true of Finn but false of Percy (unless its subject is misinformed about the properties of the 80-kilo physical object that he regards as his body). Since the I-thoughts are differentially true of Percy, it's plausible that Percy alone is their subject. And it's plausible that Percy alone is their subject at least partly *in virtue* of their being differentially true of Percy.

(3) There is a thinker who is immediately conscious of all and only those tactile and kinesthetic sensations that are felt in some part of Percy, but no thinker who is immediately conscious of all and only those tactile and kinesthetic sensations felt in some part of Finn. Any thinker who is immediately conscious of sensations felt in Finn is immediately conscious, in a natural, normal, and ordinary way, of sensations felt in something, a finger, that lies *outside* Finn.

(4) There is a thinker who has direct voluntary control over all parts of Percy over which any thinker has direct voluntary control, and over nothing that *isn't* part of Percy. But any thinker who has direct voluntary control over parts of Finn has direct voluntary control, in a natural, normal, and ordinary way, over something, a finger, that is *not* part of Finn.

With regard to differences (3) and (4), note that the following is plausibly viewed as a conceptual truth: the "body" of a conscious being contains at least part of any physical object, *x*, such that (a) the conscious being feels sensations in *x*, in a natural, normal, and ordinary way, and (b) the conscious being has, in a natural, normal, and ordinary way, direct voluntary control over *x*. (The qualification 'at least part of' might be needed to deal with such objects, if such there are, as the one consisting of Percy's left index-finger and the dirt caking it.) Plausibly, Finn fails to be a thinker in virtue of failing to extend as far as the sensations and direct voluntary control that would be attributable to Finn if Finn were a thinker. Even more plausibly, Finn fails to be a thinker at least *partly* in virtue of that failure.

(5) There is a thinker whose self-regarding concern is limited to parts of Percy, but

no thinker whose self-regarding concern is limited to parts of Finn. Any thinker who has concern of the distinctively self-regarding kind for Percy's right index-finger has it also for his left. When such concern is natural, normal, and in no way extraordinary, it is plausible (to say the least) that its object is part of its subject. And it is plausible that Finn fails to be a thinker at least partly because Finn does not contain every object of the self-regarding concerns that would be attributable to Finn if Finn were a thinker.

(6) All who think with Percy's brain (be they one or many) show differential concern for Percy over Finn. For example, all would favor the annihilation of Percy's left hand, if they believed that the gain for Percy would even slightly outweigh the loss for Percy, even though annihilation of the hand would result in the outright destruction of Finn. It's plausible that Finn fails to be a thinker at least partly because of the indifference to its own survival that would be attributable to Finn if Finn were a thinker.

Why would annihilation of the hand destroy Finn? If Finn survived, so would the complements of the *other* four fingers of the hand, and also, presumably, the complements of the host of other *parts* of the hand, resulting in a host of coinciding hand-complements. Some theorists accept the coinciding of objects of different *sorts*, such as a diminished organism and the hand-complement (or sum of particles) that has come to "constitute" it. But I know of none who would countenance the coinciding of a host of hand-complements.⁵

I have cited six differences between Percy and Finn. Before discussing their sufficiency, let me note that analogues of the first, second, fifth, and sixth differences serve to distinguish Percy from a certain entity, hitherto unmentioned, to which Percy is all but identical microphysically. That entity – call it *Adam* – is the complement of a certain one of the atoms composing Percy's left index-finger. Although no one has suggested that atom-complements might be thinkers if finger-complements are not, it will be reassuring to have the means of dealing with even the largest of Percy's parts. So I want to note a particularly striking difference between Percy and Adam, one that probably does not hold between Percy and Finn. I'll label it difference (7).

Difference (7), stated in the paragraph following this one, hinges on Adam's mereological rigidity. Why is Adam mereologically rigid? Suppose that Atom, one of the atoms composing atom-complement Adam, is about to be annihilated. And consider Adam-Minus, the *pair-of-atoms*-complement that is composed of all and only the atoms composing Adam except Atom. (Surely there is no one who believes in Adam but not in Adam-Minus.) If Adam survives the annihilation of Atom, the diminished Adam will coin-

⁵ The argument of this paragraph presupposes an endurantist view of objects. I will not consider the matter from the opposing, perdurantist point of view, on which objects as well as events have temporal parts. I believe, however, that perdurantists are likely to reach the same conclusion, although by a different argument.

cide with the undiminished Adam-Minus. But Adam-Minus will no longer be a *pair-of-atoms-complement*. Adam and Adam-Minus will be coinciding *atom-complements*, which provides ample reason for holding that Adam will *not* survive the annihilation of Atom. It provides ample reason for conceiving of Adam as something mereologically rigid, whether a sum of atoms, a quantity of stuff, or a hunk of stuff.

(7) Percy, a human organism, endures through decades. Adam, a mereologically rigid portion of an organism undergoing rapid mereological change, is either *ephemeral* (if conceived as a hunk) or *ephemerally intact* (if conceived as a sum or quantity). (One online source – www.vsar.org/vocab.html – states that humans shed an average of 650 skin cells per second.) Adam appears and disappears within the blink of an eye – or else exists intact for but a fraction of a second, existing subsequently as a conjunctive object consisting partly of atoms that compose part of an organism and partly of scattered atoms that interact neither with that organism nor with one another. It's certainly plausible that Adam's transitoriness, or transitory intactness, could help to ground a difference between Adam and Percy with regard to thinkerhood.

8. The Sufficiency of the Differences

In virtue of the striking differences cited in section 7 (and quite apart from the points of section 5), Percy has a stronger claim to thinkerhood than does Finn (or any other Percy-part). However, I have not demonstrated that the differences, individually or collectively, defeat Finn's claim to thinkerhood. And it may be said that the claims of Finn and other Percy-parts are strong *enough*, even though weaker than Percy's. Despite the differences, we may be told, Finn is sufficiently similar to the thinker Percy that it's hard to believe that Finn fails to be a thinker.

I have three replies. First, the differences cited are intended, initially, to rebut an *argument* for Finn's thinkerhood. That argument rests on the claim that there are *no significant differences* between Finn and Percy (and none between Finn and Finn*), that is, none that might ground a difference between the two with respect to thinkerhood. One supporter of the premise describes the differences as "paltry" and "piddling" (Merricks 1998, 845). Surely, the six differences we noted between Finn and Percy (and the similar, equally marked differences between Finn and Finn*) provide ample reason for doubting that premise.

Second, the differences between Percy and Finn need not be as great as one might assume, because the difference they are to ground is *less* than one might assume. If Finn fails to be a conscious, thinking being, it does not follow that Finn is *devoid* of consciousness and thought. We can say that consciousness is *present* in Finn, that thoughts occur *within* Finn, that Finn is a *container* of thoughts and consciousness (because Finn is a

container of the cerebral *realizations* of thoughts and consciousness),⁶ even as we deny that Finn is a *subject* of thoughts and consciousness. That there indeed is such a distinction, one that would be explicated by reference to differences of the sort identified in section 7, may seem clearer when considering such thought-containers as these: (a) Con-junct, the conjunctive object consisting of Percy's brain, liver, and left thumb; (b) Gerry-mander, the (nonscattered) object consisting of Percy's brain, the portion of Percy that lies between his brain and his left ear, and the first 17.43 inches of Percy directly *under* that portion; and (c) the universe. (Are Con-junct, Gerry-mander, and the universe deliberating about whether to go for a walk? Or is it rather that such deliberations are occurring *within* them?) Of course, not everyone allows that such scattered or gerrymandered objects are possible, never mind actual. But it's as reasonable to hold that counter-possibles differ in truth value as to hold that counterfactuals do. And I think that most disbelievers in such objects as Con-junct, Gerry-mander, and the universe will want to affirm that *if* such objects existed, then even though conscious thoughts would be present within them, they would not be *subjects* of those thoughts.⁷

Third, the differences will seem altogether decisive, if we proceed on the plausible assumption that there is just *one* consciousness present within Percy and just one *sub-ject* of that consciousness. The differences will then be relevant to this question: to which *one* of the entities overlapping Percy is that consciousness appropriately assigned? And when there's a competition for a single prize or honor, as in an election, a gymnas-

⁶ Two points. First, when I say that Finn "contains" thoughts, I'm using 'contains' not in the weak sense in which rooms contain everything located within them, but in the stronger sense in which Finn contains thoughts only if there are thoughts constituted by the activities of *parts* of Finn. Second, it is indeed reasonable to claim that Finn contains thoughts, in this sense. On the dominant theory of thoughts, (token) thoughts are (token) brain events. On this theory, the claim that Finn contains thoughts is straightforwardly true. On one dissenting theory, on which actions are not events, some thoughts, such as deliberations, are not events of *any* kind. But recall that we are using 'thoughts' in a technical sense, in which such nonactions as sensations and desires count as thoughts. Provided that mental *events* are brain events, it is still straightforwardly true that Finn contains thoughts. On another dissenting theory, one associated with the property-exemplification theory of events, thoughts are co-extensive with their subjects. On this theory, Finn contains part, a *large* part, though not the whole, of every thought contained by Percy. And Heddi contains a much smaller part, although (one presumes) a centrally important part, of the Percy-wide event that is the thought. So even on this theory, which I hereafter ignore, Heddi and Finn do not lack psychological properties, even if (as I contend) they are nonthinkers. They still have the property of containing centrally important *parts* of conscious thoughts. (I will ignore altogether the unpopular theory that events are locationless universals.)

⁷ Don't (narrow content) psychological states supervene on brain states? Perhaps they do, in this sense: necessarily, two subjects are in identical psychological states if their *brains* are in identical states. But the subjecthood of a brain-containing object isn't determined solely by the states of the contained brain.

tics event, or a horse race, there need be no *dramatic* difference – indeed, no more than a “paltry,” “piddling” difference – between the winner and the losers.

On what basis might we say that there is only *one* consciousness, only *one* stream of thought, present within Percy? Note first that we are under no pressure to say otherwise from the empirical facts. The case is not like one of brain bisection, where the partially uncoordinated functioning of the left and right hemispheres results in uncoordinated behavior suggestive of *separate*, partially *independent* streams of thought. In our case, there would be no reason to postulate multiple thought-streams unless there were a prior reason to postulate multiple subjects. And there is no reason to postulate multiple subjects, as opposed to multiple containers, since there are not multiple physical *realizations* of thought streams.

It’s plausible, to say the least, that for every thought-constituting brain event there is one thought token, not many, that it constitutes. And it’s plausible, to say the least, that for every thought token there is one thinker, not many, whose thought token it is. No doubt we could call these plausible propositions into question, if we *had* to. But since we can distinguish between thinkers of thoughts and containers of thoughts, we *don’t* have to. And if we do proceed on the assumption that there is just one thinker overlapping Percy, then the differences cited in section 7 provide abundant justification for assigning that status to Percy rather than to Finn, or to any other of Percy’s parts. More generally, they enable us to understand why thinkerhood, and therefore personhood, are maximal.⁸

9. Conclusion

There is an argument that presses us to acknowledge the personhood, or at least the thinkerhood, of brain-containing person-parts. With the notable exception of Carter (see section 3e), who evidently is ready to allow not just the *multiplication* of persons, but their mereological petrification, philosophers have generally sought either to resist the pressure or else to mitigate the consequences of yielding to it. But as we saw in section 3, the measures by which they have sought to do so are radical, problematic, or ineffec-

⁸ Analogues of some of the differences will be useful to those who believe that one or more objects *coincide* with Percy. As noted earlier, some theorists hold that human persons are *constituted* by, not identical with, human organisms. And some hold that a human organism is itself constituted by an object: a sum of particles (or a quantity or hunk of stuff). I oppose the first of those views in Burke 1997b and the second in Burke 1997a. But proponents of the second view can counter the sum’s claim to thinkerhood by appealing to analogues of the first, second, sixth, and seventh differences. Proponents of the first view can appeal to analogues of the sixth and second. When viewed in light of the considerations adduced in section 8, those differences should suffice.

tive. Happily, there is a conservative alternative that is both effective and defensible. We can maintain the maximality of personhood, thinkerhood, and consciousness. Moreover, we can do so without relativizing or graduating numerical identity; without denying that the thinkerhood of purely physical thinkers supervenes on their purely physical properties (intrinsic and relational); without denying the existence of heads and other brain-containing person-parts; and without denying the existence of the fingers, hands, and feet whose existence is denied, for the sake of “consistency,” by those who deny the existence of finger-, hand-, and foot-*complements*.⁹

As we saw in section 5, we do not ordinarily view person-parts either as persons or as thinkers; moreover, we have no practical *reason* to regard them as such. In section 7, I examined the main philosophical reason for thinking that some person-parts nevertheless *are* thinkers, and found it unconvincing. I noted six differences between Percy and Finn, differences that can plausibly be held to ground a difference between the two with regard to thinkerhood. Those differences are largely in the *intrinsic* properties of Percy and Finn. Contrary to what many assume (I had long assumed it myself), the maximality of thinkerhood does not stand or fall with the proposition that purely relational differences can ground a difference with regard to thinkerhood.¹⁰

In section 8, I defended the sufficiency of the differences cited in section 7. I did not prove that because of those differences, Finn is a nonthinker. But the differences refute the main argument in *favor* of Finn’s thinkerhood. Furthermore, when viewed in light of the considerations adduced in section 8, and taken together with the points of section 5, they argue strongly *against* Finn’s thinkerhood. Consciousness and conscious thoughts are indeed *present* in Finn. So Finn is by no means *devoid* of consciousness and thought. But that is not to say that Finn is a *subject* of them. We can say instead that Finn and

⁹ I don’t myself see an inconsistency in asserting the existence of natural sorts of body parts, such as fingers, hands, brains, and heads, while denying the existence, or rather the objecthood, of arbitrary portions of bodies. I doubt that there is any such *object* as Finn or Adam, although I don’t doubt the objecthood of Heddi.

¹⁰ Theodore Sider (forthcoming) is perhaps the only theorist now willing to attribute the nonconsciousness of person-parts solely to their possession of a disqualifying relational property. He writes of one such part, “Although Martha-minus isn’t literally conscious, she has what it takes intrinsically to be conscious. ... All that disqualifies her is a seeming ‘technicality’: the failure of the maximality condition” He then introduces the concept of “consciousness*,” which he defines as “consciousness stripped of any maximality requirement,” and allows that Martha and many or all of her brain-containing parts are conscious*, although only Martha is conscious. On my view, by contrast, only Martha is either conscious *or* conscious*. Sider’s defense of maximality, although nicely crafted, is unsatisfying both because its denial of the consciousness of person-parts does rest on a seeming technicality and because it concedes that brain-containing person-parts are conscious*.

Heddi, as well as Conject, Gerrymander, and the universe, are mere *containers* of conscious thought.¹¹

Since there is no suggestion that such entities might be persons *without* being thinkers, we can deny their personhood as well as their thinkerhood. And we can do so without denying their *existence*. We can blithely acknowledge heads, brains, cerebra, and central nervous systems, as well as fingers, toes, noses, and the many other person-parts with brain-containing complements. In short, we have established the tenability of the *conservative* view of person-parts, the view implicit in ordinary ways of thinking.¹²

References

- Abbott, Geoffrey. (1994) *The Book of Execution* (London: Headline Book Publishing).
- Armstrong, D. M. (1978) *Universals and Scientific Realism*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. (2000) *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Burke, Michael B. (1994a) "Dion and Theon: An Essentialist Solution to an Ancient Puzzle," *The Journal of Philosophy* 91: 129-39.
- Burke, Michael B. (1994b) "Preserving the Principle of One Object to a Place: A Novel Account of the Relations Among Objects, Sorts, Sortals, and Persistence Conditions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54: 591-624.
- Burke, Michael B. (1996) "Tibbles the Cat: A Modern *Sophisma*," *Philosophical Studies* 84: 63-74.
- Burke, Michael B. (1997a) "Coinciding Objects: Reply to Lowe and Denkel," *Analysis* 57: 11-18.
- Burke, Michael B. (1997b) "Persons and Bodies: How to Avoid the New Dualism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34: 457-67.
- Carter, W. R. (1983) "In Defense of Undetached Parts," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64: 126-43.
- Carter, W. R. (1997) "Dion's Left Foot (and the Price of Burkean Economy)," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57: 371-79.
- Geach, Peter. (1980) *Reference and Generality* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Place).

¹¹ And we can deny that it would be far worse to cause anguish to Percy than to a bodiless (but morally and psychologically comparable) angel.

¹² For valuable comments and suggestions, I am grateful to John Tilley.

- Heller, Mark. (1990) *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four Dimensional Hunks of Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lewis, David. (1993) "Many, but Almost One," in *Ontology, Causality and Mind: Essays in Honor of D. M. Armstrong*, ed. J. Bacon et. al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 22-38.
- Merricks, Trenton. (1998a) "Against the Doctrine of Microphysical Supervenience," *Mind* 107: 59-71.
- Merricks, Trenton. (1998b) "On Whether Being Conscious is Intrinsic," *Mind* 107: 845-46.
- Merricks, Trenton. (2001) *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Olson, Eric T. (1995) "Why I Have No Hands," *Theoria* 61, Part 2: 182-97.
- Olson, Eric T. (1997) "Dion's Foot," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94: 260-65.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. (1981) "Worlds Away," reprinted (from *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, 1976) in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Sider, Theodore. (Forthcoming) "Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Slack, M. W., Holland, P. W. H., & Graham, C. F. (1993) "The Zootype and the Phylotypic Stage," *Nature* 361: 490, 492.
- Unger, Peter. (1979) "Why There Are No People," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 177-222.
- Unger, Peter. (1980) "The Problem of the Many," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5: 411-67.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. (1981) "The Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 62: 123-37. Van Inwagen, Peter. (1990) *Material Beings* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).