

What Are We?: A Study in Personal Ontology (Philosophy of Mind)

By Eric T. Olson



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From the time of Locke, discussions of personal identity have often ignored the question of our basic metaphysical nature: whether we human people are biological organisms, spatial or temporal parts of organisms, bundles of perceptions, or what have you. The result of this neglect has been centuries of wild proposals and clashing intuitions.

What Are We? is the first general study of this important question. It begins by explaining what the question means and how it differs from others, such as questions of personal identity and the mind-body problem. It then examines in some depth the main possible accounts of our metaphysical nature, detailing both their theoretical virtues and the often grave difficulties they face.

The book does not endorse any particular account of what we are, but argues that the matter turns on more general issues in the ontology of material things. If composition is universal--if any material things whatever make up something bigger--then we are temporal parts of organisms. If things never compose anything bigger, so that there are only mereological simples, then we too are simples--perhaps the immaterial substances of Descartes--or else we do not exist at all (a view Olson takes very seriously). The intermediate view that some things compose bigger things and others do not leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that we are organisms. So we can discover what we are by working out when composition occurs.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Olson presents all the serious options on personal ontology, together with the best reasons for and against them. And he shows that each of these options has implications for a wide variety of philosophical topics--not just personal identity over time--and also that those topics have implications for each of these options. *What Are We?* is clear enough to be of use to the philosophical novice, but sophisticated enough and fair enough to withstand the scrutiny of professional philosophers. For anyone who wants to understand the question "What are we?"--and who wants to see how to begin to answer that question in a principled way--there is to better guide than Olson's book."--Trenton Merricks, *Times Literary Supplement*

"This is a good book. Its philosophical sophistication and rigor should recommend it to anyone working on the metaphysics of persons, and its scope and readability should recommend it to anyone teaching metaphysics to upper level undergraduates or graduate students. Whether or not this is a question with an answer, accompanying Olson on his trip through the logical space it carves out is enjoyable and rewarding."--Michael O'Rourke, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*

About the Author

Eric T. Olson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield.

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