

Research Statement

Evan T. Woods

Department of Philosophy • Denison University

205D Knapp Hall • woodse@denison.edu

I defended my dissertation titled *The Problems of the Many* in June 2019, and I graduated with my Ph.D. in philosophy from The Ohio State University in August. My primary research focus is on the metaphysics of human persons and material objects; I approach these topics from the problems like *the problem of the many*. This problem threatens to show that there are either too many, or too few, of the familiar objects of everyday experience. For instance, consider your chair, on the one hand, and the thing that has all of the same parts as your chair *minus a single splinter of wood*, on the other. Both are located in the chair-shaped region your chair is located in, but one is an undetached part of the other. Because they are so similar to one another, it's plausible that each is a chair if and only if the other is. Thus, you're either seated in many chairs, or none. This problem also arises for human persons on a number of views about the nature of human persons; in this case, the problem seems to show that there are either many people reading this through your eyes, or none. In my work, I am concerned to offer *conservative* solutions to this and other, related problems. In slogan form, I argue that *the furniture of the world isn't overcrowded or undercrowded*: there's just one person sitting in the single chair you're seated in

I argue that the problem of the many is one of many similar problems including the thinking animal problem, the thinking parts problem, and the personite problem. Part of what I find troubling—and exciting—about these problems is that they threaten ordinary views not only about chairs, but also about ourselves. These problems purport to show that, on certain assumptions, there are either no persons, or far more persons, than anyone would have thought. These problems are then used to draw various consequences for what sorts of things we persons could, or must, be. For instance, *the thinking animal problem* purports to show that, unless we are numerically identical to human animals, there are too many thinkers in our chairs. *The thinking parts problem* purports to show that we must not have any large proper parts lest there be too many thinkers in our chairs. And *the personite problem* purports to show that we must ontologically special if there is to be a workable system of ethics.

Some of my research focuses on *the shape* of responses to the problems of the many; I am interested in whether certain responses are *proprietary* to certain views, or whether other views could offer those same responses or parallel responses to the problems. For instance, an influential response to the problem of the many is that *material constitution*, a relation of non-identity between a thing and what it is made out of, is crucial in offering a conservative solution to the problem of the many. In “Is Constitution Needed to Solve the Problem of the Many?” (under review), I argue that this is false and that machinery besides constitution solves the problem in extant constitution-based solutions. Because this machinery is independent of constitution, those who deny constitution theory can offer parallel, similarly motivated solutions; the problem of the many, then, apparently doesn't provide special motivation for constitution theory. This shows that the debate should move to assessment of the parallel solutions, rather than relying on views about what solutions are available to whom.

This focus on the shape of responses sometimes makes apparent underexplored logical space. For example, in “Many, but One” (forthcoming in *Synthese*), I develop and defend a novel *many-one identity* solution to the problem of the many. According to this view, the many candidates for being an

object of kind *K* are collectively identical to a single object of kind *K*. On this view, all of the chair-like things you're seated in are collectively identical to a single chair, for instance.

Another part of my research focuses on how the thinking animal problem and the thinking parts problem bear on how best to develop, motivate, and defend views in personal ontology. The *thinking animal problem* is often taken to support *animalism*, the thesis that human persons are identical to human animals. Animalists use this problem against *constitutionalism* about human persons, the thesis that human persons are constituted by, but not identical to, human animals. The thinking animal problem challenges constitutionalists to avoid the result that both the human person and the human animal think. Animalists, meanwhile, face the structurally parallel *thinking parts problem*. This problem challenges animalists to avoid the result that the human animal and its large proper parts think. Typically, animalists deny that animals have large proper parts by adopting *biological minimalism*, the view that animals lack large proper parts. *Unrestricted animalism* holds that there are such parts and that they don't think. In "How Unrestricted Animalism Solves Constitutionalism's Thinking Animal Problem" (under review), I argue that constitutionalists can solve the thinking animal problem with analogues of unrestricted animalist solutions to the thinking parts problem if those solutions solve animalism's thinking parts problem. Thus, animalists should look elsewhere for a solution to the thinking parts problem, lest they undermine one of their main arguments for animalism and against constitutionalism. This, I argue, pushes animalists in the direction of biological minimalism.

However, this places the animalist in an awkward dialectical position vis-à-vis a new argument for animalism, Stephan Blatti's *animal ancestors argument*. The animal ancestors argument claims that only animalists can maintain evolutionary theory's claim that our ancestors were animals. I argue that the animal ancestors argument requires *rejecting* biological minimalism and the dialectical effectiveness of the thinking animal problem apparently requires *accepting* biological minimalism.

Finally, part of my research focuses on the *ethical* threat of the problems of the many. The problems motivate the thought that, in the vicinity of any human person, there are a great many person-like things that have what is sufficient for moral status but which persist for less time than you. These are *personites*. According to *the personite problem*, if there are personites, then it is immoral, for instance, to undertake projects that are unpleasant in the short-term but rewarding in the long-term; this forces countless personites to undergo the unpleasantness in pursuit of your own ends knowing full well that those personites won't be around to experience the rewards.

Some of my research on the personite problem is about whether proposed solutions really solve the problem. First, in "Revenge of the Personites" (under review), I argue that a recent solution to the personite problem faces *a revenge version* of the problem. Alex Kaiserman (2019) argues that *exdurantism*, the view that persons are stages and persist through time by having temporal counterparts at different times, solves the problem. I argue that this is incorrect. First, using the problem of the many, I show how to construct an exdurantist version of the personite problem. I then argue that two plausible exdurantist views don't solve that version of the personite problem. Second, I am currently working through Mark Johnston's solution to the problem. I suspect that his proposal doesn't solve the problem, either; on Johnston's view, persons are ontologically distinguished from the many personites in their vicinity, but the way in which they are distinguished, viz. having a special kind of essence, doesn't seem to be necessary to have moral status; indeed, the personites themselves seem to have properties that are sufficient for moral status. I am currently investigating whether the possession of such an essence could plausibly make the difference and what such a view would look like. Finally, in "Solving the Personite Problem" (draft available upon request), I develop and defend a solution to the personite problem according to which persons have psychological properties, but personites don't. The core idea is that personites' properties don't have the right causal powers to be psychological properties. Since the supposed harms done to personites require their having psychological properties, personites cannot be harmed in the ways the problem purports to show.