

PERSONAL ONTOLOGY

What are we? Are we, for example, souls, organisms, brains, or something else? In this book, Andrew Brenner argues that there are principled obstacles to our discovering the answer to this fundamental metaphysical question. The main competing accounts of personal ontology hold that we are either souls (or composites of soul and body) or composite physical objects of some sort, but, as Brenner shows, arguments for either of these options can be parodied and transformed into their opposites. Brenner also examines arguments for and against the existence of the self, offers a detailed discussion of the metaphysics of several afterlife scenarios – resurrection, reincarnation, and mind uploading – and considers whether agnosticism with respect to personal ontology should lead us to agnosticism with respect to the possibility of life after death.

ANDREW BRENNER is Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University. He has published articles in journals including *Analysis*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Philosophy of Science*, *Synthese*, *Erkenntnis*, and *Philosophy East and West*.

PERSONAL ONTOLOGY

Mystery and Its Consequences

Andrew Brenner

Hong Kong Baptist University





CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009367066
DOI: 10.1017/9781009367059

© Andrew Brenner 2024

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2024
First paperback edition 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

NAMES: Brenner, Andrew Timothy, 1989– author.

TITLE: Personal ontology : mystery and its consequences / Andrew Brenner, Hong Kong
Baptist University.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2023037577 (print) | LCCN 2023037578 (ebook) | ISBN 9781009367073 (hardback) |
ISBN 9781009367066 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009367059 (epub)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Philosophical anthropology. | Self (Philosophy) | Ontology.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC BD450 .B6494 2024 (print) | LCC BD450 (ebook) |
DDC 128–dc23/eng/20231016

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023037577>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023037578>

ISBN 978-1-009-36707-3 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-36706-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Introduction	I
1.1 What Is This Book About?	1
1.2 Composition	6
1.3 Composition as Identity	7
1.4 The Trilemma Again	11
1.5 Chapter Summaries	17
2 Arguments against Substance Dualism, Part 1	19
2.1 Introduction	19
2.2 Parsimony-Based Arguments	20
2.3 The Argument from Causal Closure/Exclusion	27
2.4 The Argument from Conservation Laws	29
2.5 The Argument from the Correlation between Mental States and Brain States	33
2.6 Where Do Souls Come From?	38
2.7 How Do We Reidentify Immaterial Souls over Time?	42
3 Arguments against Substance Dualism, Part 2: Pairing Problems	45
3.1 Two Pairing Problems	45
3.2 Response 1: No Answer Required	52
3.3 Response 2: Composite Objects Are Located Where Their Parts Are Located	58
3.4 Response 3: This Composite Object Has <i>These</i> Things as Parts Because These Things Give Rise to, Create, or Ground This Composite Object	63
3.5 Response 4: The Pairing Problems Simply Illustrate a More General Problem Which Affects Everyone	66
3.6 Response 5: Mereological Antirealism	68
3.7 Conclusion	69
4 Arguments for Substance Dualism	70
4.1 Introduction	70
4.2 Modal Arguments	70

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
4.3	An Epistemic Argument for Substance Dualism	79
4.4	The Argument from the Alleged Fact That Facts Regarding Personal Identity Outstrip the Physical Facts	80
4.5	The Argument from Phenomenology and Intentionality	82
4.6	The Argument from the Unity of Consciousness	87
4.7	Lowe’s Argument from Unity	93
4.8	The Argument from the Problem of the Many	96
5	Interlude: What Exactly Is the Difference between Our Being Immaterial Souls and Our Being Composite Physical Objects?	102
6	Nonself, Part 1: Arguments against Our Existence	108
6.1	Introduction	108
6.2	The Argument from Impermanence	113
6.3	The Argument from Lack of Control	132
6.4	The Neither One nor Many Argument	138
6.5	The Argument from Simplicity or Parsimony	139
7	Nonself, Part 2: The Self Exists	143
7.1	Introduction	143
7.2	Can We Perceive That the Self Exists?	143
7.3	Can We Infer That the Self Exists?	149
8	Personal Ontology and Life after Death, Part 1: Resurrection, Reincarnation	159
8.1	Introduction	159
8.2	Resurrection	160
8.3	Reincarnation	174
9	Personal Ontology and Life after Death, Part 2: Mind Uploading	182
9.1	Introduction	182
9.2	Obscure and Problematic Ontology	185
9.3	How Do You Move Someone into a Computer?	201
9.4	Practical Lessons	207
	<i>References</i>	216
	<i>Index</i>	239

Acknowledgments

For helpful discussion and feedback on parts of the book, I would like to thank Jamin Asay, Andrew M. Bailey, Joshua Barthuly, Elle Benjamin, Mark Boone, Ethan Brauer, Renee Brenner, Toby Brenner, Justin Brittain, David Chalmers, Rebecca Chan, Amit Chaturvedi, Levi Checketts, Justin Christy, Pirachula Chulanon, Aaron Creller, Andrew Duane, Jeffrey Green, Boris Hennig, Jack Himelright, Jenny Hung, Andrew Hunter, Elizabeth Jackson, John Keller, David Mark Kovacs, Kai Man Kwan, Siu-Fan Lee, Wang-Yen Lee, Andrew Loke, Michael Longenecker, Kym Maclaren, Domenic Marbaniang, Dan Marshall, Chad Marxen, Jonathan Matheson, Sarah Mattice, Anna-Sofia Maurin, Dolores G. Morris, Yau Nang William Ng, Timothy O'Connor, Stephen R. Palmquist, David Pattillo, Callie Phillips, Michael Rea, Bradley Rettler, James Dominic Rooney, OP, Liz Rosenberg, Stasia Ruschell, Siddharth S., Raphael Mary Salzillo, Alexander Skiles, Jeremy Skrzypek, Naomi Thompson, Peter van Inwagen, Amiao Wu, Ellen Zhang, and the two readers for Cambridge University Press. Special thanks to Peter Finocchiaro and Eric Olson, who both gave extensive feedback on the entire book. Parts of Chapter 2 were originally published in *The Philosophical Quarterly* and benefited from the feedback provided by two anonymous referees. Thanks also to Hilary Gaskin and Abi Sears at Cambridge University Press, and Aiswarya Narayanan for help with the production of the book.

Parts of this book were presented at the 2016 American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meeting, the 2021 Society of Christian Philosophers Midwest Regional Meeting, the 2022 Society of Christian Philosophers Eastern Regional Meeting, the Ernst Mach Workshop X 2022 at the Czech Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy, the University of Gothenburg, Hong Kong Baptist University, Toronto Metropolitan University, and a joint seminar held by Lingnan University, Hong Kong University, and the National University of Singapore. I thank the audiences at these presentations for their helpful feedback.

The book was written with the support of a Hong Kong Research Grants Council Early Career Scheme grant, project number 22602521.

Parts of Chapter 2 were originally published in “Mereological Nihilism and Personal Ontology,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 67(268) (July 2017); pp. 464–485. This material is reused here by permission of Oxford University Press.