

## **Animalism and deferentialism**

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*Abstract.* *Animalism* is the theory that we are animals: in other words, that each of us is numerically identical to an animal. An alternative theory maintains that we are not animals but that each of us is constituted by an animal. Call this alternative theory *Lockeanism*. Stephan Blatti (2012) offers to advance the debate between animalism and Lockeanism by providing a new argument for animalism. In this note, we present our own objection to Blatti's argument, and argue that Carl Gillett's earlier reply misses the fundamental problem. We also use Blatti's argument to illustrate a common methodological error, namely, uncritical deference to best theories from other disciplines.

*Animalism* is the theory that we are animals: in other words, that each of us is numerically identical to an animal. An alternative theory maintains that we are not animals but that each of us is constituted by an animal. Call this alternative theory *Lockeanism*. Stephan Blatti (2012) offers to advance the debate between animalism and Lockeanism by providing a new argument for animalism. Carl Gillett (2013) replies to Blatti. In this note, we present our own objection to Blatti's argument, and argue that Gillett's reply misses the fundamental problem. We also use Blatti's argument to illustrate a common methodological error.

Blatti's argument appeals to standard evolutionary theory. If animalism is false, then we are not animals, and none of our ancestors were animals either; but standard evolutionary theory says that our distant ancestors *were* animals; since 'the rejection of evolutionary theory is too high a price to pay' (Blatti 2012: 686), animalism is not false. To put the argument another way: standard evolutionary theory is true only if animalism is true; since we should not reject standard evolutionary theory, we should endorse animalism. Blatti calls this the *Animal Ancestors Argument (AAA)*.

According to Gillett (2013: 272), AAA relies on the following premise (which he labels '(2)'):

(2) If you are not identical to an organism, then you are not evolved or a product of evolution.

Gillett (2013: 273, 275–6) points out that many products of evolution are not animals: DNA and RNA molecules, cellular constituents, and superorganisms (such as the Portugese Man-of-War), which are made up of organisms. He concludes that premise (2) is false, and rejects AAA on this basis.

We believe that Gillett is right to reject (2). But we do not think that AAA requires (2) as a premise. As stated above, AAA simply relies on the claim that animalism denies something which standard evolutionary theory asserts: that our distant ancestors were animals. AAA does not require the assumption that organisms are the only products of evolution.

Gillett appears to have misunderstood the role (2) plays in Blatti's paper. As we will go on to explain, (2) is best seen as part of Blatti's defence of AAA against an objection: it is not part of AAA itself. We find no trace of (2) where Gillett (2013: 272) claims to find it, in the paragraph of Blatti's paper which presents AAA.

Our own objection to AAA is methodological in nature. Blatti assumes that if animalism contradicts standard evolutionary theory, then animalism is to be rejected. We dispute this assumption. For the sake of argument, we grant Blatti his assumption that standard evolutionary theory says that our distant ancestors were animals.

To understand our objection to AAA, first consider the following parallel argument against the view – held by Peter van Inwagen (1981) amongst others – that there are no hands. The argument runs as follows: 'If standard anatomical theory is true, then there are hands; since we should not reject standard anatomical theory, we should believe that there are hands. Those philosophers who deny that there are hands pay too high a price because their theories contradict our best science.'

The above argument is open to an obvious challenge. Hand-deniers will claim that, if standard anatomical theory really implies the existence of hands, then there is a theory lacking that implication which is, all things considered, superior. They will offer systematic ways of removing apparent references to hands: for instance, talk of hands may be replaced by talk of things arranged handwise (see Rosen and Dorr 2002: 162–3). They will then argue that the resulting theories are superior to theories which imply the existence of hands. These theories have not been discussed by anatomists, if they are even aware of them at all. We cannot be sure we have found the best theory if we restrict our consideration to those theories which have been discussed in science. There is no straightforward empirical difference between the modified theories and the standard ones: things arranged handwise look collectively just like hands, even under careful dissection. So the choice between these theories is a matter for philosophical debate. The argument therefore goes wrong when it assumes that we should not reject standard anatomical theory. The challenge to proponents of the argument is to make good this assumption by showing that the modified theories are inferior.

A corresponding challenge applies to AAA. The argument rests on the assumption that we should not reject standard evolutionary theory. But we should reject standard evolutionary theory if we can find a better theory. Perhaps there is a theory which biologists have not considered and which is, all things considered, superior to standard evolutionary theory. (Biologists may have overlooked such a theory if it cannot be straightforwardly empirically distinguished from standard evolutionary theory.)

The mere epistemic possibility of such an alternative does not show very much. But once such a theory is laid out, it then poses a challenge to AAA. And it is easy to see what form such a theory might take. Assuming that standard evolutionary theory implies animalism, consider how Lockeans might go about explaining the phenomena which standard evolutionary theory seems to explain so well. They are free to endorse the standard theory's explanation of the characteristics of animals, provided they refuse to take on the theory's further commitment to the claim that we are animals. That leaves Lockeans with the task of explaining certain characteristics of ours. At this point, they can deploy their theory that we are constituted by animals. If John is constituted by an animal, then we can explain some of John's properties by pointing to properties of the animal that constitutes him. In many cases, these will be the same property: for instance, John has brown eyes in virtue of being constituted by an animal with brown eyes. But perhaps there are other cases where these will be different properties. For instance, the Lockean might claim that John is rational and that the animal which constitutes him is not; if so, they will need to explain John's rationality by appeal to a property of the animal other than rationality. In cases like these we advise the Lockean to piggy-back on the animalist's explanation. The animalist will appeal to some property of the animal to explain why John is rational; the Lockean should appeal to the same property, arguing that John's being constituted by an animal with this property explains his rationality.

Now that these non-standard Lockean varieties of evolutionary theory have been put forward, our challenge to proponents of AAA is to make good their endorsement of standard evolutionary theory by establishing that non-standard Lockean varieties are inferior.

There are three reasons why meeting the challenge will be difficult. First, no biologists have argued against Lockean variants of evolutionary theory, so far as we are aware – indeed, we do not know of any biologists who have even considered them. It seems there is no prior biological argument for proponents of AAA to draw on here.

Second, the Lockean explanations are so similar to the standard ones that it is hard to see on what grounds the animalist would object to them, other than their Lockeanism.

Third, the usual arguments against Lockeanism cannot be used to meet the challenge, because AAA was supposed to be a *new* argument for animalism.

The challenge is therefore a difficult one. Renegade biologists who recant their animalism and sign up to Lockeanism may well suffer no explanatory embarrassment. Perhaps, if intellectual and scientific history had gone slightly differently, standard evolutionary theory would have presupposed Lockeanism, not animalism.

AAA illustrates a wider methodological error. It is common for philosophers to assume that philosophical theories should be consistent with our best theories from empirical science (or indeed from other disciplines such as mathematics) (e.g. Colyvan 2001: 33, Kornblith 2002: 26–7). The assumption guiding AAA is an example of this wider trend. The error is attractive because it is natural to think of our best theories in mathematics and empirical science as great intellectual achievements, worthy of serious respect. But the assumptions at work in AAA and parallel arguments go beyond respect for the theories (and disciplines) in question: they offer a posture of uncritical deference. Such assumptions are implausible, and those philosophers who have attempted to establish them by argument have not succeeded. So we should not rely on these assumptions when conducting philosophical debate. As our discussion of the argument for the existence of hands demonstrates, we should not dismiss a philosophical theory just because it is inconsistent with one of our best theories from another discipline. (For further discussion, see Daly and Liggins 2011.)

Although Blatti does not explicitly consider the objection we have presented, his article indicates a possible response for him to make. Blatti considers the objection that our immediate ancestors were not animals although our distant ancestors were; as part of his reply, Blatti writes: ‘natural selection may operate so as to produce new varieties of organisms, but it does not operate so as to produce non-organisms. Whatever explanation a [Lockean] gives of the appearance of a new kind of thing – a person non-identically constituted by a human animal – it will not be an evolutionary story’ (2012: 686). At the end of his article, Blatti claims that if we are not animals, then we are ‘not the kind of thing to result from processes of natural selection’ (688–9). This is Gillett’s premise (2), here serving as part of a reply to an objection rather than as a premise of AAA. Blatti’s remarks suggest the following response to our challenge: Lockeans are barred from adopting evolutionary explanations because these explanations can only explain the properties of organisms.

The sketch of Lockean evolutionary theory given above should make clear that this response is unsuccessful. Lockeans can give evolutionary explanations of the properties of animals, and in doing

so they are at perfect liberty to appeal to the mechanism of natural selection. Going further, Lockeans can then explain our properties by appeal to the view that each of us is constituted by one of these animals. Each of these explanations is clearly an ‘evolutionary story’.

Blatti’s claim that we cannot result from natural selection unless we are animals is false unless ‘result from’ is read as ‘result directly from’, and on this reading the claim is irrelevant. Lockeans are free to maintain that we result from natural selection indirectly, by being constituted by certain results of natural selection, namely, animals. As Gillett points out, natural selection gives rise to things other than organisms: it gives rise to DNA and RNA molecules, cellular constituents, and superorganisms. Let us add our own example to Gillett’s list: natural selection gives rise to skeletons. Lockeans can say that, like all these things, we are indirect results of evolutionary processes.

We will conclude by considering a second response to our argument, a dilemma for the Lockean. How are they to explain John’s ability to think? On one hand, if it is in virtue of being constituted by an animal which can think, then the Lockean is committed to the absurd conclusion that there are at least two thinkers in John’s chair. On the other hand, if the animal cannot think, and John possesses his ability to think in virtue of some other property of the animal, then the Lockean has to explain why the animal cannot itself think, even though it has the property in virtue of which John can.

Lockeans should take these worries seriously. However, both horns of the dilemma have already been set out and discussed in previous debate over animalism and constitution. The first horn is known as the ‘thinking-animal argument’ (see Olson 2003), the second horn the ‘indiscernibility problem’ (see Olson 2001). Perhaps the dilemma is bad news for Lockeans – but only if it is old news. In any case, the metaphysics of persons needs to avoid uncritical deference to current best biology.<sup>1</sup>

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