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Are We Animals? Animalism and Personal Identity

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What are we? Philosophers often look for answers that capture what we are fundamentally—what makes us who we are.

Maybe we're non-physical souls or minds.^[1] Maybe we're our thoughts and our memories. Or, perhaps we're physical things like bodies or brains.

According to a view called *animalism*, we're human animals.^[2] This view is the focus of our discussion here.

1. Animalism

Animalism is the view that each of us is a human animal: a biological organism of the species *Homo sapiens*. Animalists acknowledge that human animals typically exhibit rationality and levels of intelligence that other animals don't, but hold that we are animals nonetheless.

Animalism has implications for our identity over time, how we're still *us* through the past, present, and future, despite the many ways we change. If we're human animals, then we can't exist independently of those animals; what's often called *personal identity* depends on our being the same *animal* over time—it's a matter of biology.^[3]

2. Animalism vs. Psychological Theories

Animalism departs from views according to which our identity over time is a matter of our psychology, on being psychologically connected to our past and future selves through our thoughts, memories, and self-conceptions:^[4] e.g., if you remember not liking broccoli as a kid but like broccoli now, you're still the same person because you *remember being* that kid.

To see how animalism and psychological theories diverge, imagine this:

You are diagnosed with an untreatable illness. Your doctor proposes a cutting-edge procedure to transplant your brain into another body, and your body will be kept alive long enough to salvage any remaining healthy organs for other patients awaiting transplants. After the procedure, the patient with your brain wakes up and thinks, "Amazing! I have a new body and no illness!"

Where are *you*: with your brain or with your body?^[5]

According to psychological theories, the patient with your brain, who is psychologically connected to your earlier self, who remembers being you, *is* you.

According to animalism, this patient is *not* you: identity is a matter of *biology*, not *psychology*. You are the animal with the illness but no brain, since this biological organism continues to live the same biological life that you were living before. Your brain is joined up with a different animal living a *different* biological life.

Animalism entails that even a human animal on life support with no possibility of conscious activity is still *one of us*. And we can't outlive these animals in an afterlife or—if technology ever enables this—by uploading our consciousnesses to a virtual reality,^[6] or getting new bodies through brain transplants.^[7] So animalism denies some common views about our identity through time.

3. The Case for Animalism

Why do some people accept animalism? The best case for it is the *Thinking Animal Argument*, directed at a seated reader:

Premise 1: There is a human animal sitting in your chair.

Premise 2: The human animal sitting in your chair is thinking.

Premise 3: You are the only thinking being sitting in your chair.

Conclusion: Therefore, you are the human animal sitting in your chair.^[8]

The being in your chair is a biological organism, a human animal; this living human organism with (right now) a functional brain, is thinking;^[9] *you* are the only thinker there, no other thinking being is also in your chair.^[10]

If successful, the argument establishes that you *are* that human animal. It's not that you and the animal occupy the same space, thinking the same thoughts. There's just one thinker there, you, which establishes *identity* between you and the animal. Therefore, you are a human animal. And, if so, your identity depends on being the same human animal over time.

4. Resisting Animalism

Rejecting the argument requires denying a premise.

Denying premise 1—that there is a human animal sitting in your chair—is hard to defend.^[11]

Denying premise 2—that the human animal sitting in your chair is thinking—requires claiming that the human animal *isn't* thinking: the organism is not what literally thinks, but it is intimately related to a *mind* or a *soul* that does think. But if human animals don't think, then either other intelligent organisms like dolphins or chimpanzees are not actually intelligent, or they, too, are intimately related to minds that think.^[12]

If we are thinking *minds*, not thinking *animals*, this might challenge some of our everyday judgments about ourselves and our relationship to physical things: e.g., you never actually see yourself in the mirror (you see the organism); if you take a road trip with your dog, Spot, where we normally judge there to be *two* things are actually *four* (the human animal, the canine animal, you, and Spot);^[13] and you and Spot never snuggle (only the organisms do).

Denying premise 3—that you are the only thinking being sitting in your chair—instead requires claiming that you are not the *only* thinker: you're a thinker, and so is the human animal, with thoughts exactly like yours. But if there *are* two thinkers in your chair, you won't know that you're not the animal. Even if you think, "I'm not the animal; I'm the thinker that's *not* the animal," the animal will think the exact same thing. So, denying premise 3 doesn't provide any assurance that you're *not* an animal.^[14]

Another way to resist is with a parallel Thinking *Brain Argument* about the *brain* located where you are.^[15] The argument has analogous support, but its conclusion contradicts animalism: you are a *brain* not an *animal*. So we might have equally good evidence for a competing conclusion. At the least, it warrants more discussion of what it takes to be a thinker.

5. Conclusion

So, what are we, fundamentally? Animals? Brains? Minds? Souls? Some combination?

Any answer has consequences for our self-understanding and raises further philosophical questions: When do we come into, and go out of, existence? Who counts as *one of us*, and what moral obligations do we have toward them? There's a lot at stake when considering "What are we?"

Notes

[11] Descartes (1641) argues that each of us is an immaterial thing, a soul or a mind, rather than a physical thing, like a body. For an overview of his argument, see Meditation 6: The Existence of Physical Things and Substance Dualism in [Descartes' Meditations 4-6](#) by Marc Bobro.

[12] Olson (1999) is a major proponent of animalism. For additional presentations of animalism and its various forms, see Bailey (2015), Thornton (2016), and Blatti (2019).

[13] For an explanation of biological identity, continuing to live the same biological life, see Blatti (2019, §1.2); for an opposing view, see Madden (2016). The relationship between animalism and our identity over time is a matter of current debate; see Duncan (forthcoming) and Bailey, Thornton, and van Elswyk (forthcoming).

[14] Locke (1690, II.xxvii) argues that personal identity is a matter of psychology. For an introduction to psychological theories of personal identity, see section 3 of [Personal Identity](#) by Chad Vance.

[15] Another option is that *neither* patient is you, even if the procedure is successful. But, at most, you either follow your brain or stay with your body. Perhaps both patients survive as individuals very closely related, but not identical to, you. For discussions of *survival* as opposed to *identity*, see Parfit (1984).

[16] For fictional representations of what this might be like, see Amazon's *Upload* series or *Black Mirror's "San Junipero."*

[17] The general challenge of the afterlife is that if you gain a new body or exist unembodied after physical death, you don't appear to be *the same animal*. Some animalists, such as van Inwagen, try to preserve the possibility of an afterlife by arguing that God transports the human organism into a physical afterlife and puts a corpse in its place on earth; see discussion in Hasker and Taliferro (2019). Other animalists suggest different strategies for preserving

the possibility of an afterlife, see, for example, Thornton (2019).

^[10] This is a reconstruction of Olson's argument (2003). For other arguments for animalism, see Blatti (2012) and Bailey (2016).

^[9] If, later, this human animal has its brain removed for a brain transplant, then this human animal would no longer be thinking. But premise 2 is about what's happening right now.

^[10] Philosophers of personal identity will go to great lengths to preserve the idea behind this premise; theories of personal identity should not lead to the conclusion that there are multiple thinkers where you are. For discussion, see Hershenov (2013).

^[11] Some philosophers would deny premise 1 and endorse *mereological nihilism*, according to which there are *no* composite physical objects, such as animals (or chairs, for that matter). For discussion of this view, see Wasserman (2017, §4).

^[12] Chimpanzees and dolphins, like humans, communicate, develop social relationships, use tools, work together cooperatively, and recognize themselves in the mirror, all of which provide evidence of thought and intelligence (Bearzi and Stanford 2010).

^[13] If we were to give an inventory of everything in the car, we'd typically mention things like luggage, Spot's toys, road trip snacks, water bottle, etc., you, and Spot. But, once we've accounted for you and Spot, we would likely fail to account for two things that are very obviously in the car: the human animal and the canine animal.

^[14] Denying premise 3 also requires denying some everyday judgments: there would be twice as many *thinkers* as we normally recognize; the person and the animal are both thinking. If you do something nice for a friend, you've brought happiness to both your friend and the animal located where your friend is. If you say something that hurts their feelings, you've actually done it twice over: once to the person and once to the animal.

^[15] The Thinking Brain Argument proceeds as follows:

Premise 1': There is a human brain located where you are.

Premise 2': The human brain located where you are is thinking.

Premise 3': You are the only thinking being located

where you are.

Conclusion': Therefore, you are a human brain.

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