

Everything is a Goat

Bill Capra rebuts a cosmological argument against goatism.

Philosophers can be perverse. Sometimes intuitive, common-sense ideas are challenged by clever and apparently compelling arguments that lead to extraordinarily counterintuitive conclusions. Consider the common-sense principle that everything is a goat, otherwise known as *goatism*. This is a simple, intuitive claim about the world, part of our unreflective outlook – something we take for granted but don't ordinarily examine. Yet surprisingly, some philosophers have thought an argument can be mounted against this common-sense idea. Indeed the argument purports to show not just that not everything is a goat, but that it could not be that everything is a goat. This argument begins from a compelling principle:

Goats eat everything.

This principle seems correct. Some animals will eat this and not that, but not goats. They are omnivorous. The principle that 'goats eat everything' says that they actually do this, not just that they can or might do this. Everything can and everything does go down a goat's throat. Everything is eaten by a goat. Goats are not just omnivorous, but omnivoracious. Yet reflecting on this omnivoraciousness opens up the possibility of an argument. The argument in question is a *cosmological* argument against goatism. The argument runs as follows:

Premise 1: Goats eat everything.

Premise 2: Eating is asymmetric. That is, if A eats B, then B does not eat A.

Therefore:

Conclusion: There is at least one non-goat.

If goats eat everything, this applies to goats too, since they are things. Therefore all goats must be eaten by goats. But goats that do the eating of goats must in turn be eaten by goats. The problem is not with the top of the food chain, but the bottom. Surely there must be something which is eaten which is not an eater. So there must be something that is eaten by a goat which is not itself a goat.

I shall argue that although this argument is superficially plausible, it is ultimately spurious. Of course, many will already be suspicious of the argument because its conclusion is so deeply counterintuitive. But let us charitably examine the argument for its intrinsic plausibility, recognizing that others may not share our views of what is intuitively implausible.

Clearly premise 1 is unassailable. It is premise 2 – that the eating relation is asymmetric – which is the disputable premise. Let us call premise 2 the Eating Asymmetry Thesis ('EAT').

EAT seems to follow from an analysis of the eating relation. If A eats B, then at the conclusion of the eating process B ceases to exist while A remains. Hence the common maxim

that it is better to eat than to be eaten.

Let us distinguish two versions of EAT – 'diachronic' and 'synchronic'. *Diachronic EAT* says this:

If A eats B at one time, then it cannot be the case that B eats A later on.

This seems questionable. Surely Jonah might have decided that he would eat his way out of the whale after having being swallowed by it. (Of course, given goatism, Jonah and whale would have been a prophetic and an aquatic goat, respectively.)

It might be said that if Jonah had been eaten *properly*, which includes some form of digestion, he could not have been intact enough to eat his way out of the whale. But is it a necessary truth that what has been eaten no longer exists? If not, then Jonah might yet persist to some degree, and in a form in which he could eat the whale back, as it were.

However, suppose for the sake of argument that it is indeed a necessary truth that what has been eaten no longer exists. If eating a thing destroys it, is that clearly the end of goatism? Surely not. For nothing has been said concerning the *origin* of goats. So long as new goats come into existence to eat whatever eats a goat, there is no difficulty for goatism. There can be an infinite (food-) chain of goats eating goats eating goats. Why should we think that there need be some primal or final non-goat? So let us ignore the *diachronic* version of EAT, since anti-goatism cannot be established with it.



Last goat standing

The anti-goatist might now retreat to the doctrine of *Synchronic EAT*:

If A eats B, then at that time, it cannot be the case that B eats A.

But on reflection this also seems to not be the case. One can easily imagine two friendly goat cannibals sitting down to lunch happily munching each other at the same time. Eventually there will not be much left apart from two mouths, two esophaguses, two stomachs, and two digestive tracts. It might appear that there is a metaphysical or perhaps a logical difficulty with continuing eating much (or lunch) beyond this point. This would be like the difficulty of eating oneself beyond a certain point. Could one eat oneself so that nothing remains? Certainly one can carry on eating oneself *forever*, so long as one takes smaller and smaller bites. There is a potential infinity of bites of oneself (or of a fellow cannibal) that one can take. But – the anti-goatist will ask – can one *complete* the task, and have as it were a completely clean plate (or two completely clean plates)? Surely it is intuitively plausible that one cannot completely eat oneself, and that our two friendly cannibals cannot completely eat each other. Intuition says that they can eat quite a lot of each other, they can even carry on eating each other for ever; but it is intuitive that they can never finish every last morsel, any more than one can eat every last morsel of oneself. If so, the doctrine of goatism is finished, for then goats do not and cannot eat everything, including themselves.

However, we should be wary of the role modal intuition is playing in this argument. Severed from empirical science, the question of whether goats can eat themselves is merely an abstruse, arcane question, of little but academic interest – reminding one of the preposterous discussion in bygone eras of how many angels can fit on a pinhead.¹ Whatever ‘intuition’ might or might not have to say, it is simply part of the goatist outlook that one *can* completely eat oneself, and that friendly goat cannibals can finish eating lunch. Once one has embraced goatism, any intuitions rooted in a previous non-goatist paradigm can be rejected as unreliable. Such intuitions should go the way of equally dubious intuitions concerning simultaneity, once one has embraced relativistic space-time. One cannot simply assert the existence of a possibility or an impossibility, when what possibilities or impossibilities obtain lie downstream from the correct metaphysics. So the intuition that it is impossible for two friendly goat cannibals to complete lunch cannot be used in support of synchronic EAT.

Moreover, it’s not just that the anti-goatist appeal to intuition is dialectically empty, but also that science itself provides positive support for the possibility of self-eating goats.

Some might argue that the existence of a being that consumed itself would conflict with physical conservation laws because mass/energy would not be conserved in the space-time

¹ How comically absurd those scholastic discussions appear from the vantage point of today’s more sophisticated rationalistic outlook! We now know that angels and pinheads are one and all *goats*. Transformed into a goatist metaphysics, this question becomes empirically tractable, instead of merely a matter of abstract word-play governed by no proper methodological rules. This is yet another example of the way an issue that was once part of merely speculative philosophy later becomes part of respectable empirical science.

locality where the self-eating occurs. After lunch there would be missing mass and energy. But this takes a narrow view. It is widely thought that there is gradually increasing entropy in the universe. Postulating the existence of self-eating goats would help explain that fact. Furthermore, there is a more direct scientific confirmation, from the existence of black holes. Contemporary physics suggests that black holes are self-eating goats – for the way energy implodes in a black hole is what one would predict as a self-eating goat nears the end of its lunch. Most goats, of course, do not eat themselves. Only a few do. Most goats are content to eat other goats. But the goats that do eat themselves are plausibly identified with black holes. Contemporary science confirms goatism.

Since we have no good reason to believe either the diachronic or the synchronic versions of EAT, and indeed some reason to reject them, it follows that the cosmological argument against goatism fails by helping itself to what it needed to show. Clearly, goats eat everything; but we have not been given any reason to believe that the eaten cannot eat the eater, or that the eater and the eaten cannot be one and the same.

Although the cosmological argument fails, it is not wholly without value, for it does alert us to the metaphysical and gastronomic dependency relations that obtain between the items which comprise the ultimate furniture of the universe. Ours is not a flat world, but a structured and nuanced world. Ours is not a world of metaphysical egalitarianism. Some goats are more equal than others. In particular, it is not the case that all goats that are eaten eat the goats that eat them.

Note that this argument does not obviously yield the conclusion that there is one primal goat – the Great Goat – which eats other goats but is not itself eaten by them. The world might consist of an infinite tower of goats standing on the back of goats standing on the back on goats, and so on – each eating the goat on which they stand. That there is a Great Goat would be a further claim. The Great Goat would be a goat no other goat eats, although it eats itself. Whether there is a Great Goat is a deep and important matter, which must await further investigation. But for the present we can be satisfied to have rebutted an apparently attractive argument against the common-sense thesis that everything is a goat.

Speaking for myself, I believe in the Great Goat, although I admit candidly that this is a bold conjecture. The idea is that as the universe unfolds through time, goats come into existence and eat other goats, which eat other goats... but there eventually will be just one goat remaining. After almost all the goats have been eaten by goats, there will be one last goat – the Great Goat, which has directly or indirectly eaten all the other goats. This Great Goat then eats itself, and with that the world ends. In current physical theory, the end of everything is known as the Big Crunch, but it might be better called the Big Munch or the Big Lunch. As I say, this is a bold conjecture, for given what we now know, it is possible that the universe will collapse into two cannibal goats who eat other, or even a veritable banquet of mutually-eating cannibal goats. There will be a Last Lunch. For the goatist, the only question is: How many goats will turn up at the Last Lunch for the Big Munch?

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