

Animalism is Either False or Uninteresting (Perhaps Both)

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ABSTRACT

“We are animals.” That’s what animalists say—that’s their slogan. But what animalists *mean* by their slogan varies. Many animalists are adamant that what they mean—and, indeed, what the true animalist thesis *is*—is that we are identical to animals (human animals, to be precise). But others say that’s not enough. They say that the animalist thesis has to be something more—perhaps that we are *essentially* or *most fundamentally* human animals. This paper argues that, depending on how we understand it, animalism is either false or uninteresting. If animalism is just the claim that we are identical to animals, then it is uninteresting. For it doesn’t provide an answer to the question it’s meant to address. On the other hand, if animalism entails a stronger claim, such as that we are essentially animals, then animalism is false. Either way, we should set animalism aside.

1. ANIMALISM LIGHT

Animalism is meant to answer a very deep, very foundational philosophical question. That question is: what are we? The animalist answer is: we—that is, the humans living here on Earth—are human animals.¹

This crisp, three-word question and its comparably crisp answer may seem straightforward. Indeed, the apparent profundity of the question, together with the simplicity of the answer, is an alluring feature of animalism (cf., Bailey 2015, pp. 867).

But things aren’t quite so simple. For philosophers disagree about what the animalist answer means; that is, they disagree about the commitments of animalism. Some say animalism is the claim that we are identical to animals; some say it’s more. So to *assess* animalism we’ve got to take a look at multiple, non-equivalent theses.

The most common elaboration of animalism is the view that we are identical to human animals. I’ll call this “Animalism Light” because it does not require commitment to stronger claims such as that we are *essentially* or *fundamentally* animals.² In this section, I’ll argue that Animalism Light

is uninteresting—not in the sense that it’s tautological or otherwise trivial, but in the sense that it doesn’t provide an answer to the deep philosophical question that it purports to answer and that its longest-standing opponents do answer.

Again, the question is: what are we? Now, when one asks this, one could be posing any number of questions—some deep, to be sure, but some less so. One might simply be asking what we are like, or what our features are, or what various kinds we fall under—the sort of question one might be asking when one quizzically utters, “What is that?” while pointing at a figure in abstract art. If that’s the question here, then the answer is: we are lots of things. I, for example, am a philosopher, an American, and a fan of Paul Thomas Anderson. I don’t share these features with every human. But I do share plenty of other traits with everyone. We are all Earthlings, children of parents, possessors of brains, digesters, and we’re all under 20 feet tall.

But clearly we’re on the wrong track here. If someone asks me, in a philosophical tone of voice, “What are we?” and I answer, “We are digesters,” or, “We are under 20 feet tall,” clearly I’ve missed the thrust of the question.

So then what is the question? There are several other ways to interpret it, but context is crucial. The context in which contemporary versions of animalism were first introduced, and so the context in which *our* philosophical, “What are we?” question first arises, is in the debate about *personal identity*.³ And *that* debate is not just concerned with what we happen to be—what our various features are, accidental or not. It’s concerned with what we are, and what we could and couldn’t be, in some more fundamental sense. I think the best way to interpret this, “What are we?” question is as asking, “What are we *essentially*?” or perhaps, “What are we *fundamentally*?” However, I won’t insist on any particular interpretation here. For I don’t think we need to adopt any precise interpretation of this question to see that Animalism Light does not answer it.

For, again, Animalism Light just says that we are identical to human animals—that I, for example, am identical to a human animal. And, as we’ve just seen, that’s metaphysical milk toast. After all, I’m identical to a philosopher, an American, a fan of P. T. Anderson, and so on. But none of this, by itself, says much about *what I am* in any particularly deep or interesting sense. So, likewise, Animalism Light, by itself, does not say much about what I am in any particularly deep or interesting sense.⁴ Thus, Animalism Light is uninteresting in that it doesn’t answer the question—however it may be precisified—that it’s supposed to answer.

This point is reinforced by considering how widely defenders of Animalism Light differ with respect to what we are. Some say we are essentially animals (e.g., Snowdon 2014; Olson 1997), others say we are only contingently animals (e.g., Hershenov 2008; Sauchelli 2016); most say we are identical to *whole* human organisms (e.g., Olson 2007; Merricks 2001; Bailey 2014), but some say we are just brains (e.g., Licon 2013); some say we could survive disembodiment (e.g., Thornton forthcoming), others disagree (e.g., Olson 1997; Merricks 2001); some say we exist only so long as we are alive (e.g., Olson 1997; van Inwagen 1990), others say our future corpses will still be us (e.g., Carter 1999; Mackie 1999); some say we are wholly material beings (e.g., Olson 1997; van Inwagen 1990), others say we have immaterial souls (e.g., Toner 2011; Thornton forthcoming); some say we have biological persistence conditions (e.g., Snowdon 2014; van Inwagen 1990; Olson 1997), others say we have psychological persistence conditions (Sharpe 2015) or no persistence conditions at all (Merricks 1998).⁵ I think that if a view is consistent with all of the above claims, then it doesn’t answer the deep, philosophical, “What are we?” question. So I think Animalism Light doesn’t answer that question. So I think that, in this sense, Animalism Light is uninteresting.

This point is even further reinforced by the fact that many of animalism’s self-proclaimed *opponents* accept Animalism Light, or at least don’t rule it out. For example, anti-animalist Mark Johnston (2016) says:

That we are *predicatively* human animals is a fact that every view of personal identity must take into account. Indeed, many views of personal identity, intuitively at odds with animalism understood as a distinctive alternative position in the philosophy of personal identity, have already taken this into account ... all of us are human animals. But so what? (pp. 127).

Sydney Shoemaker (2016), another critic of animalism, says:

Persons breathe, eat, drink, digest food, excrete waste, and in countless other ways do what animals characteristically do. They have organs—hearts, livers, etc.—and reproductive systems characteristic of mammals, and share much of their DNA with other animals. Plainly they are animals (pp. 128).

That many of animalism's self-proclaimed opponents accept Animalism Light is no accident. For the view that is (and has been) mostly frequently set up against animalism is Neo-Lockeanism about personal identity, which is the view that we have psychological persistence conditions. But that we have psychological persistence conditions is consistent with our being identical to animals. So it is consistent with Animalism Light. Thus, it is no surprise that although Johnston (2016) affirms that we are animals, he also says:

Animalism is intended to be a distinctive view in the philosophy of personal identity, a view which would give an answer to the question of what changes we can survive. So it had better imply not just that we are animals, but also that we could not cease to be animals without ceasing to be (pp. 109).

And it is also no surprise that, in the same breath that Shoemaker (2016) admits that we are animals, he adds:

Is what I have just said an affirmation of animalism? No. What I said implied nothing about what the persistence conditions of animals are (pp. 128).

These sorts of comments from self-proclaimed opponents of animalism are not unusual.⁶ And they are further evidence that Animalism Light is not really what's under debate—that it's not an answer to our guiding question.

One might reply that although Animalism Light doesn't rule out Neo-Lockeanism or other theories of personal identity, it does at least rule out *some* substantive theses and so is not completely devoid of interest.

But the range of such theses is surprisingly narrow. For instance, one might have thought that dualism—the view that we have, or partly are, souls—would be a good candidate for a view ruled out by Animalism Light. But, as we've seen, some defenders of Animalism Light in fact *accept* dualism.⁷ The same goes for other theses that one might have initially thought were at odds with Animalism Light (see pp. 2-3 above).⁸

One might reply that Animalism Light does at least rule out *some* versions of dualism. Maybe not versions on which we *have* immaterial souls or are *partly* souls, but (the reply goes) it does at least rule out versions of dualism on which we are *wholly identical* to souls—assuming, that is, that no animal is wholly identical to a soul.

But even this last assumption may be too quick. Allison Thornton (forthcoming) argues that some disembodied human animals—namely, the dear departed—are wholly identical to immaterial souls. So maybe Animalism Light doesn't, in fact, preclude this. At least, it doesn't preclude our *becoming* naught but souls.

And, furthermore, even if Animalism Light did rule out that we are wholly identical to souls, this, by itself, would say little *positive* about what we are. I don't deny that Animalism Light rules out *some* views about us. For example, I don't deny that it rules out the view that we are identical to portions of lasagna (assuming, with some hesitance, that no animal is lasagna). And so I don't deny that Animalism Light is interesting in this sense. I merely deny that every such exclusion, by itself, tells us much about what we *are*. And I deny that excluding the view that we are wholly identical to souls—without, again, excluding the views that we are partly souls or that we could become souls—tells us

much about what we are in the deep and interesting philosophical sense that is in play here. By itself, it does not answer the, “What are we?” question.

Perhaps the most promising example of a substantive thesis ruled out by Animalism Light is the thesis that we are *constituted by*, but non-identical to, animals. Lynne Rudder Baker (2016) and Denis Robinson (2016), among others, defend this view. They argue that a human animal constitutes each of us in the same way that a lump of marble constitutes, but is non-identical to, a statue. Since this view entails that we are not identical to animals, it is inconsistent with Animalism Light. So Animalism Light does at least have this opponent.

But, at most, that just means that Animalism Light has some interest *in the broader philosophical scheme of things*, which I don’t deny. It doesn’t mean that Animalism Light is interesting in the sense of answering the, “What are we?” question. In fact, Animalism Light’s inconsistency with the constitution view is *not* enough to make it interesting in that sense.

Before I explain why, it’s worth mentioning that defenders of Animalism Light and defenders of the constitution view often disagree, not just about what we are, but also about what it is they are disagreeing about. Defenders of the constitution view typically assume that their debate with animalists is not just over whether we are, as a matter of fact, identical to human animals. Indeed, the very reason they deny that we are identical to human animals is because they take that claim to entail something stronger that they consider to be false—namely, that we are *essentially* human animals (see, e.g., Baker 2016, pp. 50; Robinson 2016, pp. 65). So defenders of the constitution view think that their debate with animalists is not really over Animalism Light—they think it goes *beyond* it; that it’s over a *further* claim. However, defenders of Animalism Light disagree. They deny that accepting Animalism Light automatically commits them to the claim that we are essentially human animals (see e.g., Bailey 2015, pp. 868; Blatti and Snowdon 2016, pp. 9; Olson 2015, pp. 92). In fact, they see this as a benefit of

their view. For, among other things, they think it allows them to dodge certain arguments against stronger animalist claims (cf., Bailey 2015, pp. 873; Olson 2016, pp. 151).

I won't try to settle this meta-disagreement here. I'll just say this: if defenders of the constitution view are right on this point, then Animalism Light isn't really "Light", since it entails the stronger claim that we are essentially human animals. That makes it no different from a stronger version of animalism that I'll discuss (and argue against) in the next section. So, for now, I'll just assume that Animalism Light is the distinctive thesis its defenders say it is. So I'll assume that Animalism Light does *not* entail, and thus does *not* require commitment to, the claim that we are essentially human animals. And so I'll assume that the only difference between Animalism Light and the constitution view concerns what we *actually* are. Thus, what I'll now undermine is the idea that Animalism Light's inconsistency with the claim that we are actually constituted by human animals is enough to make it interesting in the, "What are we?" context.

To begin with, note that Animalism Light and the constitution view agree on quite a lot when it comes to what we actually are. The only immediate difference between them concerns our *relation* to human animals: Animalism Light says we are *identical to* human animals; the constitution view says we are *constituted by* human animals. They agree on the human animal part. But that's the part most relevant to answering what we actually are. To see this, consider the following competing pairs of views about what we actually are: we are identical to souls vs. we are constituted by souls; we are identical to fish vs. we are constituted by fish; we are identical to marbles vs. we are constituted by marbles. Each pair of views tells us something informative about what we actually are (we are souls, fish, marbles). But, *within* these pairs, does one view have a clear advantage over the other just in terms of how much it tells us about what we actually are? Not obviously.⁹

Indeed, it seems that Animalism Light and the standard constitution view pretty much agree on what we actually are—they just differ on some of the details. But this agreement isn't inevitable.

It's a purely contingent fact that current defenders of the constitution view hold that we are constituted by *animals*. One could imagine a defender of a constitution view holding that we are constituted by bodies, or souls, or cleverly disguised robots. And these views *really would* be at odds with Animalism Light over what we actually are. But that just goes to show, once again, where this disagreement has to be in order for these views to substantially differ on what we actually are. That we are *constituted* by, rather than identical to, some x doesn't, by itself, say much about what we actually are. The x is what really matters. So the mere fact that Animalism Light rules out our being *constituted* by human animals does not say a whole lot about what we actually are.

One might respond that the above does at least say *something* about what we actually are. I concede the point. Saying that we are identical to x, as opposed to constituted by x, does say *something* about what we actually are. But so does saying that we are digesters, or Earthlings, or non-frogs. The point is, none of this—including the identity/constitution bit—says *enough* to answer our, “What are we?” question. It certainly doesn't give a *full* answer to it. Indeed, by my lights, denying that we are constituted by x says *very little* about what we actually are.

Denying that we are constituted by x also doesn't say much about us *in particular*. Constitution is (supposedly) a very general metaphysical relation, applying equally to people, statues, DNA, driver's licenses, etc. According to defenders of the constitution view, we are constituted by animals, statues are constituted by lumps of marble, DNA is constituted by sums of cells, and driver's licenses are constituted by rectangular bits of plastic (Baker 2016, pp. 52). So insofar as the, “What are we?” question is supposed to get at something deep about us people *in particular*, the claim that we are constituted by x does not, by itself, get us very far toward answering that question. And so the mere fact that Animalism Light rules out our being constituted by human animals, rather than identical to them, does not say a whole lot about us in particular.

Denying that we are constituted by human animals also does not, by itself, tell us what we *could and couldn't be*.¹⁰ For constitution is a *contingent* relation. That we are constituted by human animals is consistent with our possibly being constituted by souls, robots, or alligators. So that we are (contingently) constituted by human animals does not, by itself, say much about what we are in the deeper sense discussed earlier having to do with what we could and couldn't be (or what changes we could and couldn't survive). So the mere fact that Animalism Light rules out our being constituted by human animals does not say a whole lot about what we are in that deeper sense, which is the sense relevant to our, "What are we?" question.

All of this may seem to suggest that the constitution view, like Animalism Light, fails to answer the, "What are we?" question. And that may come as a surprise. For defenders of the constitution view are adamant that they're answering this question (see, e.g., Baker 2016, pp. 50). Are they wrong? Or have I made a mistake?

No, and no. Defenders of the constitution view take themselves to be answering the, "What are we?" question only because they *also* hold that we are identical to persons, not animals, and because they take this to entail that we are *essentially* persons. If their view was only that we are actually constituted by human animals, then, like Animalism Light, the constitution view wouldn't answer the, "What are we?" question.

But it's telling that the main argument offered by defenders of the constitution view against animalism is not really an argument against Animalism Light *per se*. Baker (2016), for example, argues that we are not identical to animals because we have certain properties that animals lack—for example, modal properties, such as possibly not being an animal, and temporal properties, such as not being an animal at some point in the past or future. But notice, this argument assumes that any animal is always and essentially an animal. So this argument assumes that animalists are committed to the claim that we are always and essentially animals. But that claim goes *beyond* Animalism Light. Thus, even within

the constitution-animalism debate, there is an acknowledgment (which is not always explicit) that what's at stake goes beyond Animalism Light.

Again, the most promising example of a substantive thesis ruled out by Animalism Light is the constitution view. But Animalism Light's inconsistency with the constitution view is not enough to make it interesting in the sense of answering the question it's supposed to answer (i.e., "What are we?"). So I conclude that Animalism Light is not interesting in that sense. My claim here is not that Animalism Light is tautological or otherwise trivially true. It is *not* trivial. Indeed, it may not be true! The constitution view may be true, or there may be other reasons to believe that we are not identical to animals. I've not made that case here. For my main point in this section is that Animalism Light is uninteresting in the sense that it doesn't answer the question it's supposed to answer. But, for all I've said, Animalism Light may have the additional fault of being false.

2. ROBUST ANIMALISM

Animalism Light is uninteresting in that it doesn't answer the question it's supposed to answer. So, in the context of pursuing an answer that question, we should set Animalism Light aside. But that doesn't mean we should set *animalism* aside. For there are various stronger animalist claims that do get at our guiding question.

Here are some examples:

We are necessarily (or essentially) human animals.

We are fundamentally human animals.

Our highest kind is human animal.

Our persistence conditions are biological—those of human animals.

All humans are, by definition, identical to human animals (it's in the *analysis* of 'human').¹¹

There may be other animalist claims that go beyond Animalism Light. But the above claims pretty well canvas what's been defended in the literature (cf., Bailey 2015; Thornton 2016). I won't discuss every one of them here. Instead, I'll focus on the claim that we are *essentially* human animals, where that just means that we are human animals at all times and in every possible world in which we exist. I'll call this "Robust Animalism."¹² Part of my reason for focusing on Robust Animalism is that each of the above claims plausibly entails it (at least given how these claims are understood and defended in the literature).¹³ So when I argue that Robust Animalism is false, as I'll do in this section, it will follow that each of the above claims is false as well. Thus, by toppling the one domino—that is, Robust Animalism—I'll thereby fell the set.

With that, here again is my immediate target:

Robust Animalism: we (humans here on earth) are essentially human animals; that is, we are human animals at all times and in every possible world in which we exist.

Robust Animalism entails the following claim:

Entailment: necessarily, for any person P (here on Earth) and any time t, if P exists at t, then P is a human animal at t.

If Entailment is false, so is Robust Animalism. And if Robust Animalism is false, so is each of the above substantive versions of animalism. I'll now argue that Entailment is false and, thus, that Robust Animalism and each of the above versions of animalism are false as well. There are many arguments against Robust Animalism. But, as we will see, my argument, a version of which I've

recently introduced elsewhere (see Duncan 2015), has distinct advantages over other arguments against Robust Animalism.

To get in the right frame of mind for my argument, let's start by engaging in a (literal) *thought* experiment. Specifically, think a short, simple thought—think “ $2+2=4$.” Close your eyes, clear your mind, and just think “ $2+2=4$.”

Now notice two things. First, you can be certain that your thought exists and that you are its subject. You could be wrong about all sorts of things, but not that. So right now you can be certain that you are thinking, and thus, that you exist. So you exist. Second: thinking takes time. Some thoughts are short. But even “ $2+2=4$ ” takes at least a few milliseconds to think. So the fact that you can be certain that your thought exists and that you are its thinker actually implies that you can be certain that you *persist*. So you persist. Specifically, you persist for as long as it takes to think “ $2+2=4$.” And this very same evidence is available to anyone who is the subject of *any* brief, uninterrupted and unimpaired phenomenal experience. So, whenever anyone is the subject of such an experience, one can be certain that one persists. In which case one persists.

But let's focus on your case. Again, close your eyes, clear your mind, and think “ $2+2=4$.” Now suppose that, in the few milliseconds it takes you to think “ $2+2=4$,” evil aliens painlessly destroy your body. The only part of you they don't destroy is your cerebrum. On the bright side, the aliens manage to sustain the normal functioning of your cerebrum. So there is no detectible phenomenal disturbance.¹⁴ In fact, you are so absorbed in your thought that you completely fail to notice what the aliens have done, at least for a moment.

Your direct introspective evidence concerning your thinking is the same as in any other case of thinking “ $2+2=4$.” So you can be absolutely certain that you thought that thought. So you thought it. Which means you persisted through the time it took you to think it. But Entailment implies the opposite. The post-operation cerebrum is not an animal. For cerebra aren't animals.¹⁵ So if Entailment

is true, you didn't survive. But you did survive! You know it. How? Because you know you thought "2+2=4." And in order to think that thought, you had to take the time to think it, which is more than the time it took the aliens to do their deed. So, contra Entailment, you survived—you exist, even though you aren't an animal. So Entailment is false. Thus, Robust Animalism is false, as are each of the above stronger versions of animalism.

In order to avoid this result, a defender of Robust Animalism must say that, since it takes a few milliseconds to think "2+2=4," and since you don't exist for that whole time, it's not really *you* who thinks "2+2=4." This is a very bad option to be left with. To see this in full force, assume for a moment that 'you' refers to the post-op cerebrum (Robust Animalists typically don't deny that non-animals could be the referents of personal pronouns). Robust Animalists have to say that although in the above case it *seems* to you (both phenomenologically and epistemically) as if you are thinking "2+2=4," in fact you aren't. But this smacks of a dubious distinction between your thinking "2+2=4" and it merely *seeming* to you as if you are thinking "2+2=4." There is no such distinction. If it seems to you that you're thinking "2+2=4," then you *are* thinking "2+2=4."

This point gains even more force when we consider the *specific kind* of mistake that you would have to be making here. You wouldn't necessarily be wrong to believe that "2+2=4" was thought. It was. Or, at least, each part of it was. If Robust Animalism is true, then a human animal thought part of "2+2=4," and you thought the other part of it. So the mistake wouldn't be in believing that "2+2=4" was thought. Rather, it would be in believing that *you* thought it. But this is not a mistake that you can make. You are, as they (i.e., philosophers) say, *immune* from such errors.¹⁶ If you know that a thought is thought, and you judge on the basis of the way things seem to you that *you* are thinking it, then you are right, you *are* thinking it. So the notion that you are wrong to believe that you are thinking "2+2=4" simply doesn't gain any traction. There's just no denying that you think "2+2=4" in the above case. So the defender of Robust Animalism doesn't have a leg to stand on.

We can see just how compelling this argument is by comparing it to two less compelling arguments. Here's the first: you've been in Detroit for the last two hours; which implies that you've existed for the last two hours; yet aliens have destroyed your body (minus your cerebrum) in the meantime; so Robust Animalism is false. This argument may be sound. But it's not very compelling. A defender of Robust Animalism will simply deny that it was really *you* who was in Detroit for all of the past two hours. And what can you say in response? It's not as if you have any special evidence that it was *you*, as opposed to a series of entities continuous with you, who was in Detroit. For all you know given the way things seem to you, you might not have been there the whole time. Thus, the assumption that you were in Detroit is not, by itself, a compelling reason to reject Robust Animalism. If you have a good reason to accept Robust Animalism, then the rational course may very well be to revise your beliefs about where you were over the last two hours.

Here is a somewhat better argument: Aliens just destroyed your body; yet you *remember* existing yesterday; thus, Robust Animalism is false. This argument is better than the previous argument because memory is a pretty reliable source of evidence about the recent past. Still, the argument is hardly conclusive. For a defender of Robust Animalism can, without too much embarrassment, just say that your memory is mistaken. She can even grant that your memory is of a person who really did exist yesterday and who is connected to you in various important ways. But then she can say that, *strictly speaking*, you are not identical to this person; while it may *seem* to you as if the person in your memory is you, in fact, it isn't you. This might be surprising, but it isn't incoherent or even particularly absurd. Memory isn't perfect, after all. The defender of Robust Animalism can therefore resist this argument by simply denying the apparent deliverances of your memory.

Now return to my argument. Here denying the appearances—that is, denying that things are as they seem—simply doesn't work. For, in the case I described, there is no gap between appearance and reality. If it *seems* to you that you are thinking “ $2+2=4$,” then you *are*. So it just isn't reasonable to

say that although it seems to you as if you are thinking “ $2+2=4$,” in fact, you aren’t. There is no epistemic wiggle room here.

Think of it this way. There are scenarios—including various skeptical scenarios—in which things seem to you exactly as they do now but in which you weren’t in Detroit for the last two hours or you didn’t exist yesterday. Perhaps an evil demon is tricking you. Or perhaps you are just wrong about what it takes for you to persist through time. These are ways things could turn out to be given the way things seem to you right now. So you can doubt that you were in Detroit or that you existed yesterday. Thus, if you have a good reason to believe Robust Animalism, then you may, without absurdity, give up your belief that you were in Detroit or that you existed yesterday. But your belief that you are thinking “ $2+2=4$ ” is different. It isn’t open to doubt. There is no skeptical scenario in which things seem to you as they do but in which you are not thinking “ $2+2=4$.” Given the way things seem to you, it couldn’t turn out that you are not thinking “ $2+2=4$.” But Entailment implies that, in fact, you are not thinking “ $2+2=4$.” So it couldn’t turn out that Entailment is true. You can conclusively rule it out. Hence, my argument against Robust Animalism is especially compelling.

A Robust Animalist might grant that my argument is better than the above arguments about Detroit and yesterday, but then deny that my argument is especially compelling compared to *their* arguments for Robust Animalism. They may even grant that I’ve given *some* evidence against Robust Animalism, but then deny that this evidence is significantly weightier than other evidence, including evidence for Robust Animalism.

But that’s not how I see it. The evidence that I’ve given is especially potent. It’s evidence that we all have access to. It’s evidence that we can be directly aware of whenever we think. And it’s evidence that is absolutely foundational to how we reason about and conceptualize ourselves as persons. Thus, rather than being just one consideration among many, this evidence carries special weight. It is certain. It is undeniable.

Still, a Robust Animalist might dig in her heels. Even if she grants that the evidence I've given is especially potent, she might nonetheless fall back to animalists' most steadfast barricade: the *Too Many Thinkers Argument*. She might insist (as animalists are wont to do) that the forcefulness of this argument outweighs, or at least counterbalances, the forcefulness of any argument to the contrary, which includes my own.

So let's take a look. Here's the Too Many Thinkers Argument (cf., Blatti 2016, pp. 163):

- (1) There is a human animal currently located where you are.
- (2) The human animal currently located where you are is thinking.
- (3) You are the only thinking being currently located where you are.
- (4) Therefore, the human animal currently located where you are is you.

There are two things that I want to say about this argument. First, I deny that it is more forceful than my argument. Each of its premises can be denied. Indeed, each *has* been denied with at least some plausibility.¹⁷ In contrast, the evidence that I've given against Robust Animalism is especially potent. It is certain. It is undeniable.

But now set that aside for a moment. The main thing I want to say in this context about the Too Many Thinkers Argument is this: it's not an argument for Robust Animalism. Its conclusion is just that we are identical to human animals—not that we are *essentially* human animals. So it's really an argument for *Animalism Light*, not Robust Animalism (cf., Johnston 2016).¹⁸ Thus, whether or not it is sound, forceful, or even irresistibly compelling, the Too Many Thinkers Argument provides no refuge for Robust Animalists. And indeed, if, as I've argued, Animalism Light is uninteresting in the sense that it does not answer the question that it's supposed to answer (“What are we?”), then this argument provides no real refuge for *any* animalist.

3. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper I said that what animalists mean by their, “We are animals,” slogan varies. This may seem to suggest that animalists are unclear about what they are defending at any given time. I don’t mean to suggest this. Or, at least, not exactly. Many animalists are *very* clear about what claim they are defending at any given time—whether it’s Animalism Light or some more robust version of animalism.¹⁹ Of course, the extent to which animalists *vary* in their claims—the extent to which they *disagree* about what we are—is surprising and has led to some confusion. But perhaps that much is forgivable.

However, what we shouldn’t overlook, and what I’ve been pressing on in this paper, is the fact that, given the context in which animalism was introduced—that is, in the personal identity debate, as an answer to the, “What are we?” question—it is misleading, and has been misleading, for animalists to insist that theirs is only the relatively weak thesis that is Animalism Light. So although animalists have in general been very clear about the claim that they are defending at any given time, I believe that the mere fact of their defending a certain (well-specified) thesis—that is, Animalism Light—has obscured and confused the debate.

The cumulative effect, whether or not anyone ever intended it, is a kind of bait and switch. We are lured in with a very deep question. But then we are given an answer—“We are identical to human animals”—that, irresistible and simple and right as it may seem, turns out to not really be an answer to the question. In this paper I’ve argued that if we are going to take the bait, we must resist the switch. Specifically, we must resist focusing on Animalism Light when discussing the philosophical question of what we are. But then I’ve also argued that if we *do* resist the switch, and thus treat Robust Animalism as the true animalist thesis, then what we will learn is that animalism is false. So, in the end, the moral is this: we should set animalism aside.

NOTES

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1. Recent defenders of animalism include Andrew Bailey (2014), Christopher Belshaw (2011), Stephan Blatti (2007, 2012), W.R. Carter (1999), David Hershenov (2009), Jimmy Alfonso Licon (2013), Jens Johansson (2016), David Mackie (1999), Trenton Merricks (2001), Eric Olson (1997, 2007), Kevin Sharpe (2015), Andrea Sauchelli (2016), Paul Snowdon (2014), Judith Jarvis Thompson (1987), Allison Krile Thornton (forthcoming), Patrick Toner (2011), Peter van Inwagen (1990), and Eric Yang (2015).

2. Animalism Light is the most common characterization of animalism (see Bailey 2015; Thornton 2016; Blatti and Snowdon 2016, pp. 2; also see Johansson (2007) for a discussion of the various ways to formulate animalism). And most animalists, including those listed above, insist that Animalism Light is the rightful thesis of animalism (Snowdon (2014) is an exception). Many animalists do also accept further claims, such as that we are essentially animals, but they insist that such claims are strictly separable from—that is, not entailed by—animalism. And some animalists (e.g., Bailey 2015; Sharpe 2015) *only* accept Animalism Light. That is, they accept Animalism Light, but *deny* stronger claims such as that we are essentially animals.

3. Although there have been animalists going back at least as far as Aristotle, here (and in what follows) I am focusing on the contemporary debate over animalism in analytic philosophy, which emerged in the 1980s (or thereabouts) and blossomed in more recent decades. This debate arose out of, and in response to, discussions about personal identity that included, among others, Bernard Williams, Sydney Shoemaker, Derek Parfit, Thomas Nagel, David Lewis, Peter Unger, and Harold Noonan. Animalists such as Paul Snowdon (who coined the term ‘animalism’), Eric Olson, and Peter van Inwagen (among others) interjected in these discussions and challenged the neo-Lockean consensus of the time. For a more detailed history of the recent emergence of animalism in analytic philosophy, see Blatti and Snowdon (2016, § 1.2). Also see Johnston (2016, pp. 109), Parfit (2012, pp. 12), and Shoemaker (2016, pp. 128) for briefer characterizations of the origins of animalism as arising within the personal identity debate.

4. Olson (2015) actually grants (in fact, *insists*) that the thesis of animalism is on a par, metaphysically speaking, with claims like, I am identical to a philosopher. But then Olson should recognize that the thesis of animalism, understood this way (i.e., as Animalism Light), does not really answer the deep, “What are we?” question, and thus is uninteresting in that sense. Now, Olson (1997) does also defend stronger claims about what we are. For example, he argues that ‘animal’ is a substance sortal/concept and so because of this, we are essentially animals. These claims *do* get at the philosophical, “What are we?” question. But, crucially, they go beyond Animalism Light. So I

will consider them in the next section. The point here is just that, again, despite Olson’s and others’ insistence that Animalism Light is the real animalist thesis, this claim, by itself, is uninteresting in the sense that it does not answer the philosophical, “What are we?” question.

5._This is just a sampling of authors and positions within the Animalist Light camp. For a more exhaustive overview of the diverse set of views whereby we are identical to animals, see Thornton (2016) or Bailey (2015).

6._Parfit (2012, pp. 12) is another especially clear example of an anti-animalist who assumes (and to some extent argues) that animalism cannot just be Animalism Light. Indeed, animalists themselves sometimes say things that seem to suggest that their view must be more than just Animalism Light (see, e.g., Snowdon 2014; Madden 2016, pp. 180; and Blatti 2019, § 1).

7._Patrick Toner (2011) and Allison Thornton (forthcoming) are examples, as are perhaps Aristotle and Aquinas. I could see some defenders of Animalism Light saying that dualist animalists are heretics—that they’re not *genuine* animalists (though it may be hard to call Aristotle a heretic, since he was arguably the first animalist). However, given that Animalism Light does not incur commitment to the stronger claim that we are essentially animals, even they should admit that we *could possibly* be souls or body-soul composites. Then, parallel to what I said earlier, I now say: if a view cannot tell me whether or not I *could be* a soul, then it does not answer the philosophical, “What are we?” question.

8._One potential competitor of Animalism Light not mentioned above is the brain view, whereby we are identical to brains. But, as it turns out, Jimmy Alfonso Licon (2013), a self-proclaimed animalist, defends the brain view—he calls his view “neural animalism”. So the brain view may not be a competitor to Animalism Light after all. Plus, even if we set aside Licon’s view, I think the brain view is better thought of as a competitor to more robust versions of animalism (to be discussed in the next section). I say this because the main motivation for the brain view relies on the judgment that we could possibly become brains—that is, we could survive being pared down to our brains (Hudson’s (2007) motivations may be a partial exception, since not all of his arguments rely on this judgment). But that judgment is consistent with Animalism Light (cf., Bailey 2015, pp. 873). Thus, while defenders of the brain view may assert that we are actually brains—a claim that many (though not all) defenders of Animalism Light deny—I think the brain view is better thought of as a competitor to a more robust version of animalism than Animalism Light.

9._A defender of Animalism Light might push back here and say that the above identity claims *do* have an advantage in terms of informativeness because, unlike the constitution claims, the identity claims actually tell us what we *are*. This response assumes that the ‘are’ in, “What are we?” is the ‘are’ of identity. But, as various philosophers have pointed out, the ‘are’ here is ambiguous, and could just as easily be understood as the ‘are’ of constitution (see, e.g., Baker 1997). So, again, I don’t think either claim in the above pairs has a clear informativeness advantage in terms of the, “What are we?” question.

10._Here I am not merely recapitulating the assumption that the animalism-constitution debate is only about what we *actually* are. Even if, as defenders of the constitution view suggest, being identical to an *x* entails being essentially an *x*, it’s still the case—by their own admission—that constitution is a contingent relation (see Baker 1997). So it’s still the case that being constituted by an *x* does not, by itself, tell us about what we could and couldn’t be. As I’ll detail in moment, it’s only because they argue that we are essentially persons, not animals, that defenders of the constitution view are answering, and indeed take themselves to be answering, the, “What are we?” question.

11._Notice that all of these claims are about *us*—people here on Earth—as opposed to, for example, all possible people. That’s because most animalists are very careful to deny commitment to the claim that all possible people are animals. They allow that angels, for example, may be people, even though they are not animals (cf., Bailey 2015, pp. 867-868; Blatti 2019).

12._Robust Animalism is defended by, among others, Olson (1997, 2007), Hershenov (2016), Madden (2016), van Inwagen (1990), and Merricks (2001).

13._And even if one denies that all of the above claims entail that we are essentially animals, the arguments that follow should apply to any standard interpretation of those claims. So the central point should be unaffected.

14._If this scenario seems too outlandish, consider this: apparently there have been cases in which someone remained conscious for a short period of time after being decapitated (at least that's what the evidence suggests). I don't know if anyone ever spent her last moments thinking, " $2+2=4$ ". But these cases should lend some credibility to the claim that a scenario like the one I've described is possible.

15._Olson (2007) says that detached cerebra aren't even *organisms*, let alone animals. He writes, "A detached cerebrum is no more an organism than a detached arm is an organism" (pp. 41). Most animalists these days agree with Olson on this point (cf., Thornton 2016, pp. 204; Bailey 2015, pp. 873; Blatti and Snowdon 2016, pp. 17; Parfit 2016, pp. 36; Johnston 2016, pp. 110). However, some philosophers who defend Robust Animalism say that cerebra are (or at least can be) organisms if they are separated from the body (e.g., van Inwagen 1990). These philosophers might say that you *do* persist from t to t^* . So the present argument does not apply to those versions of Robust Animalism. However, we might amend the above case so that your biological cerebrum and visual system are replaced with an *inorganic* cerebrum and visual system sometime between t and t^* . Of course, one might deny that this is possible. But if it is possible, then the present argument can be applied to any version of Robust Animalism.

16._See, for example, Shoemaker (1968), O'Brien (2007), Evans (2001), Howell (2006), and Gertler (2011, pp. 215-217). I take the claim that we are immune to the sort of errors mentioned above to be relatively uncontroversial. It is controversial which cases count. But the case that I have described should be safe by anyone's standards. And even if one denies this—or if one denies that you can be absolutely certain that you thought, " $2+2=4$ "—still, one can (and should) agree that you can be *more* certain, *more* confident, *more* strongly justified, etc., that you thought, " $2+2=4$," than you can be in any premise in favor of Robust Animalism (more on this below).

17._See, for example, Zimmerman (2008) and Blatti (2019) for objections to (1), Shoemaker (2016) for objections to (2), and Baker (2016) and Robinson (2016) for objections to (3).

18._Some animalists (including Olson) do also argue that all animals are essentially animals, which, together with the conclusion of the Too Many Thinkers Argument, *does* entail Robust Animalism. But this additional premise goes beyond the Too Many Thinkers Argument and gives rise to further objections that animalists (including Olson) typically don't want associated with the Too Many Thinkers Argument. It's also worth mentioning that this additional premise is, like each of the premises of the Too Many Thinkers Argument, less certain than any of the premises in my argument. Or so I say.

19._In fact, there is more than one article dedicated solely to making it *super* clear what animalism is and isn't (e.g., Bailey 2015; Thornton 2016; Olson 2015). And so animalists often marvel at how anyone could have made a mistake about their view, or at how anyone could levy an attack that so clearly does not threaten their view. But what these animalists seem to miss is that the misunderstanding, insofar as there is any, arises not because of any lack of clarity in *what animalists say*; rather, it arises because of the *context* in which they say it. Specifically, it arises because animalism is often presented as an answer to the, "What are we?" question, and it was introduced as part of the personal identity debate, so commenters rightly expect the view to be something more than Animalism Light.

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