

Another Argument for Animalism

ANIMALISM'S HALLMARK CLAIM concerns our basic metaphysical nature: whether we are material or immaterial; simple or composite; substance, property, process, or event; organic or inorganic; etc. In this context, the animalist makes the following straightforward assertion: *we are animals*.

Despite its plainness, this claim is easily misinterpreted.¹ According to the intended reading, the 'we' picks out human persons like you (the audience/reader) and me (the speaker/author). Nevertheless, animalism should not be taken to assert that all persons are animals; the possibilities of both non-animal people (e.g., robots, angels) and human animals that are not people (e.g., Terry Schiavo in a persistent vegetative state, human fetuses) are left open. The 'are' reflects the 'is' of numerical identity. Consequently, animalism is not the view that each of us is "constituted by" a particular organism (in the way that a statue is sometimes said to be non-identically constituted by the piece of marble with which it coincides). Nor still should it be thought that animalists contend that each of us *has* a body that is an animal. Finally, 'animals' refers to biological organisms—members of the primate species *Homo sapiens*. While some distinguish 'animals' from 'organisms' and deny that human animals are organisms,² most participants in the scholarly discussion about animalism—including advocates and critics alike—treat these terms interchangeably.

Expressed in logical notation and reformulated as a claim about each of us individually, animalism asserts:

$$(\exists x) x \text{ is an animal} \ \& \ x = \text{you.}$$

¹ See Olson (2003: 318–21) for discussion.

² E.g., Johnston (2007: 55–56).

While neither formulation is unproblematic,³ it is clear enough what they do *not* suggest. Among the accounts of our most fundamental nature that animalism opposes are that we are

- immaterial souls or egos;⁴
- material bodies;⁵
- body-soul complexes;⁶
- bundles of mental states;⁷
- temporal parts;⁸
- material simples;⁹
- parts of brains;¹⁰
- persons materially constituted by but nonidentical with animals;¹¹ and
- nothing at all.¹²

The standard argument for this view (popularized by Eric Olson in his widely read article “An Argument for Animalism”) goes as follows:

Thinking Animal Argument

- (P1) Presently sitting in your chair is a human animal.
- (P2) The human animal sitting in your chair is thinking.
- (P3) You are the thinking being sitting in your chair.
- (C) Therefore, the human animal sitting in your chair is you.¹³

³ See Johansson (2007) for a helpful dissection of various alternatives.

⁴ See Descartes (1984) and Foster (1991), for example.

⁵ See Thompson (1997) and Williams (1956-57), for example.

⁶ See Swinburne (1984), for example.

⁷ See Hume (1978), Rovane (1998), and Campbell (2006), for example.

⁸ See Lewis (1976) and Hudson (2001), for example.

⁹ See Chisholm (1989) and Lowe (2001), for example.

¹⁰ See Puccetti (1973), McMahan (2002), for example.

¹¹ See Shoemaker (1999a), Baker (2000), Johnston (2007), for example.

¹² See Unger (1979a, 1979b), for example; though cf. Unger (1990). A thorough survey of the foregoing alternatives (and refinements thereto) is given in Olson (2007).

¹³ Snowdon (1990: 91) was among the first to voice this argument at a 1986 conference. Subsequent versions can be found in Ayers (1991, vol. 2: 283), Carter (1988), Olson (1997: 106-09; 2003: 325-30), and elsewhere. It is variously referred to as the “thinking animal argument” (Olson 1997, 2003), the “too many minds objection” (Shoemaker 1999b), and the “two lives objection” (Campbell 2006). The next three paragraphs represent a distillation of the rationale provided in Olson (2003).

Whilst none of (P1), (P2), and (P3) is incontestable, nor is any of them easily denied. Except perhaps for far-reaching metaphysical reasons (e.g., an antecedent commitment to idealism), few would deny the very existence of animals, nor the fact that a perfectly good specimen of the species *Homo sapiens* is presently seated in your chair. So (P1) is not easily rejected.

Moreover, concerning (P2), since it would be odd (to say the least) to deny that human animals think while accepting that porpoises and porcupines do, and since we can assume that the human animal in your chair is not atypical of its kind, whatever reasons one has for accepting that various nonhuman animals think apply equally to the human animal in your chair. While there are those who deny that any animal can think (e.g., Descartes, Shoemaker), their positions strain empirical credibility and depend on quite sophisticated metaphysical machinery.¹⁴ At first glance, anyway, (P2) is much easier to accept.

(P3) is also difficult to resist, since its denial would seem to require positing the existence of a thinking being *other* than yourself. For if (P1) and (P2) are true, and if it is true that you exist and are thinking, then denying (P3) results in the implication that you are but one of (at least) two thinkers seated in your chair. Such a view faces a variety of difficult questions: practical questions (which of these beings owns the car parked out front?), epistemic questions (how do you determine which of these beings *you* are?), linguistic questions (to which of these beings do instances of the first-person pronoun refer?), metaphysical questions (what is the relationship between you and the qualitatively identical being with which you are associated?), and so on.

So, while not necessarily unanswerable or insurmountable, the questions and problems that await one who rejects any of (P1) through (P3) are not insignificant.¹⁵ Animalism, then, has at least this much going for it.

Of course, any determination of whether animalism is the best all-things-considered account of our nature would depend on an assessment of the merits of its rivals. Obviously I cannot undertake a full comparative assessment of this sort here.¹⁶ What I want to offer instead is a second arrow for the animalist's quiver. The argument goes as follows:

¹⁴ In the latter connection, see Shoemaker (1999a) and Olson's (2002) reply.

¹⁵ Those who have taken up the anti-animalist cause along one or more of these lines include Baker (2000), Lowe (2000), Noonan (2003), and Shoemaker (1999a, 1999b), among others.

¹⁶ Such an assessment is undertaken in Olson (2007); the result is somewhat inconclusive.

Ancestral Reductio

Assume for *reductio* that animalism is false. If you are not an animal, then presumably nor are your parents animals. But then, nor are your parents' parents, nor your parents' grandparents, and so on, as far back as your ancestry extends. In this case, assuming animalism to be false entails the rejection of evolutionary theory, since it means denying that your distant ancestry includes beings who *were* animals. But, since the rejection of evolutionary theory is too high a price to pay, we should reject the assumption that animalism is false.

The Ancestral Reductio complements the Thinking Animal Argument by illustrating how the credibility of animalism can be seen to piggy-back on the credibility of evolutionary theory. Nevertheless, a variety of objections may be anticipated. I shall now answer four of the most compelling.

Adam and Eve

However unlikely, it is not inconceivable that evolutionary theory is somehow mistaken. It might just be false that you are related to today's chimpanzees by a common, animal ancestor who lived roughly six million years ago. Perhaps your actual ancestors bear no relation to chimpanzees at all. Perhaps you are not an animal because the non-animal ancestors to whom you are actually related were brought into existence *ex nihilo* by a divine power.

This objection misses the mark not because the possibilities it envisions could not be actual, but because it fails to appreciate the conditional character of the Reductio. From the recognition that the falsity of animalism would imply the falsity of evolutionary theory, the Reductio concludes only that the credence one attaches to animalism should equal the credence one attaches to evolutionary theory. One should not reject animalism, in other words, if one is highly confident in the truth of evolutionary theory. Thus, it is no objection to point out that evolutionary theory could be false, since the Reductio relies not on that theory's truth *per se*, but only on its widespread acceptance as a well-confirmed theory.

Evolving Persons

Long ago our animal ancestors evolved into something entirely new: *persons*. Accordingly, you are the descendent not of an animal (to

whom you are only indirectly related), but of a person.¹⁷ Hence, a commitment to the rudiments of evolutionary theory is not incompatible with a denial of animalism.

It is difficult to see how this objection can be reconciled with the basic outline of current evolutionary theory. While we should certainly expect the emergence of characteristics typically associated with personhood (e.g., self-consciousness) to be explicable in terms of adaptation to selective pressures, few if any evolutionary biologists would identify personhood as the latest speciation stage in the descent of human animals—as if human evolution transitioned from *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalensis*, through *Homo sapiens*, to *Homo personsae*.

But even setting this aside, note that a defender of the Ancestral Reductio can allow that most human animals are persons, that human animals are the descendants of persons, and that there was a time before which our distant ancestors were not persons. All of this can be conceded so long as *person* is not construed as a substance concept.¹⁸ If being a person is a matter of having certain psychological properties and capacities—like the way being a body-builder amounts to having certain physical properties and capacities—then the defender of the Reductio can both accept that at some point in human evolution our ancestors became persons and maintain that evolutionary theory lends credence to the claim that each of us is numerically identical with an animal. Of course, an anti-animalist may want to reject this view of persons. But the question at hand is whether Evolving Persons threatens the Reductio, and the answer is no.

Disambiguating ‘Ancestors’

We should distinguish between two genealogical relations: the basic biological relation that holds between all animals and their offspring (call it ‘is the animal-parent of’, ‘is the animal-ancestor of’, etc.) and a derivative relation that links human persons and their kin (‘is the person-parent of’, ‘is the person-ancestor of’, etc.). Concerning two human persons, A and B, ‘A is the person-parent of B’, for example, might be understood to mean that A is the person who occupied at the time of conception/gestation the human animal that was the animal-parent of the human animal occupied by B. Armed with this

¹⁷ Huxley (1958), Lowe (1996: 47–48), and Baker (2000: 194) all endorse this view.

¹⁸ Olson (1997: 27ff.).

distinction, the anti-animalist contends that, although evolutionary theory concerns the animal-parent and animal-ancestor relations which link animals, it does not concern the person-parent and person-ancestor relations which link the persons who occupy those animals.

The question, of course, is whether a distinction between multiple senses of ‘ancestor’ can be defended. Perhaps it is thought that the normative dimensions of personal parenthood and personal ancestry are absent in the familial relations betwixt nonhuman animals, and that therefore the notions of parenthood and ancestry applicable to nonhuman animals are unable to capture the unique bonds betwixt persons. But if that is the rationale behind the distinction, then we ought to resist this objection, for there is growing evidence which appears to confirm the presence of normatively imbued familial relations in a variety of nonhuman animal communities.¹⁹

In addition, there are positive reasons to be skeptical of a genuine and stable distinction between different ancestral relations. First, *prima facie*, such a distinction seems to require double-counting; on the proposed view, for example, the number of parents in a crowd of people is twice as many as there seems to be. Second, we seem to get by just fine with only one concept of parenthood/ancestorhood, even if that concept (like many) encompasses multiple aspects or dimensions. Third, even if a distinction between person-parent/person-ancestor and animal-parent/animal-ancestor could be shown to be, say, explanatorily useful, that still would be insufficient to establish the conceptual irreducibility of the former to the latter. Nor, at this stage in the dialectic, can a critic non-question-beggingly insist, “I am the offspring of animals only in the sense that the animal associated with me is the offspring of animals,” since such resistance presupposes a distinction between “I” and “the animal associated with me,” and it is precisely the identity of these that the Ancestral Reductio (like the Thinking Animal Argument) purports to establish.

Overstatement

While it might be a corollary of evolutionary theory that each of us is an animal, it is not a corollary of evolutionary theory that each of us is *identical with* an animal. But it is this more robust claim that is at stake in the debate concerning animalism. *Contra* the Ancestral

¹⁹ See work by de Waal (1997) and Hauser (xxxx), among others.

Reductio, therefore, the animalist's claim of identity is not vindicated by the truth of evolutionary theory.

Like Adam and Eve, this objection targets only an exaggerated formulation of what the Ancestral Reductio seeks to establish. I agree that, if it purported to *derive* the truth of animalism from the truth of evolutionary theory, then the Reductio would be guilty as charged. But what the argument establishes is not the truth of the claim that each of us is identical with an animal, but only the truth of the conditional, "In so far as evolutionary theory's claims about the development of the human species are accepted, the assumption that you are not identical with a particular animal ought to be rejected."

Nevertheless, Overstatement rightly draws our attention to ways in which the original argument was less candid than it might have been. Consider, then, a revised formulation that lays all of its cards on the table.

Ancestral Reductio*

Assume for *reductio* that you are not identical with a particular animal. If you are not identical with an animal, then presumably nor were each of your ancestors identical with particular animals. But *on the assumption that nonhuman animals are identical with animals*, it follows that nonhuman animals are not included among your distant ancestors—in which case, it must be that evolutionary theory is false, since that theory is committed to claiming that your distant ancestors were nonhuman animals. In so far as evolutionary theory's claims about the development of the human species are accepted, therefore, the assumption that you are not identical with a particular animal ought to be rejected.

Revealed in this more explicit formulation is the fact that the defense of the concluding conditional relies on the italicized assumption that nonhuman animals are identical with animals. This claim would certainly seem to have the merit of being true. What sorts of things *are* identical with animals if not housecats, blue whales, myna birds, and the like? To deny that such beings are identical with animals would seem tantamount to denying that *anything* is identical with an animal, and hence that there are any animals at all. But recall from our discussion of (P1) that only something like an antecedent commitment to idealism could constitute the basis of such a denial.

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