

Arguments for and against animalism



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What is animalism? State and expound (what you take to be) the strongest argument in its favor.

Under the metaphysical sphere of personal identity, which concerns questions such as “ what are we,” animalism is a dominant position in the anti-Lockean tradition, holding that the persistence conditions of persons are biological rather than psychological. By ‘ psychological’ I mean in the Lockean sense that personal identity is founded in “ same continued consciousness.”[1]Animalism is essentially the view that we are human animals. Each of us numerically identical with an animal belonging to the species *homo sapiens* , and that you and it are one and the same. In this essay, I am going to support animalism by assessing the ‘ thinking animal’ Argument, and attempting to refute some anti-animalists’ attacks against its premises, particularly that of S. Shoemaker’s and L. R. Baker’s.

One of the main arguments supporting animalism is the ‘ thinking animal’ argument.[2]The argument goes as follows,

1, There is a human animal sitting in your chair. (If you are in the chair too)

2, The human animal is having experiences.

3, Similarly, there is a human person sitting in your chair. (If you are in the chair too)

4, The human person is having experiences.

5, However, there cannot be two different individuals in the chair, for there is only one individual in the chair.

6, Therefore, the human animal is the human person.

In addition, all animals have biological persistence conditions, meaning that they go on to exist as long as their biological life goes on. And since human animals are animals, the human persons, namely what we are, have biological persistence conditions too. Therefore, in the animalist's view, the persistence conditions that animals have make no reference to psychological continuity, so psychologically-based accounts of our persistence are mistaken.

However, an anti-animalist can object to this argument in many ways. One way is simply to question premise 1, which says “ there is a human animal sitting in your chair.” We could simply ask why we need to posit that there are human animals at all. There is a principle that states nothing can have different parts at the different times, so if something is replacing an old part with a new part, then the object composed of the old parts ceases to exist and it is replaced by a new object. This principle thus is incompatible with the existence of animals, as organisms are always replacing old parts with new ones. So it seems that the animals are metaphysically impossible. On second thought, however, this principle is not very reasonable, as not many people can deny the existence of animals. This is because if animals do not exist, then most things we might be if we were not animals would also be ruled out, for there would be no beings constituted by animals. So if animals do not exist, we would not likely be anything else either, and the objection thus does not successfully reject premise one.[3]

One might also question the validity of premise 2 by appealing to psychological persistence conditions opposed to biological conditions, in order to argue that the human animal cannot *think*. “Think” here means “any occurrence of a propositional attitude.”[4]The human person thinks, but the human animal does not, because it is no more sentient than a stone. Despite the fact that the human animal may relate to us, such as sharing a body, it does not have mental properties whatsoever. S. Shoemaker similarly claims that animals cannot think because mental properties can only “belong to things having psychological persistence conditions”.[5]He believes that mental properties have causal roles, which insinuate psychological continuity. A person has psychological states, which cause this thinking being in a certain state, combined with others, to behave in a certain way. For example, I am thirsty. This thirsty state that I am in, combined with my belief to get well, will thus cause me to drink something that hydrates me. Therefore, having a mental property means that one will do certain things that will be caused by your being in that state, combined with other states.

Following on this line of thought, the objection shows that animals are incapable of thinking because they do not persist under the appropriate conditions. Considering this scenario, suppose your cerebrum is put into my head, all your mental states will have been transferred to me, and not left in the empty head of yours. The subject of these mental states will then be me, the being who ends up with the cerebrum that has been psychologically continuously realised in the process, so I will have all your beliefs, memories and so on, which are sufficient for you to persist. As for the animal body that is left behind, the living organism that once had your cerebrum would stay

behind and not go along with the transplanted cerebrum. This is due to the fact that if the animal went along with the cerebrum, it would have to stop existing as an organism, and then become alive again when the transplant is complete. But the organism to be implanted with the cerebrum is also an organism. So it appears that there would be two human animals, one being the organism that acquires an empty head by losing the cerebrum, and the other being that the same organ is then transplanted into the empty skull of the other animal who is thus made complete again. Hence, even if there is psychological continuity between the donor and the receiver, they cannot be the same animal, as psychological continuity is not sufficient for a human animal to persist. Therefore, according to Shoemaker's reasoning (1984)[6], he would argue that there is an incompatibility between the transplanted cerebrum and your being an animal, as you and your body would not go together during the process, given that a thing and itself can never be separate. Animalism is thus false.

Nonetheless, one could reply that it is not necessary for human animals to have psychological continuity, so the objection above is not so persuasive. [7]For instance, if someone were in a vegetative state, we would still *not* suppose that this human organism no longer exists, although he would not have any mental activities. This is because the human animal is still biologically alive, that it could still breathe and so on. Similarly, there is no psychological continuity between a fetus and the adult human animal it now is, and yet the fetus *is* the human animal, despite its lack of mental activities at the time. Thus it seems like human beings can still persist without psychological continuity, and so animalism is still plausible.

Nevertheless, even if the animalist can avoid Shoemaker's objection, there is still an argument from the neo-Lockean position, arguing that the persistence condition of a person is "sameness of first-person perspective".

[8] It is the constitutionalist view by L. R. Baker, claiming that each of us is "constituted by" a human animal but not identical with it. This could still pose a challenge to animalist accounts. Baker agrees that a human animal is located where you are, but it is the one that *constitutes* you. She does this by reflecting on what we are "fundamentally", and she claims, following Locke, that we are "persons", who possess a form of self-consciousness, which she calls the "first-person perspective". Thus, human persons "persist as long as their first-person perspectives are exemplified."

Contrastingly, human animals have it only *accidentally*, such as a human animal in a vegetative state. Therefore, there is a rational, self-conscious being located where you are, that is numerically different from you.

However, Baker's proposal faces obstacles. Her view implies that there are two people sitting in your chair, namely you and your body.[9] It seems like you could never know which person you are. If there are essential people, who have the identity conditions of people and there are also accidental people, who have the identity conditions of animals and they are animals essentially, then you would not know whether you are the accidental person or the essential person. Baker could reply to this objection by saying that you and your body are two persons. They are not identical, and yet they are not separate, either, for you and your body do not have separate existences. Baker further expands on this response by rejecting premise 3 of the 'thinking animal' argument, arguing against that "there is a human person

sitting in your chair”, according to the constitution view. She argues that the constituted person thinks non-derivatively, whereas the constituting animal thinks derivatively. So there is a sense of ambiguity in premise 3. This is because I am an animal only derivatively, and a person non-derivatively. They are in different senses, meaning that I am an animal because an animal constitutes me without its constituting anything else, but that I am a person because nothing constitutes me. My body, by contrast, “is a person only insofar as it constitutes a person.”[10]

Nonetheless, rather than refuting the premise of the ‘thinking animal’ argument, Baker’s view seems to be doing the opposite. She seems to be claiming that the animal, on the one hand can think in the first person, and on the other hand cannot. It can think because it is composed of an essential person, and it cannot think in the first person because it cannot think independently of its composing of anything. Thus, Baker’s view does not offer an explanation as to why the body can or cannot think in the first person. Moreover, Baker seems to be complicating the matter even worse. There is a problem as to how to decide which person I am, if there are two numerically different people who are standing where I am right now. Am I the animal? Or am I the person? If, according to Baker that to be a person is to have “first-person thoughts”, namely the capacity to have these thoughts, then any being who wonders what I am is a person. But Baker assumes that both the essential person and the accidental person are thinking my thoughts. Therefore, I do not seem to know which persons I am, or whether I think in the first person derivatively or non-derivatively. Therefore, her view is not convincing.

In conclusion, I think the ‘ thinking animal’ argument is a very strong argument from animalism, despite various claims criticising each of its premise especially from the dominant neo-Lockean positions. Particularly, Shoemaker criticises the second premise with a dedication to the psychological criterion of personal identity, claiming that animals have the wrong identity conditions. However, it is proven not to be a necessary condition and Shoemaker thus fails in rejecting the biological persistence condition. Baker also provides a constitutionalist’s view, aiming to prove our fundamental nature is persons as opposed to animals. Nonetheless, she fails to do so, in my view, as she does not clarify how an animal is numerically different from the person. The ‘ thinking animal’ argument, thus, is the strongest argument on the question of ‘ what we are’, based on the above examination of anti-animalists’ attacks.

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[1]John Locke, “ *Of Identity and Diversity*” P25

[2] *An argument for Animalism* by Eric Olson

[3]From *What Are We* by Olson

[4] *An argument for Animalism* by Eric Olson

[5]S. Shoemaker “ *Functionalism and Personal Identity?*”

[6] *What Are We* , Eric T. Olson

[7]Same as above

[8] *Persons & Bodies* (2000: ch. 3) by L. R. Baker

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[9] *Thinking animals and the Constitution views* by Eric Olson, 2001

[10] *Thinking Animals and the Constitution View* by Olson