

## Animalism and the Corpse Problem

Eric T. Olson

University of Sheffield

**abstract:** The apparent fact that each of us coincides with a thinking animal looks like a strong argument for our being animals (animalism). Some critics, however, claim that this sort of reasoning actually undermines animalism. According to them, the apparent fact that each human animal coincides with a thinking body that is not an animal is an equally strong argument for our not being animals. I argue that the critics' case fails for reasons that do not affect the case for animalism.

### 1.

I believe that we are animals. That is, each of us is numerically identical with a human organism, a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. I hold this view--'animalism'--because I believe that human animals are the obvious candidates, as it were, for being us. There is a human animal that sits at your desk and sleeps in your bed, and which you see when you look in a mirror and which other people point to when they point to you. What is more, that animal can think. It is physically indistinguishable from you, with the same surroundings and causal history. What could prevent it from using its brain to think? In fact that animal ought to think in exactly the way that you think. It ought to think your thoughts. If you and the animal think differently, or if you think and the animal does not think at all, there ought to be some explanation for this difference. The explanation cannot appeal to your physical properties or your surroundings or your causal history, for you and the animal do not differ in any of these respects. And it is hard to see what else could explain it.

There seems, then, to be an animal sitting there, where you are, thinking your thoughts and reading these words. It is tempting to infer from

this that you are that animal--that you and the animal are one and the same. For if the animal were not you, there would be two beings there, you and the animal, thinking the same thoughts. How could you ever know which one you are? Any reason you could have for believing that you are not the animal would equally be a reason for the animal to believe that it is not the animal. Yet it would be mistaken. If we were not animals, we could never have any reason to believe that we are not. No one who accepts this can believe that we are anything other than animals.

This argument has three premises: (1) There is a human animal located where you are. (2) That animal thinks. In particular, it has the same thoughts as you have. (3) If you share your thoughts with a being other than yourself, you cannot know that you are not that being. It follows that if animalism is false--if we are not animals--we could never know it. Those who claim that we are not animals must reject one of these premises. They must either deny that there is any human animal where you are, deny that that animal thinks as you do, or insist that even if you share your thoughts with the animal, you can still somehow know that you are not it. There is no other way round the argument. The apparent existence of thinking human animals is a serious problem for opponents of animalism. Let us call it the thinking-animal *argument*, or thinking-animal *problem*.

## 2.

Not everyone sees it this way, however. Several influential critics argue that insofar as the thinking-animal argument supports animalism, a similar argument undermines that view [Shoemaker 1999a: 295, 1999b: 499f., Baker 2000: 207f.]. Suppose you are an animal. Unless your death is unusually violent, the critics say, it will result in a lifeless corpse. Where will that corpse come from? It can hardly come into being when you die. One's death does not create a new material object. Your corpse must exist before you die as well as afterwards (though of course we don't call it a

corpse then). So there is, even now, a material object located where you are that will come to be a corpse if you die peacefully: your body or 'corpse-to-be'.

Now your body ought to be able to think. It is physically indistinguishable from you, with the same surroundings and causal history. What could prevent it from using its brain to think? In fact your body ought to think in exactly the way that you think. So there is a human body sitting there thinking your thoughts and reading these words. It is tempting to infer from this that you are that body. For if it were not you, there would be two beings there, you and your body, thinking the same thoughts. How could you ever know which one you are? Any reason you could have for believing that you are not your body would equally be a reason for the body to believe that it is not your body. Yet it would be mistaken. If we were not bodies, we could never have any reason to believe that we were not. No one who accepts this can believe that we are anything other than our bodies.

If we are animals, however, we cease to exist when we die. At least that is what most animalists say: no living organism can come to be a corpse. So animalism implies that we are not identical with our bodies. The problem for the animalist is now evident. How could we ever know that we are not our thinking bodies? And if for all we know we are bodies, then for all we know we are not animals, for bodies are not animals. So we could never know that we are animals.

That is something that no animalist can accept. If animalists are to resist this argument, they must reject one of its premises. Their options, say the critics, are analogous to those facing the anti-animalist: they can deny that there is any human body located where you are; they can deny that that body can think as you do; or they can insist that even if you share your thoughts with your body, you can still somehow know that you are not that body. There is no other way round the argument. And these options look no more palatable than those available to the anti-animalist. The

apparent existence of thinking human bodies looks as much a problem for the animalist as the apparent existence of thinking human animals is for the anti-animalist. Thus is the animalist's best weapon turned against him. Call this the *corpse argument* or *corpse problem*.

Animalists must solve the corpse problem. But the critics claim that any such solution will suggest an equally viable solution to the thinking-animal problem. If animalists can deny that our bodies think, for instance, then anti-animalists can deny on similar grounds that human animals think. Or if animalists can explain how we might know that we are not the corpses-to-be that share our thoughts, anti-animalists should be able to explain how we could know that we are not the animals that share our thoughts. Animalists can defend their view only if the opposing view is equally defensible.

This may look like a dialectical stalemate: animalists and anti-animalists face similar problems to do with the existence of beings other than ourselves thinking our thoughts; and they have similar prospects for solving those problems. No one wins. But the animalist may come off worse. The thinking-animal argument is the principal support for animalism. If it fails--if there are no human animals, or if human animals cannot think, or if we can know that we are not the human animals that think our thoughts--then it is hard to see how there could be any reason to suppose that we are animals. Anti-animalists have it better. Even if the corpse argument gives no support to the view that we are not animals, there are other arguments for that view, arguments whose persuasive force is independent of the corpse argument. Most notably, there is the deep and abiding conviction that our identity conditions are different from those of animals. It is widely held, for instance, that our identity over time must somehow involve some sort of psychological continuity. And animalists and anti-animalists alike agree that no sort of psychological continuity is either necessary or sufficient for a human animal to persist [Olson 1997: 89-93,

114-119]. Psychological facts are simply irrelevant to questions about animal identity. These two convictions rule out our being animals. The thinking-animal problem may pose an interesting challenge for the opponents of animalism. But the corpse problem threatens to put animalism out of business.

### 3.

I say that the critics are mistaken. Their central claim is that the thinking-animal problem and the corpse problem are on a par: one can be solved only if the other can be solved as well. I disagree. I will sketch two ways in which animalists might plausibly solve the corpse problem, and show that neither corresponds to any analogous solution to the thinking-animal problem. (Nor, as far as I can see, can anti-animalists solve the thinking-animal problem in any other way, though I will not argue for that claim here.)

Let us begin by examining the corpse argument in more detail, numbering the premises. First, it says, (1) your death will ordinarily result in a lifeless corpse. That is, the matter that makes you up just before you die will make up a corpse afterwards. (2) Your corpse does not come into existence when you die, but exists and coincides with you, as your body, while you are alive. (3) Your body now thinks as you do. (4) If you coincide with a body that thinks as you do, you cannot know that you are not that body. But (5) your body is not an animal, for animals necessarily cease to exist when they die. That is, the human animal sitting in your chair is not your body or corpse-to-be. Thus, you cannot know that you are an animal.

Some animalists deny premise 1 [van Inwagen 1990, Merricks 2001]. They concede that there are particles 'arranged corporeally' after your death, but deny that those particles compose any larger object than. Strictly speaking, they say, there are no corpses. We might call this view 'corpse eliminativism'. If it is true, the existence of corpses cannot pose a problem for animalism. The analogous solution to the thinking-animal

problem would be to deny that particles 'arranged organically' ever compose animals. Whether these are sensible things for animalists or their opponents to say is a large question that we cannot consider here. Let us see whether animalism can be defended by less drastic measures.

Suppose, then, that there are such things as lifeless corpses. Let us also grant for the sake of argument that our corpses do not come into being when we die, but exist and share their matter with us while we are alive (premise 2 of the corpse argument). It follows that your body--the thing that will one day be your corpse--is sitting in your chair now. It is alive (in the biological sense). It is composed of the same matter as the animal sitting there. It is, in fact, physically indistinguishable from that animal. But if animals and their bodies are as similar as that, we ought to wonder whether they really are different things. Why not say that your body is the animal, rejecting premise 5 of the corpse argument?

Well, animals were supposed to be different from their bodies because animals stop existing when they die. But do they? That is a substantive metaphysical claim. There is nothing obvious about it. Nor does it follow in any obvious way from the claim that we are animals. Whether we are animals is one question; what it takes for animals to persist is another. So animalists needn't accept it. And not all do: some animalists say that we 'survive' death as dead animals--corpses--and cease to exist altogether only when our remains turn to dust [Ayers 1991: 224f.; Feldman 1992: 89-105, 2000; Carter 1999; Mackie 1999]. They have ordinary language on their side: we speak as if there were dead animals (and dead people) that were once alive. If they are right, then 'your' animal--the one sitting where you are--will one day be a corpse. Your body or corpse-to-be is an animal. In that case the existence of a body thinking your thoughts does not imply that there is a second thinker sitting there in addition to the animal, and is therefore no threat to the claim that you are an animal. That would solve the corpse problem.

If an animal's body is just that animal, then the existence of thinking bodies is not a problem for animalism. But those who deny that we are animals still face a problem about thinking animals. To solve the thinking-animal problem in an analogous way would be to identify the person with the animal. And that is just animalism. So here is a way of defending animalism against the corpse problem that suggests no analogous defense of anti-animalism against the thinking-animal problem.

#### 4.

For all that, I suspect that organisms do cease to exist when they die [Olson 1997: 131-138]. This is no eccentric view: Aristotle and Locke held it, and several contemporary figures do too [Furth 1988: 156f., Locke 1975: 330f., van Inwagen 1990: 142-158, Wilson 1999: 89-99].

One thought behind this view is that despite their superficial resemblance, a lifeless corpse appears to be a very different sort of thing from a living organism. A corpse, like a marble statue, maintains its form merely by virtue of the intrinsic stability of its materials. The stability of a living thing, by contrast, is dynamic. Matter constantly flows through it, in much the same way as it flows through a fountain (Miller 1978: 140). A living thing maintains its form--in particular the fine biochemical structure that makes it alive--only by engaging in constant activity: repairing damage, removing waste, fighting infection, acquiring and digesting food, and so on. All of this comes to an end when the organism dies. Matter ceases to flow. The repairs stop. Decay sets in. It is this irreversible process that we call death. If ending an organism's life appears less dramatic than shutting off a fountain, that is because some of an organism's materials--its solid parts--are more stable than those of a fountain. But even its solid parts 'flow'.

Of course, the death of an organism is not usually instantaneous. There are times when it is difficult to say whether we have a living thing or a corpse. There may even be cases where it is genuinely indeterminate (just

as there may be cases where it is indeterminate whether a person still exists according to standard psychological-continuity accounts of personal identity). Cases where an organism's death occurs in conjunction with hypothermia or freezing are especially problematic, as these conditions arrest the process of decay. The difference between a living organism that is near death and a fresh corpse may appear slight. But this shows at most that there are cases on the borderline between life and death, or that there is room for dispute about what point in the spectrum ranging from clearly living things to clearly lifeless ones counts as death. It does not show that there is no important distinction between living things and corpses.

To put it differently, a living organism has what Locke called a life: a complex, self-sustaining, physico-chemical event that imposes a remarkably constant form upon ever-changing particles. It is the motor that runs the fountain. The possession of a life appears to be what distinguishes organisms from non-organisms. If organisms are essentially organisms, or if nothing can be an organism at one time and a non-organism at another, then what it takes for an organism to persist ought to something to do with its life. The proposal that comes most readily to mind is that an organism persists if its life continues, and perishes when its life ceases and cannot be restarted: that is, when it dies. This cannot be what it takes for a corpse to persist. So the persistence conditions of living organisms seem unlike those of corpses.

We can sharpen this point by asking what the alternative could be. What does it take for an organism to persist, if not the continuation of its life? Well, an organism's life might figure in its identity over time in some less direct way. Some suggest that an organism persists for as long as the arrangement of its particles is caused in an appropriate way by the activities of its life (Ayers 1991: 222-225, Mackie 1999: 236f.). That is:

For any  $x$  that is an organism at a time  $t$  and any  $y$  that exists at a later



time  $t^*$ ,  $x=y$  if and only if  $y$ 's particles at  $t^*$  are arranged as they are at  $t^*$  in large part because of the activities of  $x$ 's life at the last time between  $t$  and  $t^*$  when that life was going on.

Call this the causal-dependence account of organism identity. It allows for an organism to persist beyond its death as an indisputably lifeless corpse: as long as the corpse remains reasonably intact, its particles will be arranged as they are then in large part because of the activities of the organism's life when it was last alive.

This proposal raises many questions: for instance, about the extent to which the arrangement of a dead organism's parts must be caused by the activities of its life (how much decay or tampering can the corpse survive?), and about what sort of causal link is appropriate (an object's particles may owe their arrangement to an organism's life via some 'deviant' causal chain in cases where no one would suppose that the object was the late organism). Since virtually all accounts of the persistence of complex objects raise similar questions, however [Shoemaker 1979], I won't press this. I worry that the causal-dependence account is more deeply flawed. Suppose an animal dies and its remains are burnt to ashes, but one finger remains intact (an ordinary finger, not one magically capable of growing into a complete human being). The lone finger's parts will be arranged as they are because of the activities of the animal's life when it was last going on. And this is not a case in which the causal link between the organism's life and the detached finger is tenuous or deviant. The causal-dependence account therefore appears to imply that the animal survives this adventure as a finger. I take that to be false.

There are many ways in which the account might be amended to avoid this consequence. The most obvious proposals, however, introduce problems of their own. For instance, you might think that the lone finger is not the original organism because it has too few of that organism's parts,

and add to the account a clause stating that  $y$  must retain, at  $t^*$ , a significant proportion (perhaps more than half) of the particles that were caught up in  $x$ 's life when it died. But the persistence of an organism seems to have nothing to do with its retaining a certain number or proportion of its parts. An organism can survive the loss of any number of its parts, through metabolic turnover or even radical surgery, as long as its vital organs remain intact or appropriate life-support machinery is provided. The reason why the detached finger is not the original organism is not that it is too small or has too few of that organism's original parts.

A more promising idea is that the finger is not the original animal because it is not an organism at all. One might then add to the account a clause stating that  $y$  must be an organism at  $t^*$ . But what makes something an organism? Not its having a life, if an organism can persist as a lifeless corpse. Perhaps an organism is something that once had a life: a dead organism is something that was once a living organism. But that would make the account useless. In order to find out whether the lone finger is identical with the original organism, we should first have to know whether it was once a living organism. That is, we should have to know which non-living things were once living things. But that is just the point at issue, or at any rate a large part of it. If we knew which non-living things were once living things at all, it would be relatively easy to say which living things those non-living things once were. And here the proposed account offers no guidance.

Once we admit that a living organism can persist as a corpse, it is surprisingly difficult to say why it should be unable to persist as a lone finger. Now it would be rash to conclude at this point that the problem is insoluble and that no acceptable account of animal identity can allow for animals to persist as corpses. But no such account has ever been proposed. What if there is none? What if an animal really must cease to exist when it dies? Does the corpse problem then threaten? I think not. Any reason for supposing that an animal must cease to exist when it dies is equally a reason

for supposing that an animal's corpse comes into being when the animal dies. The reason for thinking that animals cannot survive death is that living organisms and lifeless corpses appear to be so different as to have different and incompatible persistence conditions. But if this prevents animals from persisting through death, it ought to prevent corpses from doing so as well. So if animals cease to exist when they die (as premise 5 of the corpse argument has it), there is no apparent reason to suppose that your corpse exists both before and after you die (premise 2), and therefore no reason to suppose that living human animals coincide with corpses-to-be numerically different from them. Once again, the corpse problem dissolves.

This too suggests no analogous way of resisting the thinking-animal argument, for the latter employs no premise analogous to the claim that one's body exists both before and after one dies.

## 5.

The corpse argument is founded on two metaphysical principles: that human bodies can exist both before and after their death, and that no animal can do so. Though these principles may be individually plausible, we have seen that they are not plausible together: any reason to suppose that a human body can persist through death is equally a reason to suppose that a human animal can persist through death, and any reason to deny that an animal can persist through death is a reason to deny that its body can do so. So we have found no reason to suppose that an animal's body coincides with the animal while it is alive and continues to exist after the animal passes away. The worry that human animals might coincide with thinking bodies numerically different from them is groundless. Animalists needn't lose sleep over thinking corpses-to-be. But anti-animalists ought to fear thinking animals.

I have one final point. Some readers will know that Baker and Shoemaker put the corpse problem differently from the way I laid it out in

section 2 above. In their version it is directed against what we might call the foetus argument, which is meant to undermine psychological-continuity accounts of personal identity and support animalism. The foetus argument goes something like this:

You developed from an unthinking foetus. But you are not in any way psychologically continuous with that foetus. So the view that some sort of psychological continuity is necessary for you to persist implies that you are not identical with the foetus; rather, you must have come into being when the foetus reached a certain point in its development--presumably when certain mental capacities arose. But of course (say the animalists) the foetus did not cease to exist when this happened. It grew into an adult, just as you did. So that ex-foetus, which is presumably a human animal, is now physically indistinguishable from you, with the same surroundings and causal history. It ought, therefore, to be thinking your thoughts now. If, as the psychological-continuity view implies, that animal is not you, then there are two thinking beings sitting there and reading this. How could you ever know which one you are? The obvious way to avoid this problem is to reject the psychological-continuity account and accept that you are that ex-foetus, which is to say that you are an animal.

But if animalists admit that you are numerically different from the corpse that succeeds you, we might wonder how they can confidently assert that you must be identical with the foetus that gives rise to you. Why should your not being the foetus be any worse than your not being the corpse? The critics conclude that far from supporting animalism, the foetus argument undermines it by laying animalists open to the charge that each human animal coincides with a thinking body numerically different from it. That is, if the foetus argument is sound, the corpse argument ought to be sound as well.

We can now see the flaw in this reasoning. Once again, the case for supposing that animals stop existing when they die and are numerically different from the lifeless remains they leave behind was that what it takes for a living organism to persist appears incompatible with what it would take for a corpse to persist. The critics claim that if this is right, there is no reason to deny that a human foetus ceases to exist when it reaches the relevant stage in its development, and is immediately replaced by a numerically different organism. That is, we might as well say that it is absolutely impossible for an organism to survive the onset of whatever feature it is that gives rise to a person. (Not that the critics believe this about foetuses. Their claim is simply that if animalists can deny that living animals are identical with corpses, then the critics can deny that mature animals are identical with foetuses.)

But the cases are disanalogous. No one can seriously believe that the persistence of a human foetus after the crucial stage in its development involves something entirely different from the persistence of a foetus before that stage--so different that no one has managed to give plausible persistence conditions that apply to both. The natural view, surely, is that the foetus persists through all of this by virtue of whatever it is that animal identity consists in: the continuation of its Lockean life, perhaps. The absurd claim that a human foetus is doomed to perish before it is born gets no support from the idea that living organisms do not persist as corpses. Once again, the critics' case collapses.

I conclude that our being animals is not threatened by the metaphysics of corpses.

## References

Ayers, M. 1991. *Locke*, vol. 2, London: Routledge.

Baker, L. R. 2000. *Persons and Bodies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Carter, W. R. 1999. Will I be a Dead Person?, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59: 167-72.
- Feldman, F. 1992. *Confrontations with the Reaper*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2000. The Termination Thesis, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 24: 98-115.
- Furth, M. 1988. *Substance, Form and Psyche: An Aristotelian Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, J. 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mackie, D. 1999. Personal Identity and Dead People, *Philosophical Studies* 95: 219-42.
- Merricks, T. 2001. *Objects and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Noonan, H. 1998. Animalism versus Lockeanism: A Current Controversy, *Philosophical Quarterly* 48: 302-18.
- Olson, E. 1997. *The Human Animal*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2002a. What Does Functionalism Tell Us about Personal Identity?, *Noûs* 36: 682-98.
- . 2002b. Thinking Animals and the Reference of 'I', *Philosophical Topics* 30: 189-208.
- . 2003. An Argument for Animalism, in *Personal Identity*, ed. R. Martin and J. Barresi, Oxford: Blackwell: 318-34.
- Shoemaker, S. 1979. Identity, Properties and Causality, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 321-342.
- . 1999a. Self, Body, and Coincidence, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 73: 287-306.
- . 1999b. Critical Notice of Olson, *The Human Animal*, *Noûs* 33: 496-504.
- van Inwagen, P. 1990. *Material Beings*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wilson, J. 2000. *Biological Individuality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.