For Animalism

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1. What animalism does and doesn't say

What are we? The question has many answers. Some are evident and undisputed: we are people; we are subjects of consciousness; we are human beings (and not Martian foundlings). Others are subject to debate: we are creatures made in God’s image; we are products of evolution by natural selection; we are material things, made up entirely of chemical atoms. One such disputed answer is that we are biological organisms. We are material things of a specific sort: animals of the primate species Homo sapiens. This is the view known as animalism. Before discussing why it is disputed and whether it’s true, I want to distinguish it from some similar-sounding claims.

Animalism says that we human people (or, as the lawyers say, persons) are organisms. It does not say that this is true by definition. Specifically, it does not say that a person is by definition a sort of organism. Most definitions of personhood say that to be a person is to have certain special mental capacities—to be rational, perhaps, capable of consciousness, and able to think about oneself in the first person (as in, “I wish I weren’t such a coward”). A god or an angel, were there such a thing, would be a person in this sense, though not an organism. This is perfectly compatible with the claim that we human people are organisms. Animalism does not propose any definition of personhood—any account of what it is to be a person, as opposed to a nonperson. Nor do animalists claim to know a priori, just by rational reflection, that we are organisms. It’s the senses, and not reason alone, that tell us that we are animals.

Animalism does not say that we are animals essentially. Something is an animal essentially if it is an animal and could not possibly exist without being an animal. By contrast, something is an animal accidentally or contingently if it is an animal but could exist without being one (in the way that students can exist without being students). If human animals are animals essentially, then our being animals implies that we are animals essentially. If they are animals accidentally, then animalism implies that we are animals only accidentally. Which of these is the case is independent of whether we are animals.

More generally, animalism does not imply or presuppose any account of the metaphysical nature of animals. Aristotelians say that an animal (or any other material object) is a compound of matter and form. And what makes something an animal, or more specifically a human animal or a spider or a worm, is its form rather than its matter. Scholars disagree about what this means, but whether it is true is, again, independent of whether you and I are
animals or nonanimals. Both Aristotle and Aquinas thought we were animals, and were thus animalists avant la lettre.\textsuperscript{1}

Finally, animalism does not say that our entire nature consists in or follows from our being animals. It does not imply that our behavior is biologically determined, or that we have only biological properties (whatever these claims might mean)--any more than our being physical objects implies that our only properties are those studied in physics. There is nothing "reductionistic", in any meaningful sense of the term, about animalism. Animalists accept the indisputable fact that we have important features not shared by any nonhuman organisms that we know of: the capacity for sophisticated rational thought, for instance, and to speak a language with a complex grammatical structure. That we are animals is only the beginning of an account of human nature.\textsuperscript{2}

2. What we appear to be

Why suppose that we are animals? Well, that’s how it appears. We seem to be material things made of the same stuff that makes up sticks and stones. (This thought is expressed in the book of Genesis: “Dust you are, and to dust you will return.”) Which material things do we seem to be? If you examine yourself in the mirror, you see an animal. The animal appears to be the same size as you--no bigger and no smaller. Like animals, we seem to extend just as far as the surface of our skin. Each of us seems to have the physical and biological properties of an animal: its mass, temperature, chemistry, anatomy, and so on. Nor is there any difference in behavior between a human animal and a human person. The appearance is that we are the animals in the mirror. Of course, appearances can be deceptive. We might really be something else. But animals are what we appear to be.

Consider the alternatives. One is that we are material things other than animals: smaller parts of animals, for instance, such as brains. This would mean that we each weigh less than three pounds. A human person is composed of soft, yellowish-pink tissue and located entirely within her skull. Most likely you have never literally seen yourself or anyone else, and may not want to.

Another alternative is that each of us might be physically identical to the animal in the mirror and made of precisely the same matter, yet not an animal but rather a nonanimal "constituted by" it. How could something be physically just like an animal without being an animal itself? Well, we might have different modal properties from animals. Perhaps we are essentially able to think: it is absolutely impossible for us to exist without having that ability. Yet no animal is essentially able to think: each human animal begins its existence as an embryo without any mental capacities, and could end its

\textsuperscript{1}Toner (2014) is an interesting discussion of Thomistic animalism. My own thoughts on Thomism, for what they’re worth, are in Olson 2007: 171-176.

\textsuperscript{2}For more on the topic of this section, see Olson 2015b.
life in an irreversible coma. If you are essentially able to think but no animal is, then you could not be an animal. (In fact you must have come into being several months after the animal did: you could not have existed before the animal was able to think.)

Or we might not be material things at all. We might be nonphysical, invisible, intangible, immaterial things. Or each of us might be composed of two things, one immaterial and one material.\(^3\)

There are other alternatives to our being animals. Many of them are respectable views with important advocates. But they are surprising views. They are not how things appear. We don’t seem to be smaller parts of animals, or nonanimals made of the same matter as animals, or wholly immaterial things. We seem to be animals. We ought to deny that we are animals only if we have arguments strong enough to overturn this appearance. But we don’t need any argument in order to believe that we are animals, because that’s how things appear before the arguments are given.

That we are animals is like the view that time is real. That too is how it appears: things seem to happen one after another. Some philosophers believe this appearance to be an illusion, but only on the basis of arguments they take to be powerful enough to overturn the appearance. We are not entitled to deny the reality of time without any argument. On the contrary: it’s reasonable to believe that time is real without having any argument for it, because that’s how things appear before the arguments are given. Of course, the reality of time is more widely held than animalism. That’s because the objections to the reality of time are weaker than the objections to our being animals (I’ll come to these presently). My point is simply that both look true on the face of it.

Someone might say that what appears to be the case before we consider the arguments is not that we are animals, but only that we have animal bodies. Our bodies appear to be animals. We don’t.

In order to assess this claim, we need to know what it is for a thing to be someone’s body. What does it mean to say that x is y’s body? It’s no easy question. The most common answer is that someone’s body is an object that she can move and feel in an especially direct way: you can move and feel your body without moving or feeling anything else (except parts of it). Of course, you can move and feel your left hand without moving or feeling anything else, yet your left hand is not your body. Perhaps your body is the largest object that has this feature (see Olson 1997: 142-153). If this is correct, then for our bodies to be animals is for us to be able to move and feel the animal we see in the mirror, and no larger object, in that direct way. Since we do appear to have that ability, our bodies seem to be animals.

\(^3\)Parfit (2012) argues that we are brains. On the constitution view, see Baker 2000 and Shoemaker 2011. Many famous historical figures have taken us to be immaterial: Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant, for instance. For more on these and other alternatives to animalism, see Olson 2007.
But this does nothing to diminish the appearance that we ourselves are animals. You can move and feel your hands without moving or feeling anything else. And your hands appear to be parts of you, as well as parts of your body. They are not merely instruments that you use to tie your shoes and turn the pages of books. To move or feel your hands is to move or feel yourself. That’s how it seems, anyway. You appear to be a material thing of which your hands are parts, not an immaterial thing in two-way communication with your hands. In fact, you appear to be the largest object that you can move and feel directly: you appear to be your body.

It may be that the phrase ‘x’s body’ means nothing like ‘the largest object x can move and feel directly’. In that case we cannot evaluate the claim that only our bodies appear to be animals until we have an alternative account of what that phrase means. But whatever exactly it comes to, the claim that our bodies appear to be animals is unlikely to imply that we ourselves appear not to be.

3. The view from within

Someone might say that although we appear to the senses to be animals, we appear in introspection to be something very different: immaterial entities not composed of parts.

Close your eyes, plug up your ears, and ignore all bodily sensations. What do you you appear, from this perspective, to be? You don’t appear to be an animal. Without sensory information, you can’t even tell whether there are any animals. Do you you appear not to be an animal, then?

Descartes seems to have thought so. He noted in the Sixth Meditation that we cannot distinguish any parts of ourselves by introspection. You can tell by introspection that you are thinking, and more specifically that you have certain beliefs, desires, emotions, and the like. But you can’t tell whether you are composed of parts. (Your beliefs and desires are not parts of you, any more than your movements are.) Descartes inferred from this that we are not composed of parts. Yet if we were animals we should have many parts: organs, cells, atoms, and so on. It would follow that we are not animals. Or if the argument does not establish conclusively that we have no parts, it may show that we at least appear to have no parts when we look within, contrary to the way we appear outwardly to the senses. That would make appearances equivocal.

But is the inability to detect parts of ourselves by introspection any reason to suppose that there are no such parts to be detected? Does it show that we appear, to introspection at least, to have no parts? The answer depends on how it would appear to introspection if we did have parts. Suppose we were animals, composed of organs, cells, and atoms in vast

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4AT VII: 86. The argument presented here is an oversimplification. Bennett’s interpretation (2001: 67-71) is more plausible, though equally ineffective as an argument for the claim that we are or appear to be immaterial.
numbers. Would that give us a different inward appearance from what we actually observe? Descartes gives no reason to think so. For all he says, our appearance to introspection would be exactly the same whether we were animals composed of parts or simple, immaterial entities. If so, introspection provides no evidence against our being animals.

Compare the fact that we cannot detect any parts of ourselves by introspection with the fact that we cannot detect any penguins by introspection. This does not mean that there appear in introspection to be no penguins, contrary to the appearance given by the senses. Although introspection does not give the appearance that there are penguins, it does not give the appearance that there are no penguins either. It is simply silent on the existence of penguins. It says nothing either for or against. Introspection is equally silent on whether we are made up of parts. It does not give the appearance that we have parts, but neither does it give the appearance that we have no parts. It is not evidence of absence, but mere absence of evidence. We appear unequivocally, before the arguments are given, to be animals.6

4. People and their bodies

I have said that we appear to be animals, and we ought to believe otherwise only on the basis of evidence strong enough to outweigh this appearance. And many philosophers have believed otherwise. Nearly all the major figures in the history of Western philosophy (with the notable exception of Aristotle and his followers) denied that we are animals. The most common reason for this was the conviction that no material thing could think (a topic discussed elsewhere in this volume). Since we clearly think, we must be immaterial, and therefore not animals.

Few contemporary philosophers take us to be immaterial. Yet many deny that we are animals.6 Why do they reject the appearance?

One reason is based on the thought that to be an animal is to be a mere body. And it sounds wrong to say that people are the same thing as their bodies. People are one thing, the thought goes; their bodies are something else. Since animals are bodies, it follows that people are not animals.

Whether our being animals really does imply that we are our bodies depends on what it is for something to be someone’s body. The answer to

\[5\]This is not to deny that there are metaphysical arguments for our being simple (Lowe 2001, Olson 2007: 153-164, 176-179), or to imply that such arguments are worthless. The point is simply about how things appear before we consider such arguments.

\[6\]A recent survey of more than 900 professional philosophers (Bourget and Chalmers 2009) found that only 17 percent favored a ‘biological view’ of personal identity, which is more or less equivalent to animalism. The survey did not include a question about whether we are immaterial, presumably because the authors thought there was little current debate over it.
this question that we considered in §2 suggests that it does have this implication. I don’t set much store by that answer, but I will concede the point for the sake of argument. The important question, then, is why we should deny that people are their bodies. Presumably it’s because it sounds wrong to say things like this:

1. Descartes’ body gave two proofs for the existence of God.
2. Descartes’ body read the Guardian.
3. Descartes’ body asked the shop manager for a refund.

The reason why these statements sound wrong, the objection claims, is that our bodies don’t give philosophical arguments or read newspapers or ask shop managers for refunds. Those are simply not things that our bodies can do. They lack the mental and behavioral properties that we have.

But it’s doubtful whether this really is why 1-3 sound wrong. Consider these:

4. Descartes’ body was born in 1596.
5. Descartes’ body had dark hair.
6. Descartes’ body was seen entering the shop at 6:24pm.
7. Descartes’ body died of pneumonia.

They sound wrong too. And this would appear to be for the same reason that 1-3 sound wrong. (They have the same sort of “wrong” feel to them.) Yet if Descartes’ body was an animal, as the objection claims, they cannot be wrong because his body was not born in 1596, did not have any particular hair color, was not seen entering a shop, and did not die of pneumonia. These are things that clearly can be true of animals. Why such statements sound wrong—why we can say that Descartes, but not his body, died of pneumonia, for instance—is not easy to say. But the answer cannot be simply that human bodies are incapable of doing the things described in the statements. (Not, anyway, if they are animals.) That undermines the claim that 1-3 sound wrong because human bodies cannot think or act as we do. The way in which we can and cannot use such phrases as ‘Descartes’ body’ provides no reason to deny that human animals have the mental and behavioral properties that we have. It is therefore no objection to our being animals.

5. Life after death

Another thought has to do with life after death. To have life after death is to exist, in a conscious state, after one has died and one’s remains have decayed to the point where they can no longer function. This does not seem possible for a biological organism. Once an organism has been consumed by worms, it no longer exists, and so cannot be conscious. Animals, even human animals, cannot have life after death. If we could have life after
death, we have a property that no animal has. It follows that we cannot be animals.

The argument does not require that we actually have life after death, but only that we could have it: that it is possible in the broadest sense. If there were a god, he could bring it about. This is not because a god would be able to do just anything. Not even an omnipotent being could make a liquid giraffe, or bring it about that he himself had never existed. Nor could he give an organism life after death. But he could give us life after death.

Is life after death really possible for us? It’s not obviously impossible. We seem able to imagine it, whereas we can’t even begin to imagine a liquid giraffe. But that we are animals is not obviously impossible either. If we can imagine having life after death, we can certainly imagine being animals. In fact we don’t have to imagine it: that’s exactly how it appears. So if it’s possible for us to have life after death, it ought to be equally possible for us to be animals.

But these things cannot both be possible. If we are animals, then we are necessarily animals. Whether we are animals is not a contingent matter: it could not be that we are in fact animals but we could have been immaterial entities instead, or vice versa. We are animals either in all possible worlds in which we exist, or in none. It follows that if it’s possible for us to be animals—logically or metaphysically possible—then we are necessarily animals. And if we are necessarily animals, then it is not possible for us to have life after death—assuming, anyway, that no animal could have life after death. So it cannot be possible for us to have life after death and also possible for us to be animals. At least one of the two must be impossible. But it’s hard to know which it is.

The reason it’s hard to know is that things can be impossible without being obviously so. Consider these two statements:

9. Every even number is the sum of two prime numbers.
10. Not every even number is the sum of two prime numbers.

Since they are contradictory, only one of them can be true. Indeed, only one is possible. The one that’s false, like all mathematical falsehoods, is necessarily false—that is, impossible. But no one knows which it is. No one has ever found a contradiction in the thought that every even number is the sum of two primes. Nor has anyone found a contradiction in the idea of an even number that is not the sum of two primes. It is, as the mathematicians say, an open problem. Both statements may seem possible, yet one of them is impossible for an unknown reason. And the statement that we have life after death could be the same: it might be impossible for an unknown reason.

But even if it really were possible for us to have life after death, this would rule out our being animals only it’s impossible for an animal to have life after death. And this is disputed. Eminent philosophers--Christian
philosophers, no less--have argued that we could have life after death even if we are animals (see the chapter by van Inwagen in this volume). If they are right, the objection to animalism collapses.

6. Brain transplants

The most common reason for rejecting animalism is that it is has unattractive consequences about what it takes for us to persist through time. These consequences do not occur in real life, but we can imagine cases where they do.

Suppose your brain were transplanted into my head, and my own brain destroyed. Because the brain is the organ primarily responsible for your psychological features, it seems that the resulting person--the one with your brain--would have your plans, preferences, personality, and cognitive skills, for the most part at least (even if there would also be messy side-effects). He would remember your life and not mine. My own memories, plans, preferences, personality, and cognitive skills would be destroyed along with my brain. The resulting person would think he was you and not me. It’s tempting to think that he would be you. The operation would pare you down to the size of a brain, move you across the room, then give you a new set of parts to replace the ones you lost. It would not give me a new brain, with new memories, plans, and so on. It would give you a new body.

But the operation would not give any animal a new body. It would simply move an organ from one animal to another, just as a liver transplant would. The animal previously associated with you would lose an organ, and with it the capacity for thought and consciousness. That organ would then become a part of the animal previously associated with me. If you and I are animals, the operation would give me a new brain, together with memories of things I never did and false autobiographical beliefs. And it’s easy to believe that this is wrong. If it is, then we must be something other than animals.

In other words: A brain transplant would move a person from one animal to another. But it would not move an animal from one animal to another. It follows that a person is not an animal. Even if you never have a brain transplant, you have a property that no animal has, namely being such that you would go with your brain if it were ever transplanted. And if you have a property that no animal has, you are not an animal.

How strong is this argument? The crucial premise is that the person would go with her transplanted brain: the one who ended up with that organ would be the donor and not the recipient. Attractive though this may sound, it looks less compelling if we tell the story in a different way (Snowdon 2014: 234). Suppose you had an illness that would kill you unless your brain were replaced with a healthy donated organ. This would of course have grave side-effects: it would destroy your memories, plans, preferences, and other mental properties. It may not be clear whether you could survive such a thing, even if the operation were completely successful. But it’s not obvious that you couldn’t survive it either. (Whether your survival in these
circumstances would be any benefit to you is another matter.) Maybe the operation could save your life, though at great cost. We can’t confidently rule this out. Nor could we confidently rule it out if the new brain gave you memories, plans, and preferences from the donor. But if it’s not obvious that the brain recipient would not be you, then it’s not obvious that it would be the donor. Maybe the donor would simply lose an organ, and the organ would become a part of you, saving your life. The claim is not that this is obviously true, but that it’s not obviously false. And in that case it’s not obvious that a person must go with her transplanted brain, contrary to the transplant objection. Though forceful, the objection does not entirely settle the matter.

7. An argument for animalism

I have argued that we appear to be animals and we don’t appear to be nonanimals (§2). I have tried to counter objections both to this (§3) and to the claim that we actually are animals (§§4-6). I will conclude with an argument for animalism.

The main premise of the argument is that it’s possible for a biological organism to have mental properties. Dogs, for instance, can be conscious. They can feel pain, and be happy or miserable. They like some things and dislike others. That’s why we have animal-welfare laws. The mental powers of dogs may be feeble compared to ours, but they have mental powers.

This makes it hard to deny that we are animals. If any organism can have mental properties, a human animal can. If dogs can be happy or miserable, human animals can too. And in that case, normal, adult human animals actually have mental properties. They are conscious; they are happy or miserable; they like some things and dislike others. But they don’t have different moods or likes or dislikes from ours. If the animal sitting here is happy, I’m happy. If it prefers red wine to ditchwater, I do too. And presumably the converse also holds: if I feel or like or dislike something, the animal does as well. There appears to be no psychological difference between the animal and me. That’s hardly surprising, seeing as we share the same history, the same surroundings, the same sense organs, and of course the same brain and nervous system.

Suppose this is right: each of us is psychologically indistinguishable from a certain human animal. It would follow that a normal, mature human animal is a person—that is, a rational, conscious being that can think about itself in the first person. And if you and I were not those animals, it would follow that you were something other than the animal person thinking your thoughts. Being a person yourself, you would be one of two people within your skin thinking, in exactly the same way, about philosophy. There would be twice as many people as we thought there were.

This would threaten to make the view that we are not animals self-undermining: even if it were true, we could never know that it was. How could you know that you were the nonanimal person thinking your thoughts
and not the animal person? If you think you are the nonanimal, the animal will think, using the same reasoning, that it is too. For all you could ever know, you might be the one making this mistake.

Your epistemic situation would be like that of someone who had just been duplicated (Olson 2015a: §6). Suppose we had a duplicating machine. When you step into the “in” box, the machine reads off your complete physical (and mental) condition and uses this information to assemble a perfect duplicate of you in the “out” box. The process renders you briefly unconscious but is otherwise harmless. One person wakes up in each box. The boxes are indistinguishable. Because each person will have the same memories and perceive identical surroundings, each will think, for the same reasons, that he or she is you. But only one will be right. If this happened to you, you would no reason to suppose, afterwards, that you were the original person who stepped into the machine rather than the freshly made duplicate. (Suppose the technicians who work the machine are sworn to secrecy and immune to bribes.) You would think, “Who am I? Did I do the things I seem to remember doing, or did I come into being only a moment ago, complete with false memories of someone else’s life?” And you would have no way of answering these questions.

So even if you were not the animal, you could never know it. Nor could you know whether you would go with your brain if it were transplanted or stay behind with an empty head, undermining the transplant objection. I take this to be an absurd outcome. The obvious solution to the problem is to suppose that you are not a second person in addition to the animal. You are the animal person.

This conclusion follows from four premises (Olson 2003):

1. There is an animal where you are.
2. The animal thinks.
3. You think.
4. You are not one of two thinkers where you are.

If you are not an animal, at least one of these claims must be false. The one opponents of animalism are most likely to reject is 2. If the human animal where you are is not thinking, then it’s not a person, and not a second thinker of your thoughts. It does not mistakenly take itself to be you, and you can know that you are the person and not the animal.

But this has startling consequences. If the animal is not thinking, then no human animal can ever think. And that can only be because it is metaphysically impossible for any biological organism to have any mental property. It follows that dogs cannot feel pain or prefer some things to others. They are no more sentient or intelligent than stones. At most a dog might relate to a conscious canine nonorganism in the way that a human organism relates to a human person, whatever way that might be. What appears to be a conscious animal is really two things: a conscious nonanimal
and an unconscious animal.

And if biological organisms cannot have mental properties, there has to be a reason why not. Why should it be absolutely impossible for an animal to be conscious? What prevents human animals from using their brains—our brains—to think? This is a hard question (see Olson 2007: 31-35, Shoemaker 2011). Opponents of animalism desperately need an answer to it.7

References
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