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A new argument for animalism

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Though Aristotelian in spirit, the view known as *animalism* is a relative latecomer to the debate over personal identity, having been defended only within the past 25 years or so.¹ Its advocates make the following straightforward claim: we are animals. According to the intended reading of this claim, the 'are' reflects the 'is' of numerical identity (not the 'is' of non-identical constitution); the 'we' is intended to pick out you, me and others of our kind; and 'human animals' is meant to refer to biological organisms of the *Homo sapiens* species. According to animalism's most sophisticated rival, *neo-Lockean constitutionalism*, we persons are non-identically constituted by human animals, rather like the way statues are said to be constituted by the lumps of matter with which they coincide.²

The standard argument for animalism is commonly known as the *Thinking Animal Argument* (TAA). Very roughly, TAA registers the implausible multiplication of thinkers to which anyone who rejects animalism is committed.³ Recently, however, a structurally analogous line of argument has been shown

1 The founding advocates of this view include Ayers (1991), Carter (1989), Olson (1997), Snowdon (1990) and van Inwagen (1990). Other notable proponents include DeGrazia (2005), Hershenov (2005), Mackie (1999), Merricks (2001) and Wiggins (2001).

2 The leading defenders of neo-Lockean constitutionalism are Baker (2000), Johnston (1987) and Shoemaker (1999, 2011). Other opponents of animalism – neo-Lockeans who regard psychological properties as essential, but who are not constitutionalists – include Hudson (2001), Lowe (1996), McMahan (2002), Noonan (1998) and Parfit (2012). A more detailed overview of the animalism debate can be found in Blatti (forthcoming).

3 I believe that Snowdon (1990: 91) was the first to advance this argument at a 1986 conference. Later presentations can be found in Ayers 1991, vol. 2: 283, Carter 1988, Olson 1997: 106–9 and elsewhere. What is now the standard exposition of this argument can be found in Olson 2003.

to threaten animalism.⁴ So, here, I offer a second arrow for the animalist's quiver.

Animal Ancestors Argument (AAA). Assume for *reductio* that animalism is false. If you are not an animal, then 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, the falsity of animalism entails the rejection of evolutionary theory (or at least that theory's applicability to us), 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.

Of course, like TAA, AAA does not purport to be a knockdown argument: it does not settle the debate over animalism once and for all (whatever that would mean), nor by itself does it suffice to undermine all of the independent arguments in support of animalism's rivals. But AAA does withstand a number of likely objections. Here I will consider just two.

Objection 1: evolving persons. True, we are the products of evolution: we evolved *from* animals. But we are not ourselves animals. Although our distant ancestry includes animals, our more immediate ancestors were not animals. Long ago our distant animal ancestors evolved into a new kind of thing: people.⁵ Contra AAA then, a commitment to the rudiments of evolutionary theory is not incompatible with a denial of animalism.

Reply. It is difficult to see how this objection could be reconciled with any orthodox understanding of evolutionary theory. Evolutionary biology does not 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 personae*. The reason is that evolution is not a process that begins with one kind of thing and results in another kind of thing: natural selection may operate so as to produce new varieties of organisms, but it does not operate so as to produce *non*-organisms. Whatever explanation a constitutionalist gives of the appearance of a new kind of thing – a person non-identically constituted by a human animal – it will not be an evolutionary story.

In response to this reply, the constitutionalist opponent of AAA might propose an explanation of the emergence of animal-constituted persons that, while consistent with it, does not appeal to evolutionary theory. 'With the evolution of animals that are also psychological subjects of some sophistication,' this proposal goes, 'there appeared something properly

4 The *thinking parts problem* challenges the animalist to justify why we should suppose that, in addition to the animal as a whole, many of its proper parts (e.g. the brain, the head) are not also thinkers. The initial presentation of this objection is due to Olson (2007: 215–9). Parfit (2012) has recently argued that this problem can be solved if one abandons animalism and adopts what he calls the *embodied part view*.

5 Baker (2000), Huxley (1958) and Lowe (1996: 47–8) all endorse something like this view.

regarded as a new kind of thing – a kind whose instances are non-identical with the animals with which they are associated – and the explanation for this non-identity can be given solely by appeal to the non-overlapping properties and capacities characteristic of each kind.⁶

But this refinement of *evolving persons* faces two rejoinders. First and foremost, we should be skeptical about the prospects of any non-evolutionary explanation along these lines, since the emergence of the very capacities characteristic of personhood (e.g. self-consciousness, rationality) is explicable in terms of adaptation to selective pressures. This explanation is corroborated by the fossil record, which shows brain size increasing as skulls become progressively more recent. Second, the issue that divides animalists and anti-animalists is precisely whether the animal is the bearer of the properties and capacities typically associated with personhood: animalists say yes, anti-animalists say no. So the proposal's appeal to non-overlapping sets of properties and capacities as differentiating multiple kinds of things – persons and animals – is less an objection to AAA than it is a bald assertion of animalism's falsity.

Having said all this, I note that a proponent of AAA 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. If being a person is a matter of having certain psychological dispositions and capacities – like the way being a body-builder amounts to having certain physical dispositions and capacities – then the defender of AAA 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 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* or its refinement threatens AAA, and the answer is no.

Objection 2: 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. Yet only this stronger claim is at stake in the personal identity debate: animalists affirm it, constitutionalists deny it. Contra AAA, therefore, the animalist's identity claim is not vindicated by the truth of evolutionary theory.

Reply. I am aware of no evidence to suggest that, when evolutionary theorists talk about the evolution of animals, they understand 'animals' to refer *not* to beings that are one and the same things as animals, but instead to beings that are non-identical with animals – to beings that are, say, merely constituted by animals. Nor am I aware of any evidence to suggest that 'animal' is used differently, depending on whether it refers to human or

6 I believe Shoemaker (2011) would accept an explanation along these lines.

non-human animals. And in the absence of any such evidence, the simplest interpretation of evolutionary theory's assertions about animals treats them as referring non-derivatively to the animals themselves.

Nevertheless, philosophical considerations have recently been brought to bear on the reference of the term 'animal', and a refinement of *overstatement* that reflects these considerations should be addressed. According to Sydney Shoemaker (2011, forthcoming), 'animal' is equivocal between two senses, the first of which refers to what he calls *biological animals*.⁷ Biological animals are creatures whose persistence conditions are purely biological. Precisely what these conditions are Shoemaker does not say, but at the very least they include a necessary condition of continued living, and they are not psychological or bodily conditions. The second sense of 'animal' refers to what Shoemaker calls *animals*: subjects of mental properties that are non-identically constituted by biological animals. Since it can become confusing in which sense 'animal' is being used, I will mark the distinction by using 'animal[†]' to designate Shoemaker's narrower, second sense. On his view, then, 'animal' (without the dagger) refers equivocally to biological animals and animals[†].

Shoemaker's rationale for this distinction relies on a general account of 'what determines the nature of any sort of persisting thing?' (2011: 353), the details of which range far beyond the scope of the present discussion. The point here is that, armed with this distinction, a proponent of *overstatement* might recast the objection by challenging the animalist's assumption that evolutionary theory's claims about animals concern biological animals rather than animals[†]. It will be conceded that evolutionary theory entails the truth of the claim 'each of us is identical with an animal' but insisted that this claim be interpreted as referring to animals[†]. In this way, it can be allowed both that, once precisified in the appropriate way, 'each of us is identical with an animal' is true and that this fact follows from evolutionary theory, while maintaining that AAA overstates its case in concluding that the truth of animalism (understood as the claim 'each of us is identical with a biological animal') follows from evolutionary theory.

The problem with this refinement of *overstatement* is that its proponent faces a difficulty analogous to the one that faced *evolving persons*: how is the appearance of animals[†] to be explained?⁸ The explanation must be evolutionary in character if our status as animals is really to be grounded in evolutionary theory. Yet, if each of us is an animal[†] non-identically constituted by a biological animal, the explanation cannot be an evolutionary one, since

7 See also Unger 2000.

8 Hershenov (2007) has also argued that Shoemaker's view fits poorly into an evolutionary perspective.

non-biological ‘animals’ are not the kind of thing to result from processes of natural selection.⁹

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9 Ancestors of AAA featured in papers presented at the University of Mississippi, Wake Forest University, the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association, and the Northwest Philosophy Conference. I also received support from the Animals & Society Institute and Wesleyan University. I have been peddling this little argument for so long that it is impractical here to acknowledge all of those who discussed it with me along the way. Most recently, I received helpful feedback from Remy Debes, David Hershenov, Robert Howell, Leonard Kahn, Steve Luper, Deb Tollefsen, an anonymous referee for this journal, and especially Paul Snowdon.

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Against swamping

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1. The swamping problem

Recent work by Duncan Pritchard (2009a), Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), Linda Zagzebski (2003), Richard Swinburne (1999), Ward Jones (1997) and others illuminates a particular problem for theorists of knowledge. The problem begins with the widely-held assumption that knowledge is more *epistemically valuable* (henceforth ‘e-valuable’) than mere true belief.¹ This assumption gives rise to an *ex ante* constraint on the correct theory of knowledge: whatever conditions it places on knowledge (over and above the possession of true belief), a true belief that satisfies all of those conditions must turn out to be

1 As Kvanvig (2003) notes, the insight that knowledge is to be prized above mere true opinion (even if the former is no practically more useful than the latter) has its roots in Plato’s *Meno*.