

The elimination argument

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Abstract Animalism is the view that we are animals: living, breathing, wholly material beings. Despite its considerable appeal, animalism has come under fire. Other philosophers have had much to say about objections to animalism that stem from reflection on personal identity over time. But one promising objection (the ‘Elimination Argument’) has been overlooked. In this paper, I remedy this situation and examine the Elimination Argument in some detail. I contend that the Elimination Argument is both unsound and unmotivated.

1 Introduction

Materialism about human persons, let us say, is the thesis that we are wholly material beings. Interesting though it is, materialism is not a complete answer to the question of what we are. For materialism does not conclusively settle the question of whether we are simple or composite; and if composite, whether we are organisms or brains or cerebral hemispheres, or nervous systems, or proper temporal parts of such or things constituting but not identical to such—and so on. Materialism rules out some forms of dualism, but it doesn’t do much more than that.

I think materialism is true. I also think animalism (the thesis that we are animals—living, wholly material beings) is the most plausible version of materialism on offer. If I’m right about this, arguments against animalism are of double interest. For if sound, they provide evidence, not just against animalism, but against materialism as well. Despite its considerable appeal, animalism is a minority view amongst contemporary philosophers. It’s not entirely clear why this is so. Eric Olson offers this charitable explanation: there are just too many plausible-sounding *arguments*

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against the view!¹ Olson has done much to rebut arguments against animalism (especially those stemming from reflection about personal identity over time).² But new objections keep on coming. In this paper, I will examine an objection (the ‘Elimination Argument’) to animalism recently offered by Hud Hudson. I shall contend that the Elimination Argument is both unsound and unmotivated.

2 The elimination argument

Materialism does not settle the question of what we are. For even if materialism is true, there are many candidates left—things we might very well be. Some, like organisms, are relatively large and long-lasting. Others, like brains or proper temporal parts of brains are small or short-lived. What, then, is the materialist to do? How might she give a more fully-orbed answer to the question of what we are?

In answer to this question, Hud Hudson has proposed the following:

Elimination Principle (EP). If x and y are both human person candidates and at most one of x and y is a human person, but y has superfluous parts whereas x doesn’t, then x is the better candidate for the office.³

I’ll first comment on the content of and motivation for (EP). By ‘superfluous parts’, Hudson means those that ‘play no contributory role in supporting a psychological profile constitutive of personhood’. A part supports a psychological profile just if it ‘manifests certain properties and stands in certain relations upon which a particular collection of psychological properties’ supervenes. One might well wonder what this comes to; but since my objection to Hudson’s argument won’t turn on such details, I’ll let them pass.

One thought behind (EP) is this (I’ll put the point in the first person singular, but it generalizes): I am, among other things, the thing that thinks my thoughts. I am associated with an animal, a human organism; but not all of the things within the skin of that animal are relevant to the thinking of my thoughts. Not all of those things support my thoughts in the relevant way. My cerebrum is more closely connected to (and supports) my thoughts in ways that my toes and stomach do not.

¹ “I imagine that most philosophers could easily rattle off half a dozen arguments against “Animalism”, as the view that you and I are animals is sometimes called. Here are a few favourites: (i) If you were an animal, you would be identical with your body (or at any rate with some human body). But no human body can think or feel or act, as you can. (ii) Persons and animals have different persistence conditions: the organism that is you body could outlive you (if you lapsed into a persistent vegetative state), or you could outlive it (if your brain were transplanted and the rest of you destroyed). But a thing cannot outlive itself. (iii) Persons and animals have different criteria of synchronic identity: any human animal could be associated with two different persons at once (as cases of split personality). Thus, no person is an animal. (iv) These experiences—the ones I am having now—are essentially mine. But they are only contingently associated with any particular animal. Hence, I have a property that no animal has” (Olson 1998, pp. 396–397).

² See especially Olson (1997, 2007).

³ Hudson (2007, p. 218).

With this distinction between thought-supporting items and non-thought-supporting items in mind (of which more later), (EP) recommends a procedure for determining which thing I am. Find the smaller thing (among the plausible candidates) all of whose parts support my thoughts and such that everything supporting my thoughts overlaps it; and *that* is the thing I am. If there are several candidates for the office (several things that might be me), I am to be identified with the thing—if there is one—that is a minimal support for my thoughts.

Another thought behind (EP) is this: the materialist had better give a non-arbitrary reason to select one human person candidate over another. Appealing to (EP) is not the *only way* of doing this.⁴ But it is one way, and unlike other proposals, it does not appeal to the obscure or irrelevant notions of *natural kind* or *living object*.

(EP) is an expression of the plausible view that our thoughts must take center stage when reflecting on what we are. It is not hard to see how (EP) might be used in an argument against animalism. If animalism is true, I am an animal. According to animalism, then, I have as parts a stomach, legs, toes, arms, a nervous system, two cerebral hemispheres, and so forth (or I have as parts, at any rate, things arranged-stomach-wise, things arranged-leg-wise, and so forth). But, plausibly, many of those things are wholly irrelevant to my thoughts. They play no contributory role in supporting my psychological profile. My stomach, legs, toes, arms, and the like do not support my thinking, and my mental properties do not supervene or depend on their properties or relations. Plausibly, only certain parts of my nervous system (or perhaps only certain parts of my brain) do that. If animalism is true, then, I have as a proper part some thing that is a minimal supporter for my thoughts—my brain, say, or some suitable part of it. But if (EP) is true, I am to be identified with *that* minimal support for my thoughts, and not with something of which it is a proper part. If (EP) is true, then, animalism is not. So animalism must go. For ease of reference, let's put the argument like this:

EP. If x and y are both human person candidates and at most one of x and y is a human person, but y has superfluous parts whereas x doesn't, then x is the better candidate for the office.

Conflict. If the Elimination Principle is true, animalism is false.

Therefore, animalism is false (from EP and Conflict).

This is the Elimination Argument against animalism.⁵

3 Against the elimination principle

Animalists have not been silent on these matters. Some animalists (Trenton Merricks and Peter van Inwagen) have embraced (or, in Eric Olson's case, made

⁴ Indeed, Hudson identifies and dismisses five others. Hudson (2007, p. 233).

⁵ Hudson's presentation of the argument proceeds through a fascinating discussion of Four-Dimensionalism, Universalism, the Doctrine of Arbitrary Undetached Parts, and more. Since I will not take issue with anything Hudson has to say about those matters, I will concentrate my attention just on this short version of the Elimination Argument.

flirtatious overtures in the direction of) *restricted theories of composition*.⁶ According to such theories, it is not always the case that some things compose something. Such theories are helpful for the animalist. van Inwagen, for example, maintains that some things compose something only if, roughly, they are arranged living-organism-wise. So there just *aren't* things like brains, cerebral hemispheres, or nervous systems. On van Inwagen's view, then, animalism does not imply that I have as a proper part something that is a minimal support for my thoughts (my brain, say, or some suitable part of it). There is no such thing (though I have as parts, of course, things-arranged-brainwise), and so Conflict is false. Such an austere ontology of the material world has its benefits. But believing that there are no brains (or cerebral hemispheres, or nervous systems, or...) is a hard thing to do. I think I can manage it, but many cannot.

And so I will propose a new route of resistance. I shall argue that (EP) is false. I'll begin by appealing to some 'partisan' theses (theses that animalists have special reason to affirm). Then, I'll develop a less partisan case against (EP).

Animalism says that we are human organisms. Many human organisms lack *any* psychology (and thus lack any psychological profile) across certain stretches of their life; many human animals display no thought at all at, for example, the very beginning and very end of their lives (not to mention temporary comas, episodes of deep and dreamless sleep, and the like). So as important as reflection on our thoughts (and which things think them) may well be to the question of what we are, it must be taken with a grain of salt. It's tempting to think that there is an intimate connection between our being thinking things and the question of what we are (this explains the abiding allure of Cartesian dualism and Lockean theories about personal identity, I take it). But as intimate as that connection may be, it is not so intimate as to imply that we think at every moment of our existence. Our being thinking things is relevant to the question of what we are, but it is not, according to the animalist, a *controlling* factor.

The animalist, then, has a quite general reason to doubt principles encoding such convictions. And it would seem that (EP) is such a principle. For (EP) has it that all of our parts are relevant to our thoughts, and it's hard to see how to reconcile such a view with the view that each of us once was a fetus (lacking thought altogether) and that many of us will one day lack thought altogether (again).

Thus, a partisan case against (EP). Note that the case needn't be *wholly* partisan. It needn't take the form 'but animalism is true, and so (EP) is false'. For one might begin with the simple thought that each of us was once an unthinking fetus (none of whose parts were relevant to any thought)—and conclude from that thesis that (EP) is false. That said, I think a much stronger (and less partisan) case can be made against (EP). And to that project I now turn. I begin my non-partisan case against (EP) with a story.

I have become quite interested in the question of what books are. I have settled recently on materialism about books (the thesis that books are wholly material beings). But—philosopher that I am—I wonder still: just how *big* are books?

⁶ Merricks (2001), Olson (1995), van Inwagen (1990, pp. 173–179).

And how long do they last? *Tomes*, let us say, are among the things that occupy my shelves; many tomes have as parts some pages with text, some pages without text, and a binding. Some even have dustjackets. All tomes are medium-sized dry goods. I wonder: is tomism true; that is, are books tomes? Is every book tome-shaped? And does every book last just so long as some tome does?

I come to realize that in the nearby neighborhood of every tome, there are many book-candidates. In the vicinity of each of the tomes in my shelf, for example, there are at least these things:

1. Something composed of all the pages and the binding and the dustjacket (intuitively, a tome).
2. Something composed of all the pages (including the blank ones).
3. Something composed of just the pages with writing on them.
4. Something composed of just the page-parts with writing on them (intuitively, something composed of just the pages with writing on them, minus their margins).

And so on. Given my materialism about books and my generous ontology of the material world (according to which any things compose something), it seems that I am awash in book-candidates. This situation is no embarrassment of riches, however; it's just embarrassing. For it makes answering the question of what books are (and how big they are, and how long they last) much more difficult. Of the items listed above, which is a book? And in general, which items in my generous ontology of the material world are books?

I start over. I approach anew the question of what books are by thinking about the powers or properties characteristic of bookhood (setting aside blank books for now).⁷ It seems that carrying information is among them. At any rate, carrying information is intimately related to the nature of books. Having settled on this, I note that although some parts of tomes are relevant to carrying information, others are not. Since carrying such information is so central to the nature of books, I settle on the following:

BOOK PRINCIPLE. If x and y are both book candidates and at most one of x and y is a book, but y has information-superfluous parts whereas x doesn't, then x is the better candidate for the office.

I own only exactly one copy of *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person*; I own exactly one book by that title. So if there are various candidates for the office of being that book in the vicinity of some tome, at most, one of them is in fact a copy of the book. And of the various candidates I've considered (e.g., 1–4 above), each of 1–3 has information-superfluous parts (parts that play no contributory role in supporting the carrying of information that is characteristic of bookhood). Luckily, 4 does not. 4 is thus the best book-candidate. I thus conclude that my copy of *A Materialist Metaphysics of*

⁷ F is characteristic of G -ness, let us say, just in the case that either (a) what it is to be an F is (perhaps among other things), to be a G , or (b) it is a *generic* truth that F s are G s. (Generics, as I understand them, admit of exceptions—*ducks lay eggs* is a generic truth even though no male duck lays an egg).

the Human Person is, like 4, a proper part of and not identical to a tome. And I conclude that books, in general, are not tomes. So tomism is false.

The story I've just told is not true, but it is instructive. In it, I make a mistake. I mistakenly infer the Book Principle from the thesis that carrying information is characteristic of bookhood. But the inference does not preserve truth. Carrying information may well be characteristic of bookhood, but that does not imply that all parts of a book are relevant to carrying information. (I'm assuming here that books in fact *do* have as parts things like spines and bindings and margins in which no information is inscribed.) And in general, *G*-ness might be characteristic of being an *F* even though some of a *G*'s parts might not be relevant to *G*-ness (do not support it, etc.). This is the lesson I take from the above story.

You may not like my book story. Perhaps you think that carrying information is not characteristic of bookhood. Perhaps you think that book-talk is systematically ambiguous between book-type-talk and book-token-talk. Then I invite you to replace my book story with an analogous one constructed from these story-kernels:

1. Floating is characteristic of boathood, or at any rate intimately related to the question of what boats are. Among the various boat-candidates in my dock, then (some boat-shaped, others merely hull-shaped), the better one for the office of the one boat I own is a hull-shaped one (which is itself only a proper part of a bigger thing one might have thought is my boat). This follows from the Boat Principle and the obvious truth that I have exactly one boat.⁸
2. Being able to implement certain functions is characteristic of computerhood, or at any rate intimately related to the question of what computers are. Among the various computer-candidates on my desk, then (some laptop-shaped, others merely logicboard-shaped), the better one for the office of the one computer I own is a logicboard-shaped one (which is itself only a proper part of a bigger thing one might have thought is my computer). This follows from the Computer Principle and the obvious truth that I have exactly one computer.
3. And so on (once you get the hang of things, it is not hard to construct additional stories along these lines).

In each of these stories, I make the same mistake. (I'm assuming that my boat is not in fact hull-shaped and has as parts things like a deck and various decorative bits—parts irrelevant to its buoyancy. Similarly, I'm assuming that my computer has as parts things like an Apple logo and a casing—parts irrelevant to its ability to implement various functions.) In the stories, I rely on the Book, Boat, and Computer Principles. But these principles are false.

So too is (EP). Even if having a psychological profile *is* characteristic of human personhood, it does not follow that all of my parts are relevant to such a psychological profile, or that a being whose parts are superfluous to such a profile is a worse human-person candidate. Indeed, To appeal to (EP) and conclude that we

⁸ Thanks to Brad Rettler for this story-kernel.

are proper parts of organisms (and thus not organisms) is to make the same mistake I made in the Book, Boat, and Computer stories.

Let me be clear. I *am* claiming that reflection on the stories shows that considerations about the close connection between psychology and personhood do not support (EP), just as parallel considerations do not support the Book, Boat, or Computer Principles. I am thus advancing an undercutting defeater to the Elimination Argument, undermining the case for one of its premises. But I am *also* claiming that reflection on the stories shows that the Book, Boat, and Computer Principles are false, and that this gives us good reason to doubt (EP) too. I thus also advance a rebutting defeater to the Elimination Argument. I have given reason to think that one of its premises is more than just unmotivated. It is *false*.

As noted above, there are alternative routes to (EP). One need not arrive at (EP) merely by reflecting on the intimate connections between our psychology and the question of what we are.⁹ One might instead endorse (EP) because it promises a non-arbitrary resolution to the question of *which* material things we are. Does reflection on the stories I've told undermine *this* case for (EP)? Does it, in light of the arbitrariness case for (EP), still suggest that (EP) is false? I say 'yes' to both questions. Let's add to the Book story these details:

I am deeply concerned with being even-handed and non-arbitrary in my ontology of books. Accordingly, I resolve to have a theory of which material objects books are that, as much as possible, avoids, well, arbitrariness. The Book Principle fits the bill. So I adopt it, and deduce the falsity of tomism.

In this Expanded Book story, I still make a mistake. Though my enthusiasm for non-arbitrariness is perhaps admirable, it has led me astray (I am here, as before, assuming that tomism is true). That a given principle—like the Book Principle—is principled may offer *some* support for that principle, but it seems nonetheless clear to me that Book Principle is false and not *well*-supported by reflection on considerations about arbitrariness. The same goes, I say, for the Book and Computer Principles. And so also for (EP).

A full discussion of arbitrariness and its alleged vices will take us too far afield, but I do offer this opinionated advice to proponents of (EP): make an anti-arbitrariness case for (EP) and show how it does not also support principles like Book Principle. Be especially careful in making this case to explain what arbitrariness is, why it is bad, and what *kind* of support non-arbitrariness offers a metaphysical principle (*pro tanto?* *prima facie*, absent defeat? defeasible but strong?). I do not say that such a case cannot be made. But it does seem to me to be a tall order, and until that order is filled, I say animalism is safe from its challenge.

4 Conclusion

Animalism is, in my view, the most plausible form of materialism. Like many plausible views, it has come under fire. I haven't answered all of the objections to

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

the view, but in this paper, I have shown that one recent objection by Hudson is unmotivated and unsound. I conclude that animalism—and materialism—are not so badly off after all.

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