



Why animalism matters

Andrew M. Bailey¹ · Allison Krile Thornton² · Peter van Elswyk³

Accepted: 5 December 2020
© Springer Nature B.V. 2021

Abstract Here is a question as intriguing as it is brief: *what are we?* The animalist's answer is equal in brevity: *we are animals*. This stark formulation of the animalist slogan distances it from nearby claims—that we are essentially animals, for example, or that we have purely biological criteria of identity over time. Is the animalist slogan—unburdened by modal or criterial commitments—still *interesting*, though? Or has it lost its bite? In this article we address such questions by presenting a positive case for the importance of animalism and applying that case to recent critiques.

Keywords Animalism · Personal ontology · Personal identity · What are we?

1 Introduction

Here is a question as intriguing as it is brief: what are we? The animalist's answer is equal in brevity: *we are animals*. The slogan says, of human persons, that they are identical to certain living, breathing organisms. Animalists answer the question of what we are by supplying a precise and stark theory of how we relate to our living animal bodies. Whatever those things are, we are them.

But animalism so construed has appeared to some to be uninformative or trivial. Mark Johnston, for example, writes:

✉ Andrew M. Bailey
andrew.bailey@yale-nus.edu.sg

¹ Yale-NUS College, Singapore, Singapore

² University of South Alabama, Mobile, USA

³ University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, USA

That we are *predicatively* human animals is a fact that every view of personal identity must take into account. Indeed, many views of personal identity, intuitively at odds with animalism understood as a distinctive alternative position in the philosophy of personal identity, have already taken this into account. This means that no distinctive alternative position in the philosophy of personal identity has been characterized by saying that “each of us is identical to a human animal,”... that is to say, all of us are human animals. But so what?¹

The thing that would make animalism truly interesting (but not true), Johnston proposes, is modal or criterial augmentation according to which, for example, we are *essentially* animals or that we have biological criteria of identity over time. Derek Parfit similarly maintains that the distinctive interest attaching to animalism derives from the answer it gives to questions about our criteria of identity over time:

When Animalists entered this debate, their main claim was that... psychological criteria of identity are seriously mistaken, because we are human animals, so that our criterion of identity must be biological.²

These are provocative claims. It’s hard to know what to make of them, however, since their authors haven’t developed them at much length. Luckily, Matt Duncan has recently proposed a dilemma that gives helpful shape to the discussion.³ According to that dilemma, animalism is either too weak or too strong. In its weak form and as the view that we are animals without modal or criterial commitment, it is *too* weak, and thus uninteresting. In its strong form, it makes predictions that can be handily falsified by thought experiment.

If the critics are right, then animalism in its modest form is boring and in its distinctive and interesting form is false. Either way, it is to be set aside.

In this paper, we’ll argue that animalism is considerably better off than all that. We will first offer a positive case for the interestingness of animalism. Then we will apply our case to the critiques at hand. Since Duncan’s argument is developed in much greater detail than the others, we will accordingly dedicate much of our attention to his dilemma and return later to Johnston and Parfit. A guiding theme is that, though animalism doesn’t answer all questions, it is a substantive answer to the question of what we are, itself a matter of some philosophical weight.

¹ Johnson (2016, 127). For other avowed anti-animalists who nonetheless agree that it is a trivial and obvious truth that we are animals, see also Baker (2000, 112), Shoemaker (2008, 318), and Shoemaker (2016, 128–129). Bailey 2016 argues that Baker’s and Shoemaker’s positions collapse into full-blown animalism despite their best intentions.

² Parfit (2012, 12).

³ Duncan forthcoming a.

2 Reasons why

We have a positive case for the importance of animalism: First, animalism is indeed an answer to the question of what we are and is therefore important. Second, animalism rules out a number of substantive and interesting metaphysical views and thus shows its importance again.

We begin our first argument by noting what the question of what we are is asking. Your body is a human animal: a living, breathing organism. You see it when you look in the mirror. When it is sick, you don't feel too well. Where it goes, you go. And, where you go, it must follow. Indeed, you can make it move through sheer force of will. You bear, in sum, an important and intimate relation to your animal. You are not an exception. We human persons all have animals. And we each bear some intimate relation to these animals of ours. Philosophical answers to the question of what we are say what this relation is.⁴ They say *how* we relate to our animal bodies and thus what we *are*. To get an even better feel for what this question is asking, consider these prominent answers⁵:

Pure dualism: We are wholly immaterial souls that are non-identical to our animals.

Moderate dualism: We are wholly immaterial souls that are non-identical to our animals, but otherwise related so that we inherit properties from our animals in a secondary and derivative sense.

Union dualism: We are amalgams that have our animals as proper parts.

Constitutionalism: We are constituted by but distinct from our animals.

Brainism: We are brains that are proper parts of our animals.

Partism: We are maximal sums of thought-supporting spatial and temporal parts that are proper spatial and temporal parts of our animals.

Nihilism: We do not exist and so we bear no relation to any human animals.

One thing that unites these theories is that they are grammatically apt answers to the question of what we are. More deeply, though, they each answer that question by specifying a view about how we relate to our animals. This is evidence, we think, that the question of personal ontology—or one very plausible specification of it—concerns how we relate to our animals. With this in mind, then, consider one more answer:

Animalism: We are (identical to) our animals.⁶

⁴ We here follow Bailey and van Elswyk (forthcoming). On the question of what we are, see Olson (2007, Chapter 1).

⁵ For citations and more on these alternatives to animalism, see Bailey (2015, 869) and Blatti (2019, section 1.1).

⁶ Recent defenses of animalism include Bailey (2014), Bailey (2017), Olson (2018), Thornton and Bailey forthcoming, Yang (2013), and Yang (2015). Johansson (2007) and Toner (2011) discuss how to best formulate the view. Thornton (2016) surveys variation within the view. See also all the essays in Blatti and Snowdon (2016).

This is of a piece with the other prominent answers to the question of personal ontology—in both grammar and substance. It answers that question no less than do the others. We conclude, then, that animalism is an answer to the target question.

Does the target question matter? We think so. Here is one way to see its import. The question of how we relate to our animals is intimately connected to the question of how we relate to the material world at all. And *that* seems to be as important as it is perennial. For it bears on the truth of materialism or physicalism in their various forms and on naturalism more broadly. If we turned out to be partly or wholly immaterial, for example—if dualism in some form turned out to be true, that is—that would tell against just about every physicalist or naturalist program on offer. And the status of naturalism is itself a matter of broad “system” or “worldview” selection, the very paradigm of a non-trivial, substantive, and deep philosophical matter. Naturalism impinges on matters as diverse as clinical psychology (“do the ordinary tools of biology apply to human beings or are special techniques required?”), institutional design (“should universities fund the study of the supernatural?”), and the place of religion in a good life (“should I pray?”). *Everyone* has a stake in these questions. It is plainly true that they matter.

Another independent reason to care about the question of what we are is that it guides inquiry about ourselves. If we are souls, then one wishing to know more about us must learn about souls and their ways. If we are animals, then we must learn about the category under which we fall—*animalia*—and, presumably, about such things as kidneys, serotonin receptors, synapses, capillaries, the secondary sexual characteristics of mammals, and the deep evolutionary past of hominids.

Our point, then, is simple. Animalism, by addressing the question of how we relate to our animals and thus how we relate to the material world, impinges on these matters of grave importance. Because those matters matter, so too does animalism.⁷

The ingredients for our second reason for finding animalism important are already in place. We have noted seven answers to the question of what we are. Inspect them, the arguments for or against, and the formulations given here. We think you’ll agree that at least some of them are interesting. And animalism rules them all out. If animalism is true, for example, then we are not proper parts of animals, as the brainist or partist would maintain. And if animalism is true, then animals are not among our proper parts, as the union dualist says. We are neither larger nor smaller than our animals, as it were. Nor do we enjoy intimate relations to them that fall short of identity (contra constitutionalism). Rather, and in the most strict and precise sense expressed by nothing less than the equals sign, we *are* them.

We can put the point in a slightly different way. Consider the proponents of, say, nihilism or partism. They would be quite reasonably surprised to discover that the *denial* of their view is a trivial hypothesis and one undeserving of our attention. Their views are important metaphysical theories, and so too would be any thesis

⁷ For defense, elaboration, and application of this general argumentative strategy to another domain in metaphysics, see Bailey and Brenner forthcoming.

ruling them all out. Animalism, then, matters, at least in part because of what it rules out.⁸

Our argument may be pressed towards an even stronger conclusion. Substantivity in the sense at hand—mattering—comes in degrees. Even among various theses that matter, some matter more than others. We propose this extension of our argument above: if a dispute has *many* substantive consequences, then it is *very* substantive in its subject matter. Animalism, then, would appear to be *very* substantive. For it has as a host of substantive implications—one for each of the theories above that it rules out.

Our two arguments may be combined. A question is standardly thought to carve up logical space into mutually exclusive alternatives.⁹ To *partially* answer a question is to eliminate some of those alternatives. To *exhaustively* answer the question is to identify exactly one alternative as true. We think that an answer to an interesting question that is partial *or* exhaustive is interesting. And animalism does as much. It selects among the alternatives in the space identified by the question of what we are and thus eliminates other competing answers.

Questions differ in how broadly they carve up logical space. For example, consider the question *Where are you from?* as understood in context to be about continents. There are then seven mutually exclusive options: Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, and Europe. This question is answered exhaustively by replying *I am from Europe*. That answer rules out the six other alternatives. But it is silent on which European country the speaker is from. Likewise, *I am from the Netherlands* rules out forty-three alternatives as an answer to the follow-up question *Where are you from in Europe?*, but it is silent on where in the Netherlands the speaker is from.

Animalism is no different as an answer to what we are. It stakes a claim in logical space—at a certain level of granularity. In so doing, it rules out dualisms, nihilism, constitutionalism, partism, and brainism and says that identity is the relation we bear to our animals. But it is silent on much, too, because the question *What are we?* does not carve up logical space in the finest possible way. In this way, animalism, like the answers to most of our questions, does not reveal everything there is to know about its subject matter.

⁸ Can merely contradicting other interesting theories make a view interesting? One might think not: the view that we are noses (or middle toes, or elbows, or appendices...) contradicts every known theory of human nature. And yet it is more of a joke than an interesting theory to be taken seriously. Supplementing the nose view with modal or criterial content (that we are *essentially* noses, or that we continue to exist only so long as we can smell, for example) changes little; it is still a joke and unworthy of further attention. And yet it still contradicts every known theory of human nature. Here's what's going on: various factors determine whether a theory is worth our attention and allegiance. Among them: substantivity, prior probability, probability given our evidence, fruitfulness, and ideological and ontological parsimony. The nose view scores high on substantivity, in fact. It is an interesting view, and would have fascinating ramifications in the ethics of plastic surgery, for one. And it would show that every philosopher who's ever written on the metaphysics of human nature has been wrong not just in the details but in the main. But the nose view scores very low indeed on other dimensions—one may be forgiven for assigning it a very low prior probability, for example—and so may be set aside. We thank an anonymous referee for bringing this objection to our attention.

⁹ Hamblin (1973) and Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984).

In telling us what we are, though, it directs us to the follow-up questions that carve up the region of logical space occupied by animalism even more finely. As such, there is room for further inquiry in both the metaphysics and science of animals. If we are animals, then one wishing to know more must learn about the scientific or natural category under which we fall—*animalia*. One can know more about what we are by learning about kidneys, serotonin receptors, synapses, capillaries, the secondary sexual characteristics of mammals, the deep evolutionary past of hominids, and so on. To uncover the nature and evolutionary history of human animals is not just to learn peripheral facts about things that we inhabit, or that are parts of us, or of which we are parts. It is to know our own nature and history.

3 Animalism: light and robust

Duncan has argued that animalism is either obviously false or uninteresting and that it should therefore be set aside. He begins with a contrast between two animalist programs. The first insists on the slogan that we are animals and nothing more. This is Animalism Light. The second supplements animalism with various theses (or contends that animalism obviously entails those theses from the get-go). For example¹⁰:

- (a) We are necessarily (or essentially) human animals.
- (b) We are fundamentally human animals.
- (c) Our highest kind is human animal.
- (d) Our persistence conditions are biological—those of human animals.
- (e) All humans are, by definition, identical to human animals (it's in the analysis of 'human').

This is Robust Animalism.¹¹ Duncan's argument takes the form of a dilemma: animalists must choose between Animalism Light and Robust Animalism. The former is uninteresting. The latter is false. Either way, animalism is a philosophical dead end.

This is a valuable critique. It moves beyond a cursory dismissal from Johnston and into substantive argument. And it arrives at a striking conclusion. For if Duncan is right, philosophers fussing over animalism are wasting their time and should engage more productive topics. We view Duncan's dilemma, then, as a kind of internal audit that keeps us all honest: a good and necessary procedure, no matter the immediate result. That said, we find neither horn of the dilemma convincing. We'll address them in turn.

¹⁰ This list is from Duncan forthcoming a: 10–11.

¹¹ 'Animalism' has sometimes been used to name a thesis that explicitly includes (a) (see Snowdon 1991, 111 and Nichols 2010), (b) (see Madden 2016), or (d) (see Shoemaker 2016). Other animalists—such as Olson (2015), Sauchelli (2017), and Thornton and Bailey forthcoming—are careful to distinguish the core thesis that we are animals from claims like (a) through (e). And that distinction is, of course, central to understanding Duncan's dilemma.

Duncan's case for the first horn is that theses (a) through (e) matter. And some animalists have argued for them. But Animalism Light isn't like that. It eschews those auxiliary hypotheses. In doing this, it takes on a reduced dialectical burden. But it also eschews precisely the things that would have made animalism matter. Since Animalism Light doesn't rule one way or another on (a) through (e), Animalism Light is of dubious interest.

We have already made a positive case that animalism matters. Our case has made no use of the supplements to animalism added by Robust Animalism. Our case, that is, made no use of the view that we are *essentially* animals, that we have biological persistence conditions, and so on. We have thus already given a reason to think that Animalism Light matters.

Duncan disagrees. His arguments can be understood as showing that animalism is not an exhaustive answer to the question of what we are. But note that even if the arguments have traction, animalism is still a partial answer and, as we have already argued, a partial answer to an interesting question is itself interesting. So showing that animalism is not an exhaustive answer is not enough to show that it is not an interesting hypothesis about what we are.

Duncan concedes, in fact, that Animalism Light provides a partial answer. He grants that it rules out constitutionalism and dualism—as long as no animal is wholly identical to a soul. It's just that these exclusions don't qualify as interesting. For it might be that, as Allison Krile Thornton has argued, “some disembodied human animals—namely the dear departed—are wholly identical to immaterial souls” and so some forms of dualism are compatible with Animalism Light.¹² These would be strange breeds of dualism, it's worth pointing out. Though Thornton maintains we might *become* “naught but souls” her view implies that for now we are not: all the human people you actually know and interact with are living, breathing animals and not immaterial items trapped within.¹³ That's tantamount, it seems, to the denial of most ordinary varieties of dualism.

Duncan further claims that ruling out constitutionalism is of little interest. He considers competing pairs of views about what we are: we are identical to souls vs. we are constituted by souls; we are identical to fish vs. we are constituted by fish; we are identical to marbles vs. we are constituted by marbles. The differences *between* the pairs are interesting, he argues. The differences *within* the pairs are not. More generally, when it comes to what we are, “we're constituted by x” and “we're identical to x” are equally interesting claims. Ruling out one or the other doesn't make much progress in the project at hand. Rather, Duncan claims, “[the] x is what really matters”.¹⁴

We agree that the x really matters. That's a part of why we think animalism is a substantive view. Of course it leaves some questions unanswered: *Is there a difference between constitution and identity?*¹⁵ *Can* animals become “naught but

¹² Duncan forthcoming a, 5.

¹³ Thornton 2019.

¹⁴ Duncan forthcoming a, 8.

¹⁵ One of us has answered *no* to this question. See van Elswyk (2018).

souls”? Animalism Light doesn’t say. It doesn’t disclose everything there is to know on the matter of human persons. But this is no flaw in animalism. Nor is it a flaw in any of the other answers, for the question of what we are does not demand so fine-grained an answer.

Thus the first horn of Duncan’s dilemma poses no threat. We will go further, though, and offer a diagnosis for why Duncan’s considerations may find initial appeal. *What are we?* carves up logical space differently in different contexts. In some, as we’ve argued, it tracks how we relate to our animals. In others, however, it partitions more generally or narrowly. Duncan is focused on just one interpretation of the question. As an analogy, consider *I am from Europe* as an answer to the question of where someone is from. We can imagine frustration with this answer: “It doesn’t give a *full* answer to where you are from, and beyond ruling out the other continents, it tells me very little about you.” What such an interlocutor really wants to know is what *country* you are from or perhaps something even more fine-grained than that. They’re after, in other words, a rather different question. We submit that Duncan is in a similar situation. He wants an answer to *one* take on *What are we?* and dismisses all the rest.

Return to his examples of Robust Animalism. From here, we can reverse engineer the questions to which they’d be exhaustive answers. These are the questions to which Duncan wants an answer and that he takes to specify the content of the question of what we are:

- (f) What are we necessarily?
- (g) What are we fundamentally?
- (h) What is our highest kind?
- (i) What are our persistence conditions?

But these questions are distinct from *What are we?* and are not the only way of specifying that question. One way to see this is to consider what they presuppose. *What are we fundamentally?*, for example, presupposes that we are something fundamentally. But maybe you are a constitutionalist who thinks that the only fundamental entity is the spacetime manifold. Then you would answer *nothing* to this question just as the nihilist would, even though you are not a nihilist. Or maybe you are a dualist who thinks fundamentality-talk in metaphysics is mistaken. Then you might refuse to answer this question altogether. That refusal, though, is not because you think there is nothing that we are. You just don’t like how the question delineates options. So (f)-(i) do not exhaust the further questions that *What are we?* can suggest. Nor are they only specifications that have important answers. On the contrary, the one we voiced above, *How do we relate to our animals?*, has answers that matter.

We don’t think there is anything wrong with these other questions as such, as long as one is on board with the philosophical assumptions they make. Let a thousand inquiries bloom. Ask away. But it is no objection to animalism as an answer to one specification of the question of what we are that it does not answer some other specification. That is like objecting to *I am from Europe* on the grounds that it does not answer a follow-up like *Where are you from in Europe?*. There is

one important specification of the question of what we are—it asks how we relate to our animals. Animalism advances an exhaustive answer.¹⁶ Since the question matters, animalism matters too.

Our main tasks have been to give a positive case for interest in animalism and then to answer the first horn of Duncan's dilemma. But we will now briefly respond to the second horn as well. Duncan identifies a specification of Robust Animalism according to which "we (humans here on earth) are... human animals at all times and in every possible world in which we exist."¹⁷ His strategy is to offer a thought experiment purporting to demonstrate that Robust Animalism is plainly false:

... suppose that, in the few milliseconds it takes you to think " $2 + 2 = 4$," evil aliens painlessly destroy your body. The only part of you they don't destroy is your cerebrum. On the bright side, the aliens manage to sustain the normal functioning of your cerebrum. So there is no [detectable] phenomenal disturbance.¹⁸

From this, Duncan derives the falsity of Robust Animalism. For if Robust Animalism is true, then you could not exist without being an animal. And yet in the thought experiment, you persist across an interval even though you are—by the end of it—not an animal. The remaining cerebrum is not an animal; so there is no animal there for you to be.

Crucially, Duncan's case goes beyond familiar "remnant" and "transplant" objections long pressed against animalists.¹⁹ To see why, first note that it would, at each moment of the procedure, seem to the thinking subject that they are thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". And looking back after it was all over, it would seem to the resulting thinking subject that they thought " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout. That's ensured by the "no phenomenal disturbance" condition. The Robust Animalist couldn't accept those seemings at face value, though. They must, says Duncan, instead press the implausible distinction between someone's thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " and it merely *seeming* to them as if they're thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". After all, if Robust Animalism is true, you don't last through the whole thought, and so it can't have been you who thought it even though it seemed to you that it was.

We have three replies.

First, note that Duncan's argument turns on a modal claim about a scenario distant from actuality. For the case to work, it must be *possible* for a person to persist—and think—despite the destruction of all of her body save the cerebrum.

¹⁶ A different objection is that *What are we?* is defective and that we'd instead pursue one of Duncan's other questions if we were truly interested in the metaphysics of human persons. But such an objection would turn on—and require argumentative support from—a number of topics in modality, metaontology, and metaphilosophy. That support is not forthcoming in anything from Duncan (or Johnston, or other anti-animalists). For arguments that *What are we?* is an especially apt question, see Bailey and van Elswyk forthcoming.

¹⁷ Duncan forthcoming a, 11.

¹⁸ Duncan forthcoming a: 12. Note that Duncan's thought experiment is an objection only to some forms of Robust Animalism. Views on which detached cerebrum are themselves shrunken human animals—a variation on the view in van Inwagen (1990)—are immune.

¹⁹ On which, see Bailey and van Elswyk forthcoming.

Robust Animalists could dig in their heels and insist that the scenario as described is simply not possible. On this view, the annihilation of all of your body except your cerebrum wouldn't permit any ongoing thought. It *wouldn't* seem to you as if you're thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout. And you would not, in fact, be thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout. You'd have no thoughts, and nothing would seem to you to be the case. That is one objection to Duncan's argument and its modal demands.

Maybe you're not so sure, though. Perhaps you can survive the aliens' operation, thinking throughout; but then again, perhaps not. That place of doubt is where we stand. And many will stand with us, we suspect, for modal intuition is a notoriously frail reed. We propose, then, a modest approach that nonetheless undercuts Duncan's argument. We think a studied agnosticism is a reasonable stance towards modal claims of this nature and the fanciful cases that motivate them. And so we think it eminently reasonable to refrain from endorsing arguments taking them as premises.²⁰ On these grounds alone, Duncan's thought experiment need not rationally move a neutral audience.²¹

Second, Duncan incorrectly diagnoses what the Robust Animalist must say. He claims they'll require a dubious distinction between: (i) your thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " and (ii) it merely *seeming* to you as if you are thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". But the Robust Animalist need not cut things so finely. She can instead describe the case as follows:

At every moment within the case, it seems to some subject that she is thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". And that subject is indeed thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". At no moment is the seeming illusory, and so (i) and (ii) do not come apart. But the subject of thought at the end of the procedure is not identical to the subject of thought at the beginning. In destroying a human animal, the alien procedure destroyed the old subject (a human animal), leaving behind a new and distinct subject (a mere cerebrum). It seems to the cerebrum that the cerebrum itself *thought*—notice the tense—"2 + 2 = 4" throughout. But this is a mistake. For though there has been thinking throughout, *no one subject* has been thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout.²²

This description of the case does *not* distinguish between (i) and (ii). Instead, it distinguishes between (iii) your thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " through the last few milliseconds and (iv) it merely seeming to you as though you've been thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout the last few milliseconds. And this is a much more

²⁰ For defense of this kind of modal skepticism—better, modal *agnosticism*—as applied to animalism, see Bailey and van Elswyk forthcoming. A general form of modal skepticism appears in van Inwagen (1998). On skeptical stances that specifically focus on thought experiments about personal identity, see Gendler (2002) and Wilkes (1988).

²¹ Robust Animalists, to be sure, are committed to modal claims about cases like Duncan's—to their *impossibility*, that is. We will not take up here the delicate question of whether such commitment is a liability. But note that their commitment need not derive from a fanciful case. It could, instead, stem from a more general claim about substance sortals, for example (on which we say more below).

²² This story requires that something new can come to be—a cerebrum, in this case—merely from the annihilation of surrounding matter. This isn't as strange as it may seem; consider the statue that comes to be upon the carving away of surrounding marble. But there are still puzzles here, and animalists have had much to say on related issues; see, for example, Olson (2016).

compelling distinction, for (iii) and (iv) can indeed come apart, as when one has an illusory seeming of *past* thought. And this is what happens when the aliens operate. In destroying a human animal, they destroy you. But someone who mistakenly thinks they are you takes your place. It certainly *seems* to the replacement that they are you and that they've been around for quite a bit longer than a few milliseconds. But they haven't.

Duncan anticipates a move along these lines and claims that it's implausible: "...the mistake wouldn't be in believing that ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' was thought. Rather, it would be in believing that *you* thought it. But this is not a mistake that you can make. You are, as they... say, *immune* from such errors."²³ Alas, we are not as immune as Duncan claims. Suppose that moments ago, Earth and all its inhabitants were annihilated and quickly replaced with duplicates. No matter how convinced the resulting creatures might be that they'd been thinking various things just moments ago, they would all be wrong. For none of them so much as existed back then.

Third, and to further illustrate the possibility of error along these lines, consider a variation on Duncan's thought experiment:

You close your eyes and think " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". In the few milliseconds it takes you to savor that thought, your body fissions. There is no detectable phenomenal disturbance. Things seem fine from within. But the result is two people, both of whom have equally compelling introspective evidence that they've persisted throughout those key milliseconds. Both are totally convinced that they've been thinking " $2 + 2 = 4$ " throughout (they've carefully studied and accepted Duncan's arguments, let us suppose).²⁴ Each is accordingly certain that it is *you*.

But note well. Your successors cannot both be correct. At least one of them is *not* you. Someone has made a mistake, impressive introspective evidence notwithstanding. What's to say? Fission is, of course, a can of worms. And reasons to doubt the possibility of Duncan's case will no doubt cut against this one too. But we think we can draw at least this moral: it is by no means obvious that even direct introspective evidence about one's own persistence can decisively support the view that one has indeed persisted.²⁵ And without that key assumption, the claim to introspective certainty—the thing, really, that makes Duncan's case special—the case is not a convincing and novel refutation of Robust Animalism. With our fission case and the cautionary note we draw from it in place, what remains of Duncan's

²³ Duncan forthcoming a: 13, emphasis original. Duncan's subsequent discussion focuses on the alleged impossibility of being wrong about something like (ii). His arguments there are not at war with what we claim here, though, which is that it is possible to be wrong about something like (iv).

²⁴ Including Duncan (2015a, b, 2018, 2019, forthcoming b), of course—all of which buttress an introspective approach to personal identity issuing in certain or near-certain judgements.

²⁵ We take issue, then, with Duncan forthcoming a, 15, "The evidence that I've given is especially potent. It's evidence that we all have access to. It's evidence that we can be directly aware of whenever we think. And it's evidence that is absolutely foundational to how we reason about and conceptualize ourselves as persons. Thus, rather than being just one consideration among many, this evidence carries special weight. It is certain. It is undeniable".

case is a remnant cerebrum thought experiment of the usual kind, subject to all of the usual animalist replies.²⁶

Duncan concludes his discussion of Robust Animalism by considering whether, though his thought experiment is not decisive, it provides *some* evidence against that view, to be weighed against the arguments *for* Robust Animalism.²⁷ This is an eminently reasonable suggestion. Evidence in philosophy is rarely decisive, and we doubt Duncan's thought experiment—or the arguments for animalism—are any exception. It is here that Duncan points out that one main consideration animalists have offered—he calls it the Too Many Thinkers Argument²⁸—does not by itself establish Robust Animalism. Its conclusion is, rather, Animalism Light.

But Duncan's observation here isn't damning in the least. For with the addition of just one widely accepted thesis—that *animal* is a substance sortal—the Animalism Light promoted by the Too Many Thinkers Argument transforms into Robust Animalism.²⁹ We do not here endorse that move.³⁰ But some animalists do, and philosophers of that mind will have a ready retort to Duncan's demand that they bridge the gap from Animalism Light to Robust Animalism.

In short, Duncan has offered a welcome and skeptical audit of the claim that animalism is both interesting and true. That audit gives voice and structure to extant worries about animalism's substantivity and truth. We bring good news: animalism passes the audit.

4 Conclusion

We opened with a quotation from Johnston. It claimed that *of course* we are animals and that a proper reply to *that* claim is a dismissive 'so what?'. And we observed a related thought from Parfit. We now have the tools in place to understand and critique those claims. Johnston collapses the question of what we are into the question of what "what changes you or I, as representatives of us, could undergo, or be around—that is exist—after"³¹ Indeed, he calls that query a "reasonable philosophical refinement of the old question "What is it that we are?"³²

Contra Johnston, the question of what we are (personal *ontology*) need not be taken as asking our criteria of identity over time or what kinds of changes we can undergo (personal *identity over time*). These are, as we've argued above, distinct

²⁶ As in, for example, Olson (2016).

²⁷ Duncan forthcoming a, 16.

²⁸ Also known as the Thinking Animal Argument: see Olson (2003) and Snowdon (1990). Note that there are many other arguments for animalism besides, as in Bailey (2016), Bailey (2017), Blatti (2012), Licon (2012), and Thornton and Bailey forthcoming.

²⁹ On *animal* as a substance sortal see Olson (1997, 120–123).

³⁰ For the record: two of the authors positively disagree with the move (we prefer a version of Animalism Light that explicitly eschews Robust Animalism); the other author leans towards accepting the thesis that *animal* is a substance sortal.

³¹ Johnston (2016, 100).

³² Johnston (2016, 100).

questions with distinct presuppositions.³³ And we've made a convincing case that the question of personal ontology may be taken, instead, to be asking how we relate to our animal bodies. Johnston's inclination to dismiss Animalism Light, like Duncan's, derives from the failure of Animalism Light to answer questions about personal identity over time. This is a mistake. For the question of what we are matters *in its own right* even without being collapsed into other nearby questions. So the fact that Animalism Light doesn't answer those questions is of little consequence, provided that it answers the question of what we are. And it does.

Animalism, even unburdened by modal or criterial commitments, is a substantive and apt answer to the question of what we are. It rules out other alternatives and shows the way forward for those interested in more fine-grained questions. Animalism need not be uninteresting or false. It might just be true.

Acknowledgements Thanks to an anonymous referee and Brad Rettler for comments and to Matt Duncan for helpful conversation prior to the writing of this article. Funding from Yale-NUS College and the Singapore Ministry of Education supported this research. Co-authorship is equal.

Funding Funding was provided by National University of Singapore (Grant No. FY2020-FRC1-008).

References

- Bailey, A. M. (2014). The elimination argument. *Philosophical Studies*, 168, 475–482.
- Bailey, A. M. (2015). Animalism. *Philosophy Compass*, 10, 867–883.
- Bailey, A. M. (2016). You are an animal. *Res Philosophica*, 93, 205–218.
- Bailey, A. M. (2017). Our animal interests. *Philosophical Studies*, 179, 2315–2328.
- Bailey, A. M., & Brenner, A. (forthcoming). Why composition matters. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.
- Bailey, A. M., van Elswyk, P. (forthcoming). Generic animalism. *Journal of Philosophy*.
- Baker, L. R. (2000). *Persons and bodies: A constitution view*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blatti, S. (2012). A new argument for animalism. *Analysis*, 72(4), 685–690.
- Blatti, S., & Snowdon, P. F. (Eds.). (2016). *Essays on animalism: Persons, animals, and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blatti, S. (2019). Animalism. In N. Z. Edward (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/animalism/>. Accessed July 2019.
- Duncan, M. (2015a). I think, therefore I persist. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93(4), 740–756.
- Duncan, M. (2015b). We are acquainted with ourselves. *Philosophical Studies*, 172(9), 2531–2549.
- Duncan, M. (2018). Subjectivity as self-acquaintance. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 25(3–4), 88–111.
- Duncan, M. (2019). The self shows up in experience. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 10(2), 299–318.
- Duncan, M. (forthcoming a). Animalism is either false or uninteresting (perhaps both). *American Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Duncan, M. (forthcoming b). A new argument for the phenomenal approach to personal persistence. *Philosophical Studies*.
- Gendler, T. S. (2002). Personal identity and thought-experiments. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 52(206), 34–54.
- Groenendijk, J., & Stokhof, M. (1984). On the semantics of questions and the pragmatics of answers. In F. Landman & F. Veltman (Eds.), *Varieties of formal semantics*. Foris: Dordrecht.
- Hamblin, C. L. (1973). Questions in Montague English. *Foundations of Language*, 10(1), 41–53.

³³ For other arguments distinguishing the question of personal ontology from those about personal identity, see Olson (2007, 15–19).

- Johnston, M. (2007). 'Human beings' revisited: My body is not an animal. In D. W. Zimmerman (Ed.), *Oxford studies in metaphysics* (Vol. 3, pp. 33–74). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, M. (2016). Remnant persons: Animalism's undoing. In S. Blatti & P. F. Snowdon (Eds.), *Animalism* (pp. 89–127). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johansson, J. (2007). What is animalism? *Ratio*, 20(2), 194–205.
- Licon, J. A. (2012). Another argument for animalism: the argument from causal powers. *Prolegomena*, 11(2), 169–180.
- Madden, R. (2016). Human persistence. *Philosophers Imprint*, 16(17), 1–18.
- Nichols, P. (2010). Substance concepts and personal identity. *Philosophical Studies*, 150(2), 255–270.
- Olson, E. (1997). *The human animal*. Oxford University Press.
- Olson, E. T. (2003). An argument for animalism. In J. P. Lizza (Ed.), *Defining the beginning and end of life: Readings on personal identity and bioethics*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Olson, E. T. (2007). *What are we?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olson, E. T. (2015). What does it mean to say that we are animals? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22(11), 84–107.
- Olson, E. T. (2016). The remnant person problem. In S. Blatti & P. F. Snowdon (Eds.), *Essays on animalism: Persons, animals, and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olson, E. T., et al. (2018). For animalism. In J. Loose (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to substance dualism*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Parfit, D. (2012). We are not human beings. *Philosophy*, 87(01), 5–28.
- Sauchelli, A. (2017). The animal, the corpse, and the remnant-person. *Philosophical Studies*, 174, 205–218.
- Shoemaker, S. (2008). Persons, animals, and identity. *Synthese*, 162(3), 313–324.
- Shoemaker, S. (2016). Thinking animals without animalism. In S. Blatti & P. F. Snowdon (Eds.), *Animalism* (pp. 128–141). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snowdon, P. F. (1990). Persons, animals, and ourselves. In C. Gill (Ed.), *The Person and the human mind: Issues in ancient and modern philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snowdon, P. F. (1991). Personal identity and brain transplants. In D. Cockburn (Ed.), *Human beings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornton, A. K. (2016). Varieties of animalism. *Philosophy Compass*, 11(9), 515–526.
- Thornton, A. K. (2019). Disembodied animals. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 56(2), 203–217.
- Thornton AK, Bailey AM (forthcoming). The feeling animal. *Ergo*.
- Toner, P. (2011). Hylemorphic animalism. *Philosophical Studies*, 155(1), 65–81.
- van Elswyk, P. (2018). Contrast and constitution. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 68(270), 158–174.
- van Inwagen, P. (1990). *Material Beings*. Cornell University Press.
- van Inwagen, P. (1998). Modal epistemology. *Philosophical Studies*, 92, 67–84.
- Wilkes, K. V. (1988). *Real people: Personal identity without thought experiments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yang, E. (2013). Thinking animals, disagreement, and skepticism. *Philosophical Studies*, 166(1), 109–121.
- Yang, E. (2015). Unrestricted animalism and the too many candidates problem. *Philosophical Studies*, 172(3), 635–652.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.