
THINKING ANIMALS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

BY

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Abstract: We consider one of Eric Olson's chief arguments for *animalism* about personal identity: the view that we are each identical to a human animal. The argument was originally given in Olson's book *The Human Animal*. Olson's argument presupposes an epistemological premise which we examine in detail. We argue that the premise is implausible and that Olson's defense of animalism is therefore in trouble.

Animalism is the thesis that we are each numerically identical to a human animal. If I am identical to a human animal, then whenever that animal exists, I exist. Since any particular human animal can survive the loss of any and all of its psychological capacities, if animalism is correct, then *I* can survive the loss of such capacities. Further, the human animal exists as a fetus that lacks substantial psychological capacities. If animalism is correct, then *I* existed as a fetus lacking substantial psychological capacities. Thus, animalism is often contrasted with psychological approaches to the problem of personal identity which hold that persons, a fortiori I myself, are essentially psychological entities which cannot survive the loss in question and cannot exist as fetuses.

One *prima facie* powerful argument for animalism, the *thinking-animal argument*, aims to reduce to absurdity the supposition that you and I are *not* identical to human animals but are instead essentially psychological entities that are spatially coincident with animals for a portion of our existence – i.e. *persons*. The argument is formulated as follows in Olson's book *The Human Animal*:

If you believe you are a person, the animal connected with you thinks it is a person as well [given the supervenience of the mental upon the physical]. It thinks so for the same reasons that you think so; it has the same evidence as you have. (Moreover, the relevant belief-forming processes are the same for the animal and for yourself.) It is mistaken, however, for it is not a person. . . . But if it is so easy to believe that one is a person and be wrong, how do you know *you* aren't mistaken about this?¹

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Here is Eric Olson's recent formulation of the thinking-animal argument.

... if the animal were not you, there would be two beings there, you and the animal, thinking the same thoughts. How could you ever know which one you are? Any reason you could have for believing that you are not the animal would equally be a reason for the animal to believe that it is not the animal. Yet it would be mistaken. If we were not animals, we could never have any reason to believe that we are not.²

The conclusion does seem absurd. If I am not numerically identical to a human animal but rather am a *person* (i.e. if animalism is false and I have psychological persistence conditions), then I should be able to know this fact, or at least have reason to believe that it is the case.

At first blush, this is a striking and ingenious argument for animalism and contra the psychological approach to one's identity. However, it is not exactly obvious what Olson's reasoning is. We would like to formalize Olson's thinking-animal argument, taking our lead from Olson's recent comments on an exactly parallel *anti-animalist* argument which his opponents have laid at *his* door. This is the *corpse argument*, and we lack the space to examine it here.³ The key points for present purposes are (i) the corpse argument exactly mirrors the thinking-animals argument in structure, and (ii) Olson explicitly says of the corpse argument that it has a suppressed epistemological premise. Regarding the corpse argument, Olson says in a footnote:

This argument is formally invalid, and it is not easy to see how to make it valid without introducing a dubious epistemological premise. But I believe that the problem could be fixed at the cost of some complication.⁴

This footnote suggests that the corpse argument requires an *epistemological premise* in order to be formally valid. One further implication of the footnote is that Olson thinks that it is possible to expand the argument into a valid one *without* using a *dubious* epistemological premise. The remarks of the footnote apply equally to Olson's own thinking-animal argument, which, according to Olson, exactly parallels the corpse argument in structure. That argument needs an epistemological premise as well, if the corpse argument needs one.

We now offer a formalization of the thinking-animal argument which incorporates a suppressed epistemological premise.

- (a) The psychological approach to my identity is true. [assumption for reductio]
- (b) (i) I am a person, and (ii) I am not an animal (I merely coincide with my animal). [by (a)]
- (c) The consequences of the psychological approach are knowable by me. [premise]

- (d) I can know that (i) I am a person, and (ii) I am not an animal. [by (b), (c)]
- (e) I and my animal share all the same mental states [by (b) (ii) and the supervenience of the mental upon the physical]
- (f) I believe that (i) I am a person, and (ii) I am not an animal. [premise: I am a psychological theorist of my identity]
- (g) My animal mistakenly believes that (i') he is a person, and (ii') he is not an animal. [by (b), (e), (f)]
- (h) For all x, if x has mental states that are exactly similar to mine, and x mistakenly believes that he is ϕ , then I cannot know that I am ϕ . [Epistemological Premise]
- (i) I cannot know that: (i) I am a person, and (ii) I am not an animal. [by (e), (g), (h)]
- (j) The psychological approach to my identity is false. (by [a], [d], [i])

We need to consider now the epistemological premise (h) – call it 'EP'. EP is clearly problematic.⁵

Consider a case in which my mental twin and I both believe the same proposition P on the basis of exactly similar bodies of justifying evidence. Suppose that I am right about P, and my twin is wrong. Then I know P, and my twin does not. This assumes *fallibilism about justification*, the eminently plausible view that it is possible for someone to have a justified belief of a false proposition.

Similarly, suppose that I correctly and justifiably believe that I am $\phi = I \text{ am standing}$. My mental twin justifiably and *incorrectly* believes that he is standing. So he does not *know* that he is standing (he's dreaming that he's standing; or he's a brain in a vat; or he's anesthetized while looking at a mirror image of his standing twin brother, and I see myself standing while looking in a mirror). Such a case constitutes a counterexample to EP, since I can and do know that I am standing.

Suppose that we take an externalist, non-evidentialist approach to knowledge and justification and hold that (1) knowledge is true belief that issues from a sufficiently reliable belief forming process, and (2) justified beliefs are those which issue from such processes.⁶ We can again imagine counterexamples to EP. Suppose that my mental twin and I employ the same belief-forming process (as before, he looks in a mirror). I arrive at the true, reliably produced belief that I am standing, and yet my twin arrives at the false, though reliably produced belief that he is standing (sufficient reliability of a process may well fall short of perfect reliability). My twin fails to know that he is standing (even though he has a justified belief given (2)), while I can and do know that I am standing.

Alternatively, consider a case in which my mental twin is a brain in a vat with unreliable belief-forming processes. He mistakenly believes that he is standing. I correctly believe that I am standing, and my belief issues, we

suppose from a reliable belief-forming process. So I know that I am standing, contrary to what EP says about the case.

We will conclude by considering EP from the perspective of an externalist approach to knowledge that differs from reliabilism. Let us suppose that knowledge is true belief that is *safe*, where S's belief is safe just in case the belief could not easily have been mistaken.⁷ In other words, in the possible worlds in which S believes P that are most similar to the actual world, P is true. My belief that I am a person and not an animal is true and safe, since if the psychological approach is true (as we are assuming for reductio in the thinking-animals argument), it is *necessarily* true and so true in the closest worlds in which I have the belief in question. So even though my animal is mistaken in believing that he is a person and not an animal, I still know that I am a person and not an animal, on the safety approach to knowledge.⁸

In the end, the thinking-animal argument indeed rests upon a 'dubious epistemological premise', EP. EP is not just dubious but clearly mistaken. Olson says,

The thinking-animal argument is the principal support for animalism. If it fails . . . then it is hard to see how there can be *any* reason to suppose that we are animals. Anti-animalists have it better. Even if the corpse argument gives no support to the view that we are not animals, there are other arguments for that view . . . Most notably, there is the deep and abiding conviction that our identity conditions are different from those of animals . . . [as they] involve some sort of psychological continuity.⁹

Since the thinking-animal argument rests upon a mistaken epistemological premise, it looks as if animalism is, in Olson's phrase, 'out of business'.^{10,11}

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¹ Olson, E. (1997). *The Human Animal*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 106.

² Olson, E. (2004). 'Animalism and the Corpse Problem', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82, pp. 265–74; see pp. 265–6.

³ The corpse argument proceeds from the assumption that the animalist must distinguish between an animal (a living organism) and a corpse. Call the entity that begins as a human fetus and ends as a decaying corpse a *human body*. The corpse argument tries to raise problems for animalism by holding that the human animal spatially coincides with a distinct

entity, the human body. Epistemological worries for the animal then ensue in a manner that parallels the situation in the thinking-animals argument: Can you – the animal – know that you are an animal and not a human body? Olson denies the coincidence thesis assumed by this argument, holding that the corpse is an entity that begins to exist when the animal dies.

⁴ 'Animalism and the Corpse Problem', p. 268.

⁵ It is of course open to Olson to object that we have supplied the wrong suppressed epistemological premise. But EP is the premise that is suggested by the text.

⁶ See e.g. Alvin Goldman (1979). 'What Is Justified Belief?', in G. S. Pappas (ed.) *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

⁷ See e.g. Ernest Sosa (2007). *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ A similar situation obtains with respect to a counterfactual *sensitivity* condition proposed by Nozick as necessary for S's knowing that P: if P were false, then S would not mistakenly believe that P. I satisfy this condition with respect to the proposition that I am $\phi = I \text{ am a person and not an animal}$. On the thinking-animal argument's assumption that the psychological approach is true and hence necessarily true, there are no possible worlds in which the proposition in question is false. So the counterfactual in Nozick's sensitivity condition is true because there are no possible worlds in which I *mistakenly* believe that I am ϕ . Thus I satisfy Nozick's necessary condition for knowledge of the proposition that I am $\phi = I \text{ am a person and not an animal}$ even though my animal mistakenly believes ϕ . In (2002) 'Thinking Animals and the Reference of 'I'', *Philosophical Topics* 30, pp. 189–207, Eric Olson says, regarding the thinking-animal argument, 'If you *were* the animal and not the person, you'd still think you were the person' (see p. 190). But if the psychological approach is assumed to be true (as in the thinking-animal argument), then there is no possible world in which I am an animal rather than a person and so no possible world in which I mistakenly believe that I am a person.

⁹ 'Animalism and the Corpse Problem', p. 267.

¹⁰ 'Animalism and the Corpse Problem', p. 268.

¹¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful suggestions.