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# Properly Functioning Brains and Personal Identity: An Argument for Neural Animalism

**Abstract:** Surely, I am the same *person* I was several years prior. I must be identical to *something* that persists. First, I argue that the reductive materialism and Lockean view of personal identity are plausible accounts of our mental life and survival conditions. Second, although these positions appear to be in tension, I argue that a plausible way to reconcile them is a novel kind of animalism. This view says that I am identical to my properly functioning brain (or a part of that brain). *Thus*, I am identical to my properly functioning brain. Call this view **neural animalism**.

**Keywords:** animalism, identity theory, Lockeanism, reductive materialism

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## Introduction

In this paper, I explain the argument that I am identical to my properly functioning brain (or part of my brain). Call this view **neural animalism**. By this view, I have the same persistence conditions as my properly functioning brain. Although there are few philosophers who take something like neural animalism seriously (for a similar view, cf. Pruss 2011), I present a novel argument from two popular, but seemingly inconsistent, positions that we are identical to our properly functioning brains.

Crudely put, the argument I have in mind is this:

First, I seem to invariably travel with my psychological states in the following sense: if they were transferred to a different brain, I would go with them. Second, a good explanation for this is that my persistence conditions are psychological. After all, the exclusion argument is a plausible argument that psychological states are a subset of brain states. *Thus*, I am identical to a properly functioning brain – or, at least, a part of that properly functioning brain.

Before getting too far into the philosophical weeds, I want to explain the philosophical basis for this kind of animalism. First, I defend reductive materialism

(also known as identity theory), i.e., the view that mental states *just are* brain states. Next, I defend the Lockean view of personal identity, call it *Lockeanism*, that is, the view that psychological states, e.g., personality, memories and so forth, serve as our persistence conditions. In other words, I persist through time only if my personality, memories and so forth also persist. In the Lockean view, the survival of my personality, memories and so forth is simply the same thing as my surviving. Finally, I argue that, despite their apparent tension, reductive materialism and Lockeanism support neural animalism; indeed, if you accept them both, the *product* is neural animalism.

## 1

There is a popular argument for identity theory known as *the exclusion argument*. Consider the following passage (Papineau 2002, 17):

Let me outline what I take to be the canonical argument for materialism. Setting to one side all complications, which can be discussed later, it can be put as follows. Many effects that we attribute to conscious causes have full physical causes. But it would be absurd to suppose that these effects are caused twice over. So the conscious causes must be identical to some part of those physical causes.

I take it that we attribute behavior to our thoughts, and other mental episodes, while respecting the prohibition on gratuitous causal overdetermination; thus, if we are to incorporate the causal work done by brains, it must be that mental states are a subset of brain states. This is the only solution that respects the causal efficacy of mental states, on the one hand, while avoiding gratuitous causal overdetermination, on the other.

Consider the following example.

Suppose that Smith decides to make tea. After turning off the stove, Smith turns to grab the honey, and forgetting that the stove is hot, uses it to brace himself. He immediately feels intense pain, causing him to almost immediately pull his hand away. Call this *the stove example*.

There are some ingredients to this example that I want to explain.

First, Smith draws his hand away, almost instantaneously, because of the excruciating pain he felt after burning his hand. Although there were other causal components that led to Smith drawing his hand away, it seems that the excruciating pain would have to be an essential causal part of the explanation; indeed, denying this is tantamount to endorsing epiphenomenalism (cf. Jackson 1982). This is the view that the mental events are causally impotent. If we think

that mental goings-on have causal powers, excruciating pain must be an essential *causal* part of the explanation for why Smith drew his hand away from the hot stove. Call this *the mental cause*.

Second, there were a series of neural states that caused Smith to move his hand away from the hot stove. We know that scientists can stimulate the brain in the right spots to produce a wide variety of mental events and behaviors, from seeing colors to animating someone to do such-and-such, even though the manipulated subject did not intend to do such-and-such. Surely, this is evidence, along with the fact that people lose the ability to do various things if they have a stroke, Alzheimer's disease, etc., that neural goings-on are sufficient to produce behavior. Call this *the neural cause*.

Finally, there is nothing explanatorily gained by insisting that the feeling of pain, on the one hand, and the neural goings-on, on the other hand, are sufficient, but separate causes of Smith moving his hand. Thus, there is good reason to identify mental states with neural ones. Thus, the argument for identity I have in mind is this: we do not want to unnecessarily multiply the causes of behavior; neural and mental causes are *each* responsible, at least in part, for behavior; thus, it must be neural and mental causes *are the same causes*. Call this **the identity argument**.

There are some philosophers who worry that the identity theory cannot make explanatory sense of the subjectivity of consciousness. I have two responses to that worry. First, I cannot take seriously the fact that materialist theories of mind cannot account for conscious experience; to my mind, this is, at best, just an admission by the non-materialist that her powers to conceive are weaker than her materialist counterpart's. Second, the argument for identity theory that I defend places explanatory virtues and other goods in competition with intuitions that say mere brains are incapable of producing a rich conscious experience. For those who are dubious, my argument can be read as: if we accept the virtues of identity theory (e.g., by, in part, respecting the prohibition on *gratuitous* causal overdetermination), and it seems that we *rightly* do, then we have good reason to accept *neural* animalism.

## 2

Surely, I can survive the loss of my fingers and left arm. After all, I can imagine cutting them off, for whatever reason, and living to tell the tale. I have a strong intuition, along with many other philosophers (cf. Nozick 2003, 100), that I in-

variably follow my psychological components (e.g., personality, memories, etc.). If my psychological components like personality and memory persist, then so do I.

Consider the following thought experiment.

Suppose while sleeping, an evil scientist removes my brain from my body – call this body *A* – and places it into a different body; call this body *B*. It must be that I move with my brain, i.e., there is nowhere else for me to go. First, I occupy *A*, and then after the brain transfer, I occupy *B*. I have the intuition that I end up where my brain ends up. Call this *the brain transfer thought experiment*.

From these considerations, I do not seem to be *merely* a biological organism (cf. Olson 1997), body (cf. Thomson 2008), etc. There is something that it is like to be me *essentially*; it seems that I could not persist through time if there was nothing it was like to be me (Nagel 1974, 436). This is a good reason to suppose that Lockeanism correctly characterizes my persistence conditions.

My argument amounts to this:

First, if my brain is transplanted into another body, then I could be in either one of the following places – assuming, I survived: either (a) I travel with my brain, memories and personality, or (b) I stay with my body. Second, but, if I am essentially phenomenal (i.e., wherever you find me, in modal space, there is something it is like to be me), then there is no place I could be in a brain-less body.<sup>1</sup> *Thus*, by elimination, I must be identical to my properly functioning brain. Call this **the elimination argument**.

If we are *essentially* phenomenal creatures, then, in a brain transplant, there is nowhere for me to end up, except in the company of my brain. This strongly supports neural animalism. Indeed, from a different angle, this is yet another virtue of neural animalism: it allows us to explain the intuition that we are essentially phenomenal (i.e., if *x* is incapable of having phenomenal states, then I am not identical to *x*), combined with the intuition that we are animals, *in some sense*. I require food and water; I engage in sexual intercourse; I have genetic material and an extensive evolutionary history. If I do not qualify as an animal, *in some sense*, then it is difficult to imagine *any* organism that could meet the stringent requirements for animal-hood. I discuss these advantages in greater detail, in the next section.

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<sup>1</sup> This premise is secured if I persist just as long as certain psychological states persist *and* those psychological states are *identical* to various brain states.

### 3

Some philosophers seem to think that reductive materialism and Lockeanism are in tension (cf. van Inwagen 1997, 311). The worry is this: if my persistence conditions are psychological, I could persist if there is *some* brain that is uniquely able to store my psychological data; as such, it seems that my psychological components can exist without my *particular* brain. Thus, we cannot consistently accept reductive materialism *and* Lockeanism.

As it turns out, there is no actual tension between reductive materialism and Lockeanism. In fact, they are only inconsistent if it is insisted that psychological states come apart from brain states. Put differently, reductive materialism and Lockeanism are only inconsistent if we take Lockeanism to be an implicit denial of reductive materialism. Although this might be a view that cannot be endorsed by dualists (i.e., it looks as though *traditional* Lockeanism is dualist-friendly, whereas *strict* animalism is a materialist-friendly theory of personal identity), but that is simply because *neural* animalism is a materialist-friendly theory of personal identity. Of course, if neural animalism is construed as a denial of reductive materialism, then they would *have to be* inconsistent. That being said, I am not a *type*, but an individual. Thus, it stands to reason that if I am identical to a properly functioning brain, it must be that I am identical to a *specific* properly functioning brain, rather than any arbitrarily chosen functioning brain, with only the right *type* of psychological states.

Consider the argument for reconciliation:

First, I am identical to my psychological components like personality, memories and so forth. Call this **Alpha**. This is a Lockean theory of personal identity. Second, Alpha is merely a subset of brain states. This is just a consequence of reductive materialism. *Thus*, I am identical to a set of brain states. Third, I must be identical to specific brain states that belong to the causal history of a specific brain. Thus, I am identical to my properly functioning brain. Call this **the Reconciliation Argument**.

Neural animalism exemplifies a number of theoretical virtues. First, neural animalism is the view that a properly functioning brain is a plausible account of what I am identical to, if my identity is bound-up with the psychological. The only way to secure the intuition that I would remain with my brain throughout a brain transplant, and the strongly situational intuition that my properly functioning brain produces my experiences and the psychological components that serve as my identity conditions, *is to endorse neural animalism*. Neural animalism allows us to respect the biological basis of our identical, without ignoring its psychological components.

Second, neural animalism accommodates a wide range of biological facts, e.g., *the fact that each of us has an extensive evolutionary history*. My brain has

an evolutionary history merely by virtue of the multitude of neurological features shared by other creatures, genetic material, evolutionary ancestors and so forth. Neural animalism has the theoretical resources to make sense of this (as does its philosophical cousin, *strict* animalism), whereas Lockeanism *by itself* cannot.

Finally, many of the explanatory virtues of *strict* animalism (cf. Olson 1997) and traditional Lockeanism (cf. Nozick 2003) are *shared* by neural animalism.

1. Neural animalism denies that you and I can be simulated on a computer: *the plausibility of the exclusion argument and Lockeanism precludes this*, i.e., we must give up the exclusion argument to accept the simulation possibility, despite the plausibility of the exclusion argument. Thus, if we must accept that humans could be simulated on a computer, there is pressure to reject the claim that we are identical to properly functioning brains; however, the claim that I am a properly functioning brain (or a part of that brain) makes sense out of two *already* plausible metaphysical theories: *reductive materialism and the Lockean view of personal identity*. Or, at least, that's what I've argued. Thus, unless we have better grounds to reject these claims than hang onto them, then we have good reason to reject the claim that our mental life could be simulated on a computer without the loss of identity.
2. Furthermore, neural animalism blocks the too-many-thinkers argument for strict animalism (cf. Blatti 2006). The lynchpin of this argument is simply to claim that you and I, and our human-animal companions, have the ability to think. If we are different than our human-animal companions, then there will be more than one opinion about this paper. However, we should avoid positing *too many thinkers* to explain our ability to think. It seems like this is what we would be doing if we posited that you and I were thinkers, in addition to the human animal associated with us. Thus, by virtue of avoiding *gratuitous* causal overdetermination, we should accept that you and I are human animals. But, neural animalism prevents this kind of argument from getting off the ground simply by denying that human animals have the capacity to think, *strictly speaking*. Rather, the neural animalist holds that it is the properly functioning brain, not the *whole* human animal, that is capable of thinking.

Consider another way to think about this concept: *there could be a human animal without a brain*. Suppose, for instance, that Jones is kept alive by a breathing machine, even though his brain has been removed.<sup>2</sup> This seems like a coher-

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<sup>2</sup> I deny, for the sake of argument, that Jones' phenomenal facts are necessary for him to persist.

ent scenario: Jones is a human animal without the ability to think. Yet, prior to having his brain removed, he possessed the ability to think. Thus, we have some evidence that we cannot attribute thinking to the *animal* itself, but rather to its *brain*.

Thus, if you think that a prohibition on *gratuitous* causal overdeterminism is an attractive theoretical virtue (and this seems like the right thing to say), and you find the Lockean theory of personal identity a plausible story to explain our persistence conditions, then you have good reason to accept that you are identical to a properly functioning brain (or a subset of that brain). A plausible way to reconcile the Lockean view, on the one hand, and the identity theory of mind, on the other, is to adopt *neural* animalism. After all, *if* you accept reductive materialism and the Lockean view of personal identity, you get neural animalism *for free*.

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