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## *We Are Animals*

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### Introduction

You're running flat out now. The metallic taste of adrenaline in your mouth is at once familiar from years of aerobic activity and yet altogether foreign in its intensity. The grizzly bear's panting is increasingly audible as he pursues you through the light snow and underbrush: he's closing the gap. You never see the juniper root that trips you. And before you can regain your footing, his claws rip through your flesh. Your head strikes a rock, and everything goes black.

You rouse to the primal sound of grunting as the bear's teeth sink through your soft tissues, scraping against your bones. There is less pain than shock. Mercifully, your reawakening is fleeting: only a few moments, and the world blinks out for the last time. You were two days shy of your tenth birthday.

There will be no burial, no ceremony. No one will mourn your loss. Once the bear has had his fill, he will abandon your corpse to the gray wolves and coyotes and they, in turn, to the weasels and shrews. As the chickadees and magpies peck away the last scraps of fat from your bones, the blowflies will lay their eggs, and the maggots—aided by microscopic bacteria long present in your body—will begin to devour whatever remains. Eventually, in the months ahead, the spring sun will warm the ground, and the pace of scavenging and decomposition will slow. The tufts of hair that were not pilfered for nearby nests will join the dust from your bones in enriching the soil. One day, wildflowers may grow here —Indian paintbrush and blue lupine the only trace of your final steps.

Your short life had been as hard as your death was violent. Like your parents and their parents before, you had been born near the tiny town of Moran, in northwest Wyoming. You never knew your father. And not long after your birth, your mother succumbed to a peculiar form of progressive encephalopathy called chronic wasting disease. Marked by listlessness and compulsive behavior, this malady kills as brutally as its name suggests: through rapid weight loss and degradation of bodily integrity, one literally wastes away.

Lacking any semblance of a nuclear family, let alone a house of your own, you spent most of your life in the elements and on the move: warmer months in the mountains outside of Bozeman, winters around Jackson Hole. But though your recent roots are in the American West, your lineage can be traced back more than 12 million years to East Asia. Your animal ancestors looked and lived in ways significantly different from you and your twenty-first-century kin: you knew nothing of them, they could hardly have imagined

you. Much later, during the Pleistocene, your forefathers and foremothers migrated through Siberia, across the Bering land bridge, and into North America, eventually settling near the Gallatin Range of the Rockies, where you would be born a decade ago ... and where you would die earlier today.

It will come as a surprise to learn that, far from being an abandoned child living off the land near Yellowstone National Park, the “you” whose hard life was just described is not even a human being, but a Rocky Mountain elk: a member of the sub-species *Cervus elaphus* and one of the largest land mammals in North America. Yet more remarkable than the ruse itself is how easy it was for you to be deceived. The real you—the university student reading this essay for a Philosophy class—had no trouble imagining yourself the evolutionary descendent of animals who lived millions of years ago and a continent away; the offspring of other animals; the subject of a biological life; a creature vulnerable to the same sorts of diseases that kill other animals; the victim of a vicious bear attack; an organism that ceases to exist at death; the progenitor of a decomposing corpse ultimately consumed by other animals and bacteria. You attributed these traits to yourself instinctively; no suspension of disbelief or special pleading was required. And yet, in the story, all of these are characteristics of an animal.

*That* was the point of this exercise: not to pull the wool over your eyes, but to demonstrate what the ease of doing so reveals, which is not only how similar the lives and times of nonhuman animals are to our own, but how ordinary and intuitive it is to think of yourself as *of* nature, rather than apart from it—to think of yourself as an animal. Indeed, if it’s that easy to conceive of yourself as a kind of animal that you are *not*, how much easier must it be to conceive of yourself as the kind of animal that you *are*?

Let’s not get ahead of ourselves though. After all, you might be suspicious of my story. Perhaps you suspect that what you so easily imagined was not *being* the elk, but being yourself whilst *inhabiting* the elk’s body. If so, then maybe what my ruse actually shows is quite the opposite of what it intends: that you are something *other* than an animal—something that could inhabit an animal body without being the body it inhabits. The thought that “you yourself” are one thing and your animal body another can seem almost irresistible. And if it is a thought you share, then you are in good company: historically, most philosophers have been gripped by it; many still are.

Yet this thought raises far more questions than it answers. And I’m not even talking about really hard questions, such as, what exactly the nature of this “you” is (an immaterial soul perhaps?) and how “inhabiting” a body is supposed to work (is it like inhabiting a house?). Instead, simply consider how things look the elk’s perspective. If, rather than being the elk, what you envision is yourself coming to inhabit its body, what do you reckon happens to the “elk itself”—the being whose body you imagine inhabiting? Do you imagine that it disappears when you begin occupying its body? But why should it be forced to exit the scene upon your arrival? Alternatively, maybe the “elk itself” does not disappear and, in imagining yourself coming to inhabit its body, you imagine cohabitating with it. How exactly does that work? Does one of you control the front legs, while the other controls the back legs? With so much coordination required, no wonder y’all couldn’t outrun

the bear! Then again, perhaps there is no “elk itself”—nothing, that is, over and above the elk’s body. That seems like the most obvious thought here, doesn’t it? Yet if elks just *are* their animal bodies, then why should we presume human animals are any different? And if, in this respect at least, human animals are no different than nonhuman animals—if you stand in the same relationship to your human body that elks stand in to theirs (viz., identity), then perhaps the initial interpretation was correct after all: what the story demonstrates is how easy and natural it is to imagine *being* an animal.

Either way, stories will get us only so far. So let us now drill down a bit and begin looking at some of the key arguments and the concepts they employ.

## What Animalism Does and Doesn’t Say

“Animalism” is the name philosophers have given to the view that an animal is exactly what you are: not an elk, obviously, but a human animal—an organism of the *Homo sapiens* species. And not just you, of course, but all of us. According to animalism, all human persons are animals.<sup>1</sup>

Now, the idea that you are an animal should not come as news. Every one of your properties—all of your thoughts, actions, relations, history, *etc.*—is a property of a human animal (and vice versa). It was an animal’s eyes that blinked open when you awoke this morning. The thoughts you are having while reading this essay are the thoughts of an animal, achievements of a functioning human brain. When you digest your lunch, it is an animal who breaks down, absorbs, and assimilates the contents of your meal. You are the progeny of two animals—the result of a process involving the fertilization of one animal’s ovum by another animal’s sperm. And if you have children, yours will be animal offspring, too. It is an animal who blushes when you are embarrassed or stressed. And when you hail a cab, it is an animal’s arm that stretches into the air and an animal’s voice that exclaims “Taxi!” Special instructions are not required for these actions. You do not need to inform your animal that you would like it to open its eyes or vibrate its vocal chords. These actions occur instantaneously, animalists say, because the animal’s eyes are parts of you, the animal’s voice is your voice.

And yet, for all this common sense, the history of Western philosophy is a history of anti-animalism. To this day, the vast majority of theorists of the self and personal identity deny animalism. This unpopularity may stem from the fact that, for all its straightforwardness, animalism’s core claim is both easily misunderstood and easily mistaken for similar-sounding claims. So before proceeding any further, let us begin by clarifying, first, what animalism does not claim. We will then consider both what animalism does claim as well as some further consequences of the view.

Animalism is not the claim that, at bottom, we are all beastlike or savage in our nature. Indeed, far from saying something pejorative about our characters, animalism says

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<sup>1</sup> Overviews of animalism can be found in Blatti (2014) and in Blatti and Snowdon (2016: 1-27). Other contemporary advocates of animalism include Blatti (2012), Olson (1997, 2003), Snowdon (1990, 2014), and van Inwagen (1990).

nothing whatsoever about what defines our personality or sense of self. In this way, animalism offers an answer not to the question “Who are we?” but to the question “What are we?” Nor is animalism the claim that human animals do not differ in important respects from other kinds of animals, just as other animals differ from us. Nor still should animalism be confused with the reductive claim that we are “nothing but” or “merely” animals. Nothing in animalism denies, for instance, that you are also a student, a citizen, a son or daughter, a friend, etc.

Philosophers **use** the word ‘person’ to mean different things, but the core idea is that a **person** is the kind of thing that deserves *moral consideration*, and thus is at least a candidate for having *legal rights*. Note that defining the category of *persons* in this way allows for the possibility that some non-human entities are persons. For example, debates about animal rights are sometimes presented as debates about the extent to which non-human animals are persons. And fans of science fiction are familiar with the idea that a sophisticated computer might be a person.

Another clarification concerns beings with the capacities of self-consciousness and rationality—what philosophers sometimes call **persons**. Animalism asserts neither that all persons are human animals nor even that all human animals are persons. You, I, and others like us are persons, of course, but we may not be alone. Perhaps there is good evidence for attributing personhood to various cognitively sophisticated, nonhuman animals (e.g., chimpanzees, dolphins). Maybe there are, or could be, persons who are not animals at all (e.g., robots, intelligent aliens, deities). And certainly some human animals fail to be persons (e.g., human fetuses). Animalism is not a claim about persons in general, but human persons in particular—*i.e.*, beings such as yourself, your instructor, your classmates, the author of this article, your parents, and so on. All of us, according to animalism, are biological creatures.

Believe it or not, Bill Clinton spoke truly (albeit unwittingly) when he remarked that much “depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is.” But whilst there are many different senses of the infinitive “to be” (conjugated as “is,” “are,” *etc.*), and whilst other philosophers exploit these differences for technical, sometimes mischievous, ends, the animalist should be understood as asserting a simple **numerical identity** claim. Consider yourself right now. Next, consider the human animal located where you are right now. Animalism says that these are one thing, not two. Consequently, animalists deny, for example, that each of us “is” an animal in the sense that each of us *has* a body that is an animal. This would suggest that you are one thing and your animal body another, which is exactly what the identity claim denies. Nor is animalism the view that each of us “is” an animal in the sense that Michelangelo’s *David* “is” a piece of marble. The latter use of “is” is typically understood to mean that the statue is *made of* or *constituted by* marble. But animalism is not the view that we are merely constituted by animals. Again, animalism asserts neither more nor less than the straightforward identity claim that each of us—the walking, talking, thinking entities we are—is one and the same thing as a human animal.

Having said that, it should be acknowledged that advocates and opponents alike frequently associate two further claims with the animalist view. The first of these is the claim that we could not exist as anything other than a human animal, *i.e.*, for each

of us the property of being a human animal is an **essential property**. To see what this claim means and why it is plausible, consider a contrast with another thing you are, *viz.* a university student. Being a student is a temporary and **contingent property** of you. It is temporary in the sense that you were once not a university student (*e.g.*, before you completed high school), and you will one day no longer be a student (*e.g.*, when you graduate). It is contingent in the sense that it is possible for you not to have been a university student (*e.g.*, had you opted not to further your education past high school). By contrast, if you are essentially an animal, then this is a property that you instantiate both permanently and necessarily: you were never not an animal in the

An **essential property** of an entity is a property that the entity *has to have* in order to exist. For example, it is plausible to suppose that it is an essential property of the book you are holding that it is made out of paper; your book could not somehow lose the property of being made of paper and yet remain that very book. If you tried to replace all the pages with, say, pieces of iron, you would not thereby *change* the book; rather you would *destroy* the book.

In contrast, a **contingent property** of an entity is a property that the entity does *not have to have* in order to exist. So, for example, your book has a picture of five handsome youngsters on the front cover. If you were to somehow erase the image of one of these youngsters, you would thereby *change* the book, but you would not thereby *destroy* it.

past, nor will you fail to be an animal as long as you exist in the future; and in fact, it is impossible for you to exist and not be an animal. Can you think of an animal (human or otherwise) that is not an animal permanently and necessarily? If not, then perhaps this suggests that, provided animalism's identity claim is true, it is also true that you are an animal essentially.

Another claim associated with animalism is that our being human animals captures something quite

basic about our nature. The idea that animalists have in mind when they say that we are *most fundamentally* human animals is that the conditions of our persistence derive from our status as animals, rather than from our status as persons, students, citizens, etc. In other words, whatever must be the case for you to continue existing over time is exactly what is required for an animal to continue existing over time. Whatever makes it the case that you now are numerically identical with something that existed, say, ten years ago or something that will exist ten minutes hence is the same as what makes it the case that an animal is numerically identical with something that existed ten years ago or something that will exist ten minutes hence. What *are* the conditions of persistence for human animals? Animalists disagree with one another about how to answer this question, and we will return to their disagreement below (section 3).

In principle, one could affirm the core claim of animalism, *viz.* that we *are* human animals, without affirming the additional claims that we are *essentially* and *fundamen-*

*tally* animals. So, strictly speaking, an animalist need not be committed to the essentialist and fundamental nature claims just described.<sup>2</sup> In point of fact, however, no animalist denies either of these further claims, and so for the remainder of this article I will assume that animalism incorporates the essentialist and fundamental nature claims in addition to the core claim.

## Arguments for Animalism

Having clarified what animalism does and does not claim, we are now in a position to explore the grounds for believing that it is, in fact, true that we are human animals. Making the case for animalism is necessary because so few philosophers accept it (even though once it is pointed out to them, many non-philosophers find it patently obvious).<sup>3</sup> And anyway, if animalism is true, it ought to be possible to do more than simply assert it. Fortunately, a defense is ready to hand.

We have already seen some informal considerations that support animalism. You naturally think of yourself as an animal. You seem to share all of your properties with the human animal located where you are. When you look in a mirror, what you see is an organism of the *Homo sapiens* species. In light of such facts, anyone who would deny animalism faces an uphill battle: if human animals are not what we are, then what explains all the indications to the contrary? Providing a satisfactory answer to this question is the responsibility of any anti-animalist.

### *Thinking Animal Argument*

But beyond this *prima facie* case, animalists have offered two main arguments for their view. The first of these—what has come to be known as the “thinking animal argument” for animalism—begins with a modest factual observation:

[1] There is a human animal currently located where you are.

It would be difficult to reject this claim. If the being sitting in your chair is not a specimen of the *Homo sapiens* species, one wonders where one is to be found. That is not to say that [1] is completely beyond question. A philosopher who seriously questions the reality of the external world—because we cannot be sure that we are not dreaming, or that we are not in the matrix, *etc.*—would deny [1]. But since this theorist’s complaint is not with

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<sup>2</sup> One noteworthy consequence of this fact is that critics who target only the essentialist and/or fundamental nature claims—even if their objections succeed in hitting their mark—do nothing to undermine animalism’s core claim that what we are is human animals.

<sup>3</sup> Most philosophers endorse a refinement of the *psychological view* first proposed by John Locke (1748/1996). Perhaps the most influential proponent of this view is Parfit (1984), and in Chapter 8 of this volume Marya Schechtman advocates the psychological view. Another view—perhaps the most common view among non-philosophers—maintains that we are essentially and fundamentally *immaterial substances*. This view was famously championed by Rene Descartes (1641/2008), and a version of this view is defended by William Hasker in Chapter 9 of this volume.

[1] or even animalism *per se*, for present purposes, we can reasonably ignore such science-fiction inspired objections.

Here, then, is the next premise in the thinking animal argument:

[2] The human animal currently located where you are is thinking.

This, too, seems hard to deny. After all, lots of nonhuman animals engage in the sort of psychological activities we typically describe as wanting, feeling, believing, wondering, reflecting, fearing, reasoning, etc. Recall the tale with which this essay began. Now imagine trying to characterize your demise from the perspective of the bear, without appealing to such mental states and events. Or just try telling a cat or dog owner that her pet does not think (good luck!). And yet if nonhuman animals are correctly credited with thinking, then surely human animals are too. So, unless the human animal located where you are is atypical of its kind (something we have no reason to believe), then [2] looks like a safe bet. At the very least, given all that would have to be denied about the mental lives of nonhuman animals, anyone who denies [2] would have some serious explaining to do.

The next premise is perhaps even more obvious than the previous two:

[3] You are a thinking being currently located where you are.

If you are not a thinking being currently located where you are, then how do you even know that you exist?

Now consider the argument's fourth and most important premise:

[4] There is only one thinking being currently located where you are.

This premise also seems obvious, but it is not entirely beyond question. In order to deny [4], one would have to accept that a thinking being other than yourself is also located where you are. This is because if we assume that (a) there is a thinking animal where you are (and we have already seen that [1] and [2] are difficult to deny) and that (b) you exist and are thinking (and **Descartes** (1641/2008) showed us how difficult [3] is to doubt), then denying [4] would force us to accept that you are but one of two (or more?) thinkers currently sitting in "your" chair, thinking "your" thoughts. Have a look around. If [4] is false, then wherever you seem to see just one thinker—the clerk at the grocery store, a pedestrian crossing the street, your classmate—in fact, you see at least two: a thinking non-animal (*i.e.* a person) and a thinking animal. Likewise, when you look in the mirror: not one thinker, but at least two. If that were not disturbing enough, consider some of the intractable questions that arise if the world were really congested with thinkers in this way. As you look in the mirror, ask which of these thinking beings owns the car parked in the driveway. And before you reply "I do," consider: to which of you does that first-person pronoun "I" refer—you, the person, or the thinking animal? In fact, how could you even know which of these beings you are? Since there is no difference between your thoughts and the thoughts had by the animal, there is nothing about the animal's thinking that will

lead it to think of itself as the animal and not the person; and likewise, nothing in your thinking that will lead you to think of yourself as the person and not the animal. On the one hand, you are correct if you believe yourself to be the person, and you would be mistaken if you believed yourself to be the animal. On the other hand, no reason that you have to believe (truly) that you are the person is not also a reason to believe (falsely) that you are the animal. So the challenges facing one who denies [4] mount quickly. Yet all of this trouble can be avoided from the start, animalists say, simply by accepting [4], rather than denying it. Indeed, outside of a philosophical context, would you ever doubt whether [4] is true?

If premises [1]-[4] are true, then the animalist's preferred conclusion—the identity claim discussed above—follows immediately:

[C] Therefore, the human animal currently located where you are is you.

A human animal where you are is currently reading these words. But you are the unique being that is currently reading these words. Given these facts, one option is to accept that you are the human animal in question—*i.e.*, to accept [C]. Another option is to deny that you are the animal in question. But in that case, at least one of the premises—[1], [2], [3], or [4]—must be false. And as we have seen, none of them appear to be easy to deny. This, then, is the first argument for animalism: the thinking animal argument.

### *Animal Ancestors Argument*

But there remains a loose end to tie up. Imagine, for a moment, that your grandfather is a patient in a nursing home and that his Alzheimer's is quite severe. In fact, as can happen in rare cases, the neurodegeneration has progressed past the point of advanced dementia and left him in a vegetative condition. Because his brainstem and parts of his forebrain continue to function, he continues to open his eyelids, yawn, and demonstrate other involuntary behaviors (e.g., respond to noxious stimuli, engage in sleep-wake cycles). However, the extensive dysfunction of his cerebral hemispheres means that he has no higher cognitive activity whatsoever—no awareness of himself or the environment around him. And because he has remained in this condition for several weeks, the consensus amongst medical experts is that your grandfather has lapsed into what is known as a persistent vegetative state (PVS).

Now, setting the sadness of these facts to one side for the moment, consider how the animalist would answer the question, "What is he?" No doubt the answer would be the same as it is for you and me: like us, according to animalism, your grandfather is a human animal. Okay, but notice that the thinking animal argument cannot establish this claim. The reason is that neither your grandfather nor the human animal located where he is exhibits any of the psychological activities glossed above as "thinking": believing, experiencing, suspecting, knowing, calculating, feeling, reasoning, imagining, guessing, inferring, hypothesizing, wondering, understanding, reflecting, and so on. Since neither your grandfather nor the human animal lying in his hospital bed is a thinking being, premises

[2], [3], and [4] do not apply. And this means that the thinking animal argument cannot serve as the basis for the claim that your grandfather is a human animal.

Nor is this an isolated problem. A similar case is revealed when we consider unborn human fetuses, who, like PVS patients, lack the psychological capacities that would be required in order for premises [2], [3] and [4] to apply to them. Whilst very few of us will one day slip into a persistent vegetative state, each and every one of us was once a fetus.

Now, as we saw above, strictly speaking, animalism's identity claim concerns actual human persons only. Since fetuses and PVS patients do not exhibit the psychological capacities required for personhood, animalism could be true without having to accommodate these cases. Still, most human fetuses will become human persons in the future, and most PVS patients were human persons in the past. It would be peculiar if animalism could not even corroborate, let alone establish, the fact that your grandfather is every bit as much a human animal as you and I are. And yet, unless this loophole can be closed, the official animalist position must remain agnostic on what the human fetus in a mother's womb and the PVS patient in a hospital bed are.

Consider, then, a second argument for animalism. This argument may be presented in the form of a **reductio ad absurdum**. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that animalism is wrong and none of us is an animal. That means, of course, that our parents are not animals, either. Nor, then, are our parents' parents, nor our parents' parents' parents, nor our parents' parents' parents' parents, and so on, as far back as our ancestries extend. But now, in principle at least, our ancestry could be traced back a long way: millions of years. And tracing it back as far as the late Miocene and early Pliocene epochs reveals that our ancestry within the taxonomical genera we know as chimpanzee (*Pan*) did not between 5 and 13 million animalism means denying animals, then that means chimpanzees are animals includes chimpanzees.

An argument of the form **reductio ad absurdum** is an argument that first temporarily assumes something, and then shows that this assumption leads to, or *reduces* to, an *absurd* consequence. Because the assumption is shown to lead to an absurd consequence, the argument concludes the assumption must be false.

includes chimpanzees: tribe *Hominini*, the human (*Homo*) and split until sometime years ago. But if denying that our ancestors are denying either that or that our ancestry The first alternative—the

claim that chimpanzees are not animals—seems blatantly false: if anything is an animal, a chimpanzee is. The second alternative—the claim that our ancestry does not include chimpanzees—is tantamount to denying evolutionary theory altogether. And while it is possible that evolutionary theory is false, removing this keystone of modern science would just about topple the entire edifice of human understanding: nearly every branch of science, from anthropology to zoology, would be forced to start from scratch. Since this seems like far too high a price to pay, fortunately, there is a simpler solution: jettison the assumption that led to this result and accept animalism instead. So, anyway, contends the second in animalism's one-two punch: the "animal ancestors argument." And notice that because nothing in this argument relies on our status as thinking beings, if the animal

ancestors argument succeeds, it shows that your PVS grandfather is an animal every bit as much as it shows the same of you and me.

## Death and Immortality

It is ironic that no small part of the motivation behind any inquiry into what we are is a preoccupation with our nonexistence. One wants to know what she is in order to gain some handle on when (if ever) she will be no more. “Will I cease to exist when I die?” “Could I go out of existence before then?” “Can I outlast my own death?” “Is some sort of immortal life possible for beings like me?” Quite apart from any philosophy course, most of us have asked ourselves these questions from time to time; many are consumed by them. What insights can animalism offer in this connection? What is it in virtue of which a human animal persists through time? What does it take for a human animal to go out of existence?

If animalists endorse the essentialist and fundamental nature claims, then they must reject the popular idea that we persist in virtue of the **psychological continuity** of our conscious mental states. Because it runs counter to this prevailing view, animalism is often seen as being quite controversial. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black! Surely you would not agree that your grandfather ceases to exist when he ceases to be conscious and lapses into a persistent vegetative state. If your unconscious grandfather no longer existed, why would you and other family continue to visit him at the nursing home? It seems that, at least in some contexts, something other than the cessation of psychological activity is required for us to go out of existence. Likewise, the fact that you were once a fetus is not undermined by the lack of psychological continuity between it then and you now. If you were not once a fetus, then are we to believe that something other than you had its umbilical cord cut on the day your biological mother gave birth? Those who reject animalism in favor of a psychological criterion of persistence must explain how their view is not undermined by these ridiculous implications.

But whilst animalists agree that our persistence does *not* require psychological continuity, they are divided on what our persistence *does* require. Recall, again, the story with which this essay began, and contrast the moment when the elk dies with the period of scavenging and decomposition that follows. One line of animalist thought contends that the elk ceases to exist suddenly when it dies; whereas the other line insists that the elk ceases to exist gradually only after the long process of structural breakdown and disintegration.

According to the first of these views, animals persist when, and only so long as, the processes constitutive of biological life—metabolism, respiration, circulation, etc.—continue. In other words, in order for you to continue existing, you must remain alive, and as long as you remain alive, you continue to exist. It follows, of course, that dying is sufficient for you to go out of existence: whatever else might remain after you die (e.g., your corpse), you are not it. Because it emphasizes our status as living organisms, this line of thought is sometimes labeled “organic animalism.”

There is much to recommend organic animalism, not least that it jibes with many of our practices and concerns regarding the dead and beliefs regarding our nonexistence. We describe the deceased as being “gone.” At a funeral service for a deceased loved one, we do not fret that we are burying her when we bury her corpse or cremate her remains. Friends and family do not rush to death beds for no reason: the moment when one of us dies is a moment of great consequence. How could anyone deny that you will cease to exist whenever you breathe your last breath?

Well, imagine the moment when your grandfather eventually passes away: his heart rate slows, his blood pressure drops, his breathing becomes increasingly shallower, until finally, quietly, he expires. Now imagine the very next moment after that. What do you see on the hospital bed? Not your grandfather, according to organic animalism, for he quite literally disappeared from the realm of existence the moment before. Nor, even, do you see a human animal, as strictly speaking, on this view, there is no such thing as a “dead animal.”

This has struck some animalists as an implausible upshot of organic animalism. To be sure, they say, death is a significant moment, but nothing literally goes out of existence when it occurs. Accordingly, and in contrast to organic animalism’s claim that continued life is both sufficient and necessary for human persistence, those who endorse “somatic animalism”—so called because it emphasizes the bodily aspects of the human animal—deny that continued life is necessary. On this view, a human animal persists just in case its parts remain sufficiently intact as to be apt for life. In other words, vital processes like metabolism and respiration need not actually continue for an organism to persist. All that is required is that the internal structure of its body remain organized enough as to be explicable only by appeal to the animal body’s being, or having once been, alive. What this means in the case of your imaginary grandfather is that he quite literally survives his own death: he continues existing even after all of his vital functions cease.

In this way, somatic animalism can, whilst organic animalism cannot, countenance the possibility of postmortem survival. It is interesting, then, that both views can allow for the possibility of immortality. If, immediately after dying, your grandfather was cryogenically preserved in a way that maintained the functional organization of his body’s internal structure, then according to somatic animalism, he would properly be said to persist so long as he remained in this state—perhaps forever. Likewise, according to organic animalism, if it were possible to induce human animals into a protracted state of hibernation—wherein one’s vital processes are slowed dramatically without stopping, but where this state is maintained indefinitely—we could achieve “eternal life” of a kind. Neither organic nor somatic animalism could accommodate the religious idea of persisting eternally as an immaterial being in heaven or hell. But nor does either view rule out the possibility of immortality altogether.

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