YOU'RE AN ANIMAL, PLAIN AND SIMPLE

Jimmy Alfonso Licon

In this essay, I argue that we are merely biological organisms. This view (animalism) explains everyday practices like watching ourselves in the mirror. The claim that we are psychological in nature – i.e. wherever our conscious experience goes, we follow – cannot explain something as trivial as watching ourselves in the mirror. Thus, we should accept animalism.

Introduction

All humans are animals *in some sense.* We eat, sleep, engage in sexual intercourse, possess organs, genetic material and so forth; if these characteristics do not qualify us as animals, then no entity, however animal-like, could qualify as an animal. Most people seem to think they are more than *just* mere animals. People take their complex psychology, compared to other animals, as reason to think that wherever their mind goes, they follow.

The commitment to the psychological view is clear in discussions over personal identity; i.e. those factors that make someone the same person from moment to moment. We are convinced that individuals remain the same person from birth to death – the study of personal identity wants to know what makes persisting through a lifetime possible. For instance, what is it that makes Bob identical both to his present self and the small child he used to be?

To give the traditional answer: identity is tied to psychological factors of the right kind (e.g. memories, personality) are thought to determine a person's identity. This is known as the *psychological view* of personal identity. Put the view

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more abstractly: if individual F has the same relevant psychological traits at one time, as individual G does at a different time, then F is the same individual as G. For example, it might be that you are the same person as your teenage self because you share a number of memories and personality traits central to your identity.

Now, there is a popular thought experiment often used to motivate the psychological view. Suppose that Sally is in a horrible accident. Although her mental and neurological faculties are intact, her body is nevertheless mangled beyond repair. However, it just so happens that there is a male body that could house Sally's brain. If Sally's brain were placed in the male body, most people would think Sally received a body transplant; that intuition agrees with the psychological view.

On the flip side, the animalist view of personal identity holds that someone is the same person over time if they are the same organism over time. The view can be put abstractly: if individual F is the same biological organism at one time as individual G is at a different time, then F is the same individual as G. The animalist holds that Bob is the same individual throughout his life if he is the same biological organism; i.e. biographically speaking, Bob is nothing more than an organism that endures from moment to moment.

However counterintuitive, the animalist view of personal identity enjoys a good deal of support in the academic literature; for example, some philosophers have defended animalism based on the following claim: *everyone at some point in their lives was a fetus*. However, fetuses, at least in their early developmental stages, lack the relevant psychological characteristics needed to preserve identity over time, according to the psychological theory; e.g. they lack a personality and the ability to form and store memories.

Thus, if adults are the same individuals in the present as they were while in their mother's womb, then the psychological view must be false. Surely, people are the same individuals that one time occupied their mother's womb. Thus, we should accept animalism; it explains why adult

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Bob can be the same person as fetus Bob: *they are the same biological organism.*

In this paper, I shall defend animalism by arguing, first, that it is a better explanation for our ability to watch ourselves in the mirror, and secondly, by answering responses by those who defend the psychological view of personal identity. I conclude that animalism survives the challenges it faces from its psychological competitor.

The Mirror Argument

Although the psychological view of personal identity appears more plausible than animalism, at first glance, I argue that there is a strong, and relatively simple, argument known as the *mirror argument*, for taking the biological view of personal identity seriously; however, it should be noted that the strength of the mirror argument will only become apparent after those who accept the psychological view fail to avoid its conclusion.

The Mirror Argument can be stated as follows:

M1. Every time Sam looks at the reflection in the mirror, he spots a biological organism that persists from moment to moment.
M2. Sam is the only individual reflected in the mirror.
M3. Thus, Sam is nothing more than a biological organism that persists from moment to moment.

The argument trades on a simple insight: people can see their reflection in mirrors; however, biological organisms, rather than psychological components, are reflected in the mirror; thus, animalism is (probably) the right account of personal identity.

For the sake of the paper, I assume the first premise (M1) is well-secured. The first premise is just a restatement

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of the first paragraph: everyone is in animal *in some sense*. If Sam watches his reflection in the mirror, he clearly sees an animal-like organism with characteristics like the need for food, water, sleep and so forth. Even if one accepts the psychological theory of personal identity, there is nonetheless an animal that accompanies every individual. Wherever you go, there is a human animal that comes along for the ride.

Consider two prominent explanatory options available to anyone presented with the argument; for the sake of this paper, I am only interested in whether animalism, or the psychological view, is better equipped to handle the practices (e.g. looking at oneself in the mirror) featured in the mirror argument. The theories of personal identity under consideration will hereafter be known as follows:

> Animalism: Everyone is *just* a biological organism that may, or may not, have a complex psychology.
> Lockean: Everyone is *just* a mind and a collection of mental features (e.g. memories, personality, and so forth).

With the two main competitors in hand, we can proceed:

First, consider the animalist view. The animalist can easily accommodate the mirror argument and related intuitions. For example, whenever Sam looks in the mirror, and muses to himself that he has gained weight, according to the animalist, he is quite right assuming that he has gained weight. It is not as if Sam did not gain weight; i.e. the weight gain was restricted to just his body. On the other hand, a set of psychological aspects is not the sort of thing that *could* gain weight.

The same holds for other intuitions that we have about everyday tasks done in front of the mirror. For example, suppose Sam watches himself in the mirror as he combs his hair, brushes his teeth and so forth. On the animalist view, there is nothing more that needs to be said. Sam is

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brushing his teeth and combing his hair because he has teeth to brush and hair to comb. On the other hand, those who accept the Lockean view must deny that strictly speaking, Sam is a creature with teeth and hair. If Sam is exhausted by a set of psychological components such as personality and memory, then strictly speaking, teeth and hair are not components of Sam.

Consider another example. Suppose that Mary has been on a diet for the last six months and has been losing a good deal of weight. After weighing herself, for the first time, before leaving for work, Mary looks at herself in the mirror – it appears to her that she has lost a great deal of weight. However, it seems difficult for the Lockean view to explain how it could be, under any circumstances, that Mary *could lose weight*; put differently: memories and personality do not have any weight. On the other hand, animalism easily explains how it is that *Mary lost weight*: Mary is a biological organism, and biological organisms have a certain weight; they can weight varying amounts at different times.

With an understanding of the Mirror Argument in place, let's consider some responses.

Responses to the Mirror Argument

There are various responses to the *Mirror Argument* on behalf of the Lockean; I will survey the most obvious and explain why they fail to undermine the mirror argument.

***The Proxy Response*:** The Lockean might respond that someone can watch themselves in a mirror only by proxy – that is, one can see themselves only if they can see their bodies. So, in this case, Sam can watch himself in the mirror because he can see the body he occupies. Whenever Sam commands his arm to move, by using his nervous system, he can see the result of that intention by watching his arm move via the reflection in the mirror. On

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the proxy account, it helps to think of Sam's body as a vehicle that he controls. Indeed, from the psychological view, the proxy response is somewhat plausible; after all, if someone is just a collection of memories and personality, then they are not the sort of entity that could be reflected in a mirror. Put differently: someone's personality, *itself,* could not be reflected in a mirror; light cannot reflect off a personality.

However friendly the proxy response is to the Lockean view, it results in strange consequences. For example, suppose that Sam, and his close friend Bob, watched their reflection in the mirror. As it turns out, Sam and Bob took a pill that caused them to switch bodies; i.e. on the Lockean view, re-locating the relevant psychological components in a different body just is the same thing as switching bodies. Thus, according to the Lockean view, after the pill kicks in, Bob and Sam will have switched places, even though neither one of them noticed any movement in the mirror.

Take another example: if the proxy view is correct, then no matter how long Bob and Sam have known each other, they have never seen or touched each other directly; e.g. they have never shaken hands. Of course, the proxy view allows that they have shaken hands via proxy; i.e. the bodies that Sam and Bob occupy have shaken hands, but that is a much different than claiming that Bob and Sam have shaken hands, full stop. If the proxy response is the case, then Bob and Sam have never actually shaken hands through their entire friendship. What a strange view!

Finally, the proxy response seriously conflicts with how we talk and think about ourselves and others. If one observes how we think, act and talk about ourselves and other people, we appear to accept that we are psychologically complex human organisms. Further, there does not appear to be anything wrong with this practice. Whenever we describe ourselves as having certain physical characteristics – for example, 'he looks really good in that new suit', or 'she has lost almost all of her pregnancy weight' – it would seem, at least to the neutral observer, that we think of ourselves as living, breathing biological creatures with

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physical dimensions and characteristics. The proxy response lacks the ability to explain this practice.

To drive the point home, consider a passage from van Inwagen:

> *We usually talk and act as if we were visible and tangible. We say things like, 'I didn't like the way he was looking at me', or 'She reached for the seat belt and buckled herself in.' We don't say, 'She caused her body's hands to reach for the seat belt and buckle her body in.' And, while someone might say, 'I didn't like the way he was looking at my body,' this would mean something rather special (perhaps, 'I thought he was exhibiting undue sexual interest in me') and it couldn't always be substituted for 'I didn't like the way he was looking at me'. This suggests that our concept of a human person ... is the concept of a thing possessing certain physical characteristics: we normally conceive of ourselves as things made of flesh and blood and bone and shaped roughly like statues of human beings.*[1]

Thus, the proxy response lacks a great deal of plausibility compared to animalism for several reasons, e.g. the animalist view just gets to say that Sam can watch himself in the mirror without strange consequences or clarifications; the proxy response is not so fortunate. Further, animalism can accommodate how we normally describe ourselves and others, while it seems that the proxy response cannot.

***The Nihilist Response*:** Next, the Lockean might try another response: although people talk as if Sam can watch himself in the mirror, strictly speaking, Sam could never, even under idealized conditions, watch himself in the mirror; he is not the sort of entity that can be spotted in a mirror. After all, light cannot be reflected by psychological components like memory and personality. The nihilist response might proceed as follows: Sam is nothing but a

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collection of psychological states like memories, personality and so forth; such psychological states cannot be reflected in a mirror; thus, Sam cannot watch himself in a mirror.

Even though the nihilist argument is weak, i.e. the argument would only convince those who are already staunch Lockeans, it emphasizes our choice between two competing explanations.

A1. Humans persist through time only if their psychological components persist through time [i.e. Lockean view].
A2. Humans are capable of watching themselves in the mirror [i.e. this is consistent with the animalist view; but in tension with the Lockean view].

There is a serious problem comparing (A1) and (A2). Simply put, the problem is this: just about everyone accepts something like (A2), while (A1) is incredibly contentious; it is only accepted by the Lockeans. We take it for granted, e.g. whenever we use the bathroom, that we can watch ourselves in the mirror. Whenever I watch myself in the mirror, groaning about another awful haircut, I am committed to the notion that I can watch myself in the mirror; that explains how I know that *I have such a bad haircut.* It is not as if the individual watching me in the mirror is someone else entirely. I have the strong intuition, as I suspect you do, that I can watch myself in the mirror; however, psychological components such as memories and personality are not the sort of entities that could, even in principle, be reflected in the mirror – e.g. they lack the ability to reflect light. Thus, I am not *just* a collection of psychological components.

***The Figurative Response*:** Finally, the Lockean might respond to the *Mirror Argument* with the claim that 'Sam watches himself in the mirror' is a figurative statement; Sam does not *literally* watch himself in the mirror. Obviously, if Sam just is a collection of psychological components, then he is not the sort of entity that could watch his reflection in

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the mirror. Thus, the Lockean lacks the theoretical resources, without giving up her view of personal identity, to take the steps of the *Mirror Argument* literally.

Unfortunately for the Lockean, this admission is a serious problem. Surely, there is nothing figurative about the statement: 'Sam can watch himself in the mirror.' Suppose that Sam and his girlfriend are using the same mirror as they get ready for work in the morning. Surely, it is literally the case that Sam and his girlfriend are looking at their reflection in the mirror to make sure that they look presentable for work – at a minimum, based on the way in which Sam and his girlfriend talk about watching their reflection in the mirror – e.g. whenever Sam's girlfriend has to ask Sam to move, so she can check her eyeliner – they appear to accept that they can *literally* watch themselves in the mirror.

To illustrate the ridiculous consequences of the figurative response, consider the following example: suppose that after enjoying his evening meal, the king decides to adjourn to his quarters for the evening. While walking to his room, various servants repeatedly inform the king that he is covered in brown gravy – suppose for the sake of the example that he has gravy all over his face and neck. However, no matter how many servants warn him, he completely ignores them. As a Lockean and a staunch believer in the figurative response to the mirror argument, he has decided that he has no time for the figurative. Obviously, there is no need to stop and wipe away the gravy; after all, such talk is only *figurative*.

Surely, the Lockean will object, there is *some sense* in which the king is covered in gravy; at a minimum, his body is covered in gravy. However, there are not a lot of options available to the Lockean who adopts the figurative response. If she is willing to admit that the king is *literally* covered in gravy, then she must admit that such a concession places her in a difficult position; for example, psychological components cannot be covered in gravy. If she denies that *the king* is covered in gravy, she must explain why large portions of the king's face and neck are not *really* part of him; surely this is ridiculous.

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As if that was not enough, there a final problem. Suppose we grant the figurative response. This move would severely diminish what we take ourselves to know. The reasoning is simple: if talk about our appearance is figurative – surely it must be if statements about reflections in a mirror are figurative – then, there are plenty of things that we *think* we know about ourselves, even though we are wrong. Our appearance is the source of self-knowledge, even if it is not intimate kind of self-knowledge, e.g. there appears to be a difference, in terms of intimacy, between knowing someone's height, compared to their sexual orientation.

For instance, I *know* that my hair is a light brown; it is not as if I think I have brown hair, *in some sense*. Rather, part of being who I am is having brown hair. That is not to say that I could not dye my hair, but rather that how I appear is literally, rather than figuratively, part of what makes me who I am. Thus, even though many human animals enjoy a complex psychology, this does not exhaust their identity.

Conclusion

The mirror argument is compelling in this sense: any view of personal identity that cannot make sense out of something as mundane as watching ourselves in the mirror is a seriously implausible view; obviously we watch ourselves in the mirror all the time. Animalism is the only view that can deal with the mirror phenomenon without having to allow bizarre consequences, or denying obvious claim; thus, we should prefer animalism over its Lockean rival.

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Note

[1] Peter van Inwagen. 2008. Metaphysics: Westview Press, 246–7.

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