PHIL 4603: Metaphysics
Prof. Funkhouser
Olson, “An Argument for Animalism”

* It might seem obvious that we are animals. But surprisingly few philosophers accept this view!

1.
* In saying that we are animals, Olson means that each of us is numerically identical to an animal.

“There is a certain human organism, and that organism is you. You and it are one and the same. This view has been called “animalism” (not a very nice name, but I haven’t got a better one).”

* Many think that we are animals, but yet deny that we are identical to an animal. There are different senses of the words “is”, “are”, “be”, etc. When these people claim that you are an animal, they are merely claiming that you are constituted by an animal. Olson does not like this usage—he thinks it is misleading to say that you are something other than yourself.

“Put plainly and honestly, these philosophers are saying that each of us is a non-animal that relates in some intimate way to an animal.”

* One could be a materialist and deny animalism, holding that we are material non-organisms. The animalist can allow for the existence of non-animal people, but denies that we are such things. And we (being animals) can also cease to be people while nevertheless existing. Such is the case for those in vegetative states or, looking to the past, human embryos. We are necessarily organic objects, so we cannot survive the complete replacement of our biological parts with inorganic substitutes.

2.
* If not animals, then what are we? Candidates include: immaterial substances, material objects constituted by animals, temporal parts of animals (Lewis), a bundle of thoughts (Hume), something like a program “realized” in this body, or maybe we do not even exist at all!

3.
* Historical opposition to animalism was grounded in a denial that material objects could think. But why do people, like modern day materialists, continue to deny that we are animals? Here is an interesting comment:

“The traditional problem of personal identity is not what we are, but what it takes for us to persist.”
But Olson says that this does not necessarily tell us what we fundamentally are.

“Claims about what it takes for us to persist do not by themselves tell us what other fundamental properties we have: whether we are material or immaterial, simple or composite, abstract or concrete, and so on. At any rate, the single-minded focus on our identity over time has tended to put other metaphysical questions about ourselves out of philosophers’ minds.”

Psychological continuity theories of our persistence have been dominant in philosophy, and of course they are incompatible with animalism. Sameness of animal is neither necessary nor sufficient for psychological continuity. (So, Olson denies that you would change bodies in a Williams-style brain transplant— attend to his discussion of this case.)

4.
* Animals can think, act, and sit. There is such an animal located exactly where you are sitting right now. You can think, act, and sit. You are that animal.

The big assumption in this argument is that there is “one and only one thinking being sitting in your chair”. The conclusion is that we are identical to a human animal, but not that we are essentially or fundamentally a human animal.

5.
* One could try to avoid Olson’s conclusion by denying that there are human animals at all. But any reason for denying this would equally be a reason to deny the existence of all other animals, and this is absurd.

6.
* Another possible objection is to deny that the animal is thinking. But it is absurd to claim that animals with healthy brains (and which undergo various experiences, including education) are incapable of having thoughts. The spirit behind this objection is likely a commitment to immaterialism by one who denies that mere matter is capable of thought. But the brain is the biological organ of thought, just like the heart is the organ for pumping blood.

7.
* One could object to Olson’s argument by claiming that there are two thinking things sitting in your chair. This view can accommodate ordinary speech by saying that we do not always count by identity, but typically we count the non-overlapping things. Not only does this overpopulate the world, Olson also thinks that in such a situation you would have no reason to think that you are the person and not the animal. After all, the animal has all the same thoughts, including the thought that it is a person! But surely there aren’t multiple people sitting here.

8.
* Olson writes:
“There are about six billion human animals walking the earth. Those animals are just like ourselves. They sit in our chairs and sleep in our beds. They work, and talk, and take holidays. Some of them do philosophy. They have just the mental and physical attributes that we take ourselves to have. So it seems, anyway. This makes it hard to deny that we are those animals.”

Consider whether parallel arguments could be made to identify us with things besides animals (e.g., collections of matter).

9. * Is this claim true?

   “Every actual case in which we take someone to survive or perish is a case where a human animal survives or perishes.”

Olson addresses the vegetative state and fetus cases.