

PHI1024F

Essay 2

NLNOLI001

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Topic 4:

Cartesianism or Animalism? Which account of the self and personal identity is more plausible:

Cartesianism or Animalism? Justify your answer and respond to possible objections.

In this essay I will argue that neither Cartesianism nor Animalism is a more plausible standpoint, in terms of the self and personal identity, than the other. Both express very strong points to be considered as well as have serious downfalls in which, in most cases, the one view seems to compliment the other. By analysing both in terms of three major topics namely the self, especially to do with mind and body associations and personality, instances of change, such as aging and severe memory loss, and the possibility of immortality, this argument is proven.

To understand the viewpoint of both Cartesianism and Animalism, it is important to be aware of what both views consider true and on what grounds respectively. Beginning with the Cartesian, it is understood that the self is an essence of a person or mind which could exist without the connection to anything corporeal (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). In this sense the self is something more elusive and simple that is parasitic to a body (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). If this be the case then it is plausible to assume that the self “might survive bodily death” as it is distinct from the physical realm (Blackburn, 1999, p. 121). This view of finite separation between the mental or self and the physical is known as “property dualism” and is contradictory to Animalism's views (Blackburn, 1999, p. 51). Lastly a crucial element of Cartesianism is personal identity in events such as time elapsed is held constant in the “identity of substance” meaning that if two separate entities are of the same mind then they are the same being (Chapman, 2015, slide 2-3;6).

Animalism, being on the opposite end of the spectrum, claims that the self is part of the composite matter of the organism or body in question (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). The self begins as the animal is born and ceases to exist as the animal dies (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). It is also “bound” to the physical realm and is thus why Animalism does not agree with the property dualism of the Cartesian (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). Animalism perceives that “humans are nothing but bodies”

which act according to the organic group and chemical make-up which is associated with the species (Murphy, 2013, p. 37). In this regard, personal identity for Animalism is constant as long as it is the same organic body which is being observed (Chapman, 2015, slide 2-3;6).

One point of conflict between the two views which is apparent is the idea of property dualism, with Cartesianism claiming the self can be without a body in a separate state while Animalism claims this is impossible. However, if one were to side with Animalism, one could claim that through experience and investigation a human being's behaviour is linked strongly with the functions its brain is capable of due to it being a brain of that human species (Murphy, 2013, p. 37). Perhaps the mere fact that we are able to contemplate such conundrums is due to advanced cognitive functions of the human species. By saying this it is implied that the mind or self and body are in fact a unit and the self is not separate from the physical. This is a problem for Cartesianism. It is also questioned how we can interact with the world around us physically if we ourselves are not part of the physical realm (Palatine, 2007, p. 62). In this regard, animalism shows strong prospect of being more plausible, however, Cartesianism could come back claiming that the self could be seen as a force much like gravity which is a quality associated to bodies but not seen as a part of their physical make-up (Palatine, 2007, p.66). On Animalism's side again, however, it has been found in the field of neuroscience that the body sends certain signals to the specimen's brain to alert them of particular bodily aspects like the body's place in a space (Murphy, 2013, p. 40). Even further, a type of "theory of mind" common in the neuroscience field shows that animals are able to distinguish animals of other bodies and rate themselves as similar (Murphy, 2013, p. 40). These two points make Animalism seem an extremely strong view. Even Elizabeth, who when writing to Descartes after conceding that there must be an "immaterial cause" for the body's actions, still protests that she has never been able to sense it (Palatine, 2007, p. 68). This supports Animalism but leads on to another point of the self.

Elizabeth conceded to the fact that there might be an immaterial, elusive force that causes physical things to move within the physical realm yet she herself felt unable to perceive such a thing. This relates to the inner understanding of our own selves which Descartes aimed to prove (Palatine, 2007, p. 65). It might seem unnecessary to consider the elusive self behind the physical after analysing the mind and body associations of Animalism, yet Cartesianism ensures us that it is necessary. This is because the Cartesian might feel that if there is no immaterial self to make sense of spatial experiences, one cannot say that one has had any experience or has any of one's own perceptions (Blackburn, 1999, p. 139). In this sense Cartesianism trumps Animalism because there must be something which all perceptions can bounce off of and interpret experiences and space

(Blackburn, 1999, p. 140). A person needs to have “minimal self-consciousness” or a mechanism of personal reflection in order to make sense of the physical space they are in (Blackburn, 1999, p. 139). Elements of Animalism don't seem to account for this and hence Cartesianism is stronger in this regard.

However, this does not mean to say that Animalism does not allow for differences in perceptions and personality. Animalism simply emphasises that all people or selves are of the same kind (Reid, 1975, p. 117). Cartesianism might want to take advantage of this and claim therefore there must be some special essence of a person to some degree. This is because it has been noted that though people may share a sensation this does not mean they will react in the same way to it (Blackburn, 1999, p. 67). If I was to hurt my thumb and feel pain, I might roll on the floor in agony expressing my pain when my friend could do the same thing, feel the same pain yet simply shake their thumb and carry on. However, Animalism might come back claiming that though the two subjects experience the same cognitive responses of pain because of functional behaviour and signals sent through the nervous system which invoke them to pull their thumb out of harm's way, their supposed different reactions could be due to learned environmental behaviour and their neural pathways which give them this unique reaction are the result (Blackburn, 1999, p. 68). Therefore, Cartesianism seems to fill the void of distinct personalities until Animalism comes out stronger in bringing up the idea of learned behaviour.

In relation to functionality in terms of why Animalism believes a person behaves in the way that they do, questions of personal identity becomes apparent. When considering how an individual body or mind may change over a period of time, Animalism claims that that person is the same person as before as long as the “same animal” is being considered (Chapman, 2015, slide 2-3;4). As long as the body functions in the same way as before, as the same kind of organism, it is irrelevant whether its foundational matter changes or is replenished (Blackburn, 1999, p. 125). This view accommodates the idea of growth through a person's life (Blackburn, 1999, p. 126). Since for Animalism, the self is part of the physical, as the body changes and eventually decays, so too will the “essence” of the self (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122). Thus immortality enforced by Cartesianism seems to fall short. Also, because the self seems to be inhabiting a body to the Cartesian, if I were to cut off my arm, the problem of whether I am my arm or the rest of my body becomes apparent (Blackburn, 1999, p. 123). Animalism solves this problem however by claiming because things are composite, the rest of the body exists as the same animal with the arm being discarded (Chapman, 2015, slide 2-2;10). In these ways, where Cartesianism falls short, Animalism seems rather plausible.

Animalism accommodates the notion of change or growth but the question of to what degree proves to weaken this view. One may grow a little older with Animalism still accounting for them being the same person, yet if a more drastic change were to be made to the physical make-up of the individual, for example a sex change, this might cause problems as they seem no longer to be of the same functional organic matter. Suddenly degrees of change seem important. This is where Animalism has a great downfall and possibly where Cartesianism may compensate.

If we continue the thought of drastic changes, such as sex changes, we could consider perhaps a machine which when a person walks through it, the cells are replenished and therefore are not the same as before. If a person were to do this, one might say that the matter which makes up their body is different yet their perceptions, beliefs and even conscience are all the same. If this be the case then Cartesianism's view of personal identity seems rather plausible, as long as at two moments in time, the "Cartesian minds" are identical (Chapman, 2015, slide 2-3;5). However, this would only be true if the self were considered simple and not associated with conscience or even memory. This is because ideas, perceptions and even consciousness of an event may change in the way like a computer's memory is rebooted therefore rendering Cartesian theory of personal identity obsolete (Blackburn, 1999, p. 127). This thereby strengthens Animalism's theory of the self being apart of the matter which may break down resulting in brain damage and loss of memory (Blackburn, 1999, p. 120)

What appears to be a serious downfall for Cartesianism is the idea that a person's conscience may not be the same from one moment to the next or be continuous (Reid, 1975, p. 116). As one grows in one's experiences and perceptions, it can be said that one's thoughts and conscience alter too. This would mean that Cartesian theory of personal identity is flawed and Animalism would appear stronger in arguing thought and conscience are purely chemically and physically based. However, this problem can be solved for Cartesianism if it is said that though perceptions are changing, the "I" which is responsible for them "is permanent" (Blackburn, 1999, p. 123). This relates to the soul being simple rather than composite as Animalism would argue. It seems that memory loss would also be a problem for Cartesianism as the Cartesian believes as long as the same mind exists or is conscious of a former experience then that is the same person (Blackburn, 1999, p. 130). This is flawed when one considers that experiences may be forgotten due to dementia or lapse in memory (Blackburn, 1999, p. 131). However, this problem is again solved for Cartesianism if the self isn't viewed as memory or thought but more as the immaterial thing which perceptions must bounce off of as mentioned earlier. This would again result in the self being simple rather than made up of separate matter of the physical world (Blackburn, 1999, p. 135). This strengthens Cartesianism and

leads on to questions of then perhaps the self is capable of immortality unlike matter.

Considering changes in matter to do with particles, it is thought that it is the energy of the particles which remains constant (Blackburn, 1999, p. 124). This theory has been taken and applied to the soul or essence of a person which ensures personal identity continuity. This hints at ideas of immortality and past lives and makes Cartesianism seem plausible but if one were to assume that being the same self is to do with consciousness then this theory appears flawed. This is because one is not conscious of having been another person or having the same experiences as them (Blackburn, 1999, p. 131). Perhaps the self is continuously being eradicated after a person has awoken from sleep or even died in which case this Cartesian view is flawed anyway (Blackburn, 1999, p. 129). These points which show the pitfalls of Cartesianism thus allow for Animalism to compensate in its view of the self dying along with the body (Blackburn, 1999, p. 122)

To conclude, in analysing the formal views of the self and personal identity of both Cartesianism and Animalism in relation to their strong points, points where both have downfalls respectively and points where when the one appears implausible, the other seems to compensate, the argument of neither extreme being more plausible than the other is proven. With Animalism challenging Cartesianism with physical mind and body connections of the self and the personal identity remaining constant as long as an organism continues to function in the same way as well as Cartesianism challenging Animalism with a necessary immaterial interpreter and the notion of a simple self reflecting personal identity which results in immortality, neither appear to be distinctly more plausible than the other.

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