

Another Argument for Animalism: The Argument from Causal Powers

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ABSTRACT: The causal powers that I have, such as the ability to go to the store for cold beer, for instance are the same causal powers as those had by the human animal closely associated with me. That is, the biological organism that invariably stares back at me, whenever I look in the mirror. Thus, if I want to avoid gratuitous causal overdetermination – i.e. if I want to avoid positing two *separate* individuals with identical, and thus redundant, causal powers – as I justifiably do, then I should adopt animalism. That is, the view that I have the same persistence conditions as those had by a biological organism.

KEY WORDS: Animalism, causality, exclusion argument, materialism, persistence conditions.

Introduction

Throughout the recent history of philosophy, causal powers¹, combined with prohibiting gratuitous causal overdetermination, have often been used as a guide to how the world hangs together. That is, if x and y have the causal power to bring about F , and we want to avoid gratuitous causal overdetermination, then we should revise our ontology with regard to x and y . To illustrate the point, consider a couple arguments in the literature: first, there is the argument, in favor of identity theory – i.e. the claim that mental and neural events are identical – known as *the exclusion argument* (cf. Papineau 2002: 17–19, Lewis 1966, Sturgeon 1998), on one hand, and second, there is the argument in favor of mereological nihilism – i.e. the claim that there are no medium-sized, physical objects (e.g. there are no

¹ For our purposes, if agent, S , has the causal power to do x , S has the ability to bring x about.

tables, only atoms arranged table-wise) – known as *the overdetermination argument* (cf. Merricks 2001), on the other hand.

Roughly sketched, the exclusion and overdetermination arguments each have the following structure: X is sufficiently explained by M and N, on their own. Thus, if we want to avoid gratuitous causal overdetermination, then we should conclude either that M's just are identical to N's, or eliminate either M's or N's. That is, these arguments share the following claim: gratuitous causal overdetermination, no matter how it manifests itself, is a good reason to revise one's ontology. Call this *the avoidance rule*.

In this paper, I defend a novel argument – call it *the argument from causal powers* – for the animalist theory of personal identity (cf. Olson 1997, Snowdon 1990). This is the view that we have the same persistence conditions as those of a biological organism. The argument parallels influential and powerful arguments, like the exclusion and overdetermination arguments, which all respect the avoidance rule. Roughly sketched, the argument I have in mind proceeds as follows.

First, we have the same causal powers, to go about our everyday lives, as the human animal that invariably follows us around. Thus, if we want to avoid positing two individuals, who have identical, and redundant causal powers, all the while respecting the prohibition on gratuitous causal overdetermination, then we ought to adopt animalism.

Now, the layout of this paper is simple. In the first section, I briefly introduce a similar argument to one I use to defend animalism, featured in the literature, for identity theory. It is usually known as the causal exclusion argument. Call it *the Exclusion Argument*. In the second section, I flesh out an argument for mereological nihilism known as an overdetermination argument. Call it *the overdetermination argument*. In the section after that, I defend an argument that you and I are identical to the human animals with which we seem to be invariably associated. That is, we have the same persistence conditions as those of a biological organism. Finally, I deal with a potential objection. For the sake of brevity, my comments are brief.

I should note, before advancing further into the philosophical weeds, that this paper is modest in its aims. That is, I only want to provide *some* motivation for animalism. This paper is not meant to satisfy those who hold firmly that our persistence conditions are exhausted by the psychological. Rather, the argument from causal powers is only meant to pressure those who reject animalism, to explain how their view does not force them to accept counterintuitive consequences – for example, that I, along with my human animal companion, each have identical, redundant causal powers, which violate avoidance rule.

The Exclusion Argument

There is a popular argument, for the claim that the mental and neural are identical, on the basis of causal considerations, called *the exclusion argument*. Consider the following passage (from Papineau 2002: 17), which nicely sums up the exclusion argument:

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, from our common, although admittedly, incomplete knowledge of basic neurology that to the extent that we are willing to attribute the causal impetus of behavior, to our mental states and of course, to the extent that we rightly respect the prohibition against gratuitous causal overdetermination, then, if we are to incorporate the work done by brains, causing our behavior, then we should identify our conscious episodes with our brain states. This is the only solution which respects the causal efficacy of brain and mental states, on the one hand, and the prohibition against gratuitous causal overdetermination², on the other.

Perhaps the following example will clarify. Call it *the stove example*.

Suppose that Smith, who is particularly fond of hot drinks, decides to make Green tea, before heading off to bed. A bit after turning off the stove, Smith turns around to grab the honey, and forgetting that the stove is still hot, uses it brace himself. He immediately feels excruciating pain, causing him to almost immediately pull his hand away from the hot stove.

There are a couple of ingredients to this example, which should be nailed down, if they are to be effective at illustrating how the exclusion argument works.

First, notice that Smith draws his hand away, almost instantaneously, just in virtue of the excruciating pain he felt, when he burned his hand. Now, this is not to say that there were no other causal components that led to Smith drawing his hand away, but surely the excruciating pain was an essential *causal* component of the explanation. To deny that this is to

² There are instances where respecting the prohibition on causal overdetermination has little to recommend it. For example, suppose that Jones accidentally throws a baseball through a neighbor's window, just as Smith is vandalizing that same window with a baseball bat. Surely, in that case, each cause is sufficient, on its own, to shatter the neighbor's window. This is just an instance of causal overdetermination, instead of an instance of *gratuitous* causal overdetermination.

concede something akin to epiphenomenalism (cf. Jackson 1982) – i.e. the view that physical causes result in mental effects, while the mental is causally impotent. To the extent that we think that mental goings-on have causal powers is the extent to which we should grant that being in excruciating pain is an essential part of the explanation as to why Smith drew his hand away from the hot stove. Call this *the mental cause*.

Second, there were a series of brain states, and neural goings-on, which were sufficient, causally speaking, to bring about Smith almost instantly moving his hand away from the hot stove. After all, it is common knowledge that scientists can stimulate the brain in just the right spot so as to produce a variety of mental events, and behaviors, from seeing various colors, to animating the body of someone to do such-and-such, even though the subject who is being manipulated did not intend to do such-and-such. 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 much to be gained, explanatorily speaking, by insisting that the feeling of pain (i.e. the mental states), on the one hand, and the neural goings-on, on the other hand, are sufficient and *separate* causes for Smith moving his hand away from the hot stove. Thus, if we respect the prohibition on gratuitous causal overdetermination, then we have good reason to conclude that the mental states and the neural goings-on are just the same thing. That is, mental events are nothing over and above neural events.

Thus, with the exclusion argument, for identity theory, explained and motivated, we move on to formulate the overdetermination argument for mereological nihilism. These arguments are meant to illuminate a strategy for reducing or eliminating, those entities do not earn their causal or explanatory keep. That is, there are good reasons to suppose we should cut them out of what we go about positing, ontologically speaking.

The Overdetermination Argument

There is a debate raging, within the metaphysics of material objects, as to whether medium-sized objects (e.g. trees, tables, cars etc.) *exist*. There are those who hold that such objects do not exist. That is, they hold that there really are no such objects as tables, cars and trees, even though *there are* atoms arranged table, car and tree-wise. Call this view *mereological nihilism*. Those who accept this view hold that *strictly speaking* there are no such objects as trees and cars, even though we might be inclined to think that there are. There is an infamous and controversial argument for

mereological nihilism, called *the overdetermination argument*. The following passage (Merricks 2003: 701, along with, cf. Merricks 2001: 56) succinctly lays out the overdetermination argument:

[...] I argue that anything a baseball causes – if baseballs exist – is also caused by the baseball’s atoms working in concert. Moreover, a baseball is ‘casually irrelevant’ to what its atoms cause. These two claims imply that baseballs, if they existed, would be at best *mere overdeterminers* of whatever they cause.

Simply put, there is good reason to suppose that atoms arranged baseball-wise have the causal power to smash a window, all on their own, without positing the existence of a baseball *over and above* that of atoms arranged baseball-wise. Put a bit differently, it is plausible to suppose that everyone accepts a bunch of atoms, arranged baseball-wise, would have the causal powers, if they worked in tandem, to smash a window. If we accept that atoms exist, then there is a good reason, *vis-à-vis* not positing individuals with redundant causal powers, to eliminate baseballs from our ontology. That is, if we start with atoms, arranged such-and-such, along with a prohibition on gratuitous *causal powers* overdetermination, on the one hand, and positing a redundant object, *vis-à-vis* causal powers, on the other hand, then there is good reason, to eliminate objects, over and above atoms which are arranged object-wise, from our ontology.

Perhaps it might help to think of the overdetermination argument, in light of a different, though similar example:

Suppose that the local Sheriff, in trying to stop a bank robbery from turning into a hostage situation, shoots one of the suspects, killing him on the spot. That is, the bullet from the Sheriff’s gun resulted in the death of the bank robber. Call this *the shooting example*.

There are a couple of explanatory parts to this example.

First, notice that *the bullet itself* has the causal power, in the right context, to cause the death of the bank robber. That is, the bullet has the ability, in the right context, to tear through soft tissues causing severe organ damage, substantial blood loss and death. At least at first pass, this seems like a good explanation for why it was that the bank robber died from the Sheriff’s gunshot. Second however, it appears that the atoms which compose the bullet, if they were working in concert and within an appropriate set of circumstances, would have the causal powers necessary to take the life of the bank robber. That is, if the bullet *itself* has the causal power to kill the bank robber, and the bullet is comprised of atoms working in tandem, then it follows that the atoms that compose the bullet, working together, have the causal powers to kill the bank robber, in the right context.

Now that we have a feel for the causal exclusion strategy, for managing our ontology, I can explain the argument in favor of animalism in the next section, and respond to a serious objection in the section after that.

The Causal Powers Argument

Surely, in some sense or other, I am an animal. That is, I require food, water and sleep; I engage in sexual intercourse from time to time; I have genetic material, and an extensive evolutionary history. If I do not qualify as an animal, in some sense or other, on the basis of those qualities, then it is hard to see how any organism *could* qualify as an animal. The question that remains is whether or not, I am primarily (i.e. non-derivatively) a human animal, *or* whether I simply derive those qualities from the human animal with which I appear to be invariantly associated.

Further, clearly I enjoy various causal powers throughout most of my life. For instance, I have the causal powers required to walk down to the grocery store, purchase a cold twelve pack of beer, and walk home to enjoy it. Call the causal powers necessary for a beer run, *Alpha*. Of course, Alpha requires that I have the necessary causal powers to move, think, communicate and so forth, to complete a beer run. Likewise, surely the human animal that is invariantly associated with me, has the causal powers necessary to do everything that I did vis-à-vis my beer run. That is, he has the ability to walk down to the street to the grocery store, find the appropriate beer, and communicate with the cashier while purchasing the beer etc. Call the causal powers of the human animal, necessary for a beer run, *Beta*.

If we think about the matter – of having causal powers to go on a beer run, for example – in a bit more detail, it should be clear that I lack the necessary causal powers to go on a beer run, while I was an infant, and surely I will lack those abilities as I grow to be an old man. Likewise, the human animal that is invariantly associated with me, lacked the causal powers, to go on a beer run, when he is an infant, and likewise if he advances into his later years. That is, upon first glance, it appears as though the following condition holds:

If I have the causal power to bring about *F*, then, invariantly, my human animal companion also has the causal power to bring about *F*. Call this *the mirroring principle*.

This insight is, roughly, the basis for the causal powers argument for animalism. That is, an excellent explanation for the truth of the mirroring principle, which enjoys the added virtue of avoiding positing two separate individual with redundant, completely overlapping causal powers, is to

accept that I am identical to my human animal companion. That is, we are the same human animal.

Consider the explanationist argument that I have in mind (i.e. a kind of argument that establishes a conclusion, on the basis of explanatory considerations), properly formulated, that proceeds as follows. Call it *the argument from causal powers*.

- (1) First, I have the causal powers to do such-and-such (e.g. go on a beer run, take a hike, read a book and so forth). Surely, the human animal that invariably follows me around has the causal powers to do such-and-such that I do.
- (2) Next, we are right to avoid positing two separate individuals, with the same causal powers, without good reason, so as to avoid causal overdetermination.
- (3) Finally, the most plausible way to explain the causal powers my human animal companion and I enjoy, while respecting the prohibition on gratuitous causal overdetermination, is to accept that I am identical to my human animal companion³.
- (4) Thus, there is good reason to accept animalism.

Now, we are ready to apply our insight to the beer run example. The causal powers that I, and my human animal companion, enjoy, with regard to going on a beer run, for example, are the same. That is, it seems that Alpha and Beta – the causal powers I mentioned earlier – are just different ways of naming an identical set of causal powers. Further, there is no reason to posit two distinct individuals, myself and my human animal companion, to explain Alpha and Beta. Thus, it must be that I am identical to a human animal.

There is another argumentative strategy, I could employ, which might help clarify what I am after with the argument from causal powers. The strategy goes something like this: set up a trilemma, whereby each member of the trilemma, on its own, appears plausible, even though, they can-

³ There is a suppressed premise: positing an individual with all of the same causal powers, over and above the human animal that invariably follows me about, so as to avoid accepting animalism, is to engage in theoretical gratuity.

Simply put, this suppressed premise is meant to illustrate the explanatory redundancy, in positing two X's that have identical causal powers to explain such-and-such, without good reason, when *one X* is sufficient to explain that such-and-such. Indeed, if we want to avoid gratuitous causal overdetermination, when it comes to positing individual causes, all by themselves, then, this theoretical virtue surely applies, all the more, to positing individuals with causal powers.

not *all* be true. The trilemma – call it *the causal trilemma* – might be stated as follows:

- (A) The human animal, which invariably follows me about, has the causal powers to do everything ascribed to me, e.g. I have the causal powers to go to the store for cold beer, study for an exam, present at a conference, and so on
- (B) We should avoid positing entities with the identical, and thus redundant, causal powers, unless and until there are good reasons for doing otherwise.
- (C) I am not identical to the human animal that invariably follows me around. That is, I am something over and above my human animal counterpart, vis-à-vis my persistence conditions.

There are a couple of points to be made about the causal trilemma. To begin with, it should be clear that human animals have all of the same causal powers that we take ourselves to have. That is, they have the ability to think, talk, walk and so forth. Thus, there is good reason to hang onto member (A). After all, it would be strange to deny that *human* animals have all the causal powers that we take ourselves to have in light of the causal powers we attribute to a variety of non-human animals. Next, we have seen, throughout the paper, that there are good reasons, across the board, to respect the ban on gratuitous causal, and causal power, overdetermination, unless and until there is good reason to do otherwise. Thus, member (B) is secure. Since, it is clearly the case that the members of the causal trilemma, are inconsistent with one another, there is good reason, in the interest of establishing consistency, respecting those members of the trilemma that enjoy greater plausibility than their trilemma-counterparts, and preserving as many of the members of the trilemma as possible, to throw out member (C).

The Appropriation Objection

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the matter. There are those who hold that they are, strictly speaking, a collection of psychological conditions such as self-consciousness, rationality, memory and so forth. Surely, those who hold the psychological view will argue I am not identical to permanent-coma-state counterpart, for instance. Rather, I just appropriated his causal resources. In other words, the Lockean – i.e. someone who holds that I persist through time just as long as certain psychological conditions hold (cf. Nozick 2003: 100) – might object as follows:

I do not have all of the causal powers as my human animal companion, at least in so far as they are *mine*. Rather, I simply appropriate

many of the causal powers had by my human animal companion, and use them for myself, while I am associated, in some respect or other, with him. Just like the body I currently inhabit, there is no reason to think that the causal powers that I appropriate from him will go with me if I were ever to need a body transplant, for instance. Thus, there is little reason to accept the mirroring principle – as a guide to my persistence conditions – and even less reason to think that animalism is well-supported by how we should cut up causal powers. Call this *the appropriation objection*.

Unfortunately, for the Lockean view of personal identity, there are several problems with this objection.

One of them is the issue of *explanatory fit*. Even though my appropriating my human animal companion's causal powers would explain how it is that I have the ability to go to the store for cold beer – just in virtue of the ability had by my human animal companion to go to the store for cold beer – it is not clear why this is a better explanation than, my human animal companion and I, are the same individual. After all, this would be a more streamlined explanation, in that it is less complicated than the appropriation story. Additionally, it is the explanation that we should prefer, considering the following intuition: if x and y are never seen apart – that is, there is never an instance where we find x, without y, or the other way around – then that is good *prima facie* justification that x is identical to y.

Consider the following analogy. On the identity theory, mental events just are a subset of neural events, while on the coincident theory – i.e. mental events always travel with neural events, but they are distinct from them – there are two entities, x and y, needed to explain seeing x and y together. Surely, the coincident theory is just intuitively messier than the identity theory. Further, unlike on the identity theory, with the coincident theory, not only must we posit separate entities, x and y, but we must also explain why they are always travel together. The identity theory easily explains this: *it is always the case, for anything that is identical, that whenever we find x, we find x*. That is, if we already knew that x and y were identical, then we would expect to find x and y together. However, there must be something else at work, on the coincident theory, to explain how it is that x and y always travel together. By the same token, it is easier to explain why my human animal companion and I are always together, if animalism holds, then if its explanatory competitors hold, *ceteris paribus*.

Suppose we approach the matter a bit differently. We would rightly think that the dualist is in trouble, explanatorily speaking, if she argued in response to the exclusion argument, for reductive materialism, that mental states, along with non-physical minds, lacked the causal ability to bring about behavior, and so forth, but rather appropriated that causal ability

from the relevant brain state. That is, there is something intuitively dodgy about this explanation. It is strange, for a plethora of reasons, for the dualist to make this move. For one thing, it appears to render her metaphysical contribution, vis-à-vis positing a non-physical mental entity, to mental causation, largely superfluous. By the same token, it would be strange, not to mention a handicapping admission, for the Lockean to admit that she only has certain causal powers merely in virtue of the causal powers had by the human animal that is invariably associated with her. It would be better, explanatorily speaking, to identify herself with the human animal that follows her around, than posit two distinct individuals. That is, a person exhausted by her psychological components, and a human animal, especially where one of them is causally, and explanatorily, impotent.

Furthermore, the appropriation objection and brain transplant cases (cf. Hershenov 2004: 449) have a good deal in common – and this common threat is a serious problem for them. They both hold that there are instances, throughout modal space, where I exist without my human animal companion. Thus, I cannot be a human animal. There are a couple of problems with these kinds of moves, often used against animalism. This is especially so, if we consider that the properties – assumed by the critic applying Leibniz's Law⁴, to form an argument for non-identity between a person and human animal – to which thought experiments and arguments, like the brain transplant cases, presuppose. The critics appear to presuppose that if they can show a difference in the modal properties, had by a person, on the one hand, and a human animal, on the other hand, then they will have overturned animalism. However, that is a faulty assumption. This is because I defend a kind of modally-local animalism, rather than animalism that presupposes that, in our travels throughout modal space, the human animal with whom I am associated and I *invariably* travel together. The point is that divergent modal properties, between my human animal companion and I, is not a serious problem for my version of animalism.

It might help clarify, to consider the following point. For example, to say that a statue – call the statue, *Gamma* – depicting the Biblical David, and the clay used to depict David – call this *Omega* – is identical appears to be ambiguous between two readings. On the first reading, i.e. the non-modal reading, to say that Gamma and Omega are identical is just to say that the statue depicting David is made of clay. That is, in the actual world, and some nearby modal worlds, under many conditions, to find Gamma is just to find Omega. The location of one is a good and fairly reliable guide, to the location of the other. On the second reading, i.e. the modal reading,

⁴ Recall that Leibniz's law is the following conditional: if, for every property F, object x has F if and only if object y has F, then x is identical to y.

to say that Gamma and Omega are identical is to say that in any possible world in which we find Gamma, no matter how far away from the actual world, we will nonetheless find Omega. However, there is a possible world in which the status depicting David gets smashed, leaving only the clay, which used to depict the Biblical David, behind. Thus, Gamma and Omega come apart in some possible worlds, and thus cannot be the same, in a strict modal sense.

That being said, a similar point applies to the version of animalism I defend in this paper. That is, it is meant as a nearby-possible-worlds thesis, rather than an identity thesis across the entire, relevant parts of modal space, where I only exist in those possible worlds in which the human animal I am associated with also exists. That is, it the view holds that I happen to be a human animal, in the actual world and many of the surrounding possible worlds, within this particular neighborhood in modal space (cf. Bailey 2011: 51). The version of animalism I defend is not committed to the claim that throughout modal space, wherever you find me, you find a human animal. Call this view *modal neighborhood animalism*.

Moreover, to get a feel for the point I am after, consider the following example:

I happen to be an American citizen, at least in the actual world, along with *some nearby* possible worlds. Assuming I do not choose to be an ex-patriot, whenever you find me in the actual world, and *some* nearby possible worlds, you will find someone who is an American citizen. That being said, it does not follow from that wherever I am found, throughout nearby modal space, I am an American citizen. After all, I could be just as I am, vis-à-vis identity, even though I was born in Turkey. But it nevertheless remains the case that I am an American citizen.

Likewise, there is a good reason to suppose that I am a human animal. At the very least, that is the explanation we should prefer, as long as we accept various causal intuitions, along with respecting the prohibition on gratuitous causal, and casual power, overdetermination. If we accept that the exclusion and overdetermination arguments have something going for them on grounds of causal exclusion, then, on pain of inconsistency, so does the argument from causal powers, for the same reasons.

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