

# Thinking animals, disagreement, and skepticism

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**Abstract** According to Eric Olson, the Thinking Animal Argument (TAA) is the best reason to accept animalism, the view that we are identical to animals. A novel criticism has been advanced against TAA, suggesting that it implicitly employs a dubious epistemological principle. I will argue that other epistemological principles can do the trick of saving the TAA, principles that appeal to recent issues regarding disagreement with peers and experts. I conclude with some remarks about the consequence of accepting these modified principles, drawing out some general morals in defending animalism.

**Keywords** Animalism · Persons · Disagreement · Live skepticism

## 1 Introduction

Of the plethora of views on the ontology of human persons, the commonsensical view that human persons are animals (i.e., human persons are identical to animals) is one that has not garnered much favor from the philosophical community. In fact, this view—which is typically referred to as ‘animalism’—has been attacked not only by substance dualists but also by fellow materialists of the non-animalist variety. Substantive arguments seem to be required for sustaining belief in animalism.

Although various philosophers have offered several different arguments on behalf of animalism, Olson (1997, 2003, 2004) has done much to advance the animalist position, especially with his Thinking Animal Argument (henceforth, TAA). Olson seems to think that the case for animalism hinges on the success of

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TAA. Without much surprise, TAA has come under attack from various fronts. In a recent article, Brueckner and Buford (2009) offer a novel criticism of TAA, arguing that it implicitly employs an implausible epistemological principle.

After laying out TAA and Brueckner and Buford's criticism, I will argue that other epistemological principles can do the trick of saving the TAA, principles that appeal to recent issues regarding disagreement with peers and experts. Of course these principles will likely not be acceptable to all epistemologists; however, they are not as implausible as the original one that Brueckner and Buford attribute to Olson. I conclude with some remarks about the consequence of accepting these modified principles, drawing out some general morals from Olson's primary strategy in defending animalism.

## 2 The TAA

The TAA has a fairly simple structure. Here is one of Olson's recent formulations of it:

- [1] There is a human animal in my chair.
- [2] If something is a human animal in my chair, it is thinking.
- [3] I am the one and only thinking being in my chair.
- [4] Therefore, I am a human animal.

The argument is valid, so we need to ask about the status of the premises. Premise [1] is fairly innocuous, especially to those of us who reject idealism or nihilism about composite material objects. Some may object to premise [2], arguing that material objects (or at least composite material objects) are incapable of thinking.<sup>1</sup> Materialists, on the other hand, may have more of a difficulty rejecting [2] since both my animal and I share the same "equipment" (e.g., brain, cerebral cortex, etc.) in which our thoughts are realized, or supervene on, or emerge from, or etc. I will, however, leave worries over [1] and [2] aside and focus on premise [3].

So what are the reasons for believing that I am the one and only thinking being in my chair? Olson provides several arguments on behalf of [3], each of which assumes for *reductio* a psychological approach to personal identity such that I am not identical to my animal. First, if the psychological approach is true such that there are two spatially-coincident thinking entities, then there are too many thinkers that have the "same" thought; but it is absurd to suppose that there can be a multiplicity of thinkers having the "same" thought, and therefore there is only one thinker.<sup>2</sup> Second, if there were more than one thinking entity for every human person, we might say that some of those intelligent entities with thoughts are persons and some are animals—but what would the difference consist in given that both have the exact same

<sup>1</sup> For example, Plantinga (2007) and Lowe (2010) offer Leibnizian-inspired arguments for the impossibility of thinking material objects.

<sup>2</sup> The scare quotes are employed because, strictly speaking, my animal and I do not have the same thoughts when we employ the first-person indexical. That is, when I say, "I am a non-animal person", and when my animal says, "I am a non-animal person", the meaning of both statements are distinct.

psychological profile? On the other hand, if animals with thoughts do count as persons, why do they have distinct persistence conditions than non-animal persons (where animal persons persist by way of biological continuity whereas non-animal persons persist by way of psychological continuity)? Since these consequences are unacceptable, there cannot be more than one thinking entity in my chair. Lastly, if there were more than one thinking entity in my chair, then I could not know which one I am—am I the animal or the person? Here is how Olson puts it:

[I]f the animal were not you, there would be two beings there, you and the animal, thinking the same thoughts. How could you ever know which one you are? Any reason you could have for believing that you are not the animal would equally be a reason for the animal to believe that it is not the animal. Yet it would be mistaken. If we were not animals, we could never have any reason to believe that we are not (Olson 2004, pp. 265–266).

Given this implausible result, Olson concludes that the thinking animal in my chair and I are not distinct—and so there is only one thinking being in my chair. So these three separate arguments are supplied by Olson as ways of bolstering the support for [3].

### 3 Epistemology and TAA

It is clear that this last tack in support of [3] is deeply tied to an epistemological concern. Others have wed certain epistemological accounts with views of what we are, as Descartes' radical skepticism led him to positing a form of substance dualism. Unfortunately Olson has not explicitly laid out an explanation of why we would be unable to know that we are persons and not animals if the psychological approach were true. Brueckner and Buford have attempted to supply what seems to be the implicit argument underlying Olson's epistemic line for [3].

Here is how they recreate Olson's argument. Suppose for reductio that the psychological approach is true, and so it follows that I am a person that spatially coincides with but is not identical to a certain animal. The psychological approach also implies that I can know the consequences of such an approach, and so I can know that I am a person and not an animal. Moreover, it seems that my animal and I share all the same mental states, especially if we accept the supervenience of the mental on the physical (i.e., the animal and I are mental twins since we are physical twins).<sup>3</sup> Since we are mentally exactly alike, it follows that my animal also believes that he is a person and not an animal.<sup>4</sup> However, my animal's belief that he is a

<sup>3</sup> One worry may arise if we suppose that local supervenience is false given an externalist account of mental content (which I accept). Thus, for any  $x$  and for any  $y$ ,  $x$  and  $y$  may be physically (i.e., neurophysiologically) indistinguishable without being mental twins. Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that my animal and I would still be mental (as well as physical) twins since there can be no case in which one of us is confronted with a distinct physical, linguistic, or social environment—for instance, it is not as if I can be in an environment with water (i.e.  $H_2O$ ) whereas my animal be in an environment with twater (i.e. XYZ) instead of water.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, then, my animal and I have contradictory beliefs, and therefore we are not mental twins. However, this problem can be ignored for purposes of this paper, since in a sense my animal and I

person and not an animal is mistaken, whereas my belief that I am a person and not an animal is true. Nothing so far yields my lack of knowledge that I am a non-animal person. At this point Brueckner and Buford supply an epistemological principle that gets the required result:

[EP] For all  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x$  has mental states that are exactly similar to the mental states of  $y$  &  $x$  mistakenly believes (s)he is  $\varphi$ , then  $y$  cannot know that (s)he is  $\varphi$ .

Since my animal and I satisfy the antecedent of EP, it follows that I cannot know that I am a person and not an animal. So even if it is true that I am the non-animal person, it is something I nevertheless cannot know. Recall that the psychological approach implies that I can know that I am a person distinct from my animal; so there is a contradiction because that is something I cannot know given EP. By *reductio*, it follows that the psychological approach is false—hence, we have no reason to suppose that there are two thinking beings in my chair, a person and an animal. Thus, there is one and only one thinking being in my chair which is me (so, [3]), and since there is an animal that is thinking in my chair (from [1] and [2]), it follows that I am that animal.

Now Brueckner and Buford object to this argument by denying EP. For if we accept a fallibilist account of justification, then it is possible to have a justified false belief. So my animal may falsely believe that he is a non-animal person, however I can nevertheless know that I am a non-animal person (according to fallibilism about justification) as long as the conditions for knowledge are met (whatever they may be). Brueckner and Buford go on to argue that EP will also be rejected from many other epistemological frameworks such as reliabilism, safety-theories, etc. Since EP is an implausible principle, Olson's epistemological argument on behalf of [3] seems to fail, leaving Brueckner and Buford to reject animalism as a viable account of the ontology of human persons.

#### 4 Peers and experts: another epistemological tack

Are animalists in trouble? I suspect that even if TAA fails, the case for animalism is not doomed. Moreover, Brueckner and Buford's criticism focuses only on one line of defense for premise [3]. So even if they are right, we might still believe that [3] is true if we consider the arguments from "too many thinkers" or from the oddity of having animals that have psychological profiles just like ours but without being persons (or animals that are persons but do not persist by way of psychological continuity). However, I want to attempt to defend the epistemological line for [3]. I do not pretend that the ensuing discussion will satisfy every epistemologist or even

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Footnote 4 continued

are virtually mental twins since my animal and I will have almost all the same mental states; and where there is a mental state containing a first-person indexical, the content is nearly enough the same.

be compatible with every epistemological framework, but I believe that Olson's basic epistemological argument can be salvaged.

The first simple response would be to insist that the animalist accept some form of infallibilism, as a few epistemologists have done.<sup>5</sup> After all, infallibilism would yield EP, and it is not obvious that infallibilism is false.<sup>6</sup> However, some have argued that even the more plausible forms of infallibilism engender their own skeptical worries, and perhaps that is reason enough to reject infallibilism.<sup>7</sup>

Now I agree with Brueckner and Buford that we should reject EP given its implausibility and its incompatibility with many different epistemological frameworks such as fallibilism about justification, reliabilism, safety-theories, etc. However, it seems that we can formulate distinct epistemological principles that can be advanced to get the result that I do not know that I am a person and not an animal. In order to do so, we will look at two recent epistemic issues: peer disagreement and live skepticism.

#### 4.1 Peer disagreement and TAA

One recent philosophical problem that has attracted much attention is the problem of disagreement amongst peers. Consider the case of two philosophers, say PVI and DKL, that hold two contradictory positions over free will—PVI believes compatibilism is false and DKL believes compatibilism is true. Now suppose that PVI and DKL seem to be equally rational, intelligent, and capable of assessing and evaluating arguments, and where neither are cognitively impaired when considering arguments or entering into debates. Moreover, they both seem to be aware of all the evidence in support and against both positions (that is, there won't be a situation in which one of them will ever say, "I've never heard that before; maybe you're right"), and both are aware of each other's reasons and arguments and the fact that they have landed on opposite sides of the issue even after considering all the same evidence. What should PVI (or DKL) believe after all this? Should PVI (or DKL) continue to believe that compatibilism is false (or that compatibilism is true), or should he suspend his judgment? What is the rational thing to do?

Ignoring some of the fine details and nuances of the debate, two broad positions have emerged, what we might call the "split the difference" view (sometimes associated with the Equal Weight View<sup>8</sup> or the Conciliatory approach) and the "stick to one's guns" view (sometimes associated with the No Independent Weight View or the Steadfast approach). According to the "split the difference" view, PVI

<sup>5</sup> Williamson advocates a version of infallibilism in (2000), as well as Dodd (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Leaving aside the various formulations of infallibilism that are available, one version of infallibilism about knowledge requires that I eliminate all the possibilities in which I am mistaken about being a person and not an animal. Since I cannot eliminate the possibility of being mistaken (given that my animal has all the same evidence that I do and yet makes a mistake), then I cannot know that I am a person and not an animal.

<sup>7</sup> Dodd, an infallibilist, accepts such skeptical consequences in (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Some worries have been raised regarding the relation of the Equal Weight View and the idea of "splitting the difference", cf. Jehle and Fitelson (2009). However, I'll ignore these concerns since they do not affect my overall argument.

and DKL should adjust their belief, whether that means assigning less confidence in one's own belief or giving equal weight to the beliefs of my peer and my own beliefs. If we think of doxastic attitudes as having only three positions (belief, disbelief, and withholding judgment) and we assume that all three positions are all-or-nothing affairs,<sup>9</sup> then PVI should adjust his belief by suspending his judgment regarding the truth of compatibilism (and the same goes for DKL). According to the “stick to the one's guns” view, it can be reasonable for PVI to maintain his belief even after full disclosure, thereby giving no weight at all to DKL's belief.

Of course, further considerations must be taken into account, such as whether we embrace a Uniqueness principle or whether we adopt some measure of “permissiveness”. However, it is not implausible to suppose that given the situation described above, the reasonable thing to do is to suspend one's judgment in a case of disagreement with epistemic peers, in which all parties have the same evidence and there is full disclosure, e.g. no one is hiding or is reticent in providing additional arguments or evidence, no one is being dishonest, and so forth. This is, in fact, Feldman's (2006) position, and it is not obvious (to me at any rate) that he is mistaken. Now by ‘epistemic peers’, let us employ Thomas Kelly's definition:

S and S\* are epistemic peers if and only if [i] S and S\* are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and [ii] S and S\* are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias (Kelly 2005).

So in a case of disagreement among epistemic peers with full disclosure, one can adopt the “split the difference” view, which is a coherent, viable option in this hotly contested issue.

Let us now apply this back to the TAA. Suppose that the psychological approach is true, and that I believed it. I would then hold the belief that I am a person and not an animal, and let us call this proposition ‘P’. I also am a reasonable person (hopefully!) that believes P based on certain arguments, say I am persuaded by arguments that show that my animal and I have distinct persistence conditions, and that I would survive whereas my animal would not survive in various possible scenarios. However, my animal also has all the same reasons and evidence that support his belief that he is a person and not an animal. Moreover, my animal and I are clearly epistemic peers: my animal has all my epistemic virtues and vices (strangely, whenever I make an epistemic mistake, he makes one too; and when I make an epistemic breakthrough, he does too!). We are both familiar with all the reasons and the arguments that the other has. And given our understanding of the psychological approach, there is full disclosure—there is no additional reason that is not being shared, and we are both clearly aware of what the other believes. I believe that my animal, after examining all the reasons and evidence, believes that he is a person and not an animal; and my animal, after examining all his reasons and evidence, believes that I (which he thinks is the animal) believe that I am a person

<sup>9</sup> For simplicity sake, I will only focus on doxastic attitudes as having three positions, and I will ignore the application of disagreement in terms of levels of credence.

and not an animal. Given the plausibility of the “splitting the difference” view, we can formulate the following epistemic principle:

[EP\*] For all  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x$  and  $y$  are epistemic peers that have all the same evidence and where there is full disclosure, then if  $y$  believes that  $\sim R$ , then  $x$  does not know that  $R$ .

Some remarks regarding EP\* are required. My animal believes a proposition that is contradictory to what I believe. For although we may both utter or think a sentence that is syntactically the same as  $P$ , the sentence ‘I am a person and not an animal’ expresses a distinct proposition when uttered or thought by my animal than when it is uttered or thought by me (given its inclusion of the first-person indexical). When my animal believes that he is a person and not animal, then he believes that I am not a person but am an animal. So if I believe  $P$ , my animal believes  $\sim P$ .

If the “split the difference” view is correct, then my animal and I should suspend our judgment about  $P$ .<sup>10</sup> And if I were to continue believing that  $P$ , I would be unjustified in doing so given EP\*, and hence I would not know that  $P$ .<sup>11</sup> EP\* is much more plausible than EP, where the latter denies knowledge merely on the basis of possibly being mistaken since my mental twin is mistaken. The threat of lack of knowledge from cases of peer disagreement does not rest merely on the possibility of being mistaken but in light of the awareness that there exists an equally competent and rational agent who holds a contradictory belief even in possession of all the same evidence. Moreover, EP\*, unlike EP, is compatible with fallibilism about justification along with other epistemological frameworks (though obviously not with all of them), and so cannot be easily rejected by considering its denial from a wide variety of accounts.

If the psychological approach is true where persons and animals are distinct but spatially coincident, and where both thinking beings have all the same evidence and are aware of each other’s position and reasons, then we have a case of peer disagreement. And if the reasonable thing to do is to “split the difference”, then suspending judgment about  $P$  is the reasonable thing to do. Hence, I do not know that  $P$  given EP\*.

## 4.2 Live skepticism and TAA

EP\* is not the only epistemological principle that TAA can use, which is fortunate since some will reject EP\*, especially those who adopt a “stick to one’s guns” view. Nevertheless, there is another way of defending the epistemic line for [3], which

<sup>10</sup> Or we should adjust our credence levels accordingly. Suppose that my credence that  $P$  is .8, then it is reasonable to assume that my animal’s belief that he is a person and not an animal would also be at .8, and so his belief that  $\sim P$  would be at .2. If I am to give equal weight to my animal’s belief, then I should adjust my credence that  $P$  to .5, which is to say that I should suspend judgment regarding  $P$ .

<sup>11</sup> If we make the additional assumption in the case above that I and my animal are also aware of the epistemological issue of peer disagreement and accept the “split the difference” view, then I would not know that  $P$  since I would no longer believe that  $P$ .

takes its considerations from a newly formed skeptical threat that is due to the work of Bryan Frances (2005a, b).

In the discussion above, we considered disagreement with peers. But a similar problem arises when we consider disagreement with experts. Suppose I say that I know that I am the bearer of various mental states such as beliefs, desires, intentions, etc., and I hold this due to certain reasons. However, there is a contradictory hypothesis (eliminativism) that claims that there are no such mental states, and certain prominent philosophers of mind do in fact hold such a position.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, suppose that I am aware that such an eliminativist position is not crazy but has some rational support from experts in philosophy of mind and cognitive science (and could possibly have even wider support in nearby possible worlds, but we'll ignore this additional feature) and where I recognize that the truth of such a position would undermine my own. Then this eliminativist hypothesis poses a significant threat to my claim to know that I am the bearer of various mental states such as beliefs, desires, etc.

Frances argues that this general kind of skeptical worry, when applied to other domains, threatens a whole host of propositions I purport to believe with good reason, such as my belief that fire trucks are red, that there is a pain in my foot, that Socrates was wise, etc.; for many experts in cognitive science and philosophy of mind deny the existence of colors, the phenomenological character of experience, or character attributes. Moreover, the threat does not come from the mere possibility of being mistaken—well-known possibilities such as my being deceived by an Evil Demon or my being a brain-in-a-vat. What makes this skeptical threat more troublesome is that there is some sense in which these possibilities are “live”—viable and currently endorsed alternatives by experts that must be ruled out. Consider the following sufficient conditions, according to Frances, for a skeptical hypothesis H to be *live* (Frances 2005a, pp 561):

- [i] In our intellectual community, H has been through significant evaluation by experts over many years.
- [ii] Many well-informed experts judge it true or as likely as any other relevant possibility in the field pertaining to H.
- [iii] Those experts judged the truth or likelihood of H in an epistemically responsible way.
- [iv] Experts favorable to H claim that there are several decent and independent sources of evidence for H.
- [v] Many of those experts consider H to be a “real, live possibility”.

Frances does not claim that H would undermine everyone's knowledge of some proposition that entails its denial. Rather, H is a threat only to a certain belief Q (whichever entails  $\sim H$ ) that is held by a well-informed (regular or “mere mortal”) person S if:

<sup>12</sup> Live skepticism requires that a hypothesis be held by a significant number of experts. However, Frances also permits some skeptical hypotheses to count as live if there are nearby possible worlds in which a significant number of experts would have held it. I will leave aside some of these complications since they do not affect the main ideas in this paper.



- [a] S knows H is inconsistent with Q,
- [b] S is aware of H (and its surrounding issues),
- [c] S is no better of an expert than others in S's community who regard H, and
- [d] S's reasons would be rejected by members of that community as being insufficient to rule out H (ibid.).

Suppose, then, that some student Jones knew that he has beliefs, desires, and other intentional attitudes prior to becoming a philosophy major; but now that he has become well-informed (according to [a]–[d]) about eliminativist philosophers and their position, the eliminativist hypothesis  $H'$  poses a genuine threat to Jones' knowledge that he is the bearer of various intentional attitudes. And even if  $H'$  is false, unless it is ruled out, the threat from  $H'$  undermines Jones' knowledge that he has beliefs and other intentional attitudes. Of course, much more can be said about live skeptical hypotheses, but this sketch will suffice as we now return to its application for TAA.

Assume that the psychological approach is true such that I am a person that is spatially coincident though not identical with an animal, and this is something that I believe. Supposing that my animal and I are mentally alike, I believe that I am a non-animal person and my animal believes that he is a non-animal person. Now consider the possible hypothesis that all the thinking beings that I believe are non-person animals are in fact persons and not animals, and we will call that hypothesis ' $H^*$ '.<sup>13</sup> I am aware that my belief that P entails  $\sim H^*$ . But is  $H^*$  live, in the sense delineated in [i]–[v]? It seems to me that it is. For in our intellectual community (which includes all rational thinkers, both persons and animals—recalling that by [2] of TAA, animals think), half the community, namely the animal half, believes that  $H^*$ ,<sup>14</sup> and these beings are well-informed experts who deem it true or as likely as any other relevant possibility, and have done so for many years—my animal, who counts as one of these experts, has judged  $H^*$  true at least as long as I have believed that P is true. Supposing that we persons formed our belief that P in an epistemically responsible way, then these beings formed their belief that  $H^*$  in an epistemically responsible way since they formed their belief in exactly the same manner as we did ours. As we relied on various, independent arguments (e.g., running through various thought experiments in which I survive and my animal doesn't, etc.), these beings also have independent arguments in support of  $H^*$ . And these beings, who are aware

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps an objection will be given at this point in which such a hypothesis is in fact impossible given that persons are persons essentially and animals are animals essentially. Thus, it is not possible for animals to be persons, and so  $H^*$  is impossible. However,  $H^*$  is epistemically possible (in the way that my existing in a disembodied state is an epistemically possible scenario even if it turns out that my existing in such a state is logically impossible), and such an epistemic possibility might still be knowledge-undermining.

<sup>14</sup> Or if not half the community, at least the animals that are spatially coincident with those philosophers who accept the non-identity of persons and animals (e.g., psychological continuity theorists, proponents of the constitution view, etc.).

of my belief that P and are aware that P contradicts  $H^*$ , consider  $H^*$  to be a real, live possibility (since they believe it to be actual).<sup>15</sup>

So it seems that we can supply another epistemological principle based on these considerations:

[EP\*\*] For all x: if x believes that R, knows that R entails  $\sim H$ , and is aware both that some experts  $y_1, y_2, \dots, y_n$  believe that H and that  $y_1, y_2, \dots, y_n$  are experts about their own mental states such that H is at least as well supported as x's belief that R, then if x has not ruled out H, then x does not know that R.

Since all the thinking animals and I satisfy the antecedent of EP\*\*, it follows that I do not know that P. To be more perspicuous, I believe that I am a person and not an animal, which entails the denial of  $H^*$ . Furthermore, I am aware that many animals (the ones coinciding with each human person) believe  $H^*$  and are experts about their own mental life, and where  $H^*$  enjoys the same level of support as my belief that P. Since I have not ruled out  $H^*$  (for the proponent of the psychological approach has not yet given any argument), then we can conclude that I do not know that P.<sup>16</sup>

Similar to EP\*, EP\*\* does not require that every counterpossibility has to be ruled out—thus, EP\*\* is compatible with fallibilism about justification. But if there is a live hypothesis that contradicts my belief that P which I have not ruled out, then I do not know that P. Even if I am right that I am a person and not an animal, EP\*\* undermines my knowledge in light of my awareness of experts who hold a contradictory belief. Moreover, EP\*\* is compatible with various epistemological frameworks (though obviously not all), so contrary to EP, EP\*\* cannot be easily rejected by considering a wide variety of epistemological accounts.

How is this different from the case of peer disagreement? A significant difference between peer disagreement and live skepticism is that the former does not require expertise in the relevant issue. That is, two epistemic peers may “cancel each other out” regarding some dispute, even if both parties are novices in philosophy (or in whatever domain the disagreement is about). The disagreement involved in live skepticism, however, requires my having substantive mastery over some domain, and yet there exists several experts in that domain who hold some proposition that entails the denial of my belief. Furthermore, in peer disagreement the “split the difference” account requires that we suspend our judgment about P. However, the threat from live skepticism does not necessarily require us to abandon belief that P. Rather, awareness

<sup>15</sup> Now this case may not be strictly “live” in the sense that Frances intended, for his case seems to require a well-informed “mere mortal” aware of experts and specialists who believe contrariwise. But Frances' sufficient conditions for being a well-informed mere mortal does not rule out the mere mortal being at least as much of an expert as the other experts in the field. However, if the skeptical hypothesis being generated from epistemic superiors is crucial (as in Frances 2010), then the situation considered in this section of the paper, if not strictly live, is close enough.

<sup>16</sup> It seems fairly intuitive that I cannot rule out  $H^*$  as a live skeptical hypothesis since none of my arguments (of which the experts are all aware) have convinced the experts who believe otherwise. Especially in this case, the proponent of the psychological approach has given no reason to rule out  $H^*$  as a live option.

of a live skeptical hypothesis significantly lowers the epistemic status of our belief that P, such that our justification for P is not adequate for our knowing that P.

The threat of  $H^*$  to my knowledge that P is that even though I have some evidence in support of P (and so  $\sim H^*$ ), I also have countervailing evidence for  $H^*$  given its status as a live skeptical hypothesis. If we take the basic idea of live skepticism, we fail to have knowledge when we become aware of hypotheses held by experts that go against our beliefs. Since my belief that P is contradicted by the belief of experts, viz. the thinking animals in the world who judge  $H^*$  to be true, unless I rule out  $H^*$ , then I cannot know that P.

## 5 Lingering worries

I have argued that even if we deny EP, proponents of TAA can employ two other principles,  $EP^*$  and  $EP^{**}$ , in the epistemological argument for premise [3]. But we are now faced with an obvious worry. I mentioned earlier that one possible move for the animalist is to accept EP by endorsing infallibilism. However, the latter engenders a severe form of skepticism. The problem with  $EP^*$  and  $EP^{**}$  is that they too seem to yield skeptical results. If we accept  $EP^*$ , then along with those who accept the “split the difference” view such as Feldman, we may have to become skeptical about a whole host of issues in which there is peer disagreement. Or if we accept  $EP^{**}$ , then we may be left with the form of skepticism advanced by Frances in which we do not know that fire trucks are red, that I have beliefs and desires, and that there is a pain in my foot. Of course Feldman and Frances have gone some way in mitigating the worries that arise from these forms of skepticism. But endorsement of  $EP^*$  and  $EP^{**}$  will lead to some kind of skeptical position in which some of our putatively firm beliefs will be undermined.

Even more worrisome is that from  $EP^*$  and  $EP^{**}$ , it may turn out that we cannot know that animalism is true. After all, there are epistemic peers who hold contradictory beliefs about what we are, and many of us may not be able to rule out an anti-animalist hypothesis that is advanced by experts in metaphysics. At least I haven't definitively ruled out that we are four-dimensional objects, especially given its acceptance by a whole host of experts.<sup>17</sup>

So one lesson we may take from Brueckner and Buford's critique is the difficulty in taking the epistemic line of defense for [3]. If the epistemological principle is too weak—such as EP—then one can know that P, and hence there is no contradiction in the psychological approach. But if the epistemological principle is too strong—such as  $EP^*$  or  $EP^{**}$ —then we may be left with a kind of skepticism that results in our inability to know the truth of animalism. Some may be fine with this consequence, perhaps waiting for the day when we arrive at some philosophical consensus regarding the nature of human persons. However, such a wait seems a bit unsettling.

<sup>17</sup> Frances restricts his skeptical threat to expert judgment on *scientific* and philosophical hypotheses. I think Brueckner (2006), however, is correct in his assessment that Frances does not seem to go far enough, and that this threat can be expanded even further to strictly philosophical issues.

So the proponent of EP\* or EP\*\* may say that animalism seems to be the best account of human persons, though that is something we cannot know. Such a position, unlike external world skepticism, need not be hopeless since one can hope for the eventual formulation of a knock-down argument in favor of animalism, an argument so convincing that most (if not all) reasonable persons will be compelled to accept it. This, of course, is not a happy result, but not necessarily unwelcome for the skeptically-inclined who are still willing to dabble in metaphysical arguments.

## 6 The case for animalism

I have attempted to defend the epistemic argument for premise [3] of TAA. I argued that we can formulate more plausible epistemic principles, but such principles are grounded in frameworks that yield certain skeptical results. Although not everyone will consider that to be a success, the animalist need not abandon ship. As I said earlier, the case for [3] can also be bolstered by different arguments such as the “too many thinkers” argument. Thus, Brueckner & Buford’s criticism, even if successful, only weakens the support for [3] by attempting to take out one argument in favor of it, but it does not require us to deny [3] outright. If TAA is to be considered a failure, then the other arguments in support of [3] must be rejected or the other premises of TAA must be denied.

However, Olson often comes across as though TAA (especially the epistemological line) and the case for animalism go hand in hand. I think this is not correct, for I believe that when considering various candidates for being human persons—candidates such as immaterial souls, brains, four-dimensional objects, material objects spatially coincident with animals, etc.—a case can be made that animals (of a certain sort) are the best human person candidates. So even if TAA fails, there is reason to believe that we are animals. But that is a story for another day.

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