

**Being a Living Human Animal Person:
Comments on Ryan Ravanpak’s “How To Be Alive”**

Sally Haslanger
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In his fascinating paper, Ryan raises a bunch of connected questions:

- i. What is it to be alive?
- ii. What is it to be an organism?
- iii. What is it to be an animal?
- iv. What is it to be a human animal?
- v. What is it to be a person?
- vi. What is it to be me (for each of us)?

Ryan favors a view according to which he is essentially a *living organism*. ‘Being an *animal*,’ more specifically, ‘being a *human animal*’ are phase sortals. Being a human animal is the kind of thing that some organisms are for periods of their existence (18). Ryan is essentially a living organism who, at least for now, is a human animal (as are, presumably, all of us attending this conference).

The focus of Ryan’s paper is a puzzle about what is essential to living beings like us. On one hand, there are many forms of life that have no psychological states – plants, for example, and possibly clams, and people who are brain dead.¹ So it would seem that the capacity to have psychological states is not a necessary condition for being alive. And because I am a living animal, the capacity for psychological states is not necessary for something to be me. On the other hand, it seems that having psychological states is a necessary condition for being *me*. As Locke argued, I (here and now) am the same person as Baby Sally because there is psychological continuity between us; there would be no psychological continuity between me and something without psychological states, so such a thing could not be me. Here is a short statement of the puzzle²:

1. Being alive does not require psychological capacities.
2. So, a human animal – such as I – can be alive without having psychological capacities.
3. I cannot be alive without psychological capacities – these capacities are essential to me.
[In order for something to be me, it must be psychologically continuous with me. Something without psychological capacities cannot be psychologically continuous with me, so cannot be me.]

Locke’s solution to this puzzle would be that we should distinguish *human animals* from *persons*. Human animals do not require psychological continuity – or psychological capacities at all - but persons do. I am

¹ Ryan emphasizes brain-based psychological states to avoid the question of computers being alive...for simplicity, I will assume we are talking about brain-based capacities and states.

² I use “capacities” rather than functionings, as Ryan does. I may be influenced by background understandings of the terms, e.g., in the capability literature and the function literature. Ryan says: “For this paper, the notion of *function* is defined broadly as any ability or capacity of a thing. To say that something is *performing a function* is therefore to say that it is exercising an ability or capacity.” (fn1)

a person who has an especially close relationship with the human animal who constitutes me (something like the statue and the clay, I imagine). Ryan rejects this solution because he endorses a form of “animalism” – the view that “one persists if and only if one continues their organic life” (17). Returning to the statue/clay analogy, we might say that we are essentially the clay (animal) and sometimes have the form of the statue (human, person), and sometimes not.

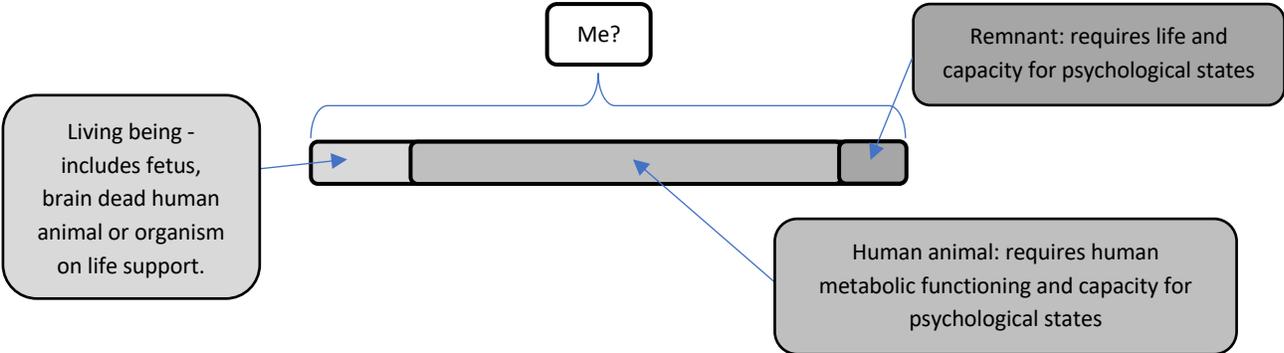
There is one more step, however, to get to Ryan’s final view. Ryan considers Parfit’s example of the “remnant.” A remnant is a human cerebrum that is kept alive in an artificial support system. It has psychological continuity with the human from which it was removed. It is not, however, an animal. But it is an organism. Being sympathetic to the idea that we can become remnants, Ryan suggests that he isn’t essentially a living animal, but instead is essentially a living *organism* who is sometimes a living human *animal*. (Human animal is a phase sortal.)

So returning to the puzzle, if I am only essentially a living organism, then given (1) and (2), I can be alive without psychological capacities. But how can that be, if (3) my psychological capacities are essential to me? Here is Ryan’s thought: it may be the case that having psychological capacities are necessary for me to be a person or a human animal (he doesn’t take a stand on this in the paper), but I am not essentially a person or human animal. So being me is not a matter of psychological continuity: (3) is false.

Not all living things need to have psychological capacities to be alive: cabbage life does not require psychological capacities, neither does clam life. Roughly, being alive is realizable in different ways. Psychological capacities be necessary for life in the case of some kinds; it may be necessary for phases of other kinds; and it may be sufficient for life in even other kinds. Being alive is more like a cluster property; you need enough capacities of various sorts, relevant to your kind, whether sortal or phase kind. (Ryan uses examples of determinables: determinates, such as red: scarlet, burgundy, etc.; similarly being alive: being a plant, being a human, being an angel (?).)

So where do we stand?

1. Being alive does not require psychological capacities – being alive is just a matter of performing enough life-relevant capacities, e.g., metabolism, respiration, psychological functioning, etc.
4. For an organism, such as a cerebrum, to be alive, it need not be self-sustaining and may only perform psychological functioning on its own.
5. For a human animal to be alive requires metabolism and other bodily functionings.
6. I am not essentially *a human animal*, for I can cease to be an animal and survive. Being a human animal is a phase sortal of human organisms who are fetuses and may become become remnants.



Let me now turn to a few questions:

1) The argument from determinables/determinates is a possibility argument. It is *possible* that being alive is determinable in different ways for beings like us: the conditions that support fetus life are different from those that support remnant life. One might think, though, that the conditions for life are kind-specific: they are variable for different kinds (cabbages, claims, humans) but not over the course of a life. We might ask, then, what are the conditions for *human* life.

Ryan is quite specific that we are not essentially *human* organisms – we are just essentially living organisms. Is this because remnants are not human? (Doesn't the remnant have human DNA?) Does the distinction between humans and non-humans matter, i.e., is human a morally relevant category? Should we make every effort to preserve psychological continuity in dying human animals and set up the infrastructure for them to become remnants?

2) It is not entirely clear how we individuate human organisms. I would think that my cerebrum is only *part* of the organism that was began as a fetus and ended when my bodily functions (metabolism, respiration, circulation) stopped. On Ryan's view, however, the organism persisted by virtue of its cerebrum persisting. Would the organism persist if its heart continued to pump blood with artificial support? If not, what is special about the continuity of psychological capacities for the persistence of (some) living organisms (such as persons)? Is the difference does seem to be relevant for the persistence of *me*, but only if there is an important connection between me and my psychological capacities. Does Ryan's view rest on but not account for that connection?

3) What is my relationship to personhood? Locke thought that psychological continuity was important for personhood mainly because he was looking for a forensic conception that could bear the weight of moral responsibility. He thought that I – the person – cannot be responsible for things I do when I am not conscious, so he was unwilling to say that I exist while there is no psychological continuity. Are there persons in Ryan's picture? Is a remnant a person? What is the bearer of moral responsibility?

4) What should we say if we have different intuitions about the cases under consideration? How should we resolve our disagreements?