

A New Objection to A Priori Arguments for Dualism

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A priori arguments for dualism do not require the rejection of physicalism. The a priori dualist arguments claim that if two things are identical, then they are necessarily identical, that it is possible that mental states exist but no physical thing exists and therefore that the mind is not identical to the brain. However, the dualist arguments need the additional premise that the body is essentially a physical thing. Physicalists can deny either that the mind is identical to the brain or that the body is essentially physical. The premise that the body is essentially physical should be rejected because it has less support and rejecting it requires less revision of belief.

I

THE following three claims are generally assumed to be inconsistent:

- (1) For all x and all y, if x is identical with y, then x is necessarily identical with y.
- (2) Possibly, I exist and no physical thing exists.
- (3) I am identical with my body.

A priori arguments for dualism (hereafter simply "a priori arguments") make use of (1) and (2) in arguing for the denial of (3). (2) (along with its variants) is by far the most controversial premise of any a priori argument.¹ I shall not rehearse objections to, or defenses of, (2). Rather, I wish to argue that if one is a physicalist (i.e., holds (3)), and becomes convinced of (1) and (2), one is not thereby forced to reject physicalism. Indeed, I will argue that to do so on the basis of (1) and (2) would be irrational.

One might insist that no self-respecting physicalist would accept (2). Whether or not this is so misses the point. If the a priori argument is to convince the physicalist, then there must be a moment at which the a priori arguer convinces her of (2) and she realizes that this has some bearing on (3). I will argue that when this occurs, it would be irrational for her to reject her physicalism. The allegation that no physicalist would become convinced of (2), which is the allegation that arguments for (2) fail, is the "old objection" to the a priori argument. My "new objection" is that if the old objection can be overcome and the arguments for (2) are successful, the physicalist should not become a dualist. If I am right, the a priori argument is not a good one because, even if the old objection can be overcome, it cannot establish its conclusion.²

(3) would be inconsistent with (1) and (2) if and only if my body, let's name it "M," were such that it was impossible that it exist, but no physical thing exist. But this is possible if M is not essentially a physical thing.³ So an argument for dualism by way of (1) and (2) needs the following premise:

(4) M is essentially a physical thing.

The contemporary defenders of the a priori argument are uniformly in agreement that (4) (or some variant of (4)) is needed if the argument is to work.⁴ Let us consider what Plantinga and Kripke have to say about (4).⁵ It is rather short work with Plantinga. He simply says "It seems to me impossible that there should be an object that in some possible world is a material object and in others is not"; he makes no argument for this impossibility.⁶

In Kripke's version of the argument, the analog to (2) is the claim that a mental state A could exist without any brain state, and specifically without its corresponding brain state, B. He then claims that since a mental state is essentially a mental state, and a brain state is essentially a brain state, A is not identical with B. Let's grant the assumptions that would connect what Kripke has to say with the a priori argument as I have formulated it: If brain states are essentially physical, so is the brain; and mental states are identical with brain states if and only if the mind is identical with the brain. Further, I will take the liberty of not distinguishing between one's being identical with one's body and one's being identical with one's brain. The variant of (4), then, that is relevant in Kripke's argument is "a brain state is essentially a brain state." What does he say in defense of the claim that brain states are essentially physical? Only this: "Note that being a brain state is evidently an essential property of B (the brain state)."⁷

II

The contemporary defenders of the a priori argument have no argument for any variant of (4). There is, however, an argument for the denial of (4) that is available to one who is both a physicalist and accepts (2):

(Argument One)

(1) For all x and all y, if x is identical with y, then x is necessarily identical with y.

(2) Possibly, I exist and no physical thing exists.

(3) I am identical with my body.

Therefore,

(5) Possibly, M (my body) exists and no physical thing exists.

Here (5) obviously entails the denial of (4). So one must decide whether the preceding argument is better than the following:

(Argument Two)

(1) For all x and all y, if x is identical with y, then x is necessarily identical with y.

(2) Possibly, I exist and no physical thing exists.

(4) M is essentially a physical thing.

Therefore,

(6) I am not identical with my body.

Both arguments are valid, so deciding which is better will amount to a judgment on the premises.⁸ (2) is above reproach in this context since I am concerned with what the physicalist ought to decide given that she accepts (2); moreover, both arguments make use of (1) and (2) as premises, so one cannot be better or worse than the other in virtue of (1) or (2). Which argument is better will simply be a matter of which premise, (3) or (4), it is more rational for the physicalist to accept.

If Argument One, and not Two, should be more compelling to the physicalist, then clearly the a priori argument fails. But I am close to making a trivial point when the question is posed in terms of which argument is, or should be, more compelling to the physicalist. For if one is a physicalist, then one accepts (3). It seems, therefore, that being a physicalist ipso facto pledges one's loyalty to Argument One. But we need not fall into triviality. The defender of the a priori argument assumes, and presumably with good reason, that the physicalist (along with everyone else) also accepts (4). If one accepts (1) and (2), one cannot, however, hold both (3) and (4). Which of the two is it more rational for the physicalist to give up?

It is more rational to give up (4) than (3). Before defending this statement, however, I should respond to an objection that shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what is at stake here, but due to its initial plausibility merits response. The objector says: "(4) is evident, obviously true, analytically true, such that any thinking person could see it just must be true. After all, M is a body, and part of what it means to be a body is to be a physical thing. (4) has the epistemic standing of a claim like "all bachelors are unmarried" or perhaps "1+2=3." Since this is the case, no amount of argument can persuade us. The rational person must stay committed to (4) come what may." But is this line of thinking correct? Note that this objection relies on the following claim:

(7) It is necessarily true that a body is a physical thing.

I do not deny (7). (7) is evidently true; part of what it means to be a body (or a brain or a brain state) is to be a physical thing. (7) can be known to be true in much the same way that "all bachelors are unmarried" can be known. (4), however, does not follow from (7). To see this consider a parallel example. "The president of the U.S. is a member of the executive branch of the American government" is necessarily true. Part of what it means to be president of the U.S. is to be a member of the executive branch. It does not follow from this that Bill Clinton is essentially a member of the executive branch, for he is not essentially president. The president could have failed to be president. Likewise, "a body is a body" or "a body is a physical thing" may be necessarily true; it does not follow from this that my body, M, is essentially a body.

What of my body: does M have the property is a body or is a physical object essentially? I don't know. If I think I really am identical with my body, this comes down to the question of whether it follows from my having the property is a physical object or is a body that I have that property essentially. Once it is clear that (7) does not commit one to (4), then we can see that while (7) may be analytic, (4) certainly is not. Nor is (4) obviously "evident." (The physicalist might be surprised to find that (4) is false, but presumably not as surprised as she would be to find that (3) is false.) Although initially extremely plausible, I do not think (4) has the status of an analytic or self-evident truth against which all argument is vain.

It is more rational for the physicalist to give up (4) than (3), and this for two reasons. The first has to do with a presumption in favor of those positions for which there is strong argument, empirical support, and even modal intuition over those positions which have as their sole justification a modal intuition. This general presumption must, of course, acknowledge and respect the fact that some modal intuitions are very strong (e.g., it's not possible that I am both a body and not a body), whereas some sorts of empirical support and argument are very weak (e.g., I think I saw, through the thick fog, Elvis Presley pass me on the highway; I should trust my senses; therefore...). The relevant distinction between (4) and (7), however, should show that (4) is not a modal intuition of the strongest sort; it is not the sort of modal intuition that has the epistemic status of "it is not possible that I am both a body and not a body." The question that must be asked, then, is how strong does the physicalist take the arguments against (4), or for (3), to be.

Argument One is an argument against (4). But since it gets its punch from (3), it is arguments for (3) (some of which are at least advertised as conclusive) that are most relevant. Some of these involve the correlation between brain states and mental states, others the findings in split-brain cases, still others the alleged problems of soul/body interaction, and so on. The arguments involving soul/body interaction are especially interesting, since they often involve a modal intuition that it is impossible for an immaterial object to act on a physical object in the ways necessary for (interactionist) dualism. So even the (misguided) claim that modal intuitions always get pride of place in deciding which beliefs to hold onto in the face of conflict will not necessarily drive the physicalist to Argument Two. Also of interest, the reasons generally given for physicalism do not purport to endorse the

stronger claim that a human being is essentially physical. Whatever force arguments for (3) have, it must be overcome if the physicalist is to be moved by the a priori argument. It seems more rational for the physicalist to put her faith in the reasons she has for endorsing (3) than in her modal intuition in support of (4).

This first consideration will vary in force, of course, according to the degree that the physicalist thinks the arguments for (3) are good ones. But there are enough physicalists who think they have strong arguments for (3) to make the first consideration significant. The second consideration applies to all physicalists who recognize the implication physicalism has on many other areas of philosophical interest, irrespective of their confidence in arguments for (3).

The second consideration is that if one comes to realize that one's system of beliefs needs revision, then *ceteris paribus* the most rational option is the one that involves the least revision. If the physicalist were to reject (3), vast stretches of her views on philosophy of mind, personal identity and other central metaphysical topics would radically change. If she rejects (4), it seems that she need not alter many other beliefs. Notice that denying one is a physical object entails that one is not essentially physical. The physicalist who is forced to endorse either Argument One or Two is forced to reject her being essentially physical. Shouldn't she choose just to leave it at that and reject (4), rather than revising her entire philosophy of mind by denying (3)? It is true that in denying (4) there are some beliefs that need to be sacrificed that one can save by denying (3) instead. Probably the most important revision rejecting (4) entails is a denial that all physical objects are essentially physical objects. But one can still suppose that such possibility is merely metaphysical possibility. One could maintain, for instance, that all objects which are actually physical (including our bodies) are physical in every possible world in which they exist and our laws of nature hold. Also, one could reject (4) and consistently maintain that there is no possible world in which an object is, at one time, a body and, at another time, immaterial; that is, one could deny the metaphysical possibility of a body becoming immaterial. Further, one could also hold that it is metaphysically impossible that most physical objects (e.g., all those that are not persons) fail to be physical. At the end of the day, it does seem that there are more doxastic casualties that result from denying (3) than result from denying (4).

The a priori argument for dualism is not one that should persuade a physicalist. To be persuasive, in addition to producing arguments for (2), the a priori arguer must also defend (4). This has not been done, and thus, as they stand, a priori arguments for dualism should make no converts--and this even if the old objections can be overcome and their most controversial premise, (2), is granted.⁹

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NOTES

(1.) Starting with Descartes, the a priori argument has usually involved first-personal thought experiments and subsequently premises which, like (2), involve the indexical "I." There is, of course, no reason why an a priori argument couldn't make use of a premise which involves no indexicals, such as "Possibly, S exists and no physical thing exists."

(2.) I will speak as if the argument's failure to convert the physicalist to dualism is for it to fail completely, but this is not exactly right. The argument may have other functions which it might still serve. For instance, it might persuade those half-convinced of dualism, or buttress the faith of dualists.

(3.) If being extended is necessary for being physical, then denying that an object which is in fact physical is essentially physical has historical precedent. According to Dean Zimmerman "Suarez considered the possibility of a cone being obliterated from its base up until the only part remaining was an unextended point-its 'tip.'" "Two Cartesian Arguments for the Simplicity of the Soul," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28 (1991), p. 219. Also, Michael Hooker doubts whether every physical object is essentially physical. See his "Descartes' Denial of Mind-Body Identity" in Hooker (ed.) *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), pp. 178-79.

(4.) I will focus my attention on contemporary defenses of a priori arguments for dualism. The reader might well wonder why I do not address the most famous a priori argument, the one Descartes offers in the *Meditations*. Several reasons: First, the contemporary defenders all acknowledge their debt to Descartes. Plantinga and Kripke introduce their arguments by first presenting that of Descartes, and then making what they see as improvements. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the aspects of Descartes' argument the contemporary reader will find convincing have been salvaged in the current versions. Secondly, there is disagreement on exactly how Descartes' argument is to be understood, and I do not wish to enter a historical debate for which I am ill-equipped. Thirdly, Descartes' reasons for defending the claim that a body is essentially extended are unavailable to the present-day physicalist. For an excellent discussion of Descartes' views on this subject see S. Schiffer's "Descartes on His Essence," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 85 (1976), pp. 21-43.

(5.) Conspicuously absent is the version of the argument defended by Richard Swinburne. His version rests on the assumption that it is possible that we survive the destruction of all our physical parts. Therefore, the following plays the role of (4) in his argument: "there is not even a logical possibility that if I now consist of nothing but matter and the matter is destroyed, that I should nevertheless continue to exist." I should note that this is the whole of the defense for his claim, but more important is that one could consistently endorse both Swinburne's claim here and the denial of (4). Indeed, the denier of (4) wants to say only that one's body (a material thing) can possibly survive when not material-but this is a far cry from

saying one's body can survive when its parts are destroyed (perhaps some of them must survive as immaterial). So Swinburne's argument is sufficiently different from Kripke's and Plantinga's so as not to be affected by the denial of (4). These differences do, I think, make Swinburne more vulnerable to a version of the old objection; that is, the claim that I could survive the destruction of all my material parts is harder to defend than (2). Furthermore, Swinburne's thought experiments seem to lack the resources to distinguish between my surviving the destruction of my body (which he needs), and my surviving the immaterialization of my body (which would not help him one bit). His argument can be found in *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 152-54.

(6.) *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 68.

(7.) What is evident to Kripke extends even further: "Indeed, even more is true: not only being a brain state, but even being a brain state of a specific type is an essential property of B" (*Naming and Necessity*), p. 147. In what follows I raise an objection to arguments for the conclusion "I am not identical with my body." An exactly parallel objection could be raised to arguments which move from "possibly, mental state M exists and no physical thing exists" to the conclusion "mental state M is not identical with its corresponding brain state."

(8.) These arguments make no inferences involving the axioms which separate S-5 and S-4, or which separate those systems from the Brouwer system (e.g., if possibly p, then necessarily possibly p). These arguments do not, therefore, presuppose any particular system of modal logic.

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