Maximality and Consciousness*

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In "Against the Doctrine of Microphysical Supervenience," I oppose the following:

> **Microphysical Supervenience (MS)** Necessarily, if atoms A_1 through A_n compose an object that exemplifies intrinsic qualitative properties Q_1 through Q_n, then atoms like A_1 through A_n (in all their respective intrinsic qualitative properties), related to one another by all the same [causal and spatiotemporal] relations as A_1 through A_n, compose an object that exemplifies Q_1 through Q_n.

My argument against MS can be summarized as follows.

Being conscious is intrinsic. Suppose P, a conscious human being, "shrinks" by losing an atom from her left index finger. Suppose that at the very first instant at which P has lost that atom, the atoms that then compose her remain just as they were (intrinsically and in all their spatiotemporal and causal interrelations) immediately before "the loss." This implies—assuming MS for reductio—that, just as those atoms compose a conscious object (P) after the loss, so they composed a conscious object before the loss. Name that latter object 'the atom-complement'.

The pre-loss atom-complement is not identical with P. (Proof: P had a part, the lost atom, that the atom-complement lacked.) So before amputation, if MS is true, there were two conscious entities, P and the atom-complement, sitting in P's chair and wearing

* Thanks to Gene Mills, Mike Rea, and Ted Sider.

P's shirt. Indeed, similar reasoning shows that, if MS is true, there were many, many such entities. But there was exactly one. So MS is false.

I shall here address objections to the above argument raised by Theodore Sider in "Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience." [1]

I

Sider says:

> The following argument seems clearly bogus. "Consider a sufficiently large hunk of matter that contains numerous atom-for-atom duplicates of rocks as parts. Surely those embedded atom-for-atom duplicates are not rocks; the property of being a rock is intrinsic; therefore MS has...been shown to be false."

Sider adds:

> The argument fails because the property of being a rock is not intrinsic. Being a rock is a border-sensitive, extrinsic property. Indeed, the premise that the hunk does not contain a multitude of rocks is justified precisely because being a rock is border-sensitive. Merricks's argument is no better than this failed argument. [Reasoning like Merricks's] is most naturally taken to show that being conscious is maximal, border-sensitive, and extrinsic: whether something is conscious, properly so-called, depends on what external things it is attached to.

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[1]Unless otherwise noted, passages quoted below are from "Maximality and Microphysical Supervenience." Other objections to my argument against MS are discussed by Hawley (1998), Noonan (1999a, 1999b), and Merricks (1998a, 1998b, 2001).

Later in this paper, I'll attack the view that whether one is conscious depends on the "external things" to which one is attached. It will then be clear why I disagree with Sider about what my argument "is most naturally taken to show." But in this section, I want to respond to a different reaction one might have to Sider's "rock argument." We could put that reaction this way:

> Whether or not we agree with Sider about <u>why</u> the rock argument fails, we can all see that it does. But Merricks's argument against MS is no better than the rock argument. So—even without a diagnosis of where exactly Merricks's argument goes wrong—we can see that it too fails.

I agree that the "rock argument" fails. But I deny that my argument is no better. There are, in fact, at least three different ways the rock argument could be worse than mine.

First, suppose—as Sider himself believes—that <u>being a rock</u> is extrinsic. But suppose—as I believe—that <u>being conscious</u> is intrinsic. If so, the rock argument is unsound. But this casts no doubt on my argument.

Second, suppose that the embedded atom-for-atom duplicates <u>are</u> rocks. Sider's argument is then unsound. But nothing analogous undermines my argument. For there are not many "embedded" conscious beings where there seems to be one or none. Instead, there is exactly one conscious being—me—now wearing my shirt, now sitting in my chair. Something similar is true for all of us.

Objection: This reply asks us to revise our beliefs about how many rocks are embedded in a hunk of rocky matter. (For we normally think there are none rather than many.) But it rejects an analogous revision regarding conscious beings. And so this reply is objectionably arbitrary.

Reply: Presumably, if many conscious beings were now sitting in my chair and now thinking my thoughts, some would survive my getting a haircut, others wouldn't.

Thus a haircut would extinguish some conscious beings, beings just like me in—so I would say—all the morally relevant ways. (I would differ from some of them only by way of a single atom in a finger; that is not morally relevant.) Contemplating a haircut would be tantamount to contemplating murder. (Or suicide: how do I know beforehand that I am not one of those who will be exterminated?) And if myriad conscious beings are wearing my wedding ring, myriad others wearing my wife's, it seems that we are unwitting swingers. And so on. All of this is unacceptable. And so the envisioned revision about the number of conscious beings is likewise unacceptable.

Perhaps you think these worries about homicide and fidelity are silly. Then you are not really taking seriously the suggestion that there are lots of conscious beings—beings just like you and me in all but the most trivial ways—where we normally think there is one. I take that suggestion seriously. But when I do, it seems absolutely incredible. And at the very least, that suggestion raises problems not raised by the claim that there are many rocks where we typically think there is one or none. And so it is not arbitrary to revise our beliefs about rocks while refusing to make analogous revisions about conscious beings. Because Sider's rock argument is thus easier to resist than my argument against MS, it is false that mine is no better than his.

Third, suppose there are no rocks or duplicates thereof; suppose atoms arranged rockwise compose nothing. Sider's argument would then fail. For it would falsely assume that both rocks and their atom-for-atom duplicates exist. But conscious human persons really do exist. And so my argument has no analogous failing. (For the record, this is the reply I endorse.)

Objection: It is arbitrary to eliminate rocks (and their duplicates) but not us.

Reply: Eliminating rocks is no big deal; eliminating us is—I say—a very big deal. Moreover, I believe that there are compelling reasons to eliminate rocks that are not compelling reasons to eliminate us. Indeed, I argue in Objects and Persons that the conscious provide the only clear examples of the composite. Thus, among the arguments

that mimic my argument against MS, the only ones that clearly get off the ground are those that "mimic" it exactly. I am happy to say that such arguments are sound.

But set aside the arguments of Objects and Persons. And set aside the other suggested diagnoses of how Sider's argument goes wrong. We should still conclude that Sider's caricature of my argument somehow fails, but that my argument does not. For just so long as everything about rocks supervenes on the microphysical—and I think it does, if rocks exist—then Sider's caricature must somehow be unsound. And just so long as there is exactly one conscious being where we ordinarily think there is exactly one, then my argument against MS goes through. It goes through, that is, if being conscious is intrinsic.

II

If being conscious is intrinsic, then my argument against MS goes through. If being conscious is intrinsic, then whether atoms compose a conscious object does not supervene on microphysical doings.[2] But suppose being conscious is extrinsic, relational. Then whether atoms compose a conscious object might supervene on the microphysical doings in and around the object.

So we must choose between two claims. The first is that consciousness is intrinsic. The second is that whether atoms compose a conscious person supervenes on the microphysical. One might object that the second claim is more compelling than the first.

This objection is motivated, I presume, by the belief that atoms' composing a conscious object supervenes on microphysical doings that are intuitively relevant. And

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[2]I assume that intrinsic properties supervene either locally or not at all. (Elsewhere (1998a, §4) I have argued that if an intrinsic property fails to supervene locally, it fails to supervene globally.) Sider would not object; he says (200X, fn. 3) "...it is conceptually incoherent that an intrinsic property of an object, x, depend on intrinsic properties of objects that are mereologically disjoint from x."

so no motivated form of this objection is consistent with, for example, the claim that whether certain atoms compose something conscious supervenes on microphysical doings light years away from (and causally isolated from) those atoms. Likewise, no intuitively attractive version of this objection allows that whether there is a conscious being composed of certain atoms supervenes on whether those atoms are next to an atom—not in a brain but—in a left index finger.

Recall my opening discussion involving P and the atom-complement. It is false that both P and the atom-complement (exist and) are conscious. Yet the only microscopic difference between them (if both exist) is that one has, and the other lacks, a single atom in a left index finger. Thus—whether or not being conscious is intrinsic—we should conclude the following. Differences in whether atoms compose a conscious object do not always supervene on intuitively relevant and significant microphysical differences.

This conclusion implies that no intuitively attractive supervenience thesis is available here, whether or not being conscious is intrinsic. For reasons noted in "Against the Doctrine of Microphysical Supervenience," being conscious definitely seems to be intrinsic. So we might as well conclude that it is. At any rate, there is nothing to be gained—certainly no attractive supervenience thesis to be gained—by denying this.

Sider agrees with some of the above. He grants that:

> Merricks is right...that it would be bizarre to claim that a single atom could make a difference as to whether a thing is anything like conscious. Surely, a single atom cannot make a difference between the full range of conscious experiences I enjoy and having the consciousness of a doorknob!

So Sider denies that a single atom can make a difference "as to whether a thing is anything like conscious." Yet he insists that whether something is conscious can

supervene on whether it has a single atom in its finger. In the next section, we shall see why he thinks he can consistently say both of these things and why he thinks that being conscious is extrinsic.

III

Sider tells us: "A property, F, is maximal if and only if, roughly, large parts of an F are not themselves Fs." Being maximal, given only this "rough" account, does not entail being extrinsic. To see why I say this, note that having exactly mass M is intrinsic. But it is also conforms to the "rough" account of 'maximal'. For large (proper) parts of objects with exactly mass M do not have exactly that same mass. Something similar holds for being simple. This property is intrinsic. Yet because simples have no parts, they have none that are large and simple. And so on.

I say there is exactly one conscious being in my chair. So I say that I am a conscious being without any large conscious parts. And, I say, so it is for all of us. Thus—given only the "rough" account of 'maximal'—I am committed to the maximality of being conscious. But "maximality" of this sort, as we have just seen, does not rule out being intrinsic. I note this explicitly in order to emphasize that Sider's (true) claim that large parts of conscious things are not conscious in no way suggests that consciousness is extrinsic. Sider's arguments require other, more controversial, claims about consciousness.

Moreover, Sider's arguments require that the maximal are thereby extrinsic. But Sider can probably have that. For his explanation of maximality goes beyond the "rough" account noted above. Sider tells us in a footnote that "for F to be maximal, large parts of Fs should be disqualified as being Fs because they are large parts of Fs." And in an earlier paper, Sider (2001, 357) mentions some maximal properties and then says: "With each of these [maximal] properties, P, there seems to be some associated intrinsic

property, P*, such that something is a P only if it is a P*, and it is not part of any slightly larger P*."

Given plausible interpretations of these further conditions on maximality, maximal properties turn out to be extrinsic. These further conditions also indicate what Sider must say about being conscious, if he is to say that being conscious is extrinsic on the grounds that it is maximal. Sider must say—and does say—something like the following:

> **Sider's Position on Consciousness (SPOC)** Conscious entities have large parts that are conscious*, and each of those parts would itself be conscious if only it were not part of a larger conscious entity. Indeed, to be conscious just is to have the intrinsic property of being conscious* while failing to be a proper part of a larger conscious* object. (Being conscious differs from being conscious* only in that being conscious precludes, but being conscious* does not preclude, being part of a larger conscious* entity.[3])

Because he fails to define 'maximal' precisely, it is hard to know exactly what Sider means when he says that consciousness is maximal and thereby extrinsic. But I think the following is clear. Being conscious is maximal in Sider's intended sense, and thereby extrinsic, if and only if SPOC is true.

According to Sider, what it means for something to be conscious rather than merely conscious* is that it is not part of a larger—larger even by a single atom—conscious* object. Whether something is conscious, as opposed to merely conscious*,

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[3]That is, P's being conscious implies that P is not part of larger entity that has "the same thoughts" as P. Sider's account is not meant to preclude, for example, billions of conscious entities' composing—like so many cells—some conscious* being. Perhaps SPOC fits with Michael Burke's (1994, fn. 21) claim that "our concept of...a thinker" is maximal. And Harold Noonan (1999b, 276) notes that something like SPOC threatens my argument against MS.

can sometimes amount to something extremely trivial. It need not amount to anything as momentous as whether it has a rich phenomenology, for there is no phenomenological difference between the conscious and the merely conscious*. It need not amount to whether—as far as anything like consciousness is concerned—it is like us or instead like a doorknob. And so, given SPOC, whether something is conscious could plausibly supervene on whether it is related to a single atom in a finger. Crucially, it could thus supervene without running afoul of the point of explicit agreement between Sider and me noted at the end of the last section.

We could have most of these "benefits" without SPOC. We could simply assert that both P and the atom-complement exist and are conscious. We could then conclude that there is no difference in phenomenology, existence, or (anything like) consciousness between P and the atom-complement supervening on their trivial atomic difference. This would, of course, undermine my argument against MS.

This "multiple conscious entities response" gives us most of the benefits of SPOC because, in a way, it <u>is</u> SPOC. SPOC is merely a notational variant of this response. But the fact that SPOC is just the "multiple conscious entities response" dressed up with some new semantics for 'conscious' is reason enough to reject it. For the problem with the "multiple conscious entities response" has nothing to do with semantics. The problem is its ontology. It is, I say, both false and incredible that there are many beings now wearing my shirt who have all the <u>phenomenology of consciousness</u>. Fiddling with the words—calling all but one of these beings 'merely conscious*'—makes this neither true nor more believable.

IV

As was explicit in my original presentation of the argument against MS, that argument requires that we deny that there are many conscious beings now sitting in my

chair, now wearing my shirt, now thinking my thoughts. Sider's objection is—in substance—to affirm this rather than to deny it. I think he thereby affirms a falsehood beyond the pale of credibility. So Sider's objection fails.

That is my main reply to Sider. But I think there is a further problem with his paper. Sider offers a semantics for 'conscious' and its cognates that allows him to say—without contradicting his lush ontology—that the sentence 'there is exactly one conscious entity wearing my shirt' is true. And so Sider thinks that he does not contradict our intuition that there is only one conscious entity in my shirt. That is, he does not do so just so long as our intuition is "properly interpreted" as linguistic, as an intuition about the truth of sentences containing the word 'conscious'.

Accommodating that "intuition"—that 'there is exactly one conscious entity wearing my shirt' is true—is supposed to count in favor of Sider's semantics. And so by parity of reason, ruling out similar intuitions ought to count against it. But consider the following.

> Whether a being is conscious cannot supervene on whether it has some particular atom in its left index finger.
>
> Consciousness is intrinsic.
>
> Introspection can tell one that one is conscious.
>
> There are not many beings now wearing my shirt that are just like me with respect to consciousness, save for their being largish proper parts of a conscious entity.

Given Sider's metaphysics and his approach to such "intuitions," the four just noted come out false. (In case it is not obvious, the third comes out false because introspection cannot reveal whether one is conscious or instead merely conscious*.)

Sider claims to save one intuition. But he sacrifices four others. Even without tallying all the "saves" and "sacrifices," we can see that the following is true. Given Sider's metaphysics, the sorts of intuitions upon which he relies—even if we concede that such intuitions are primarily linguistic—fail to offer unequivocal support for his semantics.

In light of this, Sider should revert to the more natural and straightforward version of his position. He should say that our ordinary view about how many conscious entities are sitting in each occupied chair is wrong. (Is this really worse than saying that the fourth and final intuition above is wrong?) He could then add that many of our other intuitions about consciousness—e.g., it is intrinsic, it is apparent to introspection, it fails to supervene on seemingly irrelevant trivialities—are just fine.

V

Sider ends his reply with:

> [Merricks would have us] sacrifice our belief in the eventual completion of microphysics, all because of the oddness of believing in "mighty hosts" of conscious* beings. So the question is one of trust: do you trust science, or do you trust your intuitions, intuitions that may well be merely the result of semantic constraints of maximality?

I could quibble with the way Sider puts his final question. For the beings in question would be just plain conscious; linguistic intuitions are beside the point; and rather than science, Sider trusts a bold conjecture—an intuition?—about science's

future.[4] But Sider and I can agree on at least the following. My modus ponens will be the modus tollens of those steadfastly committed to the eventual completion of microphysics and MS.

Many are understandably optimistic about the eventual completion of microphysics. And those in the grip of a wide-eyed scientism are committed to its completion at any price. But if the price is believing that a multitude of persons—a multitude of entities just like me in all but the most trivial ways—now wear my shirt and now think my thoughts, then I cannot pay it. Moreover, I take comfort from the fact that if my argument casts doubt upon the completion of microphysics, it is only in the domain of the conscious. For my argument against MS aside, others have doubted the absolute success of microreductionism in this domain all along.

References

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[4]Sider gestures at an argument for this conjecture, an argument in terms of "the success of science and Occam's razor."

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