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Substance Dualism or Eliminativism

Abstract

Physicalism (P) entails minimal physicalism (MP), MP entails minimal supervenience (MS), and MS is the thesis that there is covariance between the supervenient and the subvenient stuff. Therefore, if the (alleged) supervenient and subvenient stuff do not covary, then MS is false, and if MS is false then MP is false, and if MP is false then P is false. Put differently: if MS is false then P is false—P stands and falls with MS. In this essay, I begin by showing what the minimal physicalist thesis is: MP is, essentially, MS. Next, I look at qualia and the trouble they pose to MS and hence MP: if it is possible that qualia can be inverted without a behavioral change, then it follows that MS, MP, and P are false. In other words, the possibility of inverted qualia show that P is false. Seeing that this possibility does not establish a very robust dualism, I turn to the issue of inverted selves: if inverted selves are possible, then full-blown substance dualism follows. I argue that inverted selves are possible.

Substance Dualism or Eliminativism

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Abstract

Physicalism (P) entails minimal physicalism (MP), MP entails minimal supervenience (MS), and MS is the thesis that there is covariance between the supervenient and the subvenient stuff. Therefore, if the (alleged) supervenient and subvenient stuff do not covary, then MS is false, and if MS is false then MP is false, and if MP is false then P is false. Put differently: if MS is false then P is false—P stands and falls with MS. In this essay, I begin by showing what the minimal physicalist thesis is: MP is, essentially, MS. Next, I look at qualia and the trouble they pose to MS and hence MP: if it is possible that qualia can be inverted without a behavioral change, then it follows that MS, MP, and P are false. In other words, the possibility of inverted qualia show that P is false. Seeing that this possibility does not establish a very robust dualism, I turn to the issue of inverted selves: if inverted selves are possible, then full-blown substance dualism follows. I argue that inverted selves are possible.

1. Minimal Physicalism

Minimal physicalism (MP) is the thesis that one is minimally committed to if one is a physicalist. This is not to say that this is the *only* thesis a physicalist holds, but *if* one is a physicalist, then one affirms MP. So a physicalist affirms MP plus other theses. This entails that if MP falls, then so does physicalism. Put differently: if MP is false, then physicalism (P) in all its forms is false. The converse, however, does not hold true: if P is shown to be false, it does not follow that MP is false, for MP does not entail commitment to P. For current purposes, it does not matter what we take P to be—perhaps P is the identity thesis or eliminative materialism—whatever it is, that is not relevant.

So what is MP? Jaegwon Kim says that “[m]ind-body supervenience can usefully be thought of as defining *minimal physicalism*—that is, it is a shared minimum commitment of all positions that are properly called physicalist.”¹ So MP is the thesis

¹ 13, *Physicalism, Or Something Near Enough*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

that the mind (i.e. mental states) supervenes on the body (i.e. physical states).² But what is supervenience? Kim suggests that “covariance is the crucial component [of supervenience]; any supervenience concept must include this condition in some form”³ and covariance, Kim says, is the thesis that “[s]upervenient properties covary with their subvenient, or base, properties. In particular, indiscernibility in respect of the base properties entails indiscernibility in respect of the supervenient properties.”⁴ In other words, the minimal supervenience (MS) thesis is that the supervenient and subvenient properties (or stuff) covary: there is no difference in one kind without a difference in the other kind.⁵

We are now in position to define MP: MP necessarily entails MS, and MS is the thesis that the supervenient and the subvenient stuff covary. Thus, all that is needed to show that MP—and hence P—is false, is that it is *possible* that there be a change in one kind of stuff without there being a change in the other kind.

2. Inverted Qualia

The reason that Kim ultimately rejects P is because, he thinks, it is possible that qualia be inverted without there being a behavioral change: he thinks that it is possible for there to be a change in the “upper level” stuff without there being a change in the “lower level” stuff. In support of this claim, Kim first asks us to imagine being given the task of creating a machine that responds to exterior damage by trying to flee the source of this damage. We are, furthermore, asked to make it so that this machine *experiences pain*. But this second task is problematic, he says “[w]e can, I am sure, easily design into a machine a device that will serve as a causal intermediary between the physical input and the behavior output, but making it experience pain is a totally different affair...What we miss, something that we need to know in order to design a pain experiencing machine, is a connection between the causal work of the pain box and the arising of pain when the box is activated. Why pain rather than an itch or tickle?”⁶ The point Kim is trying to make is that “pain behavior” is consistent with a plethora of qualia: itches and tickles, for example, are consistent pain behavior. He says that this shows “that we cannot distinguish pain from itch or other sensations by their

² Kim goes on to say that mind-body supervenience likely is not *sufficient* for physicalism. I'm inclined to agree with him on this point, for I see little reason to suppose that a full-blown substance dualist could not affirm mind-body supervenience, and hence there must be more to physicalism. For this paper, however, this is not an issue.

³ 544, “Supervenience as a Philosophical Concept” In *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, edited by Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, 540-56.

⁴ 544, *ibid.*

⁵ 552, *ibid.*

⁶ 168, *ibid.*

causal work,”⁷ which entails that covariance is false. This is because there would be no behavioral change if pain behavior were accompanied by an itch or a tickle rather than pain. Hence there can be a change in the upper (or lower) level stuff without there being a change in the lower (or upper) level stuff.

Kim uses another example, he asks us to imagine a group of human beings who “when they look at mounds of lettuce, experience a color quale of the kind we experience when we look at ripe tomatoes, and who, when they look at ripe tomatoes, sense the color that we sense when we look at lettuce.”⁸ These humans would be just as adept at sorting through vegetables and living life as regular human beings: there would be no detectable behavioral difference between regular humans and the humans who suffer from inverted qualia. But this shows MS to be false, for “[i]f this is the case, color qualia do not supervene on behavior; two perceivers who behave identically with respect to input applied to their sensory receptors can have different sensory experiences.”⁹ But this is devastating for physicalism, for this shows that covariation (MS) is false, and hence that MP is false, and hence that P is false. Put simply: this shows that P—in all its glorious forms—is false. Let us call this the anti-physicalist argument (APA). The APA can be formally stated as follows:

- (1) $P \rightarrow MP$
- (2) $MP \rightarrow MS$
- (3) $\sim MS$
- (4) $\therefore \sim MP$ (modus tollens, (2) and (3))
- (5) $\therefore \sim P$ (modus tollens, (1) and (4))

The only contestable premise is (3), and the argument that Kim gave—the possibility of inverted qualia—shows that premise (3) is correct. This leaves the physicalist with two options: she can either (a) deny that there are qualia and avoid premise (3) of the APA (i.e. embrace eliminativism) or (b) embrace property dualism. Let us suppose that she chooses (b): is this a significant victory for the “anti-physicalist”? Kim does not think so. He says “[c]an the anti-physicalist celebrate [her] victory? Hardly. For one thing, the mental residue encompasses only qualitative states of consciousness, and does not touch the intentional/cognitive domain. And it is in this domain that our cognition and agency are situated.”¹⁰ The complaint, then, is that this does not show that *monism* is false, for there is only one substance that exists—it is only properties that are not physical, and a property is not a substance.

⁷ 169, *ibid.*

⁸ 169, *ibid.*

⁹ 170, *ibid.*

¹⁰ 170, *ibid.*

3. Inverted Selves

We just saw that physicalism is false, but we have only arrived at a weak dualism. This is because it is only *properties* that are not supervenient—it is only properties which are not physical. I will now try to remedy this situation: I will try to show that premise (3) of the APA is true of *substances*, not merely properties; I will try to show that (at least some) substances are not supervenient.

Howard Robinson summarizes a common view of “substance,” saying that “individual substances are the subjects of properties...and they can gain and lose such properties whilst themselves enduring.”¹¹ In what follows, I will be using “substance” in to mean something similar: a substance, as I shall understand it, is a property bearer (i.e. a subject of properties) that persists through time and can persist while gaining or losing properties. What I wish to contend here is that the *self* is a substance. The self, as I shall take it, is quite simple. The self is the first person perspective that each individual has—it is our “point of view.” In other words, the self is the subject of experience—the self is the thing (point of view) that *has* experiences.¹² The self, on this view, is a property bearer (i.e. a subject of properties): the self possesses various properties at various times. For example, I (my self) currently have the property of (or of my body) weighing over two hundred pounds. However, five years ago I did not have this property. Despite my gaining the property of weighing over two hundred pounds, I (my self) have persisted. Furthermore, should I ever acquire the property of (or of my body) weighing over three hundred pounds, it is reasonable to assume that I will continue to exist. Still further, I (my self) am the *subject* of properties. For example, I have the property, when seeing a ripe banana, of being appeared to 'yellowly,' and I'm the subject of this qualitative experience. Finally, I (my self) am the subject of constantly shifting relational properties: I currently possess the property of being more than a mile away from my parents' house. I will lose this property for a few hours tomorrow and, eventually, gain it back. Moreover, I will, throughout this process, persist: I (my self) will not cease to exist when I lose the property of being more than a mile away from my parents' house.¹³

¹¹ "Substance", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Richard Swinburne, in pages 4-6 of his “Mind, Brain, and Freewill” (Oxford University Press, 2013), further stipulates that a substance is a concrete object which, if it exists at all, exists fully. My account of the self is consistent with this further stipulation, for a point of view—a first person perspective—cannot exist partially: it is all or nothing.

¹² The argument I will give does not rely on the reductive view of the self that I have just laid out; the argument I give below should work even on a holistic conception of the self.

¹³ It should be clear, then, that David Chalmers' zombie argument does not merely establish property dualism (if, in fact, the argument is successful). It establishes *substance* dualism. This is because the self, as I have just described it, is also absent from Chalmers' zombie, and hence the self (a substance) is not physical.

Now that we have a rough sketch of the self, we can proceed to the argument. To support premise (3) of the APA, the property dualist argues that qualia are not supervenient. I, however, will argue for premise (3) in a different way: I will argue that *selves* are not supervenient. The argument parallels the argument from the possibility of inverted qualia. The argument from the possibility of inverted qualia is essentially that an individual A and another individual B can behave identically yet have different qualitative experiences (e.g. A might see the color blue when looking at tomatoes and B might see the color red). So the fact is that there can be a difference in the (supposed) supervenient properties without there being a difference in the subvenient properties. Hence (at least some) qualitative properties are not supervenient. The argument from the possibility of inverted selves argues along the same lines: it is possible that the total behavioral history of, say, Plato's life could be duplicated by a different self. That is, it is *broadly logically possible* that the body of the person that we call “Plato” be inhabited by a different self—a different point of view/first person perspective—yet there be no behavioral difference. More explicitly: it is broadly logically possible that all the (inner and outer) behaviors attributed to Plato could have obtained without Plato having existed. So it is possible that selves be inverted with there being no behavioral change. Let us call the possibility that selves can be inverted “Q.” Q shows that MS, and hence that MP, and hence that P is false. Furthermore, since the self is *substance*, it poses the following dilemma to the physicalist: she must either (c) deny the existence of selves and avoid premise (3) of the APA (i.e. embrace eliminativism) or (d) embrace substance dualism. (c), however, is untenable. For the self, as I have defined it, clearly exists: I'm immediately aware that I have a point of view. Furthermore, consciousness *presupposes* the self: in order for there to be experience, there must be a *subject* of experience—there cannot be experience (i.e. consciousness) without a self. Therefore, to affirm (c) is to eliminate consciousness. So then the physicalist must choose between eliminativism or substance dualism. However, (c)—eliminativism—is not a live option.¹⁴ Hence substance dualism is victorious.

4. Objection: Q is False

In order to avoid the dilemma, the physicalist can challenge Q: she can object to the possibility of inverted selves. However, the consequences of denying Q are implausible. For to deny Q commits her to the following proposition:

C: If behavioral sequence 'A, B, C...Z'¹⁵ obtains then, necessarily, Plato exists.

¹⁴ For a more elaborate critique of eliminativism, see my “Eliminating Eliminative Materialism.” in *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, 2015.

¹⁵ This sequence denotes every (inner and outer) behavior attributed to Plato in his lifetime. (I'm using “inner behavior” to refer to things like thoughts and also to neurophysiological happenings.)

Is C plausible? Clearly it is not. C is far too strong a claim to make: it is dubious to hold that if 'A, B, C...Z' obtains then, necessarily, Plato exists (or existed). Indeed, it seems to be logically possible that Jane Doe is responsible for 'A, B, C...Z'. Or, more modestly, it seems to be logically possible that 'A, B, C...Z' obtain in the absence of the existence of Plato. What could justify such a strong modal claim to the contrary? As far as I can see, there are no grounds for this objection. But if C is false then Q is true, and the substance dualist variation of the APA goes through.

5. Objection: Modal Skepticism

A more promising response to Q for the physicalist is predicated on modal skepticism. The modal skeptic argues (roughly) that human beings do not have abstract modal knowledge: humans are not warranted in modal beliefs that are far removed from everyday life. The modal skeptic argues, for example, that we can know that it is possible for the White House to have been painted blue, but that we cannot know whether or not it is possible for the moon to have been made of cheese.¹⁶ The physicalist who makes use of modal skepticism, then, will want to add C to the list of modal claims that we ought to be skeptical about. For, she asks, how could anyone *know* whether or not it is possible for another self to have behaved *identically* to Plato, whose total behavioral sequence is unimaginably long and complex? Surely that is beyond the scope of human modal knowledge; we cannot know whether or not C is true. But, she continues, our supposed modal knowledge of the falsity of C is being used to support Q, and this means that, because of our newfound agnosticism about C, we ought to be agnostic about Q. Hence the APA fails.

This objection has more force than the previous one, but it seems to exaggerate the foreignness of C and Q. Let me first point out that this objection is only available to incompatibilists. For, if one is a compatibilist, then she holds that a person can both be determined and have free will. However, this opens up the possibility that God could have determined that Jane Doe freely behaved in the manner 'A, B, C...Z', and hence C is false and Q is true. Therefore, the only way to justifiably remain agnostic about C is to be an incompatibilist.

Incompatibilism aside, let us concede that C is a modal claim that we ought to be agnostic about: Plato's total behavioral sequence is far too massive and complex for humans to have knowledge of whether or not it could have been duplicated by another self. Let us then consider a different person. Let us take, for example, a child—call her Sally—who died at the age of three. Sally's life consisted of considerably fewer behaviors than Plato's: she existed for only three years. Hence there is not nearly as long or complex of a sequence of behaviors that need to be duplicated by another self. This story is not one that falls prey to modal skepticism: surely it is *possible* that

¹⁶ See Peter van Inwagen's "Modal Epistemology" in *Philosophical Studies* 92 (1998): 67-84.

another self, Sarah, behaved identically to Sally. But suppose that the modal skeptic protests: even though Sally only lived to three years of age, the modal skeptic claims, her total behavioral sequence was still massive and complex: the amount of behaviors a person performs in three years is not small. Therefore, we should remain agnostic about whether or not Sarah could have duplicated Sally's behavior. Let us grant this objection and look at one more case.

Sammie is an unfortunate person: she existed for only five seconds before dying.¹⁷ Surely modal skeptics will not argue that we should remain agnostic about whether or not a person like Sammie is possible. It is no doubt possible that a person exist for only five seconds. This is something that all parties can agree on. All parties should also agree on the following: Sammie's total behavioral sequence (call it "R") could have been duplicated by another self, Amber. In other words, it is possible that R obtain but Sammie not exist, for it is possible that Amber have caused R. This is such a modest claim that not even the most stingy modal skeptic can object to it. The total behavioral sequence of Sammie is so small that it cannot be doubted that it is possible for Amber to have duplicated it. However, if *this* is possible then Q is true and, as we saw earlier, if Q is true, then substance dualism follows.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have gone over the nature of P: P entails MP, MP entails MS, and MS is the covariance thesis. Since all physicalists embrace MP, P stands and falls with MP (though, the converse is not true). After this, we looked at an argument against P predicated on the possibility of inverted qualia: it is possible that creatures behave identically to us despite having different qualitative experiences, hence P is false. This, however, did not establish a very robust dualism. We then looked at an argument for full-blown substance dualism predicated on the possibility of inverted selves: it is possible that another self could have inhabited Plato's body and behaved identically to him. But then MS, and hence MP, and hence P is false. After this, we looked at some objections to the argument: one claiming Q is false and another predicated on modal skepticism. Neither objection was successful. Hence physicalists are faced with a dilemma featuring only one plausible horn. Either we embrace eliminativism about the self (and hence consciousness), or we embrace substance dualism.¹⁸

¹⁷ I'm putting aside the question about when the self comes into existence because that is not relevant here. Whether the self emerges at conception, one year old, five years old, or sixty years old that does not matter.

¹⁸ Thanks to Adriane Hendricks, Reuben Hendricks, and Cory Hendricks for comments on this paper. Thanks especially to Bob Doede, Philip Wiebe, and Brett Lunn for their critical comments.

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