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Bioethics, Substance Dualism and the Argument from Self-Awareness

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Throughout history, most people have been substance and property dualists. Thus, regarding the mind/body problem, Jaegwon Kim's concession seems right: "We commonly think that we, as persons, have a mental and bodily dimension....Something like this dualism of personhood, I believe, is common lore shared across most cultures and religious traditions...." And regarding issues in personal identity, Frank Jackson acknowledges: “I take it that our folk conception of personal identity is Cartesian in character—in particular, we regard the question of whether I will be tortured tomorrow as separable from the question of whether someone with any amount of continuity—psychological, bodily, neurophysiological, and so on and so forth—with me today will be tortured.”

People don’t have to be taught to be dualists like they must if they are to be physicalists. Indeed, little children are naturally dualists. Summing up research in developmental psychology, Henry Wellman states that “young children are dualists: knowledgeable of mental states and entities as ontologically different from physical objects and real [non-imaginary] events.”

It seems to me that there are two tasks for any adequate philosophy of mind: (1) articulate one’s position and explain why dualism is the commonsense view (2) defend one’s position. I believe that there is an argument that simultaneously satisfies both desiderata in a non-ad-hoc way and, thus, the argument can thereby claim the virtue of theoretical simplicity in its favor. In what follows, I shall present the argument and defend its most crucial premise, and respond to two criticisms that have been raised against it.

Before we examine the arguments, I want to offer some brief remarks about the soul and the sort of high, intrinsic value human persons possess which is of relevance to bioethical reflection. Now, one could believe in the soul and reject this sort of value, and one could reject the soul and embrace this sort of value. Whether or not each view can be justified is, of course, another matter. And, in any case, the existence of the soul, rightly in my view, factors into a good deal of bioethical argumentation. As I see it, physicalists of various stripes have a difficult task in attempting to justify this sort of value for human persons in so far as they are material objects, that is, without appealing to some sort of divine voluntarism or nonphysical emergent properties. In so far as we are physical objects, we are of little value, or so it seems to me.

But, you may respond, what of the body? Are you being Platonistic here and devaluing the body’s worth? No, not at all. I just don’t think the body is of much value simply in so far as it is physical. As I see it, the body has value for these reasons: (1) As a Thomist, I take the body to be an ensouled, extended, physical structure; thus, the body includes the soul to be a body, and it is of value accordingly. By contrast, a corpse is of
little intrinsic value. (2) It has secondary qualities, which serve as the metaphysical grounding of many of its aesthetic properties, and neither secondary qualities nor aesthetic properties are physical. (3) It exemplifies certain geometrical relations, e.g., shape and symmetry, but these are not physical, they are abstract (though I am open to the claim that their property-instances are physical). (4) It exemplifies a certain relational complexity of arrangement, but since this complexity is an abstract object, it is not physical (though I am open to the claim that the relevant property-instance is physical). (5) It is owned by the person, it is the vehicle, perhaps by way of natural signs (as with Thomas Reid), in virtue of which the person is known, and it is intimately and causally related to the person. (6) It exists and, in so far as any existing thing has value, it does. (7) It is physical.

(6) and (7) involve little value compared to the other factors. It must be kept in mind that the intrinsic value/beauty of the creation is due to factors like (2)-(4) above, not (7). This can be seen in the following observation: If Berkeley’s immaterialist ontology had been true, little of value of the created world would have been lost, metaphysically speaking. If I am correct about this, then while the body has incredible value, it is not largely due to its being physical. In as much as a physicalist identifies us with a physical object—e.g., an animal, composed material object, the brain or an atomic simple—to that extent he has a problem with accounting for the high, intrinsic value of human persons. An appeal to the emergent properties constitutive of personhood won’t help, because these are not physical and, thus, such an appeal fails to locate our value in our mere physicality.

The Simple Argument

Stewart Goetz has advanced the following type of argument for the non-physical nature of the self, which I have modified:  

1. I am essentially an indivisible, simple spiritual substance.
2. Any physical body is essentially a divisible or complex entity (any physical body has spatial extension or separable parts).
3. Principle of Indiscernibility of Identicals
4. Therefore, I am not identical with my (or any) physical body.

The premise most likely to come into dispute is (1), and I will offer a defense of it shortly. Here, I want to make a few brief comments about (2), especially the role that extension and separable parts play in it, along with the associated notion of simplicity in (1). Part/whole relations are important for treatments of substances, and there are two kinds of parts relevant to our discussion—separable and inseparable (aka modes). Setting aside properties, there are two ways something can be simple in the sense relevant to our discussion: by being uncomposed of separable parts or by being metaphysically indivisible. I use “metaphysically indivisible” to mean what many philosophers say by “indivisible in thought.” Something could be metaphysically divisible but not physically divisible (if, say, such division annihilated the whole), but not conversely. Moreover, all particulars that are metaphysically indivisible are uncomposed, but not conversely (an continuously extended whole with no separable parts could still be divided). According to our usage, a substance with inseparable parts is simple.

Any relevant entity to which I am identical on a physicalist view is (most likely to be) composed of separable parts (e.g., the living body, brain, or a standard sub-region of the brain) or (less likely) at least divisible (a physical simple if such there be).
I want to advance two arguments for premise (1). Both arguments support the claim that we are directly aware of ourselves as indivisible, simple spiritual substances. Here is the first one. It often happens in science that a range of apparently unrelated data can be unified if a theoretical entity is postulated as that which is causally responsible for that range. The postulation of electrons unified a wide range of phenomena by depicting them as effects of the electron’s causal powers.

Sometimes a range of apparently unrelated items of knowledge can be unified if one has knowledge by acquaintance with some relevant object. For example, there are many things I know about a certain spatial region R in the philosophy classroom in which I usually lecture. For example, I know that everyone walks around R and not through it. R is rectangular in shape, about four feet tall and two feet in width and breadth. R does not contain metal in it. R contains something that is darker than yellow, if a book is placed near the top of R it will hover in stable suspension off the floor. I know all these things. But rather than being a set of isolated pieces of knowledge, there is a unifying pattern to them. Indeed, I know each of them in virtue of knowledge by acquaintance of the podium that overlaps R. It is on the basis of that acquaintance that I know the items in question.

There are many apparently unrelated items of knowledge people commonsensically have of themselves. At the very least, these are strong intuitions that are widely embraced (sometimes expressed in the first person):

(i) I am an indivisible, uncomposed thing that cannot exist in degrees. If I lose, say, half of my body or brain, I am not thereby a half of a person. I am an all or nothing kind of thing—either I am present or I am not. In some brain operations and cases of Dandy Walker Syndrome, well over half of the brain is absent. But while the person may lose functioning, we have strong intuitions that a whole person is present.

(ii) Pairs of people are not themselves conscious subjects of experience. Siamese twins involve two, not three subjects of experience. When two people shake hands, a new subject of experience does not come-to-be. We are inclined to think that the reason for this is that subjects of experience cannot be composites. Thus, pairs or larger groups of anything—conscious or unconscious—in whatever relational structure cannot be a conscious subject of experience. My knowledge of this fact is a species of the following genus: For any x and y, the union of x and y is not itself a thinker. I know this because it is directly evident to me that an object composed of separable parts lacks to sort of simple unity necessary for a conscious, thinking being.

(iii) At any given time, my mental states are deeply unified: it is not that my visual field is continuous and non-gappy; rather, my visual field is one and belongs to me; my thoughts, sensations, and so forth are all united into a single stream of consciousness and belong to me. We are inclined to think that what unifies my mental states is that they all belong to the same, simple subject of experience, namely, to me. Moreover, I have no difficulty in determining which mental states are mine. Indeed, I am directly aware of 1) my mental states; 2) of their belonging to me; and 3) of their being “inside” of me.
(iv) As I walk towards my kitchen, I have strong intuitions that I am the same self that lives through and owns each successive sense experience of the kitchen. In the middle of the sequence, I have strong intuitions of having had earlier experiences, of currently having a particular experience, and of being about to have an anticipated experience.

(v) I am aware of having epistemic immediacy with respect to my entire body. And when appropriately informed by philosophical theology, I am strongly inclined to think that I occupy my body as God occupies space, namely, by being fully present at each point throughout my body. Among other things, this is why I do not become 80% of a person when my arms are cut off—I am fully present at each point in the remaining locations of my body.

(vi) I have strong intuitions that psychological criteria of personal identity in terms of memories, character and personality traits are neither necessary nor sufficient for my identity through change. Others could satisfy these criteria and not be I, and I could fail to satisfy them and still be I. Also, I have strong intuitions that various causal chain analyses proffered to address problems with psychological criteria are (1) still neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity and (2) part of a dialectic involving stepwise causal-chain analyses, counterexamples, new analyses, new counterexamples, and so forth that is guided by a concept of the self as a simple, spiritual substance (see the Jackson quote above). And I have strong intuitions that appeals to immanent causation actually presuppose sameness of the self over time and, thus, cannot constitute it.

(vii) I have strong intuitions that I and my body (and each of its proper parts, including the brain) have different persistence conditions. My intuitions tell me that body switch cases are entirely (metaphysically) possible. That is why their presence in science fiction does not cause most people to protest on the grounds that such scenarios are not (metaphysically) possible.

(viii) I have strong intuitions that (1) Near Death cases are clearly (metaphysically) possible and (2) whether or not they are real is a function of the eyewitness (and related) evidence, and not a function of the laws of physics/chemistry or how thing go regarding the survival of my brain and body.

(ix) I have strong intuitions about two things: (1) My mental (fundamental, highest-order) powers/capacities lie within me and are essential to my identity. (2) Thought strictly entails a thinker or, more generally, mental states strictly entail a mental subject. Just as there could not be an instance of motion without a mover, there could not be an instance of a mental property without a mental subject. These commonsense intuitions justify the philosophical intuition that mental properties are kind-defining properties whose instances are substances constituted by those properties. Just as the instantiation of being an electron is a
substance constituted by that property as its essence, so the instantiation of mental properties form a spiritual substance constituted by those mental properties. Thus, just as being an electron is an internal constituent exemplified by an electron, so mental properties are internal constituents exemplified by me. And just as the instantiation of being an electron strictly entails an electron, so the instantiation of mental properties strictly entails a mental substance.

These intuitions are ubiquitous and very hard to give up. This is so because they express how things phenomenologically seem or appear to us. Not only are we directly aware of our mental states, but also we are directly aware of our selves. It is in virtue of our direct awareness of ourselves as simple, spiritual substances that we have these intuitions. My purpose here is not to provide philosophical arguments for the intuitions expressed in (i)-(ix). Rather, I claim that direct awareness of the self as just stated adequately explains the ubiquity of these intuitions and what unifies them. It is easy to satisfy oneself about this by re-reading (i)-(ix) while keeping in mind the basic notion of such self-awareness. Again, we have these intuitions because it phenomenologically seems to us that we are certain sorts of things—simple, spiritual substances—in acts of direct self-awareness. Note carefully, that we do not epistemically or psychologically start with an intuition of contingency of the link between my self and the relevant physical particular (or mental state), and, on that basis, believe in non-identity. Rather, we are directly aware of non-identity and, on that basis, believe in contingency.

Moreover, the intuitions in (i)-(ix) are easily unified if they are grounded in a direct awareness of the self as a simple, spiritual substance, and they are hard to unify and justify otherwise.

If we have a direct awareness of ourselves as simple, spiritual substances, then we have (1) a strong defense of dualism, (2) a solid account of why we have the intuitions above by unifying them around direct awareness of the self, rather than leaving them as a disparate set of isolated intuitions, and (3) a good explanation for why dualism is the commonsense view, namely, it expresses what people the world over know to be true based on their awareness of themselves.

Some may reply that there are introspectively attentive people who do not have these intuitions. But this is surely a strained reply. The overwhelming majority of people now and throughout history have held the intuitions listed above. And at the beginning of this article, I noted that many, perhaps most physicalists have these intuitions, at least pre-philosophically. And in my view, the usual reason for rejecting these intuitions is a question-begging, prior commitment to physicalism according to which these intuitions must be set aside (e.g., eliminated or reduced).

Others may retort that dualism is the commonsense view due to religious indoctrination and teaching the world over. This retort has never carried much weight with me for two reasons. For one thing, little children and secular people have the intuitions listed above quite independently of religious teaching, and we need an explanation for why this is the case. Self-awareness provides such an explanation. For another, I think this retort gets the cart before the horse: religious teachings are acceptable to people around the world because they capture what people already know about themselves due to self-awareness; it is not the other way around.
So much for the first argument that we are directly aware of ourselves as indivisible, simple spiritual substances. The argument supports two claims: that we are directly aware of ourselves and that the entity of which we are directly aware is an indivisible, simple spiritual substance. As we will see below, some like John Searle rebut this argument by claiming that we do not, in fact, have direct awareness or ourselves. So my second argument supports such direct awareness. Consider the following proposition which we may call the Causal-Acquaintance principle:

\[(CA) \Box(s)(x)(y)(K_{asx}[K_{asy}])\]

where \(s\) ranges over knowing subjects, \(x\) ranges over causal facts, e.g., a hammer’s causing a nail to move, and \(y\) ranges over the associated causal objects that constitute their causal facts (e.g., the hammer). \(K_{as}\) is “has knowledge by acquaintance with.” \(CA\) says that necessarily, if a subject \(s\) has knowledge by acquaintance with a causal fact \(x\), then \(s\) has knowledge by acquaintance with the relevant causal object \(y\). For example, if \(s\) is directly aware of a hammer’s causing a nail to move, then \(s\) is directly aware of the hammer. \(CA\) seems to account for a wide range of cases and is highly justified.

Now, there is a difference between active and passive thoughts. A passive thought is one that happens to me as a patient when I am, say, listening to someone talk. By contrast, an active thought is one that I exercise active power with respect to and entertain freely as an agent. We are quite capable of knowing the difference between active and passive thoughts, but we do not vouchsafe such knowledge by gaining further knowledge about the causal pedigree of the two types of states, as a compatiblist would have it. No, we are directly acquainted with the difference and can be aware of it by simply attending to the relevant mental states. Take as a causal fact my causing an active thought. It would seem to satisfy the antecedent of \(CA\). If so, then it follows that I have knowledge by acquaintance with myself.

**A Response to Two Counterarguments**

Nancey Murphy has advanced the following:11 Our most basic intuitions about ourselves are dependent on the language we have learned. More specifically, a common source of our philosophical dualist intuitions is the language we speak, and this language is derived from past and present theories about the way things are. Indeed, dualist theories that shape our intuitions come from the distant past according to Murphy, e.g., ancient attempts to provide for the just distribution of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, given that they are not so distributed in this life; attempts by Greek philosophers to use the concept of the soul to explain things such as the difference between living and nonliving things. Thus, what basic beliefs one has in any given era, including dualist intuitions expressed propositionally, may well be artifacts of one’s linguistic resources.

An adequate response to Murphy would require a discussion of the merits of non-Cartesian foundationalism, the autonomy and authority of philosophy relative to science, the reality of simple seeing, and the relationship between language and experience/thought. Clearly, such a discussion cannot be undertaken here.12 However, it may be useful to state our differences. I am a non-Cartesian foundationalist of a certain sort, I hold to the authority and autonomy of first philosophy (and do so for reasons independent of my commitment to foundationalism), I believe there is simple seeing in which we have direct access to intentional objects, and that experience and thought are temporally and epistemically prior to language. Thus, while language may affect
intuitions, the latter are not dependent upon the former, and nowhere is this more evident than in self-awareness in which we have direct, linguistic-independent (and concept-independent) access to our own selves on the basis of which we form, retain and justify our dualist intuitions. Murphy would not agree with me on these matters, and that is where our basic differences lie.

Besides this identification of our differences, the following brief remarks are in order. Dualist intuitions are not primarily philosophical; they are commonsensical. Moreover, I believe that Murphy’s account of the origin of these intuitions has it backward. People didn’t come up with the idea of the soul as a part of their theorizing about the world; their theorizing about the world employed and extended what they already pre-theoretically (and pre-linguistically) knew. Consider Murphy’s mention of the idea that people theorized another life as a place where punishments and rewards are justly distributed. Where in the world did these people come up with the idea that they were the sorts of things that could survive in an afterlife? Where did the very idea of an afterlife come from, and why was it so widely believed to be disembodied? In my view, people’s notion of an afterlife was already justified as a possibility because of the considerations in the Simple Argument (e.g., from self-awareness people knew they were not identical to and capable of independent existence from their bodies), and those considerations were subsequently pressed into service, not the other way around.

Here is a second counterargument against my thesis: Where I appeal to positive, direct awareness of the self, critics will appeal to a failure to be aware of substantive complexity (a failure to be aware of separable parts). Moreover, they will likely point out that this failure to be aware better explains why so many secular philosophers (e.g., materialists like Jackson, Nagel) who accept most or all of i-ix are not dualists. Why aren’t these thinkers dualists, if they accept most or all of i-ix? The critics can go on to say that my claim to be aware of substantive simplicity doesn’t provide any explanation for why these scholars are not dualists. Indeed, if I am correct, these people should be dualists because they too have direct acquaintance with substantive simplicity.

I have three things to say in response. First, these physicalists lack the second-order belief that they have the first-order awareness of themselves as simple spiritual substances because they are looking for the wrong sort of experience constitutive of that first-order awareness. Phenomenologically, if a philosopher claims to have a direct awareness of some entity, another philosopher can always claim not to have that awareness. When G. E. Moore claimed to have a direct intuition of goodness, his rivals simply denied they had the same intuition. A defender of Moore could respond in this way: Goodness is a second-order property like being colored or being shaped, not a first-order property like pleasure, being red, or being triangular. Now intuitions of these sorts of first-order properties have a certain texture or vivacity that is absent in the case of intuitions of the corresponding second-order properties. Those who failed to have the relevant intuition of goodness were looking for the sort of intuitive texture appropriate to intuition of a first-order property and they never found it. Unfortunately, they were looking for the wrong sort of phenomenology. Once an intuition of goodness is compared to the intuition of other second-order properties, it becomes more plausible to think that the relevant intuition is real.

Now, something like this is going on with respect to the direct awareness of the content of propositional attitudes, e.g., thoughts and beliefs. Just as we have the ability
to grasp by intuitive direct awareness the nature of a pain (and other so-called states of phenomenal consciousness), so we have the ability to grasp directly the introspectively available nature of the conceptual and propositional contents that constitute our thoughts, beliefs and so forth. Jaegwon Kim disputes this claim and argues that, in fact, a kind of belief content, e.g., that George Washington was the first president of the United States, does not have a uniform, qualitatively introspectable character present in all instances of that kind. However, Kim seems to be guilty of a Humean vivacity test for a phenomenal quale (e.g., a conceptual content) according to which one has such a quale only if it is a vivid sensation like a pain or an image of George Washington. But in this case, Kim’s belief about this matter is based on looking for the wrong sort of first-order awareness. He mistakenly seems to think that if a direct awareness of the content of a thought fails to have the sort of vividness of a sensation such as a pain, then there is no such awareness. Just because the introspective texture of a thought’s content is not as vivid as that of a pain does not entail that we do not have the former. Those who think otherwise are looking for the wrong sort of awareness.

Now, in my view, something like this is going on with respect to the positive first-order awareness of the self. People who reject such awareness on the grounds that they simply do not find that they have it are looking for something like a sensation of pain or some other vivid mental state. But an awareness of the self is not like that and this is one reason why people mistakenly believe that they do not have the awareness.

My second response to this counterargument rests on the notion that while intuitions, construed as a way things seem phenomenologically to a subject, are harder to change than beliefs, beliefs can cause someone to reject an intuition. This can occur when an intuition whose corresponding belief is prima facie justified to a subject on the basis of that intuition is overridden by a weightier belief. Thus, while dualist intuitions in (i)-(ix)—and dualism itself—receive prima facie justification from the relevant more basic intuition, namely, the self appearing phenomenologically to the subject as a simple spiritual substance, physicalists do not take themselves to have the more basic intuition because of what they think is an overriding defeater. What is that overriding belief? In the context of debates about property dualism regarding qualia, Kim says the following:

“The [property-dualist] case against qualia supervenience therefore is not conclusive, though it is quite substantial. Are there, then, considerations in favor of qualia supervenience? It would seem that the only positive considerations are broad metaphysical ones that might very well be accused of begging the question.”

Kim goes on to say that these broad metaphysical considerations amount to the assumption that physicalism must be true. He also claims, correctly in my view, that the corresponding dualist intuitions are not based on a prior commitment to property dualism but, rather, provide justification for property dualism. I believe that the same sort of question-begging prior commitment to physicalism funds the rejection of direct awareness of the self as a simple spiritual substance. To avoid the charge of begging the question, the physicalist must find independent reasons for physicalism sufficient to override what we seem to be aware of in first-person introspection. In my view, the
philosophical arguments for physicalism are surprisingly weak. And, in any case, physicalists usually rest their case on the supposed findings of science. However, I have argued in another place that the scientific issues actually have little or no bearing on topics in philosophy of mind.  

Here’s my third response: Elsewhere, I have shown that people like Thomas Nagel have come clean and acknowledged that they desire that God not exist due to what is called the Cosmic Authority problem (basically, a desire not to have to answer to God).  Similarly, I believe it is true that they desire that the soul not exist and this desire gives them reason to deny what they are directly acquainted with in introspection of the self. While this is anecdotal, I once heard one of the leading physicalists of the last fifty years respond to a question about whether or not there was a soul. He retorted that physicalism was true, there was no soul, and this fact brought him great relief because he no longer needed to worry about judgment in an afterlife and could, accordingly, live his life any way he wanted. I believe that this sort of desire is more responsible for the widespread acceptance of physicalism and the associated rejection of direct awareness of the self than philosophers want to admit.
REFERENCES

5. It might be objected that in the history of science, there have been coherent conceptions of matter according to which matter is not extended.  I am thinking of the penetrable, unextended point particles of Boscovich.  Critics of Boscovich claimed that his position amounted to “the immateriality of matter,” and that his point particles fit more naturally into a Berkeleyian ontology than a materialist one.
9. My basic argument centers on explaining why we have such intuitions and providing a unification of them.  Thus, my argument is independent of debates about epistemic foundationalism.  However, on a non-doctrinal, internalist version of foundationalism, the following principle seems correct:  \((x)(y)(s)(E_x y \iff J x s)\) where \(x\) ranges over intuitions, \(y\) over propositions, and \(s\) over seeming states.  \(E_x\) is “is expressed propositionally as" and \(J\) is “is prima facie justified by.”  Thus, for all intuitions \(x\), propositions \(y\) and seeming states \(s\), if \(x\) is expressed propositionally as \(y\), then \(x\) is prima facie justified by seeming state \(s\).  Intuitions expressed in the form of propositions are epistemically justified by phenomenological seemings or appearances.
13. Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2d ed, 2006), pp. 208-210.  Paul Churchland goes so far as to argue this same point with respect to mental states like pain that are clearly categorized as states of phenomenal consciousness.  See Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts:  MIT Press, 1984), pp. 52-53.  Unfortunately, Churchland fails to see that painfulness is a second order property, not a first-order one, and as such, it characterizes various kinds of pain that differ phenomenologically with respect to their species and not their genus.