

Swinburne's hyper-Cartesian dualism*

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Richard Swinburne's lucid and powerfully argued defence of substance dualism about the mind or soul hinges on the claim that I am essentially a thinking thing, a substance with the capacity for thought, and, further, and crucially, that my *only* essential property is the capacity for thought (p. 75).¹ From this it would of course follow that the body is not a necessary part of my essence, so that I could conceivably still be 'me', this thinking thing, if my body ceased to exist.

Descartes's contemporary critic Antoine Arnauld, in responding to Descartes's argument for substance dualism (of which Swinburne's is a sophisticated reworking) asked how I can be certain that I am not mistaken in excluding body from my essence. He gave a geometrical analogy to illustrate the problem. Suppose someone knows for certain that a triangle in a semicircle has the essential property of being right-angled, but does not know, or has not grasped, that this triangle also has the 'Pythagorean' property (that the square on its hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides). Such a person might suppose that the triangle could exist without the Pythagorean property, and he might think he had an adequate grasp of the essence of the triangle. Yet, unbeknownst to him the additional Pythagorean property is indeed an essential part of its being a right-angled triangle. The nub of Arnauld's criticism of Descartes's argument is thus that he has not shown that my knowledge of myself a thinking thing qualifies as 'knowledge of a being of which I have a complete and adequate conception'²

Descartes replied to Arnauld that in the case of the triangle, while I might doubt the Pythagorean property belongs to it, I cannot clearly and distinctly *deny* the property belongs to it. But in the case of the thinking thing that is me, not only can I doubt that the body is part of my essence, but I can clearly and distinctly deny it, or exclude it, from my essence.

Swinburne similarly argues that I can exclude body from my essence, since there is no contradiction entailed by the proposition that I am thinking and I have no body (p. 74). But Arnauld's worry, or something like it, still seems to hover in the background here. How can I be sure that my knowledge of myself as a thinking thing is complete and adequate? May there not be further (bodily) properties that are essential to my continued existence as me, so that I am simply wrong in supposing that I could survive with just the capacity of thought and no other properties whatsoever?

One way in which Swinburne supports the idea that I am not wrong in supposing I could survive without my body is to cite the case of 'near-death' experiences, where patients report leaving their bodies and observing them from a distance. Whether or not we accept such patients really left their bodies, says Swinburne, we can at least understand what these

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¹ Page references in brackets are to Richard Swinburne, *Are We Bodies or Souls?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² René Descartes, *Meditations [Meditationes de prima philosophia, 1641]*, Fourth Objections, AT VII 203: CSM II 143. In this paper, 'AT' refers to C. Adam & P. Tannery (eds), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964-76); 'CSM' to J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and 'CSMK' to vol. III, *The Correspondence*, by the same translators and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

claims *mean*, and hence they cannot be self-contradictory claims. So it is conceivable that I continue to exist without my body: ‘I am a substance which, it is conceivable, can continue to exist while my body is suddenly destroyed’ (p. 77).

But am I in a position to establish that I could *really* continue to exist in this way? There may seem to be no immediately obvious verbal contradiction in talk of my existing outside my body and looking down on it, or seeing it being destroyed, but can I be sure I know enough about my essence to know that this scenario is really possible? Everything seems to hinge on what this “I” essentially is. If indeed it is simply a thinking, conscious entity *and nothing else* – if, as it were, there is nothing further to be unpacked with regard to what this thinking consists in, entails, or amounts to – then the scenario seems possible. But just as in the triangle case, it seems possible that my essence includes other properties, and that if I had a full and adequate awareness of my essence, I would see that I could not really exist without my body.

To counter this kind of threat, Swinburne argues that in the sentence ‘I can exist without my body’, the pronoun ‘I’ is what he calls an *informative designator*. An informative designator is a word such that we know what it is for the object to which it refers to be that object – in other words, *we know its essence*:

In the case of words whose meaning we know straight-off and so are able to recognize under ideal conditions whether or not they apply, we know – simply in virtue of knowing the meaning of the word – what it is for the object to which they apply to be that object; we know the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be that object. For an object to be ‘a door’ just is for it to look, feel like, and behave like (e.g. open when pushed) paradigm instances of doors. For a person to be ‘walking’ just is for that person to be doing what we recognize as paradigm instances of persons ‘walking’ as doing when we observe them under ideal conditions (standing fairly close to that person in daylight, with eyes working properly, and not subject to some illusion). (p. 90).

This may work for doors and walking, but the obvious worry here is that pronouns and indexicals do not on the face of it seem to function in the same way: their typical function is simply to refer, often leaving it open what is the essence of the object referred to. So when I say, pointing to something I see partly hidden in the undergrowth ‘*that* is a curious object’, I may have only the haziest idea of what it is that I refer to as ‘that’, let alone having a clear idea of its essence. But to plug this gap Swinburne now invites us to consider the case of words that refer to sensations. In our own case, he suggests, we have privileged access to our own sensations: ‘the public evidence about what people mean by the words they use to describe their sensations will always make it only probable to different degrees what they mean’, and so ‘expressions describing sensations function as informative designators of one’s own sensations’ (p. 103).

There are certain assumptions here about privileged access to one’s mental states that might raise the hackles of some Wittgensteinians (I suspect for good reason), but let these be laid aside. The crucial problem raised by Swinburne’s argument at this point seems to me to be a variant of the objection first raised by Arnauld. In order for a term like ‘toothache’ to be an informative designator when used by me of a certain kind of sensation of which I am now aware, it has to be the case that I know its essence. The suggestion is that I do indeed know its essence because I have privileged access to its phenomenological character, a character which, in my own case I am directly and immediately aware of. But now, as Arnauld might have said, how do you know that this knowledge is *complete* – how do you know that the essence of your sensation consists simply in this phenomenal quality and nothing else?

It is interesting in this connection to note that Descartes's own discussion of sensations by no means suggests that he held we have complete and unproblematic knowledge of their essential nature. He frequently stressed that the deliverances of the senses are 'obscure and confused': instead of providing us with clear and distinct information about the essences of things, after the manner of, say, the idea of extension, they provide us with signals that may be in a rough and ready way useful or conducive to our health and survival (Sixth Meditation), but which are subject to an inherent opacity: 'I think of them only in a very obscure and confused way, to the extent that I do not even now whether they are true or false, that is, whether the idea I have of them are ideas of real things or of non things'.³ Now it could be supposed that all Descartes is saying here is that sensory ideas do not inform us of the essential nature of external objects; and this might be compatible with Swinburne's claim that they are 'informative designators of one's own sensations'. The idea here would be that the essence of a sensation just *is* its phenomenal quality, and hence that in having the sensation I have a complete and transparent grasp of its essence. Yet the language Descartes uses when talking about sensations does not quite bear this out. In the case of the sensation of pain, for example, we find Descartes employing an interestingly hesitant phrase, when he talks of pain as 'that I know-not-what sensation' (*iste nescio-quod doloris sensus*). Descartes goes on in the same passage to talk of hunger as a '*nescio-quae vellicatio ventriculi*': an 'I-know-not-what tugging in the stomach'. The *nescio-quae* in Descartes's original Latin (like *je ne sais quelle*, in the later French translation of the *Meditations*) conveys more than just imprecision. What seems to be implied is that there is something here that defies cognitive specification or objective description. I can't say much about the sensation of hunger except that it is a curious hard-to-describe feeling that generates (in a way that is mysterious to me) a desire to eat. Sensations may be vivid, urgent, intrusive, but transparent they are not. To unpack their essential nature I would have to unravel their role as part of a complex psycho-physical signalling system whose workings are largely hidden from me. If we take our cue from Descartes here, the upshot will be that although I may have direct and vivid awareness of my own sensations, and even if we grant that this awareness is epistemically privileged, it does not follow that I have complete and adequate knowledge of their essential nature.

Following the spirit of Descartes, we might say that bodily sensations are part of a complex psycho-physical signalling system. Now it may be true that I am in a unique and privileged position to identify a given sensation as, say, a sensation of hunger. But it does not seem to follow that my identification provides me with knowledge of the essence of hunger. That would be rather like saying that my identifying a particular flag (say in a naval signalling system) by its colour and texture provides me with a complete knowledge of its essential nature. Yet while it may be the case that, for example, identifying this flag as being made of red bunting is a necessary and sufficient condition for correctly identifying it as flag number 12, it would not follow that I have a complete and adequate knowledge of the essential nature of this flag. To understand the essential nature of the flag, I would have to know something of the role it plays in the signalling system of which it is a part. I take this that this analogy goes some way to showing that while I may know that something satisfies the necessary and sufficient conditions for counting as a given object (in this case a sensation), it does not necessarily follow that the term for that object is, in Swinburne's terminology, an informative designator, providing me with complete and adequate knowledge of the essence of that object.

Analogous problems about completeness seem to me to arise in the final phase of Swinburne's argument. When we refer to ourselves, using the word 'I', Swinburne maintains, then, unlike the case with most other indexicals, 'as used by each person, "I" is an

³ Descartes, Third Meditation, AT VII 43: CSM II 30.

informative designator of themselves. We mean by it this person who is currently aware of some conscious experience which he or she can informatively designate' (p. 105). Swinburne invites us to note that when each of us uses the term 'I' to refer to some conscious state or episode, we have privileged and infallible knowledge of ourselves. 'To be "I" just is to be the person who is aware of himself as experiencing some conscious event, and not any person who is not experiencing that conscious event' (p. 107). This much may be granted: when I use the term 'I' in such contexts, I cannot err; I correctly identify the conscious subject who is, at this moment, having such and such a conscious experience. But (unless I have missed something crucial) the essential nature of this subject who is having these experiences does not yet necessarily seem to be fully disclosed. True, I know who I am (I 'identify myself'), and I know I am having this experience. And there is, let it be granted, a certain transparency here. But in knowing *who* I am, how does it follow that I know *what* am?⁴ How do I know that the transparency goes all the way down, as it were? How do I know that my self-identification furnishes a complete and adequate account of the essential 'me', an account that is complete and adequate enough to licence the conclusion that I could really continue to exist, and to identify my conscious states, even were the body to be suddenly destroyed?

Let me add some informal reflections that do not affect the structure of Swinburne's argument, but which may perhaps serve to give some indication of why I think the dualistic approach to the mind has become progressively uncongenial to so many people in our contemporary philosophical culture. One could suppose the main reason for this is the rise of naturalism or materialism about the mind, and no doubt that is part of the story. But at a more basic level, it seems to me that many people find the very idea of a *res cogitans*, a 'thinking thing', on which Descartes set so much store, to be too *thin* to support the ontology of mental substances that he hoped to shore up. One thinks here of Hobbes's criticism of Descartes, namely that he is in effect reifying what is an attribute.⁵ Thought is an attribute, but it is not itself a substance. When we have identified thinking going on, and after we have reflected on how far this is a public or a private phenomenon and all the rest, we still have to go on to ask what it is that is *doing* the thinking.

Descartes's answer, of course, and Swinburne's too, is that what does the thinking is a pure 'thinking thing', an immaterial subject or soul. Swinburne, as we have seen, follows Descartes in supporting this idea by appeal to the alleged conceivability of my existing without a body. But it is worth noting that Descartes himself was very far from laying all the weight on this pure (and, I have suggested, questionable) metaphysical argument. A good part of the reason why he went for the immaterialist answer was that, even though he thought seriously about the possibility of a physical structure capable of supporting the function of thinking, he concluded that such a physical structure was '*morement impossible*' – impossible for all practical purposes. One could not, so Descartes argued, conceive of a physical mechanism possessing a sufficiently large number of different parts to facilitate the indefinite range of human linguistic responses to 'all the contingencies of life'.⁶ But in our own time we now have at our disposal an enormously rich account of the capacities of the cerebral cortex, composed of over eighty-five billion neurons and a hundred trillion synaptic connections. So when, having established *that* I exist as a thinking thing, I go on to ask

⁴ For a related worry, compare Gareth Evans's plausible claim that 'certain ways of gaining knowledge of ourselves as *physical and spatial* things ... must enter into the informational component of our 'I'-ideas (of what it is to think of oneself self-consciously).' Evans takes this to be 'the most powerful antidote to a Cartesian conception of the self.' *Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 220.

⁵ *Meditations*, Third Set of Objections, AT VII 173: CSM II 121.

⁶ Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], Part Five, AT VI 57: CSM I 140.

Descartes's next question, *what* am I?, the immaterialist answer (that I am a pure thinking thing, a substance with the property of thought and no other properties) just does not present itself as the only plausible candidate left standing, as it might have done to many in the seventeenth century who accepted Descartes's assumption that no physical structure could possibly support the function of thought.

This brings me to a final qualm about Swinburne's position, one that concerns his title, *Are We Bodies or Souls?* The right answer, it seems to me, is neither: we are not minds/souls, nor are we bodies, we are *human beings*. Ordinary language cannot perhaps decide philosophical questions, but for what it is worth we should take note that 'I am a mind' is a distinctly odd locution, and 'I am body' equally odd, while 'I am a human being' is an intuitively straightforward and universally accepted way of identifying what one is. That we are essentially human beings is something that Swinburne explicitly denies: on his view we are only 'currently' human beings, but this is not what we essentially are (p. 41). Essentially, we are 'souls who control bodies' (p. 1). Once again, these moves are prefigured in the debates of the seventeenth century, and it is striking that when Arnauld asked Descartes whether his view was that I am a soul who makes use of a body (*anima corpore utens*), Descartes expressly repudiated this characterization.⁷ Elsewhere, when challenged as to whether he really wanted to say that we are not essentially human, or, in the terminology of the time, that a human being was merely an 'accidental entity' (*ens per accidens*), Descartes fiercely resisted this suggestion, and insisted that a human being was a genuine entity in its own right, an *ens per se*. Mind and body, he went on to say, are united 'in a real and substantial manner' by a 'true mode of union'; and the proof of this, he explained, lay in the character of sensations such as pain, which are 'not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body'.⁸ The human mind-body complex is a genuine unit, not a soul making use of a body. When my body is damaged I feel pain. And that gives us proof, the best kind of intimate proof – proof available, says Descartes, even to those who never philosophize – of the genuineness of the union.⁹ This accords with several passages where Descartes insists that the character of our sensory awareness is the signature of our genuine humanity, showing that each of us is what Descartes called *un vrai homme*, a genuine human being.¹⁰

These passages are interesting because they show Descartes striving to accept the intuitively attractive idea of our essential humanity as embodied creatures, despite the fact that this clashes with his official identification of the "I" with something essentially incorporeal. Perhaps all this shows is that Descartes's thinking is beset with tensions, and that Swinburne should be credited with biting the bullet and eliminating the tensions by denying our essential humanity. But many may feel, as I do, that this last step involves paying too a high price in departing from the strong pre-philosophical intuition that we are essentially human. In this respect we might say that Swinburne's dualism is in a certain way 'hyper-Cartesian' – more determinedly dualistic than Descartes himself was quite prepared to be.

I should add that Swinburne does concede 'how important for human life it is that we should have a body' (p. 84), but one of the reasons he gives for saying this seems to me to reveal just how stark is his denial that we are essentially human. He says that the principal advantage of having a body is that it allows for our having 'a public presence': 'there is some place where other people can get hold of us, and we can get hold of them' – almost as if the

⁷ Fourth Objections, AT VII 203: CSM II 143, and Fourth Replies, AT VII 227-8: CSM II 160.

⁸ Letter to Regius of January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

⁹ Compare letter to Elizabeth of 28 June 1643, AT II 691-2: CSMK 227.

¹⁰ *Discourse*, Part Five, AT VI 59: CSM I 141; letter to Regius, January 1642 (AT III 493: CSMK 206).

body was like a mobile phone, enabling us to keep in contact with other people. The underlying conception of my relation to my body here is a purely instrumental one, as indeed is already suggested by Swinburne's initial description of us as 'souls who control bodies'. The body, on this view, is something that is useful to me in enabling me to do certain things (by providing a location where people can make contact with me and interact with me and so on), but it is no part of what I essentially am. So there is no good for humankind as such, nothing that counts as what Aristotle called *to anthropinon agathon*; and despite Swinburne's assuring us that he does not deny the 'crucial importance of our bodies for the value of our lives' (p. 84), it seems to me that what this boils down to, on his view, is that the only value of the body, the only sense in which it really concerns what I essentially am, is simply that it currently makes possible certain conscious goods for the soul.

To accept our essential humanity is to acknowledge that we are creatures of flesh and blood, biological organisms, with many physical attributes, and with many mental attributes. And a natural and perspicuous way of thinking about this is the (broadly) Aristotelian one, of looking at how the various organs of the body are intricately configured so as to facilitate the performance of the various essential human functions, such as locomotion, nutrition, sensation, and thought. The separating off of thought as the province of a non-biological, immaterial substance jars with the methodology that works so well for all the other functional properties of the human being, all of which are essentially embodied, with an intimate relation between function and structure. Again, this is not a logical refutation of the immaterialist account; but it shows just how anomalous it is when set against all the other ways in which we think about our status as human beings and the various human attributes we enjoy.

Swinburne is, to be sure, happy to admit that mental events like sensations are 'normally' caused by brain events, but insists that brain events are 'different events from sensations' (p. 33). I would agree that they are conceptually different, just as we can make a conceptual distinction between the digestive function and the material structure (the stomach) in virtue of which that function is performed. And of course it is conceivable that the digestive function could be performed by means of a physically different structure (an artificial stomach, for instance) that could do the same job. But the idea of a 'pure' digestive event, an event occurring in the absence of not just this or that physical structure, but in the absence of any physical structure whatever, is evidently incoherent. By the same token, it seems to me that, for all Swinburne has shown, and with all due acknowledgement of the superb clarity and ingenuity of his arguments, greater knowledge of the essential nature of what it is that is doing the thinking might make clear the essential involvement of a physical structure to support the thinking, and hence show that the notion of a 'pure' mental event (p. 33) is incoherent.