

**THE
PHYSICALISM / DUALISM
DEBATE**

by

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Physicalism and Dualism.

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What Are the Key Concepts In the Physicalism/Dualism Debate?

Physicalism affirms the existence of the body and denies the existence of the mind or soul, while dualism affirms the existence of both the body and the soul. Before we get into the arguments for dualism and against physicalism, we need to define some terms.

Philosopher J. P. Moreland, in the book *Beyond Death*, defines three key terms: *substance*, *property*, and *event*. First, we look at the nature of a substance. According to Moreland, "A substance is an entity like an apple, an acorn, a leaf, a carbon atom, a dog, or an angel. Substances have a number of important characteristics."

The characteristics of substances are as follows:

1. "Substances are particular, individual things. A substance . . . cannot be in more than one place at the same time."
2. "A substance is a continuant -- it can change by gaining new properties and losing old ones, yet it remains the same thing throughout the change." For example, a leaf can change color from red to green, but it still remains the same substance, the same leaf.
3. "Third, substances are basic, fundamental existents. They are not *in* other things or *had* by other things." For example, our cat, Lily, is not in or had by something more basic than herself; she is a basic existent.
4. "Fourth, substances are unities of parts, properties, and capacities." Lily, as a substance, has properties such as grayness and fatness (we've had her on diet, but she's still pretty fat). She has parts such as four legs and a tail. She has capacities that

are not always being actualized, like the capacity to purr. As a substance, Lily is a unity of all these things.

5. Finally, substances have causal powers. Lily can do things in the world, such as meowing or scratching.

The second key term is *property*. "A property is an existent reality, examples of which are brownness, triangularity, hardness, wisdom, painfulness. As with substances, properties have a number of important features."

1. "A property is a universal that can be in more than one thing at the same time. Redness can be in a flag, a coat, and an apple at once."
2. Properties are immutable. "When a leaf goes from green to red, the *leaf* changes by losing an old property and gaining a new one. But the property of redness does not change and become the property of greenness. Properties can come and go, but they do not change in their internal constitution or nature."
3. Properties are generally *in* or *had* by "other things more basic than themselves. . . . For example, redness is in the apple. The apple has the redness. One does not find redness existing all by itself. . . . Substances have properties; properties are had by substances."

The third key term is *event*. "Examples of events are a flash of lightning, the dropping of a ball, the having of a thought, the change of a leaf, and the continued possession of sweetness by an apple (this would be a series of events). Events are states or changes of states of substances. An event is the coming or going of a property in a substance at a particular time, or the continued possession of a property by a substance throughout a time."

Now that we have substances, properties, and events clarified, we can move on to an examination of the physicalist and dualist positions.

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What Is Physicalism?

In the previous post, we explained what substances, properties, and events are. Now it is time to use those terms to explain what physicalists believe about human beings. Philosopher J. P. Moreland explains below:

According to physicalism, a human being is merely a physical entity. The only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. When it comes to humans, the physical substance is the material body, especially the parts called the brain and central nervous system. The physical substance called the brain has physical properties, such as a certain weight, volume, size, electrical activity, chemical composition, and so forth.

As far as human beings go, physicalists hold that they are physical substances with physical properties. But what about events? Are they also physical?

There are also physical events that occur in the brain. For example, the brain contains a number of elongated cells that carry various impulses. These cells are called neurons. Various neurons make contact with other neurons through connections or points of contact called synapses. C-fibers are certain types of neurons that innervate the skin (supply the skin with

nerves) and carry pain impulses. So when someone has an occasion of pain or an occurrence of a thought, physicalists hold that these are merely physical events -- events where certain C-fibers are firing or certain electrical and chemical events are happening in the brain and central nervous system.

Are you getting the idea? Everything about human beings can be reduced to physical substances, properties, and events. You might be wondering how physicalists explain our thoughts, emotions, and pains. Are these also physical? Yes, they are. According to Moreland,

My conscious mental life of thoughts, emotions, and pain are nothing but physical events in my brain and nervous system. The neurophysiologist can, in principle, describe these events solely in terms of C-fibers, neurons, and the chemical and physical properties of the brain.

For the physicalist, a human being is 100% composed of *matter*, and nothing else. There is a further crucial point that needs to be made about matter: "*No material thing presupposes or has reference to consciousness for it to exist or be characterized.*"

Moreland elaborates:

You will search in vain through a physics or chemistry textbook to find consciousness included in any description of matter. A completely physical description of the world would not include any terms that make reference to or characterize the existence and nature of consciousness.

So now you have a description of what physicalists believe about the mind and body. They affirm that the body exists, but deny that anything like an immaterial mind exists. For them, everything about human beings, and the world in its entirety, must be explained by physical/material substances, properties, and events.

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What Is Dualism?

In the previous post, philosopher J. P. Moreland explained what *physicalists* believe, particularly with respect to human beings. Physicalism holds that humans are composed of nothing but matter.

Now we will see what *dualists* believe. Again, we are quoting from Moreland and Habermas's *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality*. Dualists disagree with physicalists that matter is all there is. For dualists, there also exist *mental entities*. Moreland gives three examples of mental entities:

1. Sensations: These would include "experiences of colors, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, pains, and itches. Sensations are individual things that occur at particular times. I can have a sensation of red after looking in a certain direction or by closing my eyes and daydreaming. An experience of pain will arise at a certain time, say, after I am stuck with a pin."

Moreland continues his description of sensations:

Further, sensations are natural kinds of things that have, as their very essence, the felt quality or sensory property that makes them what they are. Part of the very essence of a pain is the felt quality it has; part of the very essence of a red sensation is the presentation of a particular shade of color to my consciousness. Sensations are not identical to things outside a person's body -- for instance, a feeling of pain is not the same thing as being stuck with a pin and shouting, "Ouch!" Sensations are essentially characterized by a certain conscious feel, and thus, they presuppose consciousness for their existence and description. If there were no conscious beings, there would be no sensations.

2. Propositional attitudes: A propositional attitude is having "a certain mental attitude toward a proposition that is part of a that-clause. For example, one can hope, desire, fear, dread, wish, think, believe that *P* where *P* may be the proposition: 'The Royals are a great baseball team.'"

There are at least two components to propositional attitudes:

First, there is the attitude itself. Hopes, fears, dreads, wishes, thoughts, etc. are all different attitudes, different states of consciousness, and they are all different from each other based on their conscious feel. A hope is a different form of consciousness from an episode of fear. A hope that it will rain is different from a fear that it will rain. What's the difference? A hope has a very different conscious feel from a fear.

Second, they all have a content or a meaning embedded in the propositional attitude -- namely the propositional content of my consciousness while I am having the propositional attitude. My hope that *P* differs from my hope that *Q*, because *P* and *Q* are different propositions or meanings in my consciousness. If there were no conscious selves, there would be no propositional attitudes. My hope that it will rain is different from my hope that taxes will be cut. The contents of these hopes have quite different meanings.

3. Acts of will or purposings: "What is a purposing? If, unknown to me, my arm is tied down and I still try to raise it, then the purposing is the "trying to bring about" the event of raising my arm. Intentional actions are episodes of volition by conscious selves wherein and whereby they do various actions. They are acts of will performed by conscious selves."

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Why Is Identity Important in the Physicalism/Dualism Debate?

In previous posts we have surveyed the physicalist and dualist positions with regard to human beings. Now it is time to start looking at arguments for the dualist position. Before we start to defend dualism, we need to introduce the concept of *identity*, which will be an extremely important concept in the debate.

The law of identity simply states that *A* is *A*. Yes, it's that simple, but we need to draw out some implications from this law. Philosopher J. P. Moreland helps us understand with the following example:

Suppose you want to know whether J. P. Moreland is Eileen Speik's youngest son. If J. P. Moreland is identical to Eileen Speik's youngest son (everything true of one is true of the other), then in reality we are talking about one single thing -- J. P. Moreland, who is Eileen

Speik's youngest son. However, if even one small thing is true of J. P. Moreland and not true of Eileen Speik's youngest son, then these are two entirely different people. Furthermore, J. P. Moreland is identical to himself and not different from himself. So, if J. P. Moreland is not identical to Eileen Speik's youngest son, then in reality we must be talking about two things, not one.

Where does this example take us? Moreland explains:

This illustration suggests a truth about the nature of identity known as Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals: For any entities x and y, if x and y are identical (they are really the same thing -- there is only one thing you are talking about, not two), then any truth that applies to x will apply to y as well. This suggests a test for identity: If you could find one thing true of x not true of y, or vice versa, then x cannot be identical to (be the same thing as) y. Further, if you could find one thing that could possibly be true of x and not y (or vice versa), even if it isn't actually true, then x cannot be identical to y.

Hopefully you have followed along, because now Moreland explains why this matters to the mind/body debate:

Physicalists are committed to the claim that alleged mental entities are really identical to physical entities, such as brain states, properties of the brain, overt bodily behavior, and dispositions to behave (for example, pain is just the tendency to shout "Ouch!" when stuck by a pin, instead of pain being a certain mental feel). If physicalism is true, then everything true of the brain (and its properties, states, and dispositions) is true of the mind (and its properties, states, and dispositions) and vice versa. If we can find one thing true, or even possibly true of the mind and not of the brain, or vice versa, then dualism is established. The mind is not the brain.

At this point, it is critical to note that it is not enough for the physicalist to show that mental and physical entities in the human brain/mind are in a causal relation or are constantly conjoined.

It may be that brain events cause mental events or vice versa: Having certain electrical activity in the brain may cause me to experience a pain; having an intention to raise my arm may cause bodily events. It may be that for every mental activity, a neurophysiologist can find a physical activity in the brain with which it is correlated. But just because A causes B (or vice versa), or just because A and B are constantly correlated with each other, that does not mean that A is identical to B.

Therefore, and this is critical, physicalism cannot be established on the basis that mental states and brain states are causally related or constantly conjoined with each other in an embodied person. Physicalism needs identity to make its case, and if something is true, or possibly true of a mental substance, property, or event that is not true or possibly true of a physical substance, property, or event, then physicalism is false.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 1

Philosopher J. P. Moreland outlines several differences between physical and mental entities in the book he co-authored with Gary Habermas, called *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality*. In previous posts, we have laid the groundwork for this discussion, so that you may want to review the last few posts before reading this one.

Moreland starts out with the basics. He reminds us of the following differences:

Mental events are feelings of pain, episodes of thoughts, or sensory experiences. Physical events are happenings in the brain and central nervous system that can be described exhaustively using terms from chemistry and physics.

Are these two kinds of events really the same kind of thing?

Physical events and their properties do not have the same features as do mental events and their properties. My thoughts, feelings of pain, or sensory experiences do not have any weight; they are not located anywhere in space (my thought of lunch cannot be closer to my right ear than to my left one); they are not composed of chemicals; they do not have electrical properties. On the other hand, the brain events associated with my thoughts, etc. -- indeed, with material things in general - do have these features.

Moreland then asks us to picture a pink elephant in our mind. When you close your eyes and look at the image, you will see a pink property. But note that there is no pink elephant outside you, but there is a pink image of one in your mind. In addition, there is no pink entity in your brain; a neuroscientist cannot open up your brain and see a pink entity while you are seeing the pink elephant in your mind.

Moreland concludes, "The sensory event has a property -- pink - that no brain event has. Therefore, they cannot be identical. The sense image is a mental entity, not a physical one."

This is just a basic introduction to the differences between mental and physical entities. We will introduce several more differences in later posts.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 2

In our continuing series, today we look at the fact that mental properties are *self-presenting* and physical properties are not. Philosopher J. P. Moreland explains what self-presenting means:

Mental properties -- such as feeling sad, experiencing red, having a thought that three is an odd number -- are self-presenting. They present themselves directly to the knowing subject. They are psychological attributes that are directly present to a subject because that subject simply has them immediately in her field of consciousness. There are two pieces of evidence

for the claim that mental properties are self-presenting while physical properties are not: I can have private access to my mental properties and not to my physical ones, and I can know my mental properties incorrigibly but not my physical ones.

Private Access

I have private access to my own mental life. I am in a privileged position to know what I am thinking and sensing. Whatever ways you have for finding out if I am presently sensing a red afterimage (by analyzing my brain states or by looking at my behavior, say, my shouting 'red' after looking at the flag), those ways are available to me, too. But there is a way of knowing I am having a red afterimage that is not available to anyone else -- my own immediate awareness of my own mental life. I am in a position to know my own mental life in a way unavailable to anyone else.

But that is not the case for any physical property, including my brain and its various states. Physical objects, including my brain, are public objects, and no one is in a privileged position regarding them. A neurophysiologist can know more about my brain than I do, but he cannot know more about my mental life. I have private, privileged access to my mental life because it contains self-presenting properties. Physical properties, however, are not self-presenting.

Incorrigible

If something is incorrigible to a knowing subject, then that subject is incapable of being mistaken about that thing. Suppose I am experiencing what I take to be a green rug. It is possible that the rug is not there or that the light is poor and the rug is really gray. But it does not seem possible for me to be mistaken that I seem to see something green, that I am having a green sensation. The former claim is about a physical object (the rug); the latter claim is about a mental state within me -- my seeming to see something green, my having a green sensory experience.

Again, I can be wrong if I think that a chair is in the next room. But I cannot be wrong about the fact that I at least think the chair is there. The former claim is about a physical object (the chair); the latter is about a mental state within me -- a thought that I am currently having. In general, claims about physical states, including claims about my brain and its properties/states, can be mistaken. But if I am being attentive, I can know my sensory states (the ways I am being appeared to, the current sensory experiences I am having) and my episodes of thought (that I am having such and such a thought right now).

Moreland then summarizes the issue of self-presentation:

To summarize then, physical states/properties are not self-presenting, but mental states/properties are, as evidenced by the twin phenomena of private access and incorrigibility. Thus, physical states/properties are not identical to mental states/properties.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 3

There is another way that the mental differs from the physical, and that is in the subjective nature of experience. J. P. Moreland offers the following illustration:

Suppose a deaf scientist became the world's leading expert on the neurology of hearing. It would be possible for him to know and describe everything there is to the physical aspects of hearing. Nothing physical would be left out of his description. However, something would still be left out: the experience of what it is like to be a human who hears.

Moreland quotes Howard Robinson: "The notion of *having something as an object of experience* is not, *prima facie*, a physical notion; it does not figure in any physical science. *Having something as an object of experience* is the same as the subjective feel or the *what it is like* of experience."

Moreland explains that "subjective states of experience are real. I experience sounds, tastes, colors, thoughts, and pains, and they are essentially characterized by their subjective nature."

Philosopher Thomas Nagel points out the problem this causes for physicalism:

If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features [the felt quality or experiential texture of experiences that make them the kinds of things they are, e.g., the painfulness of pain, the sounds, colors, odors, of sensory experiences] must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character, it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view.

In summary, Dr. Moreland argues:

The subjective texture of our conscious mental experiences -- the feeling of pain, the experience of sound, the awareness of color -- is different from anything that is simply physical. If the world were only made of matter, these subjective aspects of consciousness would not exist. But they do exist! So there must be more to the world than matter.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 4

One of the most important differences between the mental and physical is the property of *intentionality*. Philosopher J. P. Moreland explains just what intentionality is and why physicalism does not account for it.

Intentionality is the mind's of-ness or about-ness. Mental states point beyond themselves to other things. Every mental state I have is of or about something -- a hope that Smith will

come, a sensation of the apple, a thought that the painting is beautiful. Mental states can even be about things that do not exist -- a fear of a goblin or a love for Zeus.

Does physicalism account for intentionality?

Intentionality is not a property or relation of anything physical. Physical objects can stand in various physical relations with other physical objects. One physical thing can be to the left of, larger than, harder than, the same shape as, or the thing causing the motion of another physical object. But one physical object is not of or about another one.

Moreland gives a concrete example to draw out the difference:

When I am near a podium, I can relate to it in many ways: I can be two feet from it, taller than it, and my body can bump into it. These are all examples of physical relations I sustain to the podium.

But in addition to these, I can be a conscious subject that has the podium as an object of various states of consciousness I direct toward it. I can have a thought about it, a desire for it (perhaps I want one like it), I can experience a sensation of it, and so forth. These are all mental states, and they have intentionality (of-ness, about-ness) in common.

Hence, mental states possess intentionality, while physical states do not. Mental states are not physical states.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 5

In the book *Beyond Death*, philosopher J. P. Moreland continues to review differences between the mental and the physical. The next point of departure is the awareness each of us has of our own *self*. Here is Moreland:

When we pay attention to our own consciousness, we can become aware of a very basic fact presented to us: We are aware of our own self (ego, I, center of self-consciousness) as being distinct from our body and from any particular mental experience we have. We simply have a basic, direct awareness of the fact that I am not identical to my body or my mental events; rather, I am a self that has a body and a conscious mental life.

Moreland offers the following experiment in case you doubt his point:

Right now I am looking at a chair in my office. As I walk toward the chair, I experience a series of what are called phenomenological objects or chair representations. That is, I have several different chair experiences that replace one another in rapid succession. As I approach the chair, my chair sensations change shape and grow bigger. Further, because of the lighting in my study my chair experiences change color slightly. Now the chair doesn't change in size, shape, or color; but my chair experiences do.

I am, of course, aware of all the different experiences of the chair during the fifteen seconds it takes me to walk across my study. But if I pay attention, I am also aware of two more things. First, I do not simply experience a series of sense-images of a chair. Rather, through self-awareness, I also experience the fact that it is I myself who has each chair experience. Each chair sensation produced at each angle of perspective has a perceiver who is I. An "I" accompanies each sense experience to produce a series of awarenesses -- "I am experiencing a chair sense-image now."

I am also aware of the basic fact that the same self that is currently having a fairly large chair experience (as my eyes come to within 12 inches of the chair) is the very same self as the one who had all of the other chair experiences preceding this current one. In other words, through self-awareness I am aware of the fact that I am an enduring I who was and is (and will be) present as the owner of all the experiences in the series.

So what does this mean for dualism and physicalism?

These two facts -- I am the owner of my experiences, and I am an enduring self who exists as the same possessor of all my experiences through time -- show that I am not identical to my experiences. I am the thing that has them. In short, I am a mental substance. Only a single, enduring self can relate and unify experiences, a fact that . . . physicalists cannot adequately account for or explain away.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 6

After a little break from this series, it is time to pick it up again because there is plenty more to discuss. Philosopher J. P. Moreland explains yet another way that mental and physical entities differ: *the first person perspective*.

A complete physicalist description of the world would be one in which everything would be exhaustively described from a third-person point of view in terms of objects, properties, processes, and their spatiotemporal locations. For example, a description of an apple in a room would go something like this: "There exists an object three feet from the south wall and two feet from the east wall, and that object has the property of being red, round, sweet," and so on.

The first-person point of view is the vantage point that I use to describe the world from my own perspective. Expressions of a first-person point of view utilize what are called indexicals—words such as I, here, now, there, then. Here and now are where and when I am; there and then are where and when I am not. Indexicals refer to me, myself. "I" is the most basic indexical, and it refers to my self that I know by acquaintance with my own consciousness in acts of self-awareness. I am immediately aware of my own self, and I know who "I" refers to when I use it: It refers to me as the owner of my body and mental states.

But how does physicalism handle the first-person point of view that we all clearly have? Is there room for the first-person perspective? Moreland thinks not.

According to physicalism, there are no irreducible, privileged first-person perspectives. Everything can be exhaustively described in an object language from a third-person perspective. A physicalist description of me would say, "There exists a body at a certain location that is five feet, eight inches tall, weighs 160 pounds," and so forth.

But no amount of third-person descriptions captures my own subjective, first-person acquaintance of my own self in acts of self-awareness. In fact, for any third-person description of me, it would always be an open question as to whether the person described in third-person terms was the same person as I am.

I do not know myself because I know some third-person description of a set of mental and physical properties and I also know that a certain person satisfies that description. I know myself as a self immediately through being acquainted with my own self in an act of self-awareness. I can express that self-awareness by using the term "I."

"I" refers to my own substantial soul. It does not refer to any mental property or bundle of mental properties I am having, nor does it refer to anybody described from a third-person perspective. "I" is a term that refers to something that exists, and "I" does not refer to any object or set of properties described from a third-person point of view. Rather, "I" refers to my own self with which I am directly acquainted and which, through acts of self-awareness, I know to be the substantial possessor of my mental states and my body.

It seems that the physicalist cannot account for the first-person perspective that we all have. Surely this is a serious deficiency in any theory that attempts to explain what human beings are.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 7

The next major difference between mental and physical entities is how personal identity through change is handled. Dr. Moreland asks us to...

Imagine a wooden table that had all its parts removed one by one and replaced with metal parts. Now suppose someone took the original wooden parts and made a new table. Which one would be the original table -- the metal one or the wooden one? The answer seems to be clear.

The original table would be the wooden one. Why? Because if something is made out of stuff called parts, then it cannot remain identical to itself if it gains new parts and loses old ones. If a table here and now is going to be the very same table as one that was here, say an hour ago, this table must be made out of the same stuff as the one an hour ago. If not, then they are different tables. In general, physical objects cannot remain literally the same if they gain new parts and lose old ones.

But what about people? How do we view the identity of human persons who are constantly losing parts?

Each moment I lose hundreds of thousands of skin cells, some hair, and other microscopic parts. In fact, every seven years my cells are almost entirely replaced. Do I maintain literal, absolute sameness through change?

Dualists argue that persons do maintain absolute identity through change, because they have, in addition to their bodies and current mental experiences or mental capacities (say, the capacity to remember a childhood event), a soul that remains constant through change. Personal identity is constituted by sameness of soul, not sameness of body or mental abilities, such as memory.

How do physicalists handle personal identity through change?

Physicalists . . . have no alternative but to hold that personal identity through change is not absolute. Usually they argue that persons are really ancestral chains of successive, momentary "selves" (called person-stages) that are connected with one another in some way. At each moment a new self exists (since the organism is constantly in flux, gaining new parts and mental experiences and losing old parts and mental experiences), and this self resembles the self prior to and after it.

The relation of resemblance between selves, plus the fact that later selves have the same memories as earlier selves and the body of each self-traces a continuous path through space when the whole chain of selves is put together, constitutes a relative sense of identity. At this moment I merely resemble a self that existed a moment ago: My body resembles that body; my memories resemble the memories of that earlier self; my body was reached by the body of the earlier self through a continuous spatial path.

So substance dualists hold to a literal, absolute sense of personal identity, and physicalists . . . hold to a loose, relative sense of personal identity that amounts to a stream of successive selves held together by resemblance between each self in the stream— similarity of memory or brain, similarity of character traits, and/or spatial continuity. But this perspective creates certain problems for physicalism.

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What Are the Differences between Mental and Physical Entities?

Part 8

Last post we looked at the issue of personal identity through change. Dualists explain this phenomenon by positing the existence of a soul which remains constant throughout a person's life. Physicalists, however, deny that there is an absolute sense of personal identity, but this creates problems for their view. J. P. Moreland draws out those problems below:

First, the fact that I can have a memory that an earlier self had presupposes that I am the same person as that alleged earlier self. Memory presupposes personal identity; it does not constitute it.

Second, in self-awareness I seem to be aware of the fact that I am literally the same self that continues to exist throughout my life and that unites my stream of consciousness into one stream that is mine. How can a physicalist . . . explain this basic awareness?

Third, why should I ever fear the future, say, going to the dentist next week? When the day arrives, I will not be present; rather, another self who looks like me (or has my memories) will be there, but I will have ceased to exist. The same issue arises with any emotion or attitude related to the future.

Fourth, why should anyone be punished? The self who did the crime in the past is not literally the same self who is present at the time of punishment.

Dr. Moreland summarizes the problems faced by the physicalist:

Physicalism . . . seems to require a radical readjustment of these basic, commonsense notions because these notions presuppose a literal, absolute sense of sameness through change, and this makes sense only if the soul is a substance that is a continuant (something that remains the same through change). If the intuitions expressed in points one through four above are reasonable—and we maintain that they are—then this provides further evidence for substance dualism.

The cumulative case for dualism and against physicalism continues to mount, but we have not even touched on some of the most important problems for physicalism. In future posts, we will look at the issues of free will, morality, responsibility, and punishment.

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Why Is Physicalism Self-Refuting?

Part 1

In the previous post, we saw that physicalism seems to inevitably lead to determinism. Determinism, if you recall, means that every event, including all of your thoughts, feelings, desires, and choices, is determined by the physical conditions antecedent to it. The renowned atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell said it this way:

When a man acts in ways that annoy us we wish to think him wicked, and we refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth and therefore to events for which he cannot be held responsible by any stretch of imagination.

If determinism is true, then what follows? J. P. Moreland points out that "a number of philosophers have argued that physicalism . . . must be false because [it] impl[ies] determinism and determinism is self-refuting." Moreland quotes J. R. Lucas speaking of the determinist:

If what he says is true, he says it merely as the result of his heredity and environment, and of nothing else. He does not hold his determinist views because they are true, but because he has such-and-such stimuli; that is, not because the structure of the universe is such-and-such but only because the configuration of only part of the universe, together with the structure of the determinist's brain, is such as to produce that result. . . . Determinism, therefore, cannot be true, because if it was, we should not take the determinists' arguments as being really arguments, but as being only conditioned reflexes. Their statements should not be regarded as

really claiming to be true, but only as seeking to cause us to respond in some way desired by them.

Moreland also quotes H. P. Owens:

Determinism is self-stultifying. If my mental processes are totally determined, I am totally determined either to accept or to reject determinism. But if the sole reason for my believing or not believing X is that I am causally determined to believe it, I have no ground for holding that my judgment is true or false.

Determinism, and therefore, physicalism, then appear to be self-refuting. It might be helpful to flesh this out more. Moreland argues that physicalism, itself, undermines rationality. The physicalist cannot claim to know that physicalism is true, or claim to believe in physicalism for good reasons, because to know something is true for good reasons requires at least three factors be assumed.

These three factors are intentionality, an enduring *I*, and genuine libertarian free will. All three of these are conditions of rationality will be discussed in part 2 of this series.

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Why Is Physicalism Self-Refuting?

Part 2

In part 1 of this series, we argued that physicalism and determinism are self-refuting because they undermine rationality. At the end of part 1, we said that there are three conditions of rationality that physicalism does not allow, and Dr. Moreland explains them below:

First, humans must have genuine intentionality; they must be capable of having thoughts and sensory awareness of or about the things they claim to know. For example, one must be able to see or have rational insight into the flow of an argument if one is going to claim that a conclusion follows from a set of premises. We can simply see that if you have: 1) If P, then Q, and, 2) P, therefore, you also have, 3) Q. This requires an awareness of the logical structure of the syllogism itself.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, intentionality is a property of mental states, not physical ones. Thus, this first feature of rationality is incompatible with physicalism Intentionality is not a physical property.

The second factor is the enduring *I*. Moreland explains:

Second, in order to rationally think through a chain of reasoning such that one sees the inferential connections in the chain, one would have to be the same self present at the beginning of the thought process as the one present at the end. As Immanuel Kant argued long ago, the process of thought requires a genuine enduring *I*.

In the syllogism above, if there is one self who reflects on premise 1), namely, "If P, then Q," a second self who reflects on premise 2), namely, "P," and a third self who reflects on the concluding statement 3), namely, "Q," then there is literally no enduring self who thinks

through the argument and draws the conclusion. As H. D. Lewis noted, "One thing seems certain, namely that there must be someone of something at the centre of such experiences to hold the terms and relations together in one stream of consciousness."

However, we have already seen in a previous blog post that physicalism denies a literal, enduring *I*, and thus physicalism is at odds with this necessary condition of rationality.

The third necessary condition for rationality is libertarian freedom of the will.

Finally, rationality seems to presuppose an agent view of the self and genuine libertarian freedom of the will. There are rational "oughts." Given certain evidence, I "ought" to believe certain things. I am intellectually responsible for drawing certain conclusions, given certain pieces of evidence. If I do not choose that conclusion, I am irrational.

But "ought" implies "can." If I ought to believe something, then I must have the ability to choose to believe it or not believe it. If one is to be rational, one must be free to choose her beliefs in order to be reasonable. Often I deliberate about what I am going to believe, or I deliberate about the evidence for something. But such deliberations make sense only if I assume that what I am going to do or believe is "up to me"—that I am free to choose and, thus, I am responsible for irrationality if I choose inappropriately. But we have already seen that physicalism . . . rule[s] out libertarian freedom.

Moreland, thus, concludes that physicalism rules out the possibility for rationality. "It is self-refuting to argue that one ought to choose physicalism . . . on the basis of the fact that one should see that the evidence is good for physicalism. Thus, substance dualism is the best view of the self and is most consistent with the preconditions of rationality."

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Is Free Will Possible for the Physicalist?

If you recall, at the end of the series comparing physicalism and dualism, I promised to look at additional problems for physicalism. Before doing so, let me remind you what physicalists believe. Here is philosopher J. P. Moreland:

According to physicalism, a human being is merely a physical entity. The only things that exist are physical substances, properties, and events. When it comes to humans, the physical substance is the material body, especially the parts called the brain and central nervous system. The physical substance called the brain has physical properties, such as a certain weight, volume, size, electrical activity, chemical composition, and so forth.

Physicalists are usually metaphysical materialists who believe that all that exists is matter in its different forms. There is nothing immaterial that exists.

Moreland brings us to a fundamental human capacity that we all take for granted, that of free will. What do we mean by free will? Moreland explains:

When we use the term free will, we mean what is called libertarian freedom: Given choices A and B, I can literally choose to do either one. No circumstances exist that are sufficient to

determine my choice. My choice is up to me, and if I do A or B, I could have done otherwise. I act as an agent who is the ultimate originator of my own actions.

Is there room for free will under physicalism? Moreland argues that there is not.

If physicalism is true, then human free will does not exist. Instead, determinism is true. If I am just a physical system, there is nothing in me that has the capacity to freely choose to do something. Material systems, at least large-scale ones, change over time in deterministic fashion according to the initial conditions of the system and the laws of chemistry and physics. A pot of water will reach a certain temperature at a given time in a way determined by the amount of water, the input of heat, and the laws of heat transfer.

There are other problems that follow if determinism is true. What about moral obligation or responsibility? What about moral praise or blame?

Now, when it comes to morality, it is hard to make sense of moral obligation and responsibility if determinism is true. They seem to presuppose freedom of the will. If I "ought" to do something, it seems to be necessary to suppose that I can do it. No one would say that I ought to jump to the top of a fifty-floor building and save a baby, or that I ought to stop the American Civil War, because I do not have the ability to do either. If physicalism is true, I do not have any genuine ability to choose my actions.

Moreland concludes with the following:

It is safe to say that physicalism requires a radical revision of our commonsense notions of freedom, moral obligation, responsibility, and punishment. On the other hand, if these commonsense notions are true, physicalism is false.

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Does Man Have Free Will - Christian Thought?

Let's define free will first. I define free will as the human ability to make contrary choices or decide between multiple options. Free will is the power of self-determination. It gives human beings the power to make real moral decisions.

Some Christians deny that humans have free will because they say it diminishes God's sovereignty. If humans have the ability to choose, then God cannot be in control of human choices, they argue. But this is just not so.

God could have created humans with the power of free will, and also have known from the beginning of time exactly what humans would do with their free choices, because everything that humans will do *pre-existed* in the mind of God "before" it was actualized by God. God wrote us in as characters in a cosmic drama, but as characters who make *real choices*. We are not rocks or robots, but people with free will.

Since God is the cause of free will in humans, then he absolutely has complete control over it in the sense that nothing has happened or will ever happen without his *knowledge* and *determination*. God knowingly determines and determinedly knows every choice we will ever make. Does this take away free will?

No. Throughout church history, the majority view has been that God is sovereign over everything *and* that man is free. During the Reformation, some of the reformers took the position that man cannot be free because it necessarily follows that God is not sovereign, but as we've seen, that is not true. God is still in control, even with free creatures wandering around. Even today, most Christians still hold that man has free will.

How exactly does God have control over everything, but humans possess free will? Bottom line: we don't know exactly how this works because we are dealing with a being, God, who exists outside of time and space. God's interactions with humans will necessarily remain mysterious, but the Bible clearly teaches both the sovereignty of God and man's free will. A sound Christian theology *will retain both of these teachings*.

End

<http://www.toughquestionsanswered.org/2012/03/14/what-are-the-key-concepts-in-the-physicalismdualism-debate/>

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