

The Self and the Body: Substance Dualism Explored

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Pat Flynn:

Greetings, and welcome to Mind Matters News. This week, we're continuing our discussion with Pat Flynn, Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, diving into arguments in favor of substance dualism. We would encourage you to listen to the first part of this conversation if you've not already done so. Enjoy.

Okay, now that we have that brief but somewhat complicated history of the soul on the table, and these debates are tough, as all debates and philosophy are, help convince us of substance dualism in the broad sense. What sort of arguments, what sort of motivations? We already hinted at one, is that it seems that most of us just have these very strong, call them dualistic seemings. It just seems like this is the common sense way that we just experience the world and really ourselves is presented to us. But either expanding upon that or going beyond that, let's now consider some of the arguments and reasons that you think point in the direction of dualism, if you wouldn't mind. Whoever wants to take that first, go ahead.

Stewart Goetz:

I'll be going first here, so I'll let Charles go first.

Charles Taliaferro:

Well, I think we're-

Stewart Goetz:

I'm fair, Charles. I'm fair.

Charles Taliaferro:

Okay. Well, I think where Stu and I are aligned is in believing in the primacy of self-awareness of ourselves as substantial beings over time, and that this stands way over against a very, well, late 19th century, but mostly 20th century, early 21st century materialist view that we are more convinced of the reality and the identity of physical bodies than we are of the mind or the soul. The latter seems so hopelessly abstract.

But really our sense, and I think the sense of many of us, is that really, it's self-awareness or the first-person point of view that has primacy over the third-person point of view. If somebody says to me, "Well, look, what makes you this animal rather than that animal," I wouldn't know what this or that refers to unless I had an awareness of myself as a subject over time. That animal means simply the animal that the speaker is drawing attention to, and so on.

Our understanding of ourselves existing over time, which is strict, we may undergo all kinds of amnesia and visual agnosia. We lose our sense of the familiarity of objects around us. But really, we understand what it is for Pat, Charles, to exist over time. But the existence of our bodies are something quite different in the sense that we're gaining and losing cellular parts all the time. It is, as one philosopher, Joseph Butler, said, "It's existing over time in an imperfect fashion and as an aggregate or as a bundle that has detachable parts and is being renewed and so on, whereas self-identity seems in a technical sense to be simple, but it's just not composed of detachable parts." Yes, you may talk about different

aspects of your identity and the dreams you have versus the desires you have and different aspects, but is different aspects of the self same person?

Now, I put a little more stock in Descartes' original argument for mind-body dualism. He does ground his understanding of the self in self-awareness, the famous cogito, backed up by his theistic argument, giving him confidence in his cognition. But he believes, and this is a recent argument of Richard Swinburne's as well, that it is conceivable, whether it happens or not, that persons may survive the death of their bodies or their dissolution, their non-existence, body switching, reincarnation, and so on. All of these persistence conditions seem radically different from our concept of what it is to be a body, which is why, going back to what I was saying earlier, the reason why some people think that dualism goes all the way back is because of belief in that a person could persist even after the biological decomposition of their body. This indicates something that there's more to it.

I find, actually my students, well, and others too, to differ on this, but I always find it disturbing when a relative, friend, parent dies and they say, "We're going to bury Aunt Martha tonight." I go, "Well, is she dead?" This is probably not bad, but ... I mean not good, sorry. But when my mother died, and the morticians I called in at the funeral home and they said, "Well, we have your mother here." I said, "Well, put her on the phone." My feeling is, "No, they don't have my mother. They have her corpse, or remains, or body." This is just a fundamental and haunting realization.

I've been present with the death of maybe four people now and counting, and we have to ask, "Is it an accidental change or a substantial change?" If it's an accidental change, well, the person's still there. Their body just has died, just as a chicken would still be there after you've killed it and so on. The chicken's still there. It's in the refrigerator. But really with persons, I think we are left to believe or led to believe intuitively and perhaps our grasp of persistence conditions that there's more to us than our bodies. And so, I think that will remain a very enduring and deep-seated intuitive grasp of our identity as beings that are more than our bodies.

Pat Flynn:

It's interesting, if I can just chime in real quick, how there are certain thinkers, more on the materialist and strongly reductive side, that will largely agree with everything you just said, Charles, but they'll just ride the train of thought in the opposite direction and essentially bite all the bullets that I personally would never know how to bite. You think of these eliminativists of saying, "Yeah, you swap out the tire in the car, it's not the same car. You swap out by cellular constituents, it's not the same person." I'm not the same person I was five minutes ago, two seconds ago, whatever it was. Right? I mean, minimally, that doesn't seem right, but I think it also would invite a great many other catastrophic philosophical problems. I mean, how do you even hold a line of reasoning, if you don't have some enduring stable subject in these intervals of time?

Charles Taliaferro:

That's what I think. I believe that our understanding of ourselves is not simply how we exist at an instant. In fact, I don't think we could. An instant is an infinitesimal that is a non-interval. You can't even think during an instant. What I would do with students is I say, "You can't even say the word avocado in an instant," something I can say very fast. Avocado. Avocado.

Pat Flynn:

Which I had for breakfast, by the way.

Charles Taliaferro:

Excellent. But really, that's an interval. To even follow this sentence, you would have to be the self same person who began hearing the sentence as this sentence, as who hears the end of it. Diachronic identity, I think, is a deliverance of our self-aware experience. And so the idea, and some have suggested this, that you only exist momentarily. Well, one is you can't exist for just an instant because that takes up no time whatsoever. But secondly, you have to exist for intervals in order to think, reflect, act, make motions, see things, and so on. So the idea that you could have caught worried about the could be undetectable substitutability of the self is somewhat preposterous or science fictionist because the idea that the self same thinker would be changed, who heard the sentence, "The cat is on the mat," who heard the sentence, "the," and then you have a new person think the word "cat." And so, it borders on the preposterous.

Our sense is ... well, at least my sense, but I think Stu and I share this, is that our understanding of ourselves as temporal subjects over time. We don't accept that persons are temporal parts, like a week made up of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and so on. We believe it's the self same person who endures over time. And to say that I only exist for four minutes or five and I'm different, it really begs some questions that might be harmless, but when it gets down to matters of moral responsibility or accountability and our understandings of free will and so on, becomes very vexing.

Pat Flynn:

Well, that's really helpful. Thank you for that, Charles. Of course, if some of these implications from the other side are right, then I guess I'm off the hook for my promises because it wouldn't be the same person who made those promises 5 minutes ago, 10 minutes ago. So you can quickly see how it would invite certain moral situations that many of us, again, would think are absurd. Then I think that's a lot of the philosophical game, is you try to show the costs of certain position and you try to keep increasing and raising the costs. Although I am quite impressed with how certain thinkers, no matter how high the costs may be, they just keep trying to embrace them. I don't know what to do at a certain point, but those are some very good ... Yeah, go ahead, Charles.

Charles Taliaferro:

Well, I'll say something, but then I think I'm hogging the mic. I want Stu to jump in here, but I will say two things. One is Anthony O'Hare and some other philosophers have pointed out how one way to make a reputation is by making your moves bolder and more and more outrageous. Gilbert Ryle famously said, "meinongianism," this is the philosophy of meinong, which was that, "there are or could be some realm between being and nothingness." Ryle said famously, "If meinongianism isn't dead, nothing is." Well, it's back. Even the idea that you can exist for only four minutes, Galen Strawson, very famous philosopher, son of Peter Strawson, he actually held that view for some months. He then changed.

But really, you get a lot of attention. I'd have to say William Lycan is somewhat right about this, that sometimes it can be fruitful to maintain very bold conditions, radical skepticism, push it as far as you can. This way, you can discover certain natural limits. In terms of, Whitehead said, a philosophy often attaches a price tag to certain beliefs. You can go with that belief, but it's going to come with a price tag. And when does that price going to be too big? Over to Stu or to Pat.

Pat Flynn:

Great. No, Stewart, definitely chime in here and expand however you like.

Stewart Goetz:

I won't say too much here. I just think that for people who are interested in this topic, one of the best ways is to get a feel for it is to pick up different introductory texts in the philosophy of mind. In my experience over the years, Charles can correct me if I'm wrong, but just about every introductory text I would ever consider for teaching the philosophy of mind, it always started out with substance dualism. In other words, those who write about this stuff, the kind of default position initially is always substance dualism. There is the self and then there's the body.

And so, even those where in "professional philosophy" today who write about this stuff, they concede from the get go that everybody generally has a sense of the self as something distinct from its physical body. They write their textbooks that way. They think there's a problem with the view. Thereby, what you have to do is consider their objections to the view. I think even they will admit, they start out with substance dualist self body beliefs. They are the intuitive beliefs. But they go on then to say, but they can't be right. There's a problem with them.

So even those who disagree with substance dualism or the self soul-body distinction, which in the profession for a long time now has been the majority view, the view's just got to be wrong. But even they will concede, it's intuitively right, but there are problems with it. Charles, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I know, years I've taught philosophy of mine, new books would come out on the topic, but I can't right now think of a one of them that didn't start with substance dualism.

Charles Taliaferro:

I agree completely with you, Stu. When I was at visiting scholar at NYU and substance dualism was immediately dismissed in the first lecture. The professor said, "Look, I'll give you a proof that it's false. Just after class, drink quite a bit of alcohol, and you'll eventually go unconscious, just to prove substance dualism can't be true." I'm going, "What?" I mean, the idea that, what, causal interaction between thoughts, actions, intentions, feelings, sensations, nerve endings, this is the most basic constitutional part of our ordinary ways of living and experience. Eating properly, having sex, writing books.

Whatever activity you're involved in, you have to assume on a pragmatic level your intentions and desires are impacting the world. John Searle once said, "If you're going to have a revolution, someone's going to have to bring the molecules." In other words, if you're going to explain a revolution, whether it's in Iran or Moscow or wherever, you can't do it by just molecular biology. You're going to have to get into desires and intentions and beliefs and manifestos. Stu has an excellent critique of this philosopher, Alexander Rosenberg.

Pat Flynn:

I was going to bring him up as one of those eliminativists.

Charles Taliaferro:

Please. Well, why don't you bring him up and we'll see this, too.

Pat Flynn:

I mean, let me comment because you bring up an excellent point, Charles, and this has always bothered me. I'm somebody who was on the naturalistic side for a while, and then now I'm not. I'm a very religious person now. I'm very much attracted to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, but I-

Stewart Goetz:

I could tell by your Iron Man poster there.

Pat Flynn:

Right. But I should probably change that. But anyways, you brought up a really important point. There's this sort of air, and I don't want to say this is just on one side. But it is strong, and I experienced it when I was doing my undergrad of this absolutely arrogant, chronological condescension towards thinkers of the past. It's like, "Okay, you drink some booze, you get a little fuzzy." And this refutes Aristotle? Somehow, maybe he was wrong about some things, but the man, he wasn't an idiot, right? They always knew if you mess with the body, you get different qualitative experiences. They didn't have all the strong correlative mappings that we have in neuroscience, but that's offering specifications of something that people always generally knew. Right? You hit somebody over the head, their experience is very different. So, what on earth is going on here? So sorry, that's just a bit of a rant of what you said, Charles, but it is. Of course, there are more sophisticated arguments against dualism. We'll get to that, but I always want to just address that one just with, I guess, the tone of annoyance. Go ahead.

Charles Taliaferro:

Oh, I just had to add a footnote that Aristotle does, if you look at the complete works of Aristotle by Jonathan Barnes. Anyway, he does have a solution for hangovers. I think eating cabbage is very good for that.

Pat Flynn:

It's a testable hypothesis. Sorry, you wanted to bring up Rosenberg. Rosenberg is a thinker. Actually, I like him a lot. I like him a lot. He's provocative. He's interesting. He's sort of a guy that I think is just trying to grab his fellow naturalist, and he's like, "It's time to commit fellas." You know what I mean? We have this certain epistemic starting point. Let's follow this out right on through to its sort of inevitable, logical end. He's a nihilist, he's a moral nihilist, he's eliminativist, and he is one of these guys that if you read his work, he will just keep biting or accepting every cost that you lay out to him. I'm not an enduring self. Well, that makes meaning hard. Well, there is no meaning. There is no meaning in this whole book that I wrote.

I don't know what to do. Honestly, once you get to with a thinker like that or a position like that, I think it's deeply self undermining. I don't think that it's sustainable, but that's one of those examples of somebody who I think is, he's obviously not a stupid guy. He's very intelligent. I think that he's helpful in actually trying to run, I think, a ferocious reductio of a certain starting point, which I think should cause somebody to go around and question and revise that starting point. But rather, he just seems to just want to ride it out all the way through. So I like Rosenberg and I like the work that he does. I disagree with it deeply, but I think it's important. Sorry, please mention whatever you were going to say about him.

Charles Taliaferro:

Stu, why don't you go, because you've written on him in particular.

Stewart Goetz:

Well, in some way, I think we should be thankful for Alex Rosenbergs that are out there that actually explain the view that they hold and they take it seriously. I think when you have people like that articulating their view and following it out to its reasonable conclusions, you just see what the view

really is. And so, I've written that Rosenberg, the implication of his view is he doesn't write his books for purposes. This just seems absolutely crazy.

But so on the one hand, I'm critical of Rosenberg, but I actually think we should be grateful for him. He's honest, and this is the implication of the view. And so, what I look for in Rosenberg is in addition to, is actually taking this stuff seriously the way he seemingly does, because I want to know from him what's wrong with my view and what's the argument. Because this is where you end up. We should go back and take a look at what's wrong with the intuitively plausible view. I've given talks, lectures on Rosenberg, and the audience is always, "This guy actually believes this stuff?" I mean, that's always the reaction. They go thinking, "He takes this seriously?" And I say, "Yeah, but in a way that's good for us because we now have laid out for us by someone who believes that what the implications of it are." What we really want to know from this person, at least I do, what's wrong with my view. It seems so intuitively plausible, commonsensical.

Pat Flynn:

That's it for this time. We'll be back soon with the final part of our discussion with Pat, Stu, and Charles. Thanks for listening. Until then, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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