

## Week 5: The Argument from Persons

- I. Why I believe in God
  - a. So far I have tried to show that the *existence* and *characteristics* of our universe are best accounted for in terms of a maximally great being, God (see weeks 3 and 4). Today I will present an argument for God based on the sorts of beings we find *in* our universe.
  - b. I will present an argument based on the existence of *persons*. This argument is rationally compelling to *me*, and I believe that it would be rationally compelling to a wide audience, given that it is based on premises that most people would find reasonable (see week 2 for an account of rationally compelling arguments).
- II. Some nifty features of the argument from persons
  - a. The argument from persons is based on the general problem of *accounting for conscious beings in a fundamentally physical world without God*. This problem is widely recognized by philosophers as being so difficult to solve that it has been called the **Hard Problem**.
    - i. A top philosopher in the philosophy of mind, David Chalmers (an atheist) coined the term “hard problem.” He writes, “Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? ...The usual explanatory methods of cognitive science and neuroscience do not suffice... When it comes to the hard problem, the standard approach has nothing to say.”<sup>1</sup> Chalmers explains that the reason science cannot (in principle) solve the Hard Problem is that science can at best explain the *functional role* of consciousness, but it cannot explain why consciousness experience should come to exist to begin with. (I defend this point below).
    - ii. Another leading philosopher in the philosophy of mind, Jaegwon Kim (from University of Notre Dame, though he is no friend of theism) in his most recent book argues against attempted solutions to the Hard Problem. He concludes, “What is becoming increasingly clear from the continuing debate over the mind-body problem is that currently popular [positions] are not easily tolerated by robust physicalism.”<sup>2</sup>
    - iii. Michael Huemer (an atheist philosopher) writes, “[The Hard Problem] is in my view a major, perhaps the major, challenge to our fundamental world-view, and it would require a major world-view-revision to resolve the difficulty. As far as I can tell, no philosophical theory has come anywhere near to solving this problem in any coherent and vaguely plausible way”<sup>3</sup>
      1. Huemer rules out the idea of God creating conscious beings as “silly.”

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<sup>1</sup> David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2(3):200-19, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World*, p 120.

<sup>3</sup> <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/mind.htm>

- b. The argument from persons has been so successful in exposing the problem of consciousness in a physical world without God that some atheist philosophers have even become skeptical that we have conscious experiences at all.
    - i. Paul Churchland<sup>4</sup> and Daniel Dennett<sup>5</sup> deny that people have beliefs or experience sensations in an effort to save physicalism (the view that only physical things exist). These guys are **eliminativists** with respect to consciousness.
    - ii. Those who deny consciousness appear to deny *introspection* as a valid source of knowledge. For it is introspectively undeniable that we have beliefs and desires.
  - c. Just as there are many types of the cosmological and design arguments, so too there are many types arguments from persons. Three main types are as follows:
    - i. The argument from persons based on conscious experiences (pains, desires, thoughts, etc)
    - ii. The argument from persons based on intentional actions
      - 1. Regarding stage one, the idea is that no physical thing or aggregate of physical things can *intentionally* perform actions.
    - iii. The argument from persons based on moral principles that apply to persons.
      - 1. Regarding stage one, the idea is that moral principles do not apply to any physical thing or aggregate of physical things.
  - d. The argument from persons is a *two-staged* argument. In the first stage, a case is made for thinking that persons are not solely physical beings. In the second stage, it is argued that the best explanation (perhaps the only *possible* explanation) for the existence persons is an eternal personal being that can be reasonably identified as God.
- III. The Argument from Conscious Persons
- a. What are persons?
    - i. I am not in a position to provide a full account of persons. But one key feature of persons is that they have the capacity to have **conscious mental states**.
      - 1. A conscious mental state is any state that a person can experience. Paradigm examples include sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and desires.
      - 2. For example, I am rolling around in the snow, and I experience a cold chill sensation. The *cold chill sensation* is a mental state.

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<sup>4</sup> Churchland, P.M. (1989). *A Neurocomputational Perspective: The Nature of Mind and the Structure of Science*.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dennett, "Quining Qualia" in *Philosophy of Mind; Classical and Contemporary Readings*.

3. I think that God is the most wonderful being. My *thinking that God is the most wonderful being* is a mental state.
  4. I believe that metal is not made of wood. This belief is a mental state.
  5. I desire a bowl of mint-chocolate chip ice cream. This desire is a mental state.
  6. Notice that although you can be directly aware of your mental states, no neurosurgeon could find your mental states by probing the insides of your brain. So on the face of it, it appears that your mental states are not the same as your brain states. I will present two arguments for this same conclusion.
- b. Stage I: Conscious persons have nonphysical characteristics.
- i. **First Argument:** According to Christian philosopher, JP Moreland, “We know that mental states are in no sense physical (*i.e.* part of the physical, material world) because they possess four features not owned by physical states.
    1. First, *there is a raw qualitative feel — a “what it is like to have it” — to a mental state.* For example, pain hurts. A physical state may cause pain, but the physical state itself can be completely described in the vocabulary of physics and chemistry, or in the commonsense vocabulary of the physical world. Being hurtful, however, is not describable in the vocabulary of any of these.
    2. Second, *many mental states have intentionality — “ofness” or “aboutness” — which is directed towards an object.* A thought, for instance, is *about* the moon. But no physical state is about anything. The *brain* is a physical object, but a brain state cannot be about the moon any more than a rock or a cloud can be about the moon. Only a state of *mind* can be about the moon.
    3. Third, *mental states are internal, private and immediately accessible to the subject having them.* A scientist can know more about my brain than I do. But I have direct knowledge of my mind which is not available to anyone else.
    4. Fourth, *mental states fail to have crucial features that characterize physical states.* Unlike physical states, they have no spatial extension (it doesn’t make sense to ask how tall or wide someone’s thoughts are) and they have no location either (which is why it doesn’t make sense to ask *where* someone’s thoughts are). In general, mental states cannot be described using physical language.”<sup>6</sup>

**ii. Second Argument: The Multiple Realizability Argument**

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<sup>6</sup>See Moreland, “Does the Argument from Mind Provide Evidence for God?”  
<http://boundless.org/features/a0000901.html>.

1. This argument has been very persuasive in motivating philosophers of mind to give up the belief that the characteristics of persons are purely physical.
2. Premise 1: It is possible that two physically distinguishable organisms have the characteristic of *experiencing sharp pain*.
  - a. By possible, I mean *logically* possible. Something might be physically impossible and yet still logically possible. For example, it is *logically* possible for objects to approach and then exceed the speed of light, but according to Einstein's special theory of relativity, this situation is *physically* impossible. So even if it were somehow physically impossible for physically distinguishable organisms to share the characteristic of experiencing sharp pain, it would still be logically possible. All I am claiming here is mere logical possibility.
  - b. One reason to accept premise 1 is that there appears to be actual examples of different organisms experiencing pain: variously structured animals act as if they can have the same sort of pain experience.
  - c. A second (stronger) reason to accept premise 1 is that it is *conceivable* that two physically distinguishable organisms have the same sort of pain experience. And **conceivability is a good guide to possibility**.
    - i. For a defense of the claim that conceivability is a good guide to possibility as applied to mental properties, see David Chalmers, "Does conceivability entail possibility?" <http://consc.net/papers/conceivability.html>.
3. Premise 2: If x and y are different names for the very same characteristic, then it is not possible that something have x without having y (since x and y refer to the same characteristic).
4. Conclusion: the characteristic of *experiencing sharp pain* is not identical to any physical characteristic of an organism. **Proof:** from premise 1, it is possible that two organisms exist, O1 and O2, where O1 and O2 both experience a kind of pain P. Now P cannot be any physical characteristic of O1. For suppose P were a physical characteristic of O1. Then it would be impossible for P to exist without O1's physical characteristics existing (premise 2). But it *is* possible for P to exist without O1's physical characteristics existing: P would still exist in O2 even if O1 did not exist.

Therefore, the pain that O1 experiences cannot be a physical characteristic of O1.

- iii. This Second Argument is responsible for the demise of the view that mental characteristics are identical to physical characteristics among philosophers.
  - 1. Although not *every* philosopher has abandoned the *mind characteristics = physical characteristics* view, it is safe to say that it has been largely abandoned since the late 1960s when the multiple realizability argument was developed.<sup>7</sup>
  - 2. The use of rational argument to cause the demise of the *mind characteristics = physical characteristics* view is an example of *progress in philosophy*.
- iv. Our conclusion so far is that *conscious persons have nonphysical characteristics*.
- v. **Objection:** Brain science tells us that our “experiences” can be traced to certain regions of our brain. Strong evidence for this is that a neurosurgeon is able to cause persons to have certain experiences by stimulating certain parts of the brain. As a result, one might think that science has shown that conscious experiences are just parts of the brain after all.
- vi. **Reply to Objection:** All that brain science establishes (at best) is that there is a *correlation* between one’s experiences and one’s brain states. Science cannot in principle establish that brain states *just are* mental states, only that they are somehow correlated. According to neuroscience, whenever a certain C-fiber in my brain is stimulated, I experience a certain pain sensation. These two are correlated. But a *correlation* between two events does not establish *identity* any more than the correlation between a sunrise and a rooster crowing establishes that a sunrise is identical to a rooster crowing. Moreland puts it this way: “just because A causes B, that does not mean that A is the same thing as B! Fire causes smoke, but fire is not smoke itself. Being stuck by a pin causes pain, but being stuck by a pin is not pain itself. A desire to vote causes one’s arm to go up, but that desire is different than the arm’s going up. The fact that a state of one’s mind can affect physical states and the fact that physical states can affect the state of one’s mind do not mean that corresponding mental and physical states are identical to each other. In fact, they are fundamentally different.”<sup>8</sup>
- c. Stage II: The origin of conscious persons resulted from an eternal conscious being(s)
  - i. Premise 1: Conscious persons have an origin

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<sup>7</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World*, p2.

<sup>8</sup> See Moreland, “Does the Argument from Mind Provide Evidence for God?”  
<http://boundless.org/features/a0000901.html>.

- ii. Premise 2: If the origin of conscious persons could not have resulted from the rearrangement of physical stuff, then they must have resulted from an eternal conscious being(s).<sup>9</sup>
- iii. Premise 3: The origin of conscious persons could not have resulted from the rearrangement of physical stuff
- iv. Conclusion: the origin of conscious persons resulted from an eternal conscious being(s).
- v. God is the most plausible identity of the eternal conscious being(s) (compared to other candidates, such as eternal conscious beings that would not qualify as “God”), given that the *prior probability* of God is higher than that of other possible hypotheses: see week 2.
- vi. **In defense of premise 2:** If the origin of conscious persons could not have resulted from the rearrangement of physical stuff, then they must have resulted from an eternal conscious being(s). Suppose physical stuff cannot account for the origin of conscious persons. Then how else could conscious persons have originated?
  1. Option 1: *Conscious persons originated uncaused.* But this is impossible because nothing can pop into existence uncaused. Option 1 also violates a scientific principle according to which it is more reasonable than not to think that facts have explanations (for an explication of this principle, see my defense of the cosmological argument, week 3).
  2. Option 2: *Conscious persons originated from one or more non-eternal conscious entities.* Option 2 only pushes the problem back to the origin of this non-eternal conscious being. What accounts for *its* existence? We could answer that by saying that it too was caused by a non-eternal conscious being, which in turn was caused by a non-eternal conscious being, and on and on, with no first being in the series. But this answer is one that I do not think very many people would take seriously. And furthermore, unless at least one of the beings existed *necessarily* (and eternally), there would be no reasonable answer to the question “why are there any conscious beings rather than none at all?” For more details on how this is a problem, see my defense of the cosmological argument (week 3).
  3. Option 3: *Conscious persons originated from an eternal conscious being(s).* Option 3 appears to be the only reasonable alternative to Options 1 and 2 above (the option that conscious beings resulted from non-conscious physical stuff is considered below). Also, it is not hard to see how a

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<sup>9</sup> By “physical” I have in mind material stuff that is not itself conscious. But we could generalize “physical” to include *immaterial*, nonconscious stuff, so that our argument even rules out the peculiar option of consciousness coming from immaterial nonconscious stuff.

conscious Being (like God) who has the power to create things from nothing could produce the finite conscious minds we possess.

- vii. **In defense of premise 3:** The origin of conscious persons could not have resulted from the rearrangement of physical stuff. How could conscious persons result from physical stuff?
1. Option 1: *Conscious persons just are certain arrangements of physical stuff.* Option 1 was already ruled out by stage 1 of our argument. Recall that persons have mental states that have features (such as being *felt*, being *about* things, and being *subjectively* accessible) that no physical bit (or group of bits) of matter has. Therefore, persons cannot be identical to arrangements of physical stuff.
  2. Option 2: *Persons' nonphysical characteristics are determined by physical stuff.*
    - a. Physical stuff **determines** something S if S's identity is *necessitated* by that physical stuff.
    - b. For example, if a bunch of stones are piled together, then those stones *determine* that the *characteristic of weighing 400 pounds* is had by the pile of stones.
    - c. Another example: If two people are married, then their marriage determines that they are *family*. Notice that *being a family* can be determined by different groupings of people (depending on the number of kids, for example).
    - d. Another example involves computers. Physically distinguishable computers can *determine* that the same software exists. For example, the very same type of program, let's say Microsoft Word can run on a Pentium I hardware *or* on a Pentium II hardware. Two distinguishable types of hardware can determine the same type of software.
    - e. After the demise of the *mental characteristics = physical characteristics* view, many philosophers have hoped that they could account for consciousness in a physical world by treating mental states as **functional states** that are determined by physical states (similar to how software is determined by hardware). This view is called **functionalism**.
    - f. According to functionalism, mental properties are **functional properties that play certain roles**. For example, *being in pain* plays the role of causing a person to wince or shout "ouch" whenever "damage" is caused to that person. So even though physically *distinguishable* organisms can

experience the same type of pain, their pain is an *indistinguishable* functional role. In both organisms, pain is the same thing: *wincing or shouting whenever damage occurs*. And this functional role is something that is determined by purely physical stuff.

- g. But functionalism is plagued by several devastating problems. I will present two of the problems that convince Jaegwon Kim to abandon functionalism. Recall that Kim is one of the foremost philosophers of mind today, and he is an atheist who would love to find a way of accounting for consciousness in solely physicalist terms.
  - i. Kim points out that some mental states have features that are *not* functional.
    - 1. Consider for example, the experience of tasting strawberry shortcake. This experience is sweet, and its sweetness is *unified and intrinsic*. By unified and intrinsic I mean that one can be aware of the sweetness without also being aware of the *functional role* of sweetness in relation to other mental and brain states.
    - 2. Contrast this with Microsoft Word. MW is defined in terms of a *complex* set of functional capacities (allowing typing, etc.) One cannot know fully what MW is without also knowing a set of its functional roles. Also, some of MW's functional roles involve allowing persons to syntactically represent their mental states. Thus, MW is defined partly in terms of mental states – as is all software. So software does not appear to be a function of solely physical states. (This is one reason that the software-hardware analogy cannot be a *solution* to the Hard Problem of consciousness.)
  - ii. Kim's most famous objection to functionalism (an objection that applies to *all* theories which claim that mental states are determined by physical stuff) is that our

mental states can cause events to happen in the world (e.g. My *intending to quench my thirst* can cause my body to move toward a cup of water). But this would be impossible if all our mental states were determined by physical stuff. For if physical stuff determines our mental states, then the physical stuff would preempt the mental from causal contribution. The moving of bits of matter would do all the causal work, leaving no room for mental states to cause anything. This is similar to how family *members* do the causal work, whereas *being a family* (the property that is determined by the family members) cannot cause anything to happen. For a full defense of this problem, see Kim's, *Mind in a Physical World*.

- h. Another problem with option 2: The Chinese Nation problem: Imagine the *Chinese nation* following exactly the commands of a computer program functionally identical to your brain during the time you are experiencing a refreshing drink of water on a sunny Phoenix afternoon. But the *Chinese nation* could not be experiencing anything of the kind! Even if the Chinese nation and your brain were identical in function, they would not have the same experience. So the functional account of experience appears to be incorrect.
  - i. A possible reply would be to affirm that the *Chinese nation* really does enjoy the thirst quenching experience when the Chinese follow the commands of a computer program that is functionally identical to your brain. But this reply strikes me as highly counterintuitive.
- i. And *another* problem with option 2: The zombie argument
  - i. Premise 1: It is possible for there to be a bunch of physical stuff arranged in the same way as my body, except with no consciousness. (Though this premise is certainly debatable.)
  - ii. Premise 2: If consciousness is determined by the physical stuff, then it is not possible for there to be a bunch of physical stuff

- arranged in the same way as my body,  
except with no consciousness.
- iii. Therefore, consciousness is not determined by the physical stuff.
  - j. Huemer summarizes the problems with option 2 when he says, “You can not derive a statement about colors from any set of non-color statements. You can't derive geometrical statements from non-geometrical ones.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, you cannot derive statements about *conscious experiences* from statements about moving bits of matter.
3. Option 3: physical stuff **produced** conscious persons
- a. The problem with this option is that physical stuff does not appear to be the right sort of stuff to produce non-physical stuff. First, physical stuff could not produce mental “stuff” by *determining* that mental “stuff” exists, as we saw above. Nor can physical stuff *choose* to create brand new mental “stuff” since physical stuff is not the sort of stuff that can make *choices*. Nor can I think of any other way in which physical stuff might produce mental “stuff.”<sup>11</sup> Both rational intuition and empirical evidence go against the claim that physical stuff could produce non-physical, mental stuff. Thus Moreland states, “Though evolutionary theory can handle the appearance of the physical brain, the appearance of the nonphysical *mind* is utterly unpredictable and inexplicable. Thus the emergence of minds and consciousness seems to be a case of getting something from nothing.”<sup>12</sup>
    - i. Pushback: physical brain states can cause mental states. So it looks like physical stuff *can* cause mental “stuff”.
    - ii. One problem with this reply is that it confuses the situation in which *physical stuff produces brand new mental stuff* with the situation in which *physical stuff merely affects already existing mental stuff*. Even though physical stuff can affect mental stuff, physical stuff simply cannot produce non-

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<sup>10</sup> <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/mind.htm>

<sup>11</sup> It might be suggested that physical stuff produces mental “stuff” in virtue of some law that connects the two kinds of stuff. But this suggestion only pushes the problem back a step: what would account for how there came to be such a law? Clearly, it could not be physical stuff.

<sup>12</sup> Moreland, “Does the Argument from Mind Provide Evidence for God?”  
<http://boundless.org/features/a0000901.html>.

physical stuff from scratch. Bits of matter moving and bumping could not produce a non-material stuff from scratch anymore than a sea of blue marbles could, just by moving and bumping, produce a brand new red marble from scratch.

- iii. A second problem with the reply is that it assumes that brain states cause mental states *in virtue of the nature of the brain state alone*. But it seems to me that no property of a brain state fully explains why it should have the affect it does on a mental state, unless there is, in addition to the physical and mental states, some *psychosomatic law* that correlates the two states. But physical stuff cannot explain the existence of such laws since laws that govern physical things would exist *prior to* the physical things that they govern. Therefore, even though physical states can cause mental states, physical stuff does not appear to be capable of accounting for the causal connections between mental and physical states.
4. Therefore, the origin of conscious persons could not have resulted from the rearrangement of physical stuff.
5. **Objection:** In time, science may be able to explain why consciousness exists in terms of purely physical causes. So the argument from consciousness is based on our current ignorance. But just because we don't know what the explanation could be now, does not mean that we won't one day discover what the physical explanation is.
6. **Reply to Objection:** Philosophers disagree about a lot of things (they even disagree over whether we can perceive the external world!) But I am not aware of *any* philosopher who would disagree that the above objection is really *bad*, that is, unsound.<sup>13</sup> The reason it is a bad objection is because science is not in a position to explain consciousness *in principle*. Empirical tests can indicate *correlations* between brain states and mental states. They might even tell us the functional roles that mental states normally play. But empirical tests cannot tell us *how* and *why* mental states should be correlated with physical states to begin with. Accounting for consciousness in a physical

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<sup>13</sup> A possible exception would be those philosophers who deny that consciousness exists at all. But even these philosophers admit that their denial of consciousness was arrived at through philosophical reflection rather than through empirical experiments alone.

world has been called the Hard Problem because it is a problem that cannot be solved even in principle by the empirical sciences. Incidentally, if my argument from persons is sound, then the Hard Problem cannot be solved without admitting the existence of an eternal conscious Being.

7. The reaction by secular philosophers to the sort of arguments I've presented is telling.
  - a. Some philosophers are compelled to deny consciousness altogether (it may seem like we have feelings, but we really don't. We don't even experience the feeling that something *seems* to be the case!)
  - b. A growing number of philosophers are flirting with the idea that everything is conscious: atoms can literally feel sensations.
    - i. Apart from grating against common sense, this position only translates the problem of the origin of persons into the problem of the origin of conscious bits of matter. And according to our argument, the solution to that problem apparently can only be an eternal conscious being(s).
  - c. Some philosophers are seeking to revitalize *mental characteristics = physical characteristics* view. But I've yet to find a good reply to the multiple realizability argument against this position.
  - d. Some philosophers just admit that naturalists have a Hard Problem.
    - i. Kim argues against naturalistic solutions to the Hard Problem. Then Kim considers the alternative according to which non-physical persons exist: "It will be premature, however, to conclude that an all-out dualism [the theory that persons have a nonphysical component that is not determined by physics] offers a more realistic chance of saving the mental. For most of us, dualism is *uncharted territory*, and we have little knowledge of what possibilities and dangers lurk in this dark cavern" (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup>
- IV. The conclusion of all this is that the existence of conscious persons seems to provide strong evidence for the existence of an eternal conscious Being who may reasonably be identified as God.

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<sup>14</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World*, p. 120.