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ON THE SIMPLICITY OF THE SOUL

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“Gregory of Nyssa tells us Plato asserted that the intellectual substance which is called the soul is united to the body by a kind of spiritual contact; and this is understood in the sense in which a thing that moves or acts touches the thing that is moved or is passive, And hence Plato used to say, as the aforesaid Gregory relates, that man is not something that is composed of soul and body, but is a soul using a body, so that he is understood to be in a body in somewhat the same way as a sailor is in a ship.” St. Thomas Aquinas.¹

The Soul as Incorporeal

I will defend the thesis according to which there is something that is metaphysically unique about persons: we have a nature wholly unlike anything that is known to be true of things that are known to be compound physical things. I will attempt to show how this thesis coheres with the traditional doctrine of “the simplicity of the soul.” And I will argue that the doctrine of the simplicity of the soul is, in William James’ terms, very much of a live option.

I am using the word “soul” in the way in which St. Augustine, Descartes, Bolzano and many others have used it: to mean the same thing as “person.” In this use of the word, you and I and everyone else can be said to be souls. (This use of the term “soul” is one of two traditional philosophical uses. The other is the Aristotelian use, in which the term “soul” designates a *power*, or *principle*, by means of which certain substances think and perceive.)

According to the thesis of “the simplicity of the soul,” we are substances but not compounds of substances; we are, therefore, monads. We are not like pieces of furniture, for such things are composed of other substances—as this chair is composed of back, seat and legs. Why, then, say that you and I are simple substances?

Using the first person, I will begin with the familiar question: “What is the relation between *me* and my body?” There are three possibilities. The first is that I am identical with my body. The second is that I am identical with a proper part of my body. And the third is that I am not identical with *any* body. (Surely, whatever else I may be, I am not identical with any bodily thing having parts that are not shared by *this* body.) Isn’t the hypothesis that I am identical with some proper part of this body more plausible than the hypothesis that I am identical with the whole of this gross body? This hand, say, is not an essential part of me. I could have lost it, after all, just as I have lost other parts, without thereby ceasing to be.

What is an *incorporeal* substance? It is a substance that is *not* a bodily substance. What, then, is a *bodily* substance? St. Augustine raises this question in *Of the Soul and its Origin* and he tells us that bodily substances are *compound* substances:

If that is not “body” which does not consist of limbs of flesh, then the earth cannot be a body, nor the sky, nor a stone, nor water, nor the stars, nor anything of the kind. If, however, a “body” is whatever consists of parts, whether greater or less, which occupy greater or smaller local spaces, then all the things which I have just mentioned are bodies.²

The thesis that we are, in this sense, *incorporeal* things is not the same as the thesis that we are things *composed of incorporeal stuff*. If we are composed of incorporeal stuff, then, of course, we are incorporeal. But we can be incorporeal without being composed of any stuff at all, as would be the case if we were simple substances. A simple substance, therefore, does not require a kind of stuff that is foreign to the world of physics. Indeed, there is very good reason to believe that every extended physical body contains inner and outer boundaries and therefore has constituents that are unextended.

A Cartesian Approach

I propose that we treat these difficult questions from a Cartesian point of view.

This means, first, that we begin by considering the nature of our *mental* properties. We should begin here for the very good reason that our mental properties provide us with the most assured information that we have about *any* individual thing or substance. On the basis of what we know about our own thinking, we may derive certain conclusions about the nature of ourselves.

A Cartesian approach is also rationalistic. We presuppose that we are *rational* beings: we are able to “conceive things that are purely intelligible,” such *entia rationis* as numbers and properties or attributes.³ In conceiving these things, we are able to tell them apart and to see just what it is that they logically require in order to be exemplified. We can see, for example, that the property of *being a body*, if it is to be exemplified, logically requires an individual thing that has other individual things as proper parts.

We will consider the nature of mental properties, then, and ask ourselves what kind of entity *could* have such properties.

The Qualitative Nature of Mental Properties

Our mental life, as many philosophers have said, has the property of being *qualitative*. To explicate what the relevant sense of “qualitative” is, I will list certain formal or structural marks of the property of thinking. These marks, in combination, will define a type of property which, so far as anyone knows, is exemplified only by things that are capable of thinking.

(1) If thinking is going on, then there is a *substance*, or *individual thing*, that is doing the thinking. Consider any familiar mental property—for example, judging, wondering, wishing, hoping, enjoying oneself, being sad, being depressed, having a sensation, or dreaming. In grasping the nature of such properties, we can see that they are properties that can be exemplified only by substances, or individual things. Judging, wondering, wishing, hoping cannot possibly be properties of *states* of things, or of *processes*. And they cannot be properties of *abstract objects* such as properties, numbers, and relations. *You* can hope for rain, but no state or process or number or property or relation can hope for rain.

In other words, the fact that a certain mental property is exemplified—the fact, say, that the property of hoping for rain is exemplified—logically implies that there is a *substance* that has that

property. This is a fact about the property itself: the property of hoping for rain is necessarily such that the only things that can have it are substances. And similarly for the other mental properties.

These facts, of course, should be considered together with the *unity of consciousness*. If I can know that I see people who are running in time with the music that I hear, then the substance that knows this fact is identical with the substance that sees the people who are running and is identical with the substance that hears the music that is being played.⁴

What more does a mental property require in order to be exemplified? The answer is: very little—indeed astonishingly little. This brings us to a second feature of thinking, one that points in the direction of the simplicity of the soul.

(2) So far as *logical* requirements are concerned, mental properties are such that they may be exemplified by simple substances. Those of our activities that are not mental do not have this feature. The property of rowing a boat, for example, is not like that. The property of rowing a boat logically requires the existence of ever so many substances *in addition to* the person who is rowing the boat. But the property of *thinking about rowing a boat* doesn't logically require a single substance other than the person who is thinking. And this means that it doesn't *logically* require that the person who is thinking have any proper parts. You could think about rowing a boat even if you were a monad.

What I have just said is true of the relatively simple thought that you have when you think about rowing a boat. But the thought may be as complex as you like and yet not need a more complex substance in order to be exemplified. Let the content of the thought be one that would be normally expressed by a statement that is logically complex: a conditional, say, having a disjunction as antecedent and a conjunction as consequent. This thought, too, does not logically require any complexity on the part of the substance that thinks it. You could think in such a way even if you were only a simple substance.

But there are possible misunderstandings.

Presumably nothing can think unless it has a brain. The property of thinking, therefore, may causally require the existence of a brain. But this fact is quite consistent with what has just been said. When we say that thinking causally requires a brain, we mean that it is *causally necessary*—or *physically necessary*—that whatever thinks

has a brain. But when we say that the property of thinking does not logically require that the things that have it have proper parts, we are saying only that it is *logically possible* that the thinker is an unextended thing. Clearly no *logical* contradiction is involved in saying that the thinker is unextended.

There is an elementary point here that is sometimes missed. I need a brain in order to think just as I need eyes in order to see and ears in order to hear. But I see *with*, or *by means of*, my eyes and I hear *with*, or *by means of* my ears. Those physical organs do not do my seeing and hearing *for* me. As Bishop Butler said, I see with my eyes in the same sense in which I see with my glasses.⁵ And similarly in the case of my brain. *I* may want to take a walk tomorrow and *I* may wonder whether you are interested in this particular point. But *my brain* doesn't want to take a walk tomorrow. And *it* does not wonder whether you are interested in anything that I am asserting; unlike me it will not be in the least disappointed if you are not.

Mental properties, in order to be had, need no substances other than a single simple substance. And yet such properties are *open* to any number of substances. For any number you like, the mental properties that we have cited may be exemplified by just *that* number of things. Let us say that such properties are "*open*":

D1 P is open =Df P is possibly such that, for any number *n*, there are *n* substances that have P and *n* substances that do not have P.

(3) Mental properties are *repeatable* in the following sense:

D2 P is repeatable =Df P is possibly such that there is something that does not have it but did have it and will have it.

I have recommended that we take a Cartesian approach to these questions. But so far as repeatability is concerned, I would say that Descartes went wrong. He had held, somewhat implausibly, that the property of *thinking*—the property of *being conscious*—is *not* repeatable. Once you lose it, according to him, you cease to be. This point is quite essential to what is called Cartesian philosophy, but it is not essential to what I have called a "Cartesian approach" to the mental.

May we say that the property of *being able to think* is repeatable? Not if we use "x is able to think" to mean that x is such that *no logical contradiction* is involved in saying that it thinks. But if one takes "x

is able to think,” as it is intended here, to mean that *x* has the *power* or *potentiality* of thinking, then one may say that the property it expresses is repeatable; for a person may lose such a power or potency and then take it on again.

I now list two structural features of some of the properties of *compound* substances—two features that are *not* shared by any mental property. These have to do with parts of substances—where the term “part” is so understood that we may say that a *part* of a substance is itself a substance.

(4) One feature that is known to characterize certain properties of compound things and that is also known *not* to hold of any mental property is that of being compositive.⁶ Consider such properties as being magnetized, being warm, being heavy. If a physical thing is composed of two parts, each of which is magnetized or warm or heavy, then that physical thing itself is magnetized or warm or heavy. A *compositive* property is a property of this nature:

D3 P is compositive = Df P is necessarily such that whatever is composed of things that have P is itself a thing that has P.

Being extended and being green are also properties that are compositive.

Of course, not *all* properties of compounds are compositive. If a body is composed of two parts each of which weighs exactly 10 pounds, then it would be a mistake to suppose that that body itself weighs exactly 10 pounds. But although some physical properties are compositive and some are not, *no* mental property is compositive.

From the fact that an aggregate is composed of two persons each of whom is thinking, it does not follow that the aggregate is thinking. You could want the weather to be colder and I could want it to be warmer; but that heap or aggregate which is the pair of us (that thing that weighs 300 pounds if you and I each weigh 150 pounds) does not want anything at all.

(5) A closely related feature of mental properties is that of being what we may call “*divisive*”:

D4 P is divisive = Df P is necessarily such that any compound thing that has it has a proper part that has it.

Any body that is extended also has a proper part that is extended. But the fact that I am hoping for rain does not imply that I have a proper part that is hoping for rain. That is to say, the fact that I am

a substance that hopes for rain does not imply that there is *another* substance that is a proper part of me and that *that* substance *also* hopes for rain.

We now describe the final positive feature of mental properties.

(6) Mental properties are among those properties that have traditionally been called *internal*, or *nonrelational*. If an individual has properties that consist in *relating* that individual to *other* individuals, then that individual also has internal properties, properties that do *not* consist in relating it to other individuals.

Roughly speaking, we may say that my internal properties are those of my properties that would not tell you anything about any substance other than myself. If you know that I have the property of being married, then you are in a position to know that there is a person who has a property that I don't have—namely, that of having married me. But if I tell you that I feel well or that I do not feel well, then what I tell you does not logically imply anything about anyone else but me. We may put this point a little more precisely by saying that an *internal* property of a substance tells you something about the substance itself but doesn't tell you anything about the open and repeatable properties of any other substance.

D5 P is an internal property of substances =Df (1) P is necessarily such that whatever has it is a substance; and (2) either P is necessary to whatever has it or P is necessarily such that whatever has it has every open and repeatable property that P implies.

The sense of “imply” intended in this definition may be defined this way:

Property P implies Q =Df P is necessarily such that, if it is exemplified, then Q either was, is or will be exemplified.

(In saying that mental properties are internal to substances, we are taking account of the first of the six features of the mental that we singled out—namely, that mental properties are restricted to substances.)

With this concept of internality, we can assure ourselves that such properties as that of *being in the vicinity of a thinker* will not be counted as qualitative. Such properties, although they are exemplified by every thinker, are also exemplified by countless things that are not thinkers.

These five features, when taken together, yield the philosophical concept of being *qualitative*. They provide us with a sense of “qualitative property” which is such that, so far as we know, only substances that are capable of thinking may be said to have qualitative properties. But we must proceed with care in formulating just what the relevant sense of “qualitative” is. It will not be enough, for example, to say that a qualitative property is a property that has the features just singled out. The property of being *either thinking or moving* fulfills all five conditions, but this property, of course, is not restricted to things that are capable of thinking.

There is good reason to say that *thinking or moving*, unlike certain other properties, may be called a “disjunctive property.” And disjunctive properties may be distinguished from conjunctive properties.⁷ Thus we could say:

D is a property-disjunction of G and H =Df D is necessarily such that it is exemplified if and only if either G or H is exemplified; and G and H are such that neither implies the other and neither implies the negation of the other.

C is a property-conjunction of G and H =Df C implies G; C implies H; everything implied by C implies something that either G or H implies; and G and H are such that neither implies the other and neither implies the negation of the other.

Our definition of “qualitative property” should now go this way:

D6 P is qualitative =Df Consider the property Q of being both open and repeatable, being neither compositive nor divisive, and being an internal property of individuals: Q is exemplified by P and by either all or none of the disjuncts of any disjunctive property that is equivalent to P and by each conjunct of any conjunctive property equivalent to P.

The final qualification, pertaining to conjunctive properties, makes it clear that such conjunctive properties as *walking and (not-walking or thinking)* are not qualitative.

Anything that has a qualitative property, then, is a substance that is capable of thinking.

Five Philosophical Arguments

Some philosophers have spoken about *proving* the simplicity of the soul. But, as one might reasonably expect, the attempts at such proofs usually presuppose something that is at least problematic. There are, however, philosophical arguments that may be said to *bear upon* the simplicity of the soul. I will consider five such arguments.

(A) The first is the argument that Kant presents in the second of his supposed “paralogisms of transcendental psychology.” He formulates the argument this way:

That, the action of which can never be regarded as the concurrence of several things, is *simple*. Now the soul, or the thinking ‘I’, is such a thing. Therefore, etc.⁸

Kant states that the argument “is no mere sophistical play...but an inference that appears to withstand even the closest scrutiny” (A351). Then he goes on to say:

Suppose a compound thing were to think. Then every part of that compound would have a part of that thought. The thought that the compound would then have would be composed of the thoughts of the parts of that compound. But this would be contradictory. For thoughts that are distributed among different thinkers can never constitute a single thought. From the fact that the different words of a piece of poetry are thought of by different thinkers it does not follow that the aggregate of those thinkers has thought of the piece of poetry. It is, therefore, impossible for an aggregate to think.

Given the conclusion, it is a simple matter to complete the argument: I think; therefore I am not a compound.

But consider what is expressed by the second sentence: “Every part of that compound would have a part of that thought.” What is the justification for saying that, if a compound thing has a certain thought, then one part of the compound has “a part” of that thought and another part of the compound has “another part” of the thought? One must *find* a sense for the use of “part” in the expression “a part of a thought,” a sense that enables us to apply the expression to such a thought, say, as that of noting that a certain face is familiar. I would say that, having so such sense, we have no reason to accept the statement in question.

(B) The second argument is suggested in Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed*.⁹ In discussing the incorporeality of God, Maimonides

formulates—and rejects—an argument which could readily be restated as an argument for the simplicity of the soul. It is this:

If God were corporeal, His true essence would necessarily either exist entirely in every part of the body, that is to say, in each of its atoms, or would be confined to one of the atoms. In the latter alternative the other atoms would be superfluous, and the existence of the corporeal being [with the exception of the one atom] would be of no purpose. If, on the other hand, each atom fully represented the Divine Being, the whole body would not be *one* deity, but a complex of deities, and this would be contrary to the doctrine adopted by the *kalâm* that God is one.

Maimonides rejects this argument on the ground that it has a false presupposition—namely, that God is composed of atoms. But in application to souls other the deity, it has at least this plausibility:

Consider the hypothesis, with respect to the soul and to some extended proper part P of the gross physical body, that the soul is identical with P. However small P may be, there will be no sufficient reason for supposing that P itself, rather than some proper part of P, is identical with the soul. And so, to the question, “How small could I be?”, the answer would seem, “Smaller than any dimension that one can specify.”

(C) Bolzano’s discussion, in the *Athanasia*, suggests a further possibility.¹⁰

- (1) All compounds are necessarily such that they have parts.
- (2) No bearers of psychological properties are necessarily such that they have parts.

Therefore

- (3) No bearers of psychological properties are compounds.

The first premise seems to me to be beyond question. And the argument is formally valid. So what about the second premise?

A rational analysis of properties shows us that mental properties do not require that their bearers be compound things. But from the fact that psychological properties are possibly such that their bearers have no proper parts, it does not follow that the bearers of psychological properties are possibly such that *they* have no proper parts.

(D) The doctrine of mereological essentialism may seem to provide another argument for the simplicity of the soul, but the argument, I believe, is subject to the same difficulties that we have just found in Bolzano’s argument.

According to the principle of mereological essentialism, if a thing P is a part of a whole W, then W is necessarily such that P is a part of W. From this principle it follows that, if W is possibly such that it has no parts, then W has no parts and is, therefore, simple.¹¹ If this consequence is combined with the assumption that I am possibly such that I am a simple substance, then it yields the conclusion that I am a simple substance. But unfortunately this Cartesian conclusion does not enable us to deduce that *I* am possibly such that I am a simple substance.

(E) The final argument, which is somewhat more modest, has three premises. The first is an empirical proposition, stating certain things about our psychological properties. The second and third premises are Cartesian: they tell us what rational beings can know about the nature of the psychological properties that they have.

I will state the argument using the first person plural.

- (1) We have qualitative properties.
- (2) Every qualitative property that we are acquainted with is known to be possibly such that it is exemplified by simple substances.
- (3) No qualitative property is known to be such that it may be exemplified by compound substances.

Hence

- (4) Some of our properties are known to be such that simple substances can have them and are not known to be such that compound substances can have them.

Therefore

- (5) We have a nature which is wholly unlike the nature that anything known to be a compound physical thing is known to have.

The conclusion of this argument leaves us with two possibilities: either (a) the soul is an unextended substance or (b) souls have a type of property that extended physical substances are not known to have. The latter option is defended by those who have argued that the fact of thinking indicates the presence of a peculiar type of “emergent property” in nature.¹²

Souls and Complete Human Beings

I have said that we are souls and that souls are simple substances. But it is also said, even by those who have held that the soul is simple, that *persons* are compound things having souls as parts.¹³ Can we have it both ways? Descartes, although he held that the soul is an unextended substance, felt compelled to say that a “complete man” is a compound consisting of the soul and the body.¹⁴

If the soul is simple and the person is a compound of soul and body, which would I be—the simple substance which is the soul or the compound substance which has the soul as one of its parts?

If we say (1) that I am a thinking being and (2) that thinking things and souls are the same, then we should also say (3) that I *am* a soul; and therefore (if we take “have” in its ordinary sense) we should say (4) that I do not *have* a soul. And this is what is suggested in the reference to Gregory of Nyssa, with which we began.

What, then, is the distinction between a boundary that has no dimensions and a monad? A boundary is an entity that depends for its existence upon being a boundary of *another* entity. It is necessarily such that there is a three-dimensional thing of which it *is* a boundary.¹⁵ But a monad is a *simple substance*. This means, as Descartes had noted, that it is not ontologically dependent upon any other contingent thing. A substance is an entity which is possibly such that there is no other entity *in* which it exists.¹⁶

Notes

1. The citation is from pages 35-6 of the translation by M. C. Fitzpatrick and J. C. Wellmuth, of *On Spiritual Creatures*; (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1949). The translators note that another version of the text reads: Plato “does not mean that man is made up of body and soul, but that he is a soul using a body and, as it were, clothed with a body” (P. 35n.).
2. St. Augustine, *Of the Soul and its Origin*, Book IV, Ch. 17; in Marcus Dobs, ed., *The Anti-Pelagian Writings of St. Augustine*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), p. 315.
3. See René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, Section 32; in E.S.Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. I, p. 232.
4. Compare Chapter IV (“On the Unity of Consciousness”), in Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); this work first appeared in 1874.

5. Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, Part I, Chapter 1 ("Of a Future Life"); in *The Whole Works of Joseph Butler, LL.D.* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839), p. 7. Compare Bernard Bolzano, *Athanasia: oder Gründe für die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (Sulzbach: J. G. v. Seidleschen Buchhandlung, 1838), p. 60. Bolzano's discussion of these questions (esp. pp. 21-68) is the best that is known to me.
6. The term "compositive" is suggested by the following sense of "being composed of." A compound object A may be said to be *composed of* two compound objects B and C, provided only that (i) B and C are parts of A, (ii) B and C have no parts in common and (iii) every part of A has a part in common either with B or with C. This definition was proposed, in somewhat different terms, by A. N. Whitehead, *The Organization of Thought* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1917), pp. 159-60.
7. I have suggested a more rigid definition of "disjunctive property" in *On Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 146; but that definition, since it makes use of a mentalistic concept, cannot be used in the present context.
8. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A351. From the translation by Norman Kemp Smith in *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1933), p. 335.
9. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1956), p. 142.
10. I have discussed Bolzano's reasoning in detail in "Bolzano on the Simplicity of the Soul," in *Traditionen und Perspektiven der analytischen Philosophie*, edited by W. Gombocz, H. Rutte, and W. Sauer, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1989), pp. 79-88.
11. This consequence was pointed out by Gary Rosenkrantz, in "Reference, Intentionality, and Nonexistent Entities," in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 58 (1990), pp. 165-171, and discussed by me in "Monads, Nonexemplified Individuals, and Possible Worlds," in the same issue, pp. 173-5.
12. Compare James Van Cleve, "Mind-Dust or Magic? Panpsychism versus Emergence," *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. IV (1990), pp. 215-226. A useful discussion and bibliography of the doctrine of emergence may be found in Arthur Pap, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 364-72. Compare Leopold Stubenberg, "Chisholm, Fechner und das Geist-Körper Problem," *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, Vol. 28 (1986), pp. 187-210.
13. Two recent defenses of this approach may be found in: Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 145ff. and Josef Seifert, *Das Leib-Seele-Problem und die gegenwärtige philosophische Diskussion*, Second Edition, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), pp. 35-72, 131-44.
14. See, for example, his reply to Gassendi's objections to the second *Meditation*; in E.S.Haldane and G.R.T.Ross, *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. II, p. 207-8. Descartes' expression was "*homme tout entier*." St. Augustine noted that we have here a usage in which "a part is to be taken for the whole. For both the soul and the flesh, the component parts of man, can be used to signify the whole man; and so the

animal man and the carnal man are not two different things, but one and the same thing, viz., man living according to man." See *The City of God*, Book IV, Ch. 4; in Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1948), Vol. II, p. 244.

15. I have discussed these points in detail in *On Metaphysics*, pp. 63-89, 162-8.
16. I am indebted to Earl Conee, Ernest Sosa and Barry Smith for criticisms of earlier versions of the discussion of mental properties.

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