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THE MODAL ARGUMENT IS NOT CIRCULAR

Richard Swinburne

Hasker's claim that my modal argument for substance dualism is epistemically circular is implausible. Someone can accept Premise 2 (which, Hasker claims, is the premise which generates the circularity) without ever understanding the conclusion, or without accepting Premise 3.

Hasker claims that my argument for substance dualism is epistemically circular in the sense that "no reasonably well-informed person would accept the premise who does not already accept the conclusion". The premise he has in mind is my premise 2 which says, loosely in words, that it is logically possible that I who am conscious in 1984 should go on existing in 1985, even if my body is destroyed at the end of 1984 - whatever else might be the case in 1984 compatible with my conscious existence (and the subsequent destruction of my body). The conclusion of my argument, however concerns an item not mentioned in this premise - "a soul". The term by which this item is introduced needs careful definition (it has after all been used by philosophers and others in many different senses) - I defined it as the "immaterial stuff which forms part of me". The argument was designed to show that there is a part of me separate from my body, and has the consequence - given the logical possibility of disembodiment (argued for in the text) - that that is the essential part of me. So it does not seem very plausible to suppose that the argument is epistemically circular in the stated sense - since someone might accept the premises without ever understanding the conclusion. The grounds for accepting the premises are the coherence of various thought experiments described in two pages of my text²; including ones easily graspable by seven-year old religious believers or readers of fairy stories. These thought experiments involve my surviving despite various things happening to my body. They do not mention things happening in the wider world; but the latter is evidently fairly irrelevant. My survival is not rendered logically impossible by events further away, such as explosions on Jupiter. All philosophical arguments depend on the coherence or incoherence of various claims, and the justification for these claims depends ultimately on the coherence or incoherence of particular thought experiments. Almost any philosophical principle can be challenged by apparent counter-instances (of a paradoxical kind not initially considered), which can be ruled out by making the principle more



precise. Apparent counter-instances to Premise 2 require it to be toughened up by introducing the notion of a "hard fact" defined in my way (no more difficult to understand than the normal notion). But (even thus tightened up) the premise can be accepted without any understanding of the item mentioned in the conclusion.

Another reason why Premise 2 may be accepted by someone who denies the conclusion is that they may deny Premise 3 - there are lots of philosophers in that category (all those who believe in teletransportation, for example). Separate arguments are required - which I give - in favour of that premise. True, if anyone accepts both Premises 2 and 3 (and Premise 1) and thinks through what that involves, they will accept the conclusion. But of course that goes for any valid argument. And they'd need to think it through - I've certainly met professional philosophers who have initially granted me all my premises, but withdrawn their initial assent as I went through the argument.

Premise 3 was not, incidentally, meant to be understood in such a way that it ruled out re-creation; only re-creation of me without any part of me being re-created. That was, I agree, unclear in the original version of the argument. In the revised edition of *The Evolution of the Soul*, I defined q more carefully as follows: "To say, as q does, that my body is destroyed in the last instant of 1984, is just to say that my body existed during a period terminating with the last instant of 1984, but not during any period beginning with that instant."³

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NOTES

1. *The Evolution of the Soul*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 323. My page references are to the revised edition of this book. I mention explicitly below the only place where the text differs from that of the original edition.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 323.