

The Modal Argument and a Rejoinder to Contingent Physicalism

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Abstract: Since the time of Descartes, various versions of a modal argument have been proffered for substance dualism. Until recently, the premise most frequently attacked is one that moves from conceivability to metaphysical possibility. However, more recently, a new criticism has surfaced, viz., an argument from contingent physicalism. The purpose of this article is to show that what I take to be the most sophisticated contingent physicalist criticism fails as a defeater of the modal argument. After stating and clarifying my version of the modal argument, I present arguments from contingent physicalist Trenton Merricks that are intended explicitly to be defeaters of premise (2) of the modal argument. Along the way, I give reasons for thinking that these arguments fail as defeaters of (2) and that Merricks' contingent physicalism is false.

Keywords: Modal argument, Contingent physicalism, Trenton Merricks, De re reference, De dicto reference

Philosophy is experiencing a resurgence of property and substance dualism.¹ One important argument for substance dualism that has played a role in this resurgence is some version or other of a modal argument.² In what follows, I present and clarify one form of the argument and defend a crucial premise with a focus on important defeaters proffered by the best known and, in my opinion, the most articulate advocate of contingent physicalism—Trenton Merricks. This issue is of crucial importance for philosophical and systematic theology and religious studies because of its direct bearing on broader debates about the nature of human persons. This debate is central to several issues in those fields and in religious ethics. Moreover, opinions are greatly divided about the nature of the afterlife, the reality of a

¹ See Robert C. Koons and George Bealer (2010).

² See Meixner (2016).

disembodied intermediate state, and the nature of the *Imago Dei* to mention a few. To be sure, my paper is not a defense of a modal argument *tout court*. Rather, it presents defeaters for a growing number of contingent physicalists who attack a premise of the argument that was heretofore considered uncontroversial. With this limited goal in mind, let's dive into the issues.

I. A Modal Argument for Substance Dualism

I.1. Statement of the Argument:

The modal argument has its roots in Descartes (*Meditations* 2 and 6, especially in 6). Since then, several different modal arguments have been formulated, but I shall focus on one specific form. I am not implying that other forms are not appropriate, but my formulation will allow us to get at the important issues. Let SS be a wholly spiritual substance, e.g., a soul, and PO be a wholly physical object. Here is the argument stated in terms of the modal semantics of S4 and S5. While these systems differ in some ways, those differences are not important for what follows, and they are widely adopted as a heuristic for interpreting modal operators. No particular ontological commitment about possible worlds follows from this adoption. For what it's worth, I adopt an Aristotelean-Leibnizian view recently proffered by Alexander Pruss.³

- (1) The Indiscernibility of Identicals & $(x=y) \rightarrow \bullet (x=y)$.
- (2) POs are essentially, wholly, and intrinsically physical and SSs are essentially, wholly, and intrinsically immaterial.
- (3) Possibly, I exist, and no POs exist.
- (4) My physical body is a PO.
- (5) Therefore, possibly, I exist without my physical body existing.
- (6) Therefore, it is not the case that I am essentially, wholly, and intrinsically my body or any PO.
- (7) I am essentially, wholly, and intrinsically either a PO or SS.
- (8) Therefore, I am essentially, wholly, and intrinsically a SS.

³ Alexander Pruss (2011).

1.2. Clarification of the Argument

Certain clarifications are in order. In (1), “x” and “y” take Kripkean Rigid Designators or Swinburnean Informative Rigid Designators as substitutions (i.e., items that can be used in place of “x” and “y” as proper examples of them.) Thus, (1) expresses *de re* and not *de dicto* reference and modality. I will take up a defense of the essentialist part of (2) below, but here I want to clarify “intrinsically.” This is meant to capture the idea that what makes a PO physical are the physical natures of the constituents—e.g., properties, property-instances, relations, relation-instances, parts, stuff, or events/processes—that “make up” a PO, that are inherent in its being. With proper substitution, the same goes for SS. Finally, I take “is a constituent of” to be unanalyzable and primitive. This is analogous to most formulations of extensionalist mereology that take “is a part of” to be unanalyzable and primitive.

In (3), (4) and following, “I,” “PO,” and “my physical body” are *de re* rigid designators.⁴ I don’t like using “my physical body,” because “my” is an indexical possessive adjective, and I agree with those who take the nominative pronoun “I” and the possessive adjective “my” to be (pure) singular indexicals. *Secunda facie*, they seem to be unique kinds of rigid designators: singular referring terms that refer to *sui generis*, irreducible non-physical (in these two cases, mental) entities.⁵ Thus, designating something as “my body” suggests that one has already adopted a mental ontology as an “aspect” of the referent. But I set this issue aside, and for convenience, and in conformity with standard statements of modal arguments for substance dualism, I shall retain “my physical body.” Finally, along with many philosophers, I take terms such as “I” and “my” to be implements of direct reference and, when used to express beliefs, e.g., that I am tired, they express *de re* (sometimes called *de se*) beliefs.

Regarding (7), if we limit our domain of discourse to strictly physicalist views and various substance dualist views of the subject of consciousness, the I, and of the physical body, then (7) is an exhaustive dilemma. If we remove such a limitation, (7) still captures the live options for most who support or reject the modal argument(s), so I set aside other options, e.g., contemporary idealism and panpsychism, for convenience. Certain formulations of double-aspect personalism (e.g., E. J. Lowe’s) or of staunch hylomorphism would be included in the type of generic substance

⁴ For a treatment of the importance of recognizing that these are *de re* and not *de dicto* expressions, see Uwe Meixner (2016, 17–34; see especially 24–25).

⁵ See Geoffrey Madell (1981, 2015).

dualism that is within the range of (7).⁶ Let us grant (7) and our limited focus for the sake of argument.

I am assuming (1), (4) and (7). (5) follows from (3) and (4), (6) follows from (5), and (8) follows from (6) and (7). (2) and (3) are the main premises subject to attack. In what follows, I defend (2) and respond to sophisticated defeaters of (2) proffered by Merricks. For a long time, the premise of the modal argument that was the focus of attack was (3) (Possibly, I exist, and no POs exist.) The main issue was modal skepticism about the move from conceivability to metaphysical possibility. As important as issues regarding (3) are, I want to set them aside and focus on (2). (3) has already received intense focus. However, in recent years (2) has come under attack.

II. Defense of the Argument against Merrick's Contingent-Physicalist Defeaters

II.1. Merricks, Contingent Physicalism, and Premise (2)

Most philosophers would embrace the notion that wholly physical and wholly mental particulars are essentially such. There are no possible worlds, W_1 and W_2 , such that an object that is a PO in W_1 is wholly non-physical in W_2 , and similarly with an object that is a SS. Speaking of whether physical objects, e.g., a bronze statue, could exist without being physical, Jaegwon Kim asserts what most take to be obvious: "The answer seems a clear no. If anything is a material object, being material is part of its essential nature; it cannot exist without being a material object" (Kim 2011, 40). Universal agreement in philosophy is very hard to vouchsafe. However, though I may be wrong, I think that we get close regarding the claim that wholly physical and mental particulars are such essentially. I am not merely counting votes in making this point. Rather, claims like Kim's are so obvious to so many philosophers, that dissenters face a substantial burden of proof.

Nevertheless, Merricks demurs and accepts contingent physicalism, which entails that an object could be wholly physical in the actual world but not wholly physical in another world.⁷ And given his way of framing the options, contingent physicalism for Merricks entails that an object could be wholly physical in the actual world and wholly immaterial in another world.

Contingent Physicalism: Given some object x and possible worlds w_1 and w_2 , x is a PO in w_1 and x is a SS in w_2 . It follows from contingent physicalism that the

⁶ I have argued this point extensively in Rickabaugh and Moreland (2023, chapter 8).

⁷ Trenton Merricks (1994, 81–85); Cf. Dean Zimmerman (1991, 217–26).

physicality of a PO is not essential to it. Merricks develops his contingent physicalism in the context of defeating premise (2) of the modal argument.

Merricks begins with a consideration of this argument:

- (1) For all x and all y , if x is identical to y , then x is necessarily identical to y .
- (2) Possibly, I exist and no physical thing exists.
- (3) I am identical with my body.

The dualist employs (1) and (2) to establish the negation of (3). Merricks seeks to block the inference from (2) to the negation of (3), and he claims that the inference rests on (4):

- (4) M (my body) is essentially a physical thing.

Moreover, Merricks says that there is no argument for (4). Subsequently, he invites us to consider (5):

- (5) Possibly, M (my body) exists and no physical thing exists.

Premise (5) entails the denial of (4) and deciding which to adopt depends on arguments/judgements regarding the acceptance of (3) or (4). The contingent physicalist will prefer (3) and also accept (1) and (2). From the fact that there is a possible world in which I exist and no physical thing exists, it does not follow that in the actual world, I am not identical to my wholly physical body.

But what if someone argues that (4) is intuitively evident and a properly basic belief (according to which a belief is justified without needing additional propositional evidence for it)? Merricks responds that (4) actually rests on (7):

- (7) It is necessarily true that a body is a physical thing.

But, says Merricks, (4) does not follow from (7) as can be seen in this counter example: It is necessarily true that the President of the United States is a member of the executive branch of the American Government. But, Merricks continues, this does not entail that Bill Clinton is essentially a member of the executive branch.

Merricks concludes: Given that we have strong arguments and empirical evidence (e.g., split brain phenomena, mental/physical correlations,) and modal intuitions (e.g., we have strong modal intuitions that mental/physical interaction is impossible) against (4) and for (3), and given that we have only weak intuitions against (3), the physicalist should adopt (3) and give up (4), even though the modal

argument for substance dualism may persuade those half-convinced of substance dualism, or strengthen the faith of substance dualists. While this is a creative argument, I think it suffers from significant problems.

II.2. The Proper-Basicity Response to Merricks

First, a substance dualist could hold that (4) is properly basic and grounded in very strong modal seemings. This need not be a mere question-begging assertion. For example, Husserl (see below) has provided a detailed account of how we procure the relevant intuitions that provide access-internalist grounds for (4). The epistemic ground for (4) is not propositional knowledge, but a non-conceptual, (sub)-categorical intuitive awareness or apprehension of the features of formal ontology (material object) characteristic of one's body. Such intuitive awareness provides non-doxastic grounds for holding that it is part of the very essence of a material object that its materiality is essential to it.

Moreover, when one via proprioception is aware of one's body regarding its physicality, after a thorough bodily search, one fails to be aware of anything that could ground the identity of that very body *qua* physical with a body in another possible world that was wholly immaterial yet identical to that body *qua* physical. Nor has anyone adequately provided such a ground. I am adding the qualifier "*qua* physical" because classic hylomorphists hold that the body is an ensouled physical structure and its corpse is entirely physical. I am making allowance for this by focusing on the cross-world identify of one's ensouled body only insofar as it possesses physicality. I also acknowledge that an absence of awareness is not an awareness of absence. However, I think the failure mentioned above is actually grounded in a deeper direct awareness of this fact: One is aware of one's ego as simple (not composed of substantial parts), of one's body as constituted by a structural arrangement of substantial physical parts), and on this basis, recognizes both their non-identity and the essential physicality of the body. Not everyone would agree with me here, but my purpose in mentioning these issues is to provide a precis of how direct seemings—modal or otherwise—are relevant to the defense of (4).

Even if Husserl is wrong in his specifics, he shows that the proper-basicity claim need not be a mere assertion. Moreover, we will see below that dualist intuitions of disembodiment are historically and geographically ubiquitous, and they are naturally formed by little children with no exposure to dualist or religious teaching, much less to ancient Greek philosophers. A good explanation for this fact is that people have a direct awareness of their spiritual selves, a categorical intuition of their

bodies qua being physical, and they become aware of their non-identity and the contingency of their relation to each other. So, people do not have strong intuitions for (3). Quite the contrary. In fact, many physicalists who believe (3) acknowledge that their intuitions against (3) remain. I agree with George Bealer when he claimed that

Belief is highly plastic; not so for intuition. For nearly any proposition about which you have beliefs, authority, cajoling, intimidation, etc. fairly readily insinuate at least some doubt and thereby diminish to some extent, perhaps only briefly, the strength of your belief. But seldom, if ever, do these things so readily diminish the strength of your intuitions. Just try to diminish readily your intuition of the naive comprehension axiom or your intuition that your favorite Gettier example could occur. Although there is disagreement about the degree of plasticity of intuitions (some people believe they are rather plastic; I do not), it is clear that, as a family, they are inherently more resistant to such influences than are the associated beliefs. (Bealer 1998, 211)

I belabor the point about the importance of intuitions because their psychological stability and, as I will attempt to show below, their epistemic weight factors into my purposes in two ways: (i) they provide support for my claim that the relevant referring terms in my modal argument should be taken in a *de re* and not a *de dicto* way; and (ii) they provide defeaters against Merrick's claim that we have strong intuitions about certain things that support physicalism. More on these later. For now, I mention these claims about intuition to suggest that a dualist is sufficiently justified in the absence of overriding defeaters to assert that (4) is properly basic and grounded in very strong modal seemings/intuitions without begging any questions. Later, I will give a fuller defense of these intuitions when I address the two issues just mentioned.

One could respond that this shows merely that the folk ontology of human beings includes the belief that we are possibly, but not essentially, disembodiable. However, if that were the case, one would expect to find a fair number of children and adults, *sans* prior physicalist indoctrination, expressing physicalist understandings of the afterlife. But that is not the case because, arguably, people intuit the *kind* of thing they are—essentially immaterial.

Merricks counters that dualist commitment to (4) relies on (7):

(7) It is necessarily true that a (wholly physical) body is a physical thing.

As noted, I disagree and embrace a Husserlian-type account that (4) is epistemically grounded on the relevant seemings. But more importantly, in context, (7) is a *de dicto* claim with wide scope for the modal operator, and “a body” as used by Merricks seems to be a non-rigid designator. This is an important disanalogy with understanding (4) which employs a *de re* rigid with narrow scope. Why? Because the latter does not imply that (4) is a necessary truth; rather, it implies that the object— one’s body- is essentially physical. The former makes no such implication as Merricks’ false analogy shows in his treatment of (7) and its relationship to (7’). So, if Merricks employs a correct understanding of (7), then if there is a propositional ground for (4), it is not (7) but (7’):

(7’) The sub-category of “wholly physical body” has and only has members each of which is *de re* necessarily (more appropriately, essentially) wholly physical.

Here “wholly physical body” and “physical thing” are rigid designators (the former rigidly designates a particular sub-category under the generic category “wholly physical thing” and “wholly physical” rigidly designates the property of being wholly physical). Further, the premise involves *de re* necessity with the modal operator exhibiting narrow scope (the modal operator is within the premise and, thus, involves the metaphysical attribution of necessity to the relevant object; wide scope applies to the whole premise and attributes to the entire proposition the feature of being a necessary truth.) So Merricks’s employment of (7) is mistaken, especially as an understanding of dualist thinking in presenting a modal argument.

One could respond to my argument by advancing a form of descriptivism, roughly, the view that mental contents (or linguistic entities) “directed towards” individuals are definite descriptions that uniquely pick out those individuals that satisfy them. Thus, there is no such thing as direct, *de re* reference. After all, one cannot think about something, the response continues, unless one thinks of it as propertied in one way or another, and the descriptive mental content expresses that unique way the referent is so propertied.

II.3. A Defense of *De Re* Modal Seemings, Knowledge by Acquaintance, and Direct Reference

In reply, it is obvious that I cannot undertake a suitable evaluation of descriptivism here.⁸ But it is important briefly to defend *de re* reference and its relationship to

⁸ See Scott Soames’ classic work *Reference and Description* (2005).

modal seemings or intuitions in cases relevant to my modal argument. Walter Hopp notes that this objection is based on a confused understanding of what direct, *de re* reference does and does not entail.⁹ For one thing, it is a false dichotomy to hold that directly referential terms, e.g., proper names, natural kind terms or categorial expressions, either have descriptive meaning (and, therefore, are not directly referential) or no sense at all. Instead, some such terms have descriptive and directly referential non-descriptive aspects. For example, while one cannot entertain demonstrative thoughts about a chair directly in front of one without being aware of at least some of its features, this does not entail that there is no non-descriptive, directly referential element inherent in true demonstrative reference.

Moreover, just because one must think of, say, New York, in a certain way to think about it, it doesn't follow that one thinks of New York via a uniquely satisfied definite description, viz., as just whatever unique properties one thinks New York to have. One can directly refer to New York *and* keep it in mind as one varies the properties one thinks New York to have. As Hopp notes:

Ultimately, the difference between thinking of something directly and thinking of it as just whatever has such and such properties is phenomenologically evident. But thinking about something directly is not incompatible with thinking of it in some way or via some sense. (Hopp 2011, 21–22)

Edmund Husserl clarified this claim quite precisely.¹⁰ Husserl began his account of intentionality and *de re* reference by bracketing (aka *epoche*) the natural world as depicted by the natural attitude in favor of the phenomenological attitude (aka *phenomenological/transcendental reduction*). This meant that he set aside scientific considerations about the existence and nature of the physical world due to his conviction that when it comes to the realm of consciousness and the self, “Natural cognition begins with experience and remains *within* experience.”¹¹ For Husserl, the phenomenological exploration of consciousness is a strictly first-person endeavor.

In his account of intentionality, he held that every intentional experience is constituted by two independently variable yet inseparable moments (i.e., a dependent part or property-instance)—a matter and a quality. The act-quality is roughly what we mean today by the attitude in propositional attitudes. The quality

⁹ Walter Hopp (2011, 21; 12–26).

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (hereafter, *LI*), (1970, V, chapter two, section 17, p. 578 – chapter three, section 22, p. 593 (especially section 20)).

¹¹ Husserl (1982, I section 1: 5).

is what grounds the intentional act as a judging, hoping, merely experiential, etc., one.

More important is Husserl's ontological analysis of an intentional experience's matter. The matter gives the intentional act its directedness towards an object and consists in a referring to the object in a specific manner. It fixes reference to this very object in this very manner. Put differently, the matter included *a reference to an intentional object* and *the manner* in which it is intended, what it is *intended as*. The former stands to the latter as determinable to determinate. The matter presents the object in a specific way. The quality and matter of an intentional act are the act's intentional essence, and in purely intuitive acts, e.g., perceptual, eidetic, or categorial, the intentional essence is entirely non-conceptual. In such acts, the non-descriptive, directly referential elements secure *de re* reference. And Husserl included the direct awareness of and associated *de re* reference to one's own ego as a spiritual entity.¹²

Finally, Husserl held that intentionality is a monadic property and not a relation.¹³ Among other things, this permits him to avoid hunting around for a surrogate object (one's own concept, an haecceity, and so forth) in cases where one is aware of or thinking about a non-existent object like Zeus, a surrogate that is clearly *not* the intended intentional object.

It may be useful to compare Husserl's view of direct *de re* awareness and reference to an intentional object with a sophisticated alternative presented by John Campbell. In his major work *Reference and Consciousness*, published in 2002, Campbell focused his study on the reference of perceptual demonstratives to currently perceived objects on the basis of current perception of them.¹⁴ Knowledge of reference of perceptual demonstratives is grounded in the basic idea of direct acquaintance with an object in terms of non-conceptual direct awareness of the object.¹⁵ Such awareness involves conscious attention, a primitive psychological relation that provides us with knowledge of reference. This also involves a primary experience of location, with a subsequent Gestalt organization binding together the referent's

¹² For primary sources for the claims in this paragraph, see Husserl, *LI* 5 section 20, 589; 6 section 25, 737; 5 section 20, 586; 6 section 27, 743 all in *Logical Investigations* (1970). For a good secondary source see Walter Hopp (2022, 80–89); Dallas Willard (1984, 218–49).

¹³ For defenses of this claim and primary sources, see Hopp (2022, 89–90); Dallas Willard, (1984, 52–61).

¹⁴ John Campbell (2002). While his account is limited to perceptual demonstratives, he does include acquaintance with properties and, in any case, his views could easily be expanded to any object known by direct intuitive awareness of some sort or another.

¹⁵ Campbell (2002, 1–2; chapters 1–2, 5–7).

properties, facilitated by unconscious sub-mechanisms described by science that stream various forms of sensory information.

In his 2002 publication, Campbell adopted a relational view of experience, viz., as a simple relation between a subject and an object.¹⁶ The qualitative character of a relevant experience is constituted by the qualitative character of the scene perceived. In this way, perceptual experiences (allegedly) put us in direct contact with the world by being partly constituted by external objects. In a 2009 publication, Campbell tackles the problem of accounting for the fact that we can be consciously aware of an object from different standpoints. In response, he expands his analysis of conscious awareness such that it is a three-placed relation among a person, a standpoint, and an object.¹⁷

Campbell agrees with Husserl that words, e.g., demonstratives and *de re* referring terms have derived intentionality with the relevant mental acts or states possessing fundamental intentionality. They also agree that *de re* reference is experientially, conceptually, and epistemically fundamental relative to *de dicto* counterparts, and that in typical cases of (especially demonstrative) reference, the thing itself must be directly given.

However, in my view, Husserl's ontological categories and distinctions are far richer than those of Campbell, his adoption of monadic over relational accounts of intentionality and awareness is preferable to Campbell's views, and I agree with Husserl's bracketing, something clearly eschewed by Campbell. Regardless of the reader's agreement with these last points, the items shared by both thinkers will be crucial in our discussion of the modal argument in what follows. And they support the claims that (i) the ground for (4) (M (my body) is essentially a physical thing.) is directly experiential and (ii) the previous claim in (i) is no mere question-begging assertion; it has been supported by various well-developed theories.

Hopp also observes that since Sellar's attack on the "myth of the given," there has been a widespread consensus that reasons-giving relations hold among only mental states whose intentional contents are conceptual or propositional. Thus, perceptual (or non-perceptual intuitive states) must include conceptual/propositional content.¹⁸ Hopp calls this experiential conceptualism, and while it may not entail the reduction of *de re* to *de dicto* reference, minimally, experiential conceptualism is hard to square

¹⁶ Campbell (2002, chapters 6–7).

¹⁷ John Campbell (2009, 657–59, 662).

¹⁸ Hopp (2011, 1–2).

with direct *de re* reference and our epistemically justified confidence in its success but fits quite nicely with *de dicto* reference.¹⁹

Given these claims by Husserl and Campbell, it is quite plausible to hold that all *de dicto* intentionality is grounded in *de re* intentionality, since the latter always involves a genuine, direct reference to some specific individual, property, relation, etc., such that the epistemic justification of the *de dicto* expression requires that referent “to show up in person,” being directly present or given to the referring subject in the fulfilling act. In this way, purely non-conceptual, intuitive—e.g., perceptual, eidetic, categorial—intentional states are reason-giving with respect to the relevant conceptual/propositional content in that the former are the fulfillment of the latter.²⁰

In contrast to experiential conceptualism, this view makes *de re* reference the foundation of *de dicto* reference. However, ubiquitously favored forms of experiential conceptualism entail that there is no direct intuitive awareness of an intentional object “out there” and, without this, *de re* reference becomes otiose. And since experiential conceptualism also entails that the only reason-giving relations that obtain are conceptual and propositional, this would seem to favor quite strongly a commitment to irreducible *de dicto* reference and an eschewal of *de re* reference as epistemically irrelevant.

In my view, these remarks about the relationship between *de re* and *de dicto* reference, experiential conceptualism, and so forth provide good grounds for rejecting Merricks’s preference for *de dicto* treatments of the relevant referring expressions in my modal argument. I acknowledge that many philosophers who embrace experiential conceptualism favor *de dicto* interpretations of these expressions over my adoption of them in *de re* terms. My hope is that this brief exploration into Husserl and Campbell proffers reasons to reconsider their position, along with their understanding and assessment of the modal argument. At the very least, this exploration shows that I am not begging the question in my treatment of (4) (M (my body) is essentially a physical thing.) when I claim that it is properly basic and grounded in internalist seemings. As we have seen, this claim has been supported by rigorously developed internalist accounts of *de re* seemings.

¹⁹ There is a widespread tendency on the part of many naturalists to reduce or replaced *de re* to *de dicto* reference. For a classic example of this, see Brian Loar (1997, 597–616). For an excellent response, See Howard Robinson (2016, 73–92).

²⁰ For Husserl, pure perceptual states have two kinds of non-conceptual content—intuitive content (the object is directly present) and horizontal content (roughly, one is now aware that the physical object of which one is directly aware has more to it and one is indeterminately aware of this more while anticipating further directly presentational experiences of this “more.”

Moreover, the case I have presented over the last few paragraphs provides reasons to hold that *de re* reference is basic and not derivative as it *de dicto* reference. Thus, at the very least, my remarks provide *prima facie* defeaters for Merricks case against (2) in my modal argument.

II.4. Merricks' Inconsistent Employment of Contingent Physicalism

Here is an additional objection to Merricks' employment of contingent physicalist as a defeater of (2) in my modal argument. In criticizing van Inwagen's simulacrum hypothesis—basically the idea that, possibly, when we die, God instantly replaces our body with an exact double that is then buried, while whisking away our body (or an important subset of it) into the afterlife to sustain personal identity—Merricks says that even if there is a possible world in which van Inwagen's view is true, nevertheless, it is the actual world that is of concern to us and his view is false in the actual world.²¹ Analogously, he claims that (2) of his argument implies there is a possible world in which I am a wholly immaterial object, but that world is not the actual one. On pain of inconsistency, it would seem that Merricks' rejoinder to van Inwagen applies with equal force to his rebuttal of my modal argument.

Consistency would seem to imply that our fundamental interests are about what we are in the actual world, and if we limit our focus accordingly, then it would seem that premise (2) of the modal argument would go through if the scope of the modal operator is limited to those worlds relevantly similar to the actual world. It would be question-begging for Merricks to appeal to a depiction of us as POs in the actual world. But advocates of the modal argument do not assume substance dualism epistemically if, for the sake of argument, they index the relevant notions in (2) (essentially, wholly, intrinsically) to a range of possible worlds relevantly similar to the actual world. The reason this is true is that the justification for (2) and (3) are the relevant non-conceptual seemings that are ubiquitously present among people in these worlds.

To support this claim, it is important to observe that people did not create the idea of the soul as a part of their theorizing about the world; their theorizing about the world employed and extended what they already pretheoretically (and prelinguistically) knew. Commonsense substance dualism is an expression of what Jesse Bering calls a "folk psychology of souls," not mythology.²² Ilkka Pyysiäinen observes,

²¹ Trenton Merricks (2001, 183–200). See Merricks (2001, 184).

²² See, e.g., Jesse M. Bering (2006, 453–62) and Jesse M. Bering (2002, 263–308).

All peoples have beliefs about various types of souls that are responsible for the liveliness of the body as well as for various cognitive-emotional functions...Such conceptions thus cannot be analyzed merely at the level of their linguistic expressions and are not spread only through cultural contacts. (2009, 93)

Pyysiäinen goes on to explain the anthropological data of early cultures: “Although humans may have lacked doctrines and narratives about souls, they must have had *intuitive* ideas about minds...Otherwise, even a rudimentary form of religion would not have been possible” [italics mine] (Pyysiäinen 2009, 68).

After a detailed analysis, Raymond Martin and John Barresi conclude that commonsense substance dualism “did not even begin with the Greeks or Hebrews, or even the Egyptians. Rather, it began much earlier, perhaps with the Neanderthals...” (2006, 290). In my view, people’s notion of an afterlife was already justified as a possibility because of the account of dualist seemings we’ve considered—e.g., direct acquaintance with one’s own self and conscious states—and these dualist seemings were subsequently pressed into service, not the other way around.

These claims accord well with the prevailing view among cognitive scientists that dualism is a widespread, pre-theoretical belief (including non-religious),²³ shared across cultures, and developed in infancy.²⁴ We are, as Paul Bloom says, “natural Cartesians.”²⁵ In my view, the best explanation of these data is that people are simply aware of their own selves, recognize its non-identity to anything physical, and form (perhaps unconsciously) modal intuitions about disembodied existence.

These ubiquitous observations not only provide a basis for claiming that direct intuitive awareness is foundational, natural, and hard to dismiss among people all over the world since Neanderthals, including little children bereft of religious instruction. They also make Merrick’s claim that we have strong “modal intuitions (e.g., we have strong modal intuitions that mental/physical interaction is impossible) against (4) (M (my body) is essentially a physical thing.) and for (3) (I am identical with my body.), and ... we have only weak intuitions against (3)” very difficult to

²³ See, e.g., Jesse Bering, Carlos Hernandez Blasi, and David Bjorklund (2005, 587–607); Jesse Bering, and David Bjorklund (2004, 217–233).

²⁴ See, e.g., Paul Bloom (2004); V. A. Kuhlmeier, P. Bloom, and K. Wynn (2004, 95–103); Henry Wellman and A.K. Hickling (1994, 1564–80); Henry Wellman (1990); Henry Wellman and D. Estes, (1986, 910–23).

²⁵ Bloom (2004, xii). For a philosophical analysis of this literature in relation to dualism, see, Brandon Rickabaugh (2019).

take seriously unless Merricks limits the scope of “we” to him and his physicalist colleagues.

Moreover, even if we grant that we have modal intuitions against causal interaction (and given the widespread acceptance of some form of interactive theism around the world, I’m being charitable here), the evidence cited above supports the rejoinder that we have significant overriding defeater intuitions to those about the interaction problem.²⁶

My third reply to Merricks rests on the idea that modal intuitions, especially as understood by Husserl and me, are of *kinds* of objects—the kind “pure ego” and the sub-categorical kind “physical object” (including “wholly physical body”). Merricks could reject this as irrelevant, but he shoulders a burden of proof here since most philosophers and lay people find contingent physicalism to be unacceptable because POs and SSs are just not the kind of objects that could be characterized by contingent physicalism. David Lewis is not the only one who must face the incredulous stare. Merricks also needs to interact with modal epistemologies like Husserl’s before he is entitled to treat the relevant referring expressions in *de dicto* ways.

II.5. Defeating a Possible Counterargument from Merricks

How might a contingent physicalist respond? I think the best line would be to say that identity, including the identity of a complex object (or kind of complex object) is brute and ungrounded; it is the object itself—a PO/SS—that is identical in the two worlds, and that’s that.

Unfortunately, this claim comes very close to begging the question. We are disputing whether a PO could be identical to a SS as Merricks depicts it, and this response says, in effect, that these arguments are ineffective because they just are identical and there’s nothing more to be said. Surely, when it comes to complex objects as I have characterized them, we are owed at least some sort of account as to how such an identity could be brute. Not all brute primitives are created equal. I could see how a constituentless bare particular’s self-identity could be brute, but complex objects are another matter altogether.

Further, I think the following claim is ambiguous: Identity is never grounded (“each thing is what it is and not something else” is about all one can say on the matter), including the identity of complexes, so the search for a ground is misguided. If this means that the identity relation is primitive and irreducible to some other

²⁶ I have addressed empirical objections to substance dualism elsewhere. See Rickabaugh and Moreland (2023, chapter ten).

relation, e.g., exact similarity or some (weaker) persistence relation, then I agree. But I suspect that this isn't what is being affirmed. I think it means that there is no reductive analysis of cases of identity themselves; in these cases, identity is what it is and, consequently, uninformative.

A good place to begin evaluating this interpretation is the debate over diachronic personal identity between advocates of the simple and complex views.²⁷ One criticism of the simple view is that by taking personal identity to be primitive and brute, the simple view is uninformative and merely an assertion of diachronic identity.

This criticism is confused in that it conflates a reductive analysis of diachronic identity with an ontological assay of the entities that retain it. The simple view does entail that no reductive analysis of personal identity, e.g., in non-personal terms involving sortal-dependent psychological or bodily persistence conditions, is adequate. But this does not entail that a case of diachronic identity is uninformative because in each case—particularly, cases of wholes that are metaphysically complex and mereologically simple with respect to separable parts—an ontological assay may be given of the entity that retains identity to understand what must be the case for identity to obtain.

For example, a simple advocate could say that personal identity is identity of a specific type of soul and, moreover, that the identity of that sort of thing requires identity of its constituents—the essence “human personhood,” the nexus of exemplification and primitive thisness, e.g., a bare particular. Such an assay retains the basicity of identity itself but provides a nonreductive ontological inventory of the relevant complex entity and insight as to what must stay the same for the entity to retain identity.

Again, according to a property-exemplification view of event identity, a proper ontological assay would be this: $(e_1=e_2) \otimes [(S_1=S_2) \ \& \ (P_1=P_2) \ \& \ (t_1=t_2)]$, where e_1, e_2 are events, S_1, S_2 are substances, P_1, P_2 , are properties, and t_1, t_2 are times. Here, identity itself is primitive, but the natures of the entities (events) that are/are not identical are complex and in need of an ontological assay. I suggest this same response is sufficient to defeat this objection.

III. Conclusion

I have tried to show that contingent physicalism fails as a defeater of premise (2) (POs are essentially, wholly, and intrinsically physical and SSs are essentially,

²⁷ See Georg Gasser and Matthias Stefan (2012).

wholly, and intrinsically immaterial) of the modal argument. After stating and clarifying my version of the modal argument, I presented arguments from contingent physicalist Trenton Merricks that are intended to be defeaters of premise (2) of the modal argument. I also give reasons for thinking that these arguments fail as defeaters of (2). The reader may not agree with my arguments, but since contingent physicalism is on the rise, it is important for there to be critical discussions of the view and its employment as a defeater against a popular argument for substance dualism.

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