Journal of the American Philosophical Association (2016) 332–343 © American Philosophical Association
DOI: 10.1017/apa.2016.17

# How Valuable Could a Material Object Be?

ABSTRACT: *Arguments for substance dualism—the theory that we are at least partly nonmaterial beings—abound. Many such arguments begin with our capacity to engage in conscious thought and end with dualism. Such are familiar. But there is another route to dualism. It begins with our moral value and ends with dualism. In this article, we develop and assess the prospects for this new style of argument. We show that, though one version of the argument does not succeed, there may yet be a deep problem for standard physical accounts of our nature.*

KEYWORDS: materialism, substance dualism, metaphysics, personal identity, personal ontology, philosophy of mind

## Introduction

Arguments for substance dualism—the theory that we are at least partly nonmaterial beings—abound. Many such arguments begin with our capacity to engage in conscious thought and end with dualism. Such are familiar. But there is another route to dualism. It begins with our *moral value* and ends with dualism. In this article, we develop and assess the prospects for this new style of argument. We show that, though one version of the argument does not succeed, there may yet be a deep problem for standard physical accounts of our nature.

Here's how we'll proceed. First, we develop a value problem for materialism. Although there are hints of the problem in philosophical history,[1] the clearest and most recent formulation of the problem comes from Gerald Harrison. So we'll pay special attention to his formulation of the problem. We then press a dilemma and argue that promising escape routes require not the rejection of materialism altogether, but rather revisions to standard materialism. Finally, to stimulate further interest we present a cluster of alternative formulations of the problem. We do not claim that these formulations are decisive refutations of materialism (in any of

Thanks to Nathan Ballantyne, Gerald Harrison, Jonathan Simon, and an anonymous referee for helpful feedback.

1 Many think, after all, that there is a problem locating normativity within a wholly material world. See Jackson (1999: chapter 5), for example, or Moser and Trout (1995: 28): 'Materialism, understood as a comprehensive account of the world, must explain how moral phenomena fit into an altogether physical world. . . . Many people regard such phenomena as different from what is *factual*, or at least different from what is *objective*. Many of these same people regard what is physical as factual, and thus they contrast physical phenomena and moral phenomena'.

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its forms). But they do support the view that there is indeed a value problem for standard materialism.

## 1. The Value Problem

To get an initial feel for the value problem for materialism, consider the following reasoning. We are *people* (or, if you like, *persons*). We therefore enjoy special moral status. We command (or ought to command) regard; we deserve things from each other; we *matter*. According to the materialist view about human persons, we are also *wholly material* beings—material through and through. It is not obvious how to reconcile these doctrines; it is not obvious how material objects could command respect or matter in the way we apparently do. A materialist-friendly solution to the mind-body problem—even one showing how material objects could enjoy conscious experiences—would not necessarily solve *this* problem. For our moral value arguably does not arise merely from our conscious experiences. It is not as though you deserve less respect or matter less merely because you were in pain this morning. Furthermore, a great many *other* material objects—even living ones—do *not* obviously enjoy the elevated moral status we do. But we are of a kind with them and made of the same basic stuff (electrons, for example). So what is it, exactly, that makes us, morally speaking, so different from these other material objects?

That's a nice rhetorical question. But it is, so far, only a question. Many materialists accordingly will be unimpressed. Can we convert this question into an *argument* against materialism? To our knowledge, Harrison is the first to do as much. His proposal is a valuable step toward understanding what the value problem might be, and it deserves careful attention. To that task we now turn.

## 2. Harrison's Value Argument

Harrison invokes a bevy of background presuppositions before constructing his argument. Among them: (a) at least some ethical claims are true; (b) at least some ethical truths are not constitutively determined by anyone's feelings; (c) moral truths are necessary truths, and (d) we can reliably (though imperfectly) access ethical truths through rational intuition. Those are fine assumptions, or at least they are acceptable for the sake of argument, and we propose to leave them be.

To explain (d), Harrison uses the image of a help desk, staffed by operators skilled in correctly issuing moral judgments. These are the experts we turn to when we engage in rational intuition. Calling up the help desk is an important philosophical tool, on Harrison's view.

But what happens when we call the help desk with questions about our *own* value? Harrison is confident that the results will be reassuring. Should we have ears to hear, then the help desk will let us know, loud and clear, that we bearers of conscious experience are morally valuable. This implies, among other things, that

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'we are owed a degree of respect and good will from others' (Harrison 2016: 27). This value we enjoy, furthermore, is not constitutively determined from the value of our conscious experiences; it is, in some sense, 'inherent' (Harrison 2016: 26). For even while our conscious experiences ebb and flow, our value remains steady; a person doesn't become more valuable merely by becoming happier or more excited. When we press for more detail, the help desk will even reassure us that this deep value we bear holds irrespective of whether we are wholly material beings or not.

All of this is another way of saying that it *seems* to be the case that we enjoy an interesting kind of deep moral value. Suppose so. What follows? According to Harrison, we gain reason to believe something about our *nature* (about what we are). In particular, we gain reason to think that we are not, after all, material beings. The inference from this judgment about our moral value to a conclusion about our nature goes along these lines:

> Imagine you have no physical body whatsoever.... The operators at the Help Desk say (with as much confidence as ever) that *if* that truly is our situation, we still have inherent value.... So, our moral intuitions tell us, loud and clear, that we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body. This, I hold, strongly implies that we the bearers of inherent value are not physical bodies. (Harrison 2016: 27, emphasis in original)

Let's slow down the reasoning. How, exactly, does Harrison get to 'we the bearers of inherent value, are not physical bodies' (*Bold Conclusion*, let's call it) from the rational insight (*Reason Says,* let's call it) that 'we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body'? It is clear that an inference along those lines is happening in Harrison's mind, but Harrison doesn't say explicitly how it proceeds. Luckily, there are a few tantalizing details from which we can reconstruct the steps Harrison takes between premise and conclusion.

According to *Reason Says*, we enjoy value whether or not we are material objects. Even if we *were* immaterial (as would be the case if we were to lack physical bodies altogether), we'd *still* be as valuable as we in fact are.[2] This result, in turn, suggests that our status as material beings is not relevant to whether we enjoy inherent moral value; so also for other properties we have that might seem to situate us in the physical world. None of *those* properties are relevant to our value. Thus Harrison says: 'it is *irrelevant* whether we—the objects bearing inherent value—even have a shape, size, mass, or color at all, not just what shape, color, or size we have' (Harrison 2016: 27).

2 The move here from a subjunctive conditional (which may be a counterpossible, something we consider below) to a judgment of irrelevance is certainly tempting. Compare: 'even if the glass were painted, it'd still be just as fragile as it in fact is; therefore, the glass's color is not relevant to its fragility'.

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The bridge between *Reason Says* and *Bold Conclusion*, then, appears to involve a judgment about the irrelevance of materiality to value along these lines:

> *Bridge:* If we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body, then our materiality is irrelevant to our value.

From *Reason Says* and *Bridge*, this much follows immediately:

> *Intermediate Conclusion*: Therefore, our materiality is irrelevant to our value.

Even with this friendly addition in place, the argument is not yet complete. The missing link appears to go along the following lines:

> *Implied Theory*: If our materiality is irrelevant to our value, then we are in fact immaterial.

We call this premise *Implied Theory*, because we think it implies an interesting view about the status of materiality. Saying whether *Implied Theory* is plausible (and even why one might accept it in the first place), however, will require us to comment on the kind of (ir)relevance at play in the argument. Our comments will eventually take the form of a dilemma: either we are to give 'irrelevance' (across the entire argument) a *modal* reading or a *grounding* reading. On either reading, we will show that materialists have some ways of escaping Harrison's argument, each of which involves deviating from standard materialist dogma but *without* abandoning the claim that we are wholly material. We do not propose, then, that Harrison's argument completely fails, for it may still succeed in exposing some nonstandard ways of endorsing materialism.

To introduce the two readings of 'irrelevance' we think are at play, turn briefly to recent debates about the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP). This principle has it that someone is morally responsible for an action only if she could have done otherwise. Opponents of the principle have, by contrast, insisted that alternative possibilities are not relevant to moral responsibility. Harry Frankfurt famously described cases in which someone is morally responsible even though she could not have done otherwise (see Frankfurt 1969). Frankfurt-style cases are designed to show, among other things, that alternative possibilities are *irrelevant* to moral responsibility. As Felipe Leon and Neal Tognazzini have recently pointed out, one can think of irrelevance here in two different ways (see Leon and Tognazzini 2010). Alternative possibilities are irrelevant to moral responsibility if either (a) possibly someone is morally responsible even in the absence of alternative possibilities, or (b) someone's being morally responsible is not even partly grounded in her having alternative possibilities. On reading (a), Frankfurt cases must be genuine metaphysical possibilities to unseat the relevance of alternative possibilities to moral responsibility. On reading (b), Frankfurt cases need not be possible at all; they need only show that moral responsibility is not *grounded in* the having of alternative

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possibilities; one is not morally responsible even partly by virtue of having various alternative possibilities.

We may draw a general moral: irrelevance comes in at least two flavors—modal and grounding. We may, accordingly, interpret Harrison's argument along two lines:

> *Modal*: Our materiality is irrelevant to our value in that possibly we are immaterial and yet nonetheless valuable.
>
> *Grounding*: Our materiality is irrelevant to our value in that our value is not grounded in our materiality.

With these two possible interpretations in place, we may now explain the initial plausibility of *Implied Theory*. On the modal reading of the argument, when we dial the help desk, we learn that our materiality is irrelevant to our value in this sense: we *could have been* immaterial and inherently valuable beings. So (by conjunction simplification), we could have been immaterial beings. Many have thought that if something is material at all, it *must* be material. To be material is, if you like, to be *essentially* material. Well, from that view about the modal status of materiality (the implied theory) and from the modal reading of the argument, our *actual* immateriality would follow. This move from possible to actual immateriality is what *Implied Theory* expresses. Harrison's argument would, on this interpretation, be linked with some other famous arguments against materialism: beginning with a thought experiment about possible disembodiment and concluding with the denial of materialism (Descartes's arguments in Meditation 6 come to mind, as does Avicenna's Floating Man thought experiment). As such, Harrison's argument would have all the assets and liabilities of such arguments.

Thus, we have the modal reading. This reading is *not* how Harrison wants his argument to be read, however. On this he is clear:

> My argument does not assume that clear moral intuitions about a case automatically imply that the case represents a metaphysically possible situation. Moral intuitions tell us about the morally relevant features of a situation. They are *moral* intuitions. It is an *ethical* Help Desk. Accordingly, a situation in which all morally relevant features are coherently represented should continue to elicit clear moral intuitions even if the morally irrelevant features could not possibly obtain. If we represent to our faculty of moral intuition a scenario we have independent reason to think could not possibly obtain—such as one involving backward time travel—and it continues to elicit clear moral intuitions, this implies not that backward time travel is metaphysically possible, but that the temporal location of an act is morally irrelevant (or alternatively, that our moral intuitions can only provide insight into the moral lay of the land at the present time). By contrast, it is obviously morally relevant what kind of object is bearing our conscious experiences for it bears inherent moral value. (Harrison 2016: 29)

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Harrison, then, disavows the modal reading. Yet, he also seems to *avow* it. Consider these lines:

> It is *not a necessary truth* that conscious experiences are borne by physical objects. (Harrison 2016: 27, emphasis added)

> The kind of object that bears our conscious experiences is of a sort that is *compatible* with our having a physical body and also compatible with our not having one. (Harrison 2016: 29, emphasis added)

> The kind of object our moral intuitions imply is bearing our conscious experiences is one apparently *capable* of existing inside any other thing at all and all by itself. So, it is a kind of object that has no size or mass. (Harrison 2016: 21, emphasis added)

> Our moral intuitions thus imply that the kind of object that bears conscious experiences *can be* inside any kind of physical body whatever or can exist by itself. (Harrison 2016: 28, emphasis added)

'Necessary truth', 'compatible with', 'is ... capable of', 'can be'; these locutions all strongly support the modal reading. They suggest an interpretation of the argument according to which at least *one* step in the argument has it that we are possibly disembodied. So the modal reading appears to be relevant somehow or somewhere. But, as noted above, Harrison claims otherwise and does not intend his argument to rely on recondite judgments about what is possible.

How, then, are we to understand his argument? How can we construct it in its best light? We will put aside the question of whether Harrison *intends* the modal reading or not. The more pressing question is whether there is a reading of his argument that reveals a cogent argument. We will argue that, unfortunately, there is no plausible reading of Harrison's argument on which the argument shows what Harrison says it shows. On to the dilemma.

## 3. The Dilemma Developed

We offer the following construction of Harrison's argument:

> *Reason Says*: We have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body.

> *Bridge*: If we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body, then our materiality is irrelevant to our value.

> *Intermediate Conclusion*: Therefore, our materiality is irrelevant to our value.

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*Implied Theory*: If our materiality is irrelevant to our value, then we are immaterial.

*Main Conclusion*: Therefore, we are immaterial.

We are concerned with the *linking* premises, *Implied Theory* and *Bridge*, because we are concerned with the meaning of 'irrelevant'. In what sense is our materiality irrelevant to our value?

We pose the following dilemma. Either we understand 'irrelevant' in terms of modal notions, or we understand it instead in some other way, such as grounding. We shall show that in either case there is an interesting way to escape Harrison's argument.

Start with the modal reading. Let us say that 'our materiality is irrelevant to our value' means this: *possibly*, we have value and are immaterial. Then the linking premises read:

*Modal Bridge*: If we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body, then, possibly, we have value and are immaterial.

*Modal Implied Theory*: If, possibly, we have value and are immaterial, then we are immaterial.

There is a way to doubt both premises. One may doubt *Modal Bridge* because its antecedent doesn't obviously entail its consequent. When the ethical operators tell us that we have moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body, they report an *ethical* intuition, not a *modal* one. We can express this intuition as a subjunctive conditional: if we *were* immaterial, we would still have moral worth. This intuition is no less luminous if we learn that the antecedent happens to be impossible.[3] Modality and morality are different matters. Sadly, then, the ethical operators give us no information about whether we really *could* be immaterial.

One could also doubt *Modal Implied Theory*—which encodes the inference from 'possibly, we are immaterial' to 'we are immaterial'. One may doubt that inference by doubting the essentiality of materiality. Suppose you think that some material things could have been immaterial. There are philosophers who have thought as much (for example, Merricks 1994). If you are among them, you will reject the *Modal Implied Theory*.

3 Chalmers (2002) identifies various flavors of materialism in the philosophy of mind. According to 'Type-A' materialists, zombie scenarios are both impossible and inconceivable; 'Type-B' materialists say zombie scenarios are conceivable but not possible. We may draw a similar distinction regarding ghost scenarios—those in which we are immaterial. Some materialists will maintain that ghost scenarios are both impossible and inconceivable, while others will say that ghost scenarios are impossible but conceivable. In short, the prospects for a subjunctive conditional taking a ghost scenario as its antecedent appear more dim on the former version of materialism than on the latter. Below, we consider a form of materialism that does not rule out the possibility of ghost scenarios.

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Endorsing *contingent materialism* (as we might call it) would, admittedly, be a nonstandard move. *Most* materialists have thought that if something is wholly material, it could not have been otherwise. But *must* a materialist endorse this modal requirement? We don't think so. The contingent materialist may consistently insist that we are made entirely of things like electrons, bosons, quarks, and the like even though we didn't *have to be* made of those things. And something made entirely of those things would certainly *seem* to count as a material object. So it seems to us that the contingent materialist counts as a materialist. She thus has ample resources to answer the modal version of Harrison's argument even without attempting to resist *Reason Says*.

Turn now to the other horn of the dilemma: a nonmodal interpretation of 'our materiality is irrelevant to our value'. Our best attempt at a nonmodal interpretation is in terms of *grounding*. In particular: to say that materiality is irrelevant to our value is to say that there is no *physical* property or kind (such as a property or kind that is a proper object of study via the physical sciences) that grounds our value. On this interpretation, the linking premises come out as follows:

> *Grounding Bridge*: If we have inherent moral worth irrespective of whether we possess a physical body, then our value is not grounded in a physical property or kind.

> *Grounding Implied Theory*: If our value is not grounded in a physical property or kind, then we are immaterial.

*Grounding Bridge* strikes us as harder to deny than its modal cousin. For suppose our value is grounded in some physical property or kind. Now consider the scenario (whether possible or not) where we are wholly nonphysical. In that scenario, we lack the physical grounds of our value. Yet, the ethical operators tell us that we still have our value. How could that be? One possibility is that in the scenario where we are nonphysical, our value is grounded in a nonphysical property. But this possibility is implausible since it implies a wild coincidence: that the physical and nonphysical grounds of value happen to ground *the same degree* of value. Without a deeper explanation of why these two radically different kinds of properties happen to give rise to the same degree of value, this result is implausible. We are assuming with Harrison that the ethical operators not only tell us that we would have value if we were nonphysical, but that we would have *no more or less* value. That's part of the intuition that our value holds irrespective of our materiality.

Notice that the case for *Grounding Bridge* allows us to respect the fact that the ethical operators tell us nothing about whether we *could* be immaterial. The point is that if we were immaterial (putting aside whether that's metaphysically possible), we would have no more or less value than we do. But that's implausible if our value is actually grounded in our having certain physical properties. Thus, one may infer: our value is not grounded in a physical property or kind.

What about *Grounding Implied Theory*? That says that *if* our value is not grounded in a physical property or kind, then we are immaterial. Is that true?

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One could argue for *Grounding Implied Theory* on the basis of a standard physicalist theory. The theory goes like this: we are material, and every feature of a material being is either a physical feature or is grounded in physical features.[4] Familiar forms of reductive and nonreductive physicalism imply this theory. In fact, the ingredients of this theory have been offered as a way of *defining* 'physicalism' (for example, Dasgupta 2015). So let's call it Standard Physicalism (SP).[5] SP implies *Grounding Implied Theory* because it implies that we are material only if our value (assuming we indeed have value) is grounded in a physical feature.

Yet, a materialist could have reason to reject *Grounding Implied Theory*. For a materialist could deny SP and suppose instead that there are properties of material persons that are *not* grounded in physical properties. More to the point, a materialist could suppose that our value is not grounded in a physical property (precisely because of Harrison's argument). We are material all right; we have mass and take up space. But our value is a *basic* property that is not grounded at all; or, if it is grounded, it is grounded in some nonphysical properties.

If our value is not grounded in a physical property, then in what, if anything, is our value grounded? Perhaps the safest answer here is: *we don't know*. Or, if we are feeling slightly bolder, perhaps we shall propose that our value is grounded in our *being people*, which is itself not grounded in a physical property. In either case, our value is neither a physical property nor grounded in a physical property. In either case, there is a clean way out of the grounding version of Harrison's argument. Reject *Grounding Implied Theory*.

There are two ways of resisting the premise at hand, then. If our value is ungrounded or else grounded in some nonphysical property (itself not grounded in any physical property), then *Grounding Implied Theory* is false. Standard Physicalists may be uneasy with these escape routes. Both options are, after all, nonstandard. But materialists who are more open to nonstandard moves may find in Harrison's argument some reason to step away from orthodoxy. One alternative to orthodoxy is a version of materialism on which, though we are made of (only) things that are physical (electrons and such), we nonetheless have features that are not grounded in our physical features because they are not grounded at all or because they are not grounded in our physical features (constructing a definition of materialism that allows for these nonstandard hypotheses is a project one of us takes up in Bailey, n.d.).

4 We take no official view about the relata of grounding relations, whether grounding must be a proper relation or whether there is some canonical locution by which to express facts about grounding. Accordingly, the somewhat loose way we'll put things (we'll speak of features being grounded in other features) may be easily adapted or translated into any framework; '*x*'s feature *F* is grounded in *x*'s feature *G*' may be rendered as '*x* is *F* because *x* is *G*', or as 'the event of *Fx* is grounded in the event *Fg*' for example.

5 We've put things in terms of properties of material beings being grounded in physical properties. What we mean by 'physical properties' here is, roughly, *narrowly physical* properties—those nonmental properties that figure in fundamental physics. So (SP) says that if you are material, your properties (feeling certain pains, say) are grounded in properties such as mass, charge, and spin (or whatever nonmental properties turn out to be treated by fundamental physics). There are, of course, difficulties with this conception of physical properties, and wading into that swamp is not on our agenda; for explication and defense, see Wilson (2006).

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We think of Harrison's argument, then, not as providing compelling reasons to deny materialism or to adopt full-blooded substance dualism, but rather as providing reasons to modify materialism. If the argument can be likened to a referee for a journal, it issues the materialist a verdict of 'revise and resubmit', not 'reject'.[6]

## 4. The Value Problem Revisited

Harrison's argument is, then, not a convincing refutation of materialism in all its forms. That is unsurprising, really. Philosophical arguments are often less than maximally convincing (but see Ballantyne 2014). But we do not think that the materialist is off the hook just yet.

Notably, our diagnosis of where Harrison's argument falters doesn't speak directly to the broader questions about the value of material objects that motivated the problem in the first place. The general value problem remains unsolved. Even if Harrison's argument falters, there may yet be a problem in the neighborhood for materialists. By analogy: even if various arguments purporting to show that material objects couldn't have conscious mental properties were shown to fail, there would still be a mind-body *problem*; materialists would still face puzzling questions about how matter might give rise to mind.

So it is with the case at hand: there is a value problem for materialism. We'll indirectly argue for *that* thesis by briefly developing various versions of the value problem—a few seed arguments against materialism. As you read each argument, objections will no doubt spring to your mind. Here is our advice: when you think of objections, look for ways one might attempt to develop the argument to get around those objections. We anticipate that in the end, you'll see that there is at least a prima facie problem for standard materialist views and that promising ways of avoiding the problem will require adopting a nonstandard materialism.

### 4.1 The Problem of Essential Value

Many have thought that we persons are so valuable that we *must* be valuable. In this respect we are different from the material world; for no material object is valuable in *that* way. We may regiment the thought here as follows:

E1. I am essentially valuable.
E2. No material object is essentially valuable.
E3. Therefore, I am not a material object.

6 That is not to say that Harrison's argument could not provide *anyone* with a reason to endorse substance dualism. Suppose you have no reason to accept materialism in any form, and suppose you accept Harrison's proposal that substance dualism provides the best explanation of our moral intuitions, other things being equal. Then you may find yourself with a reason to prefer substance dualism, even while it remains the case that there is a form of materialism that *can* account for the relevant moral intuitions.

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## 4.2 The Problem of Category Shift

There is a vast gap, it seems, between things that are as valuable as *we* are and material objects, on the other. The gap is so wide as to seem *categorical*; it is not a matter of mere degree. Rather, it is a matter of kind. And yet, the differences between material objects seem to be matters of degree (in size, shape, location, mass, and so on). This suggests:

C1. All differences between medium-sized material objects are ultimately grounded in *noncategorical* differences (such as differences in size, density, mass, complexity, etc.).
C2. A difference with respect to having *inherent value* is a difference that is not grounded in a noncategorical difference.
C3. Therefore, a difference with respect to having inherent value is not a difference between any medium-sized material objects. (C1, C2)
C4. Some medium-sized material objects lack inherent value.
C5. Therefore, no medium-sized material object has inherent value. (C3, C4)
C6. Human persons have inherent value.
C7. Therefore, human persons are not medium-sized material objects.

## 4.3 The Spirit Confirmation Argument

Consider two hypotheses and one datum. One hypothesis is that we are spirits—immaterial thinking substances. Another hypothesis is that we are wholly material beings. One datum is that we enjoy inherent value. It is obvious, if we are spirits, that we enjoy inherent value. But it is less obvious, if we are wholly material beings, that we should enjoy that value. These observations do not form a decisive case against materialism, but they do suggest that our value *confirms* the hypothesis that we are spirits. More carefully:

S1. The conditional probability of our inherent value on the spirit hypothesis is very high.
S2. The conditional probability of our inherent value on the materialist hypothesis is low (or, at any rate, much lower than on the spirit hypothesis).
S3. We enjoy inherent value (datum).
S4. If the conditional probability of a datum on one hypothesis is much higher than on another, the datum confirms (is evidence for) the first hypothesis over the other.
S5. Therefore, our inherent value confirms (is evidence for) the spirit hypothesis over the materialist hypothesis.

These are intriguing arguments. They present us with various angles or perspectives on the value problem. No doubt materialists will have many things to say about

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them. We raise the arguments here not to praise their soundness, but rather to display the value of taking the problem seriously.

## 5. Conclusion

We have mitigated one value problem for materialism by showing that Harrison's argument does not succeed in demonstrating substance dualism. But we should not feel complacent just yet. There is still a value problem for materialism, and it deserves careful attention.

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