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Topic neutrality and the mind–body problem

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Abstract: **In a previous paper I argued that there is conceptual parity between Christian materialism and Christian dualism because nonmatter is neutral with respect to thinking and feeling – it might do these but it also might not. This undermines the explanatory power of immaterial souls. J. P. Moreland responded by saying that dualists reject this neutral conception of souls: souls are not generic immaterial substances, but consist of a special kind of nonmatter, namely, nonmatter whose essence it is to think and feel. I reply that conceptual parity can still be maintained: Christian materialists can claim that brains are not neutral either, but consist of a special kind of matter, namely, thinking and feeling matter. So there is parity whether one adopts a topic-neutral approach or an essentialist approach.**

In responding to an earlier argument of mine, J. P. Moreland asserts, 'Substance dualists will resist the topic-neutral approach as a prior methodological constraint placed on the mind/body debate'.[1] My argument's aim was to demonstrate the parity between Christian materialism and Christian dualism in order to show that the latter has no advantage over the former. Whatever dualists say about people that is required by their Christian beliefs can also be said by materialists who want to say the same things because of their Christian beliefs.

Dualists often argue, for example, that dualism is true because Christianity requires that people have the ability to think, feel, and make choices. Since only immaterial substances can do these, dualists claim, Christians must be dualists. My parity response to this argument claims that dualism is in no better position than materialism with respect to Christianity because we can conceive of matter having the same capacities that dualists say only nonmatter has, namely, the ability to think, feel, and make choices. Both matter and nonmatter, in fact, are neutral with respect to these capacities. We can conceive of matter either having the ability to think or not having it, and we can conceive of immaterial substances either being able to think or not being able to think. Philosophers, in fact, have actually conceived of various immaterial substances that cannot think – possible worlds, objectively existing values, and numbers, to name a few. The proper

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inference to draw from this fact is that 'nonmatter is neutral with respect to thinking and feeling; it might do these but it also might not'.[2] If matter is also neutral, as I believe it is, then it too might think or feel, and there is parity between dualism and materialism, at least conceptually.

Moreland responds by disavowing a topic-neutral approach to the mind–body problem: 'The soul is a special *kind* of immaterial entity'.[3] The immaterial substance that people possess is not 'some generic property that covers souls and sets alike'.[4] So my argument for parity is a non-starter, Moreland concludes, because it makes an assumption that dualists would not accept. The assumption is that souls are neutral with respect to whether or not they can think or feel. Souls are not neutral, Moreland claims.

The parity still stands, however. To see why, we must ask what a topic-neutral approach to the mind–body problem is and why dualists resist it. In a topic-neutral approach, both matter and nonmatter are conceived neutrally. This means that the concept of thinking is not part of either the idea of matter or the idea of nonmatter. Matter and nonmatter are defined, according to the topic-neutral approach, without reference either to the ability to think or to the inability to think. So far as their definitions are concerned, they might think, but they also might not.

Dualists who reject the topic-neutral approach do so because they want to include the concept of thinking in the concept of the immaterial substance people possess and to exclude it from the concept of matter. It is not the case, they say, that matter could think, and this is a conceptual truth about matter. Nor is it the case that the immaterial part of people might or might not have the ability to think. It has this ability as a matter of definition. This appears to be the import of Moreland's assertion that the soul is a special kind of immaterial entity. It is not a generic substance to which the ability to think is 'superadded', to use Locke's word.

The rejection of the topic-neutral approach to the mind–body problem by dualists accords with the fact that they generally appear to view the mind–body problem as a conceptual issue rather than an empirical one. When they say that matter cannot think, they mean to be asserting that it is impossible to conceive of matter thinking; our conceptual framework won't allow that. This is the burden of both the argument from different properties and the argument from introspection that dualists commonly use. Thoughts can be profound or superficial, but electrochemical processes in the brain can be neither, asserts the former. The 'can be neither' is a conceptual exclusion, not an empirical one, or else dualists would adduce empirical evidence for it, which they do not. When we are introspecting thoughts, we are aware of something different from what we are aware of when we observe the brain, states the argument from introspection. The brain is not the kind of thing that we can introspect, nor are thoughts the kind of things we can see. Here, too, the issue appears conceptual. Introspection reveals to us something whose essence includes the ability to think.

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Materialists, on the other hand, generally view the mind–body problem as empirical, which is why they favor the topic-neutral approach. It is not concepts and definitions that tell us which view is correct, they say, but evidence that points to the dependence of thinking on brains. Conceptually, the issue could go either way, but as a matter of fact, it leans towards materialism. So Moreland's rejection of the topic-neutral approach gets at a crucial difference in the way dualists and materialists generally support their views.

One response materialists can make to dualists is simply to argue that the topic-neutral approach is correct, but that it is not prejudicial to dualism. Dualism can still be argued for on empirical grounds. However, dualists who base their view on conceptual considerations, as most appear to do, would not be likely to want to shift to an empirical orientation. Conceptual considerations appear decisive to them.

I want to propose a different response. It is that if dualists reject the topic-neutral approach, then materialists can concede that to them. Materialists can admit that dualists are right to claim that souls are not generic immaterial substances to which thinking is added, but are essentially thinking entities. They can also assert that materialists are entitled to say precisely the same things about brains. Brains are a special kind of matter. They are not made of a generic substance that non-brains also are made of. What kind of special matter are brains made of, according to materialists? It is thinking and feeling matter, that is, matter whose essence it is to think and feel.

Here materialists might point out that similar remarks can be made for all material substances. Leaves, for example, consist of a distinctive organic matter. Stones consist of a kind of matter different from leaf matter or dirt matter or iron matter. Neither of them is rightly thought of as being made of generic matter. So if dualists are correct in saying that souls are distinctive kinds of immaterial entities, namely, thinking and feeling entities, materialists can make a similar claim about brains. What makes something a brain is just its distinctive capacities, one of which is the ability to think. And these capacities are part of the essence of the matter of which brains are made.

If this response is coherent, the alternatives are that we think of matter and nonmatter neutrally or that we think of them as 'special'. In the first, the concept of thinking is neither included in the concept of nonmatter nor excluded from the concept of matter. In the second, the concept of thinking is included in the concept of a soul if dualism is true, and in the concept of a brain if materialism is true. Souls are a distinctive kind of nonmatter if dualism is true, namely, thinking nonmatter, and brains are a distinctive kind of matter if materialism is true, namely, thinking matter.

This response is consistent with thinking that the issue between dualists and materialists is an empirical one. It is possible to think both that part of the concept of a soul is that it has the ability to think and that it is a question of fact whether

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souls exist. The same is true of brains: we can define brains as thinking matter, but it would still be a matter of fact whether there are brains in this sense. Again, the case is analogous to everyday cases. We can conceive of the concepts of leaves and stones as including the concepts of special kinds of matter, yet also believe that it is an empirical issue whether leaves and stones exist.

We have, then, a new kind of parity, different from that in the topic-neutral approach. In the topic-neutral approach, the question is whether thinking should be conceived as being added to matter or whether it should be conceived as being added to nonmatter. In the new kind of parity, the question is whether the things whose essence it is to think are material or immaterial.

Belief in God's omnipotence can also be preserved in the new kind of parity. It might be thought by Christian materialists that the topic-neutral approach is needed in order to believe that God is omnipotent: God can make matter have the ability to think only if the concept of matter is neutral with respect to the concept of thinking. But belief in omnipotence can be retained even if the concept of matter is not neutral with respect to the concept of thinking. God is able to make a special kind of matter, just as He can make a special kind of nonmatter. That is, He is able to bring into existence essentially thinking matter just as easily as He can bring into existence essentially thinking nonmatter, in the same way that He can make leaves and stones with essences. So whichever approach one adopts, the topic-neutral approach or the essentialist approach, God's omnipotence is retained. And whichever view is actually true, dualism or materialism, God could have made it such that the other one was true.

The inference to be drawn here is that dualists are not in a more advantageous position by rejecting the topic-neutral approach. There is parity with it or without it. Although there may be more empirical evidence for one side, conceptually the two views are on a par.

Dualists, of course, are likely to view this conclusion as a case of philosophical cheating. The whole question in the debate between dualists and materialists, they would say, is whether matter can think. It simply begs the question to assert that there can be a distinctive kind of matter that thinks. So the materialist's new parity response is just as much a non-starter as is the topic-neutral approach.

However, parity is still not undermined. For the dualist to say that the question is whether matter can think implicitly presupposes the topic-neutral approach. It does so because it supposes that matter is generic, that is, normally is not the kind of thing that thinks, and asks whether we can conceive of the ability to think being added to it. This presupposition is analogous to the one that provoked Moreland to object that I illegitimately adopted a topic-neutral approach to the question of whether nonmatter can think in my original argument for parity. This latter question presupposes the topic-neutral approach, he claimed, because it supposes that nonmatter is generic, and then asks whether we can conceive of the ability to think

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being added to it. The two questions, one about nonmatter and one about matter, it is evident, are parallel.

In conclusion, if the question of whether matter can think presupposes the topic-neutral approach, then so does the question whether nonmatter can think. This is one kind of parity. If one rejects the topic-neutral approach for either question, it is just as legitimate to reject it for the other. This is a second kind of parity. Either way, parity is preserved.

Notes

1. J. P. Moreland 'Locke's parity thesis about thinking matter: A response to Williams', *Religious Studies*, **34** (1998), 258. This is a response to my 'Christian materialism and the parity thesis', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, **39** (1996), 1–14.
2. Williams 'Christian materialism', 9.
3. Moreland 'Locke's parity thesis', 258.
4. *Ibid.*

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