Rel. Stud. **34**, pp. 253–259. Printed in the United Kingdom © 1998 Cambridge University Press

Locke's Parity Thesis about Thinking Matter: A Response to Williams

J. P. Moreland

Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, California 90639, U.S.A.

Abstract Recently, Clifford Williams has attempted to argue for the plausibility of a Christian form of physicalism. To make his case, Williams appropriates certain claims by John Locke regarding the possibility of thinking matter to argue for what Williams calls the parity theses: (1) God can make matter and nonmatter either to think or not to think. Given God's omnipotence, the justification for (1) is: (2) there is no contradiction in asserting either that matter or nonmatter thinks or that they do not think. If we expand thinking to include other morally and religiously relevant operations of the mind, then we get: (3) God can make either a purely material being or a nonmaterial entity to have moral and religious characteristics. From this, Williams infers that: (4) there is an equal amount of mystery in thinking matter as there is in non-thinking matter. In response to Williams, I argue that his main arguments for the parity theses fail and his Lockean style argument must be judged a failure. To show this I, first, state Williams' Lockean parity argument and, second, criticize the three arguments he offers for its most important premise.

The proliferation of interest in the philosophy of religion during the last 15 years has spawned a renewed interest in the religious aspects of the mind/body problem. Moreover, in light of the current unpopularity of substance dualism, it is also quite understandable, at least sociologically, to see a growing number of attempts to argue for a religious, and more specifically, Christian form of either supervenient or strict physicalism. One such attempt was recently offered by Clifford Williams. Williams has sought to appropriate insights from John Locke's views about thinking matter to support what is called Locke's parity thesis.[1]

If Williams' employment of Locke's parity thesis is successful, then it would, indeed, provide a solid argument in support of some form of Christian physicalism. As I will try to demonstrate, however, Wiliams' main arguments for the parity theses fail and his Lockean style argument must be judged a failure. To show this I will, first, state Wiliams' Lockean parity argument and, second, criticize the three arguments he offers for its most important premise.

1. Wiliams' Lockean parity argument

As an initial formulation of the parity thesis, Williams cites Locke's statement that 'all the great ends of morality and religion are well enough secured,

[1] Clifford Williams, 'Christian materialism and the parity thesis', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **39** (February 1996): 1–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

without philosophical proofs of the soul's immortality'.[2] According to Locke, since God is omnipotent, and since there is no contradiction to the proposition 'there is such a thing as thinking matter', God could 'superadd' a faculty of thinking to matter. In fact, on Locke's view, there is no greater mystery to the idea of a material entity thinking than there is to a non-material entity thinking. Therefore, all of the great ends of morality and religion are indifferent as to whether or not 'thinking matter' is the correct way to characterize human beings and their mental operations of cognition.[3]

Williams expands and formalizes Locke's parity thesis into four propositions which he calls parity theses:

(1) God can make matter and nonmatter either to think or not to think.

Given God's omnipotence, the justification for (1) is:

(2) There is no contradiction in asserting either that matter or nonmatter thinks or that they do not think.

If we expand thinking to include other morally and religiously relevant operations of the mind (e.g., acting freely, worshipping, fearing), then we get:

(3) God can make either a purely material being or a non-material entity to have moral and religious characteristics.

From this, Williams infers that:

(4) There is an equal amount of mystery in thinking matter as there is in thinking nonmatter.

2. REBUTTAL OF WILIAMS' ARGUMENTS FOR HIS PARITY THESIS

According to Williams, the strength of his parity thesis turns on a defence of premise (2). If (2) fails, then the parity argument is rendered ineffective. So he offers three arguments 'designed to support parity between matter and nonmatter by loosening the necessary inclusion and exclusion dualists have thought they have seen, that is by supporting (a) and (b) ...'.[4] Here are propositions (a) and (b):

(a) The idea of nonmatter does not necessarily include the idea of thinking.

(b) The idea of matter does not necessarily exclude the idea of thinking.

In the remainder of this article, I shall analyse these three arguments and

[2] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Dover, 1959), Book IV, Chapter III, Section 6, p. 195.

[3] Both Locke and Williams include other mental states, operations, and faculties in their arguments. I will continue to focus on thinking, but much of what is to follow could be applied to other states of consciousness.

[4] Williams, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

show why I take them to fail. If I am successful, it follows that (2) is not well supported and, in the absence of stronger arguments on its behalf, the parity argument itself is not convincing.

a. Argument one: The First Adam and Eve Experiment. Williams invites us to consider the following thought experiment. Suppose God has just created Adam and Eve with intellectual capabilities at their fullest. Suppose further, that God uses a cerebroscope to explain to Adam the various regions and physical activities of Eve's brain and vice versa. Could Adam or Eve determine that the other's brain is not able to think? Williams answers this question in the negative, claiming that for all they can tell, the brain being observed might be able to do the very sorts of things with which they are acquainted from their own experience (e.g., have thoughts or feelings, act as a self mover). Williams concludes that since neither Adam nor Eve can answer this question a priori, then it is not a synthetic a priori truth that matter cannot think and, therefore, thinking matter is possible.

There are several things wrong with this argument.[5] For one thing, Williams fails to distinguish strict logical necessity from metaphysical necessity. From the fact that 'matter cannot think' is not, strictly speaking, a logical contradiction, it only follows that the proposition is synthetic, not that it expresses a metaphysical contingency. The fact that some proposition is not a synthetic a priori truth because it is not known a priori does not imply that the state of affairs expressed by that proposition is not necessary. Adam may not be able to tell a priori that, necessarily, water is H_2O and that it is impossible that our water (H_2O) be composed of XYZ. Modal divisions do not map neatly onto Adam's faculties.

Moreover, if God gives Adam a lecture about the kinds of properties/capacities essential to material substances just prior to the cerebroscope exploration, then even if God does not list every single property or capacity of matter, Adam will be able to tell that the properties/powers widely taken to constitute the essence of immaterial substances (if such there be) and that he knows to be characteristic of his own self are just not aspects of the material substance (Eve's brain) before him.

To elaborate on this point, various arguments for substance dualism have been formulated over the years. Now whether or not these arguments are successful, most advocates and critics of substance dualism agree about the view of the soul supported by these arguments and which constitute the nature of immaterial substances, even though there is disagreement over whether or not immaterial substances exist. These arguments for substance

[5] Though a minor point, as it stands, Williams thought experiment represents a misunderstanding of at least some rationalist views of a priori knowledge according to which repeated exposure to particular sensory phenomena is necessary as the occasion for the mind to get the proper concepts before itself to be in a position to have a priori knowledge. So just because Adam and Eve would need to use their senses to observe the brain before them, this might form the occasion for them to form a concept of matter such that, a priori, they would know that, necessarily, matter does not think.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dualism support a view of the soul such that it (1) has an unextended, immaterial essence; (2) contains the various ultimate capacities to exemplify thoughts, sensations, beliefs, desires, and so forth such that these exemplifications are modes of the soul; (3) sustains primitive unity at a time, absolute sameness through change, and is *de re* possibly such that it could exist disembodied; (4) is a self reflexive centre of subjectivity; (5) has the power to exercise libertarian agency. For brevity, let us call these properties/powers of the soul ψ properties/powers.

Now ψ properties/powers are just not constituents in strictly material substances. As David Papineau puts it, the history of science, especially physics, has given us enough empirical evidence about the *kinds* of properties and powers that will characterize any future descriptions of matter and irreducible, uneliminable psychological traits – including ψ properties/powers – are not among those physical properties and powers.[6] Even if we grant that an immaterial substance with the relevant features could emerge from matter fitly disposed, the emerging substance would not itself be physical. If God were to inform Adam about the differences between material and immaterial substances prior to the cerebroscope exploration, then Adam would be able to tell what sort of substance Eve's brain was.

Finally, suppose God merely presents a functioning brain to Adam without mentioning any other person, where by 'functioning' I mean what Williams has in mind, namely, a brain with neurons in motion, firing synapses, and so forth. Adam will simply have no idea at all that this object is supposed to have anything whatever to do with a person. He already knows that God is a person in the sense of being a certain sort of immaterial substance, if he has been instructed in angelology, he knows the same thing about Michael, and through introspection he is aware of himself as an immaterial substance.

Regarding this last claim, perhaps following Hume, Williams will only allow Adam to be acquainted with his own mental states in introspection, but most substance dualists will eschew this opinion and opt for the view that in introspection, Adam is acquainted with himself as well as his internal states. On one interpretation of the well-known knowledge argument, and in light of the dualist argument about indexicality and the inadequacy of third person physical descriptions either to express the concept of a person or to be adequate for the identification of one, it seems that when Adam is presented with an exhaustive catalogue of the brain's properties/capacities, he will simply think he has a 'magnificent array of complexly interrelated parts' before him. At no point will he be tempted to form the belief that a person is present. However, if Adam is told that he is about to meet another person, Eve, he will understand that to imply that Eve is another immaterial substance like God, Gabriel, and himself and he will be interested to learn that Eve is attached to a brain even though God and Gabriel are not.

[6] David Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 29–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

b. The Second Adam and Eve Experiment. Williams presents a second thought experiment intended to show the possibility of an immaterial substance that does not think. God invites Adam to watch while he assembles Eve body part by body part. After putting the elbow, muscles, and other body parts in place, God tells Adam that He is going to put an entirely different, invisible substance into her. When Adam asks what this entity is for, God tells him that it is what makes Eve like Adam – alive, able to move, feel and think. According to Williams, Adam's question reveals his inability to tell a priori that nonmatter thinks and feels.

My response to this thought experiment is parallel to the rebuttal I offered for the first one. Even if Adam cannot tell a priori what the immaterial substance is for, it does not follow that the substance so added is such that, possibly, it does not have the essential ψ properties/powers characteristic of the soul. Moreover, if God explains to Adam just what kind of entity he is adding by describing its essence, then given that Adam has been lectured about material substances, he will be able to know that (1) this soul is not a material substance nor are its properties/powers physical ones; (2) necessarily, this entity is such that it has certain properties/powers in all possible worlds in which it exists. Further, in light of his own first person acquaintance with his own self and its inner states and capacities, Adam will know that this immaterial substance being placed in Eve is the same kind of entity as is his own soul.

c. The inability of nonmatter to explain thinking. Williams advances a different argument to show that since it is possible for nonmatter not to think, then the presence of a nonmaterial entity does not offer any help in explaining various mental abilities. Here is his argument: There are various nonmaterial entities that do not have the ability to think, feel, etc. – forms, numbers, possible worlds, objective values, logical relations, meanings. 'This fact shows that nonmatter is neutral with respect to thinking and feeling; it might do these but it also might not'.[7] Since nonmatter is neutral with respect to thinking, the presence of an immaterial substance in people does not explain their various mental abilities.

It is hard to see the force of this argument. Just because immateriality is not sufficient for the presence of various mental powers/properties, it does not follow that immateriality is not necessary. Immateriality may be a higher order generic property that characterizes souls as well as the various entities cited by Williams. Substance dualists do not think that immateriality *per se* captures the various operations of the soul. Assuming solely for the sake of argument that numbers are immaterial substances, substance dualists do not try to explain why a body appears to move by the action of a self moving agent by postulating that the number two is in that body. Rather, the human

[7] Williams, p. 9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

soul is a certain *kind* of immaterial entity and a specification of its differentiation from other immaterial entities would take into account the ψ properties/powers associated with the arguments for and the widely accepted characterization of immaterial substance. Now, in my view, substance dualism is not first and foremost an explanatory theory postulated to explain things; rather, it is a set of descriptions of the properties/powers with which one is acquainted in acts of first person introspection. But to the degree that the notion of a substance explains anything, a proper understanding of the type of essence that constitutes the human soul does, in fact, explain various mental features characteristic of human beings.

Williams acknowledges that in ordinary language, 'soul' contains the notion of thinking and, consequently, the parity theses require a topic neutral account of 'soul' which renders it equivalent merely to 'nonmaterial'. But substance dualists will resist the topic neutral approach as a prior methodological constraint placed on the mind/body debate because they see substance dualism primarily as a first person description and not as a theory. Wiliams' and Locke's scepticism about the nature of spiritual substance is due in no small measure to an epistemologically defective understanding of the fundamental way we come to know we are immaterial substances in the first place. Moreover, when Williams uses 'nonmaterial', it is now clear that he means by it some generic property that covers souls and sets alike. Now, if this move is required for the parity thesis to go through, it is a non starter because it places the substance dualist in a position of having to deny the essence of his position, namely, that the soul is a special *kind* of immaterial entity with a specific differentia constituted by ψ properties and powers.

On one occasion, Locke bemoaned the fact that the idea of soul, especially when compared to the idea of matter, was regarded as obscure by many in his day. Locke thought that this judgment followed from people being preoccupied with the study of material substances compared to immaterial ones: 'I know that people whose thoughts are immersed in matter, and have so subjected their minds to their senses that they seldom reflect on anything beyond them …'.[8]

In this judgment, Locke was probably correct. Around two decades before the publication of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Ralph Cudworth had noted a growing number of thinkers 'possessed with a certain Kind of Madness, that may be called Pneumatophobia, that makes them have an irrational, but desperate abhorrence from Spirits or incorporeal Substance'. According to Cudworth, this attitude went along with Hylomania 'whereby they madly dote upon Matter'.[9] In the contemporary intellectual climate, there is a growing impetus to develop a satisfying version of Christian

[8] John Locke, Book II, Chapter XXIII, Section 22, p. 409.

[9] Cited in John Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 122.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press

materialism. However understandable this impetus is, I have tried to show that Wiliams' three arguments for the crucial premise of the parity thesis – premise (2) – fail and his Lockean style argument must be judged a failure.[10]

[10] I wish to thank Dallas Willard, Garry DeWeese, Robert C. Koons, and Stew Goetz for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004429 Published online by Cambridge University Press