

Essay on refuting physicalism

The history of Christian teaching supports the view that human being consists of a material as well as an immaterial substance, namely the body and the soul. When a person dies, the soul continues to exist and will be reunited with the resurrected body in the last Days. With this view, the soul, or ego is not the same thing as the body. In fact, the Scriptures has clearly supported this position with Paul's teaching that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." (2 Corn 5:8) Therefore, the existence of the soul was a well-established doctrine based on the historical teaching of Christianity.

However, a majority of Christian scholars today hold the view of physicalism which states that human is made up of just one substance, namely the physical body. They deny the existence of soul and they see that the mind is no different than the brain, and that the soul in the Bible is something that the body can do and is a behavior of the brain, not an immaterial substance.

In fact, the question of whether human is made of one kind or two kinds of thing is described as the mind-body problem. On one hand, the strict physicalist holds that humans are made up of a physical substance. In other words, humans are complicated physical objects. When a person dies, he ceases to exist. On the other hand, the dualist holds that humans are made up of two kinds of things, a physical and an immaterial thing. However, there are different opinions among the dualist. The property dualist claims that humans are made up of one physical substance but they have two kinds of properties (physical and immaterial); while the substance dualist claims that humans have two kinds of properties and each kind has its own processor.

In order to refute physicalism, it is important to understand the Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. This principle is defined as for any X and any Y, if X = Y, then for all properties P, P is true of X if and only if P is true of Y. For example, if X is George Washington and Y is the First President of the United States, then if X = Y, then for any property P (being 6' 1.5" tall) will be true of George Washington (X) if and only if that property is true for the First President of the United States (Y). If a property is true of X but is not true of Y, then X is not identical to Y.

By applying the Law of Identicals to the brain (X) and the mind (Y), it can be shown that the physical brain and the mind are not identical because their properties are different. For example, the properties of the brain can be described by its weight, size, shape, and electrical charge while the properties of the mind can be described by its mental states such as the perceptual sensations which are states of sentience, awareness or consciousness that are produced by one of the five sense organs, and non-perceptual sensations which are produced not by one of the five senses. The mind has thoughts and beliefs which are also one of its properties. While a thought can be either true or false, no physical properties can be true or false. Also, some sensations are pleasurable, but there are no physical properties that can be described as pleasurable.

In addition, even though a brain scientist may have exhaustive knowledge about the brain by observing a person's brain state, he cannot have any knowledge about the thoughts or emotions of the person. Thus, this shows that the view of physicalism cannot be correct. The view that human is made up of only physical substance cannot explain where consciousness comes from because consciousness has mental properties and they are different from physical properties.

Based on these arguments, Moreland concludes that property dualism is at least true. However, the question is which substance possesses these mental properties. It is either that the brain possesses two kinds of properties (physical and mental) which shows that property dualism is correct; or that humans are composed of a body and soul that each possesses its respective kind of properties, thus showing substance dualism is the correct view.

However, Moreland argues that no amount of information regarding a person's body or his conscience can tell who or where he is. He proposed a split-brain operation, a philosophical thought experiment, in which one-half of person 1's brain is put into a body (namely P2) and another half of person 1's brain is put into a different body (namely P3). After the operation, suppose both P2 and P3 live and have all person 1's memory and personality trait, so where is person 1? A number of options of where person 1 is offered, such as person 1 was annihilated while two new people (P2 and P3) come into existence, or that person 1 is identical to person 2 while person 3 comes into existence after the operation, or that person 1 is identical to person 3 while person 2 comes into existence after the operation. But in any case, the option that P2 is half of person 1 and P3 is half of person 1 cannot be true because a person is not capable of splitting. This illustration shows that even though the body and the brain of person 1 is known, or even P2 and P3 may have the same personality trait of person 1, yet no amount of information can solve the question of where P1 is because there is no information about person 1's ego. In other words, this philosophical experiment shows that a person is more than his brain and his personality traits, memories and conscious life.

In addition, a person has the property of being possibly disembodied while his body does not have that property, thus the person cannot be his body. In the near death experiences, a person can clearly see his own body and even hear sounds. This shows that there is something true of a person which is not true to the brain.

Finally, if a person is simply a brain, then all his behaviors are fixed by the structure of the brain, his genes and the environmental inputs because physical objects behave by natural laws and inputs. However, the reality of free will shows that a person has to be more than just his body which also shows that property dualism has its own shortcomings.

By considering all the above arguments, the only views that can satisfactorily explain the mind-body problem is the view of substance dualism. This concludes that the view on physicalism is false.