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Proving God without Dualism: Improving the Swinburne-Moreland Argument from Consciousness

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Abstract: With substance dualism and the existence of God, Swinburne (2004, *The Existence of God*, Oxford University Press, Oxford) and Moreland (2010, *Consciousness and the Existence of God*, Routledge, New York) have argued for a very powerful explanatory mechanism that can readily explain several philosophical problems related to consciousness. However, their positions come with pre-suppositions and ontological commitments which many are not prepared to share. The aim of this paper is to improve on the Swinburne-Moreland argument from consciousness by developing an argument for the existence of God from consciousness without being committed to substance dualism. The argument proceeds by suggesting a solution to the exceptional-point-of-view problem, i.e., the question how it can be explained that there is a conscious being lucky enough to experience the point of view of a relatively tiny brain amidst a giant universe that is indifferent about which physical entities it brings about according to the laws of physics.

Keywords: argument from consciousness, existence of God, explanatory gap, Swinburne, Moreland

1 Introduction

In the worldview of many there is no God, nor anything transcendent. Neither does the world have transcendent parts (like immortal souls), nor is there anything transcendent outside the world that serves as a cause or explanation for it. If at all anything else is assumed to exist beside the actual physical world, it is usually regarded as causally inert (as, for example, abstract entities) or as spatiotemporally and causally isolated

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from the actual world (as Lewis's many possible worlds; Lewis 1986). This worldview is both atheist and physicalist, what seems to be a widespread combination. According to this worldview, there is no transcendent being that wished the world to be. The world simply exists without anything else, through brute arbitrariness.

On the other hand, even physicalists acknowledge that they have conscious experience and a first-person perspective. Based on this, Swinburne (2004) and Moreland (2010) have argued against the atheistic and physicalist worldview in two steps. They argued that, first, the best explanation for our first-person perspective is the existence of (immortal) souls, and that, second, the best explanation for the existence of (immortal) souls is the existence of a divine being. This argument is not without problems. In particular, it first needs to convince the atheist of the falsehood of physicalism, which is a position in close keeping with the natural sciences and might thus be attractive also to some believers. It is, to be sure, attractive to some Christian philosophers, such as Peter van Inwagen (1998), who argues that there is no need for the assumption of immaterial souls in order to believe in resurrection.

For this reason, we want to improve on the dialectical situation set before us by Swinburne and Moreland. Like them, we start from the fact of our having a first-person experience in order to argue for the existence of God, but unlike them, we do not presuppose the falsehood of physicalism. Everything we say in the following should be compatible with both physicalist and non-physicalist theories of mind, in particular with dualist theories, although, for the sake of the argument, our wording will have more proximity to the physicalist's language.

We proceed as follows: In the next section, we present the Swinburne-Moreland account of the argument from consciousness and show its peculiar difficulties in arguing for its conclusion. We also show that the explanatory gap, from where Swinburne and Moreland drive their argument, is only one problem connected with consciousness among several others. For our own argument, we choose the problem of the exceptional point of view as a starting point. In Section 3, we introduce the probability assumption on which our argument rests and defend its two steps. Finally, in Section 4, we conclude by setting out the dialectical advantages of our argument as opposed to the Swinburne-Moreland approach.

2 The Swinburne-Moreland Argument

2.1 Swinburne-Moreland and the Explanatory Gap

In the literature, there are many theories that attempt to describe or explain consciousness: reductionism (consciousness can be reduced to neurobiological

concepts; Churchland 1988), eliminativism (consciousness fails to carve mental reality at its joints and therefore does not exist; Dennett 2000), emergentism (consciousness is not reducible to the physical entities from which it emerges; Kim 1992), panpsychism (everything has some degree of consciousness; Chalmers 2015), and theistic substance dualism (consciousness requires a divine substance; Swinburne 2004, Moreland 2010) – to mention only a small fraction of the extant theories.

Chalmers (2007) classifies consciousness-related problems into easy problems and a hard problem. Among his easy problems are the integration of information by a cognitive system, the reportability of mental states, the focus of attention, and the deliberate control of behaviour. Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness can be summarised as follows: Why is consciousness experienced rather than not experienced? The term 'experience' has, so Chalmers explains, a subjective aspect, because its content is directly accessible only to those who undergo this experience, and not for an outside observer. From the outside, a conscious person cannot be distinguished from the so-called philosophical zombies, who can report to have a first-person experience and display appropriate brain activities and behaviour, but do not in fact experience any consciousness.

Both Swinburne and Moreland base their argument for theism-cum-substance dualism, in the first place, upon the so-called explanatory gap (Levine 1983): How can it be explained that seemingly non-physical phenomenal properties, such as qualia and consciousness, arise from physical matter in brains? Swinburne asks the question: "How probable is it that, if there is no God, human bodies would give rise to the conscious life typical of humans?" (Swinburne 2004, p. 192). He claims that it is very improbable. Moreland argues that while finite mental entities may be inexplicable on a naturalist worldview, they may be explained by theism, thereby furnishing evidence for God's existence (Moreland 2010, p. 28). Swinburne and Moreland's argument can be summarised as a double inference to the best explanation:

- SM1 There is an explanatory gap between physical brains and consciousness.
- SM2 A substance dualism, postulating a non-physical mental substance SOUL, apart from physical substance, is the best explanation to bridge the explanatory gap.
- SM3 THEISM is the best explanation for the existence of a SOUL.

Hence, THEISM: God exists.

All of the three premises of this argument are controversial. *SM1*, the claim that there is an explanatory gap, is denied by Dennett (2000), who claims that there is no such gap. Dennett compares the brain with a computer and consciousness with

the user interface. The reason why there appears to be an explanatory gap is that there are so many layers between the user interface and the hardware of the computer. The actual reduction of consciousness to its neuroscientific components is so hard in practice that it appears to be impossible. However, every layer explains the next, and thus Dennett concludes that the physical brain perfectly well explains consciousness mediated through all of these layers taken together, which are thus bridging the explanatory gap.

The second proposition, *SM2*, is also problematic. *SM2* is ontologically extravagant in proposing the existence of a non-physical substance, namely a soul. What can a non-physical substance explain that physical substance cannot explain? The many layers between a consciousness and its neurobiological reality will most probably also occur in non-physical substances.

SM3 is not warranted either, as there are explanatory alternatives to *THEISM*. The existence of non-physical souls could be explained by postulating either (a) certain physical entities, or by postulating (b) non-divine non-physical entities. Strategy (a) aims at explaining consciousness, even if non-physical, by something physical. Both interactionism (Seager 1988) and epiphenomenalism (McLaughlin 1989) are accounts along this line. In the case of interactionism, the causal relation between the physical and the non-physical is bidirectional, whereas in the case of epiphenomenalism, the non-physical is caused by the physical, but not the other way around. Strategy (b), explaining consciousness by postulating a non-theistic non-physical entity, would postulate a non-physical mind or computer that simulates or computes consciousness, but that is too small or too imperfect to be called divine. This would be, one could say, a Bostrom scenario of one mind simulating or generating other minds by means of algorithmic computing (Bostrom 2003), apart from the fact that strategy (b) would be committed to non-physical computing processes.

2.2 Swinburne-Moreland and Other First-Person Problems

The explanatory gap is only one out of several problems arising from the experience of consciousness. The Swinburne-Moreland argument from consciousness can get further backing by the personal identity problem, as shown by Swinburne (1984): How can it be explained that the mind of the first person remains correlated with a brain (or a part of a brain) that changes over time both in its internal structure and in its relations to other brains (or brain parts)? What decides, in this situation, which elementary brain components (such as brain cells) are experienced (or correlated with experience) and which remain unexperienced for the first person?

Swinburne argues that only a soul can determine to which physical brain components a person remains correlated through time. This problem may not seem to be a real problem to many, mainly because it requires thought experiments about brains that are more exotic in structure and history than the clearly delimited, skull-contained brains of everyday life. An example of such a thought experiment is the duplication of a body and the question in which of the two copies a person will continue to live. Other examples involve the splitting of a brain in two parts, or a gradual fusion of two brains into one brain. In all these thought experiments, there is no problem in investigating objectively what happens if the brain parts involved are third-person brains. However, the problem becomes real for the first person if the experiments are applied to his or her brain. In these situations, or so Swinburne argues, we would know from the first-person perspective which path – copy or original – the consciousness follows, while the objective description of brains and bodies would not be able to decide the question.

Nagel's 1974 paper is probably one of the most prominent discussions of the peculiarities of phenomenal consciousness. Nagel points to two problems: First, Nagel points out that there is a subjective experience of every single consciousness over and above the objective, physical theory of reality (Nagel 1974, p. 437). We could dub this the single-point-of-view problem. Second, he argues that while, say, the points of view of other humans are sufficiently similar to our own in order to allow for mutual understanding, it would not be possible to know how it would be to have the phenomenal consciousness of members of another species, say of bats (Nagel 1974, p. 441). This could be called the specific-point-of-view problem.

In contrast, our own argument starts from the exceptional-point-of-view problem: How can it be explained that there is a first person who is lucky enough to experience the point of view of a relatively tiny, intelligent brain amidst a giant universe that is indifferent about which physical entities it brings about according to the laws of physics? Swinburne and Moreland do not provide a solution to this first-person problem, although they could probably fit one into their project by positing that only non-physical souls that are created in God's image are possibly experienced – or something like that. Furthermore, they would claim that, because of their dualism, the bringing about of physical matter according to the laws of physics has no effect on the probabilities that non-physical souls have any experience.

Our solution to the exceptional-point-of-view problem, treated in the next section, is different and aims at improving the Swinburne-Moreland argument. In particular, it does not presuppose substance dualism but remains neutral with respect to the philosophy of mind.

3 Introducing the Argument

Our argument starts from the fact that we have a first-person experience of an intelligent and conscious being. From the point of view of our phenomenal life this is a somewhat trivial proposition, but as we have seen, it is far from clear how this first-person experience can be incorporated into an ‘objective’ physicalist world-view. As we learn from Descartes, the first-person experience is undoubtable, for whoever wants to doubt needs to be an intelligent and conscious being. Starting from this premise, we will now present an inductive argument for the existence of God from the first-person experienced consciousness.

In a nutshell, we proceed as follows: In step 1, we argue that the best explanation for our first-person experience is that there are more than sparse islands of intelligence in the world, i.e., that the world is predominated by intelligent matter with respect to sheer mass. In step 2, we then argue that the existence of God is the best explanation for our living in such an intelligence-dominated world, and that it is hence rational to assume that theism is true. We start by discussing the extremely small probability of having an exceptional point of view in Section 3.1, argue for the first step in Section 3.2, and for the second step in Section 3.3.

Three definitions are at the core of our argument:

- D1 The **world** is the totality of everything that exists, including God, if God exists, and any other transcendent entity, if there is any.
- D2 **Intelligent matter** is physical, spatiotemporal matter that is correlated with an intelligent mind, such as human brains, but possibly also complex silicon-based computer chips that are mind-producing.
- D3 **God** is an infinite (or at least very large) intelligent mind.

We will use the following sigla for propositions relevant for our argument:

- **EXPERIENCE**: At least one consciousness experiences an exceptional point of view.
- **PREDOMINANCE**: More than 50 percent of the world’s matter is intelligent matter.
- **NATURALISM**: Only those entities exist that are explanatorily necessary for the natural sciences. In particular, there is no God, nor any other transcendent entity.
- **THEISM**: God exists.

The argument starts from **EXPERIENCE** and argues for the truth of **THEISM**. It does so by contemplating the probabilities of several propositions given **NATURALISM** or **PREDOMINANCE**.

3.1 Calculating the Probability of an Exceptional Point of View

We start from the question: What is the probability of a certain intelligent consciousness to be correlated to a particular chunk of matter in the universe? Using the oft-cited picture of throwing an arrow, we could imagine this as the probability of randomly throwing a dart at all the matter in the universe and then check whether the matter hit by the dart is intelligent matter. How can we estimate this probability?

According to recent estimations, the mass of the big bang universe, including both dark and luminous matter, is about 1.46×10^{53} kg (Ade et al. 2014). If we assume that the average human brain weighs about 1.5 kg (Herculano-Houzel 2009), and that there are seven billion people living on Earth, we end up with a mass ratio of human brains of 1 to 1.39×10^{43} . If we are optimistic about the probability of intelligent life given Naturalism, we would probably count 10,000 civilisations in each of the 10^{11} galaxies in the big bang universe. Assuming that these civilizations display roughly the same mass ratio of intelligent matter as *Homo sapiens* on Earth, this count results in a ratio of intelligent matter that is still roughly 1 to 10^{28} .

This is already an impressively small number. Things get even more impressive, when we consider that many naturalists assume the existence not only of our universe, but of a multiverse consisting of many universes like ours. One motivation for assuming a multiverse is the urge to explain cosmological fine-tuning: how comes that the big bang universe exhibits a pattern of properties from exactly that seemingly very small range of parameters that allow for the development of life and consciousness? In order to get the odds straight, some authors estimate conservatively that this multiverse world needs to consist of 10^{500} universes (Vilenkin 2007). In most of these universes no intelligent matter would exist at all, such that the mass ratio of intelligent matter would decrease even more.

In any case, the ratio of intelligent matter versus matter that is not intelligent is extremely small in the case of NATURALISM. The probability estimate would be even lower were we to choose the volume ratio of intelligent matter instead of its mass ratio. For then the vast interstellar vacuum would count into the calculation, which is irrelevant for the mass ratio, as there is by definition (virtually) no matter in a vacuum.

3.2 The First Step: From EXPERIENCE to PREDOMINANCE

Theists may hold that the laws of physics are of divine origin, while naturalists will deny this. Given NATURALISM, the laws of physics are indifferent regarding whether they bring about intelligent or non-intelligent matter. Consequently, all complex

entities are equal in this respect; there are no complex entities that are given a special status by the laws of physics. At best, it can be determined that one entity requires more physical resources than another for its bringing about by the laws of physics, because, for example, it has a greater mass, more elementary particles, or a greater volume.

The observation that we experience the conscious activity of some particular intelligent brain reveals an unexplained choice that has been made in the otherwise objective, naturalistic worldview. How should we determine the probability that this choice has been made in favour of some intelligent brain? Because of the indifference of the natural laws of physics regarding what they bring about, the only operationalisations available are things like the ratios of the mass or the volume of intelligent brains and that of the entire world.

As discussed, we use the ratio of the mass of a physical entity versus the mass of the world (or, for short, its mass ratio) as the measure of the probability of being experienced. That is, we assume that the probability of being experienced only depends on the mass ratio: The probability that the first person experiences the activity of some brain consciously is equal to the ratio of the mass of that brain versus the mass of the world. We can then estimate the probability of a consciousness experiencing its exceptional point of view as the ratio between $M_{Int-Nat}$, the mass of all intelligent matter (i.e., of all sufficiently complex brains) in the natural world, and $M_{World-Nat}$, the mass of the whole natural world. Given NATURALISM, as said, the fraction of mind-governed matter will be very small, and hence we have the following estimate:

$$P(\text{EXPERIENCE}|\text{NATURALISM}) = M_{Int-Nat}/M_{World-Nat} \ll 0.01$$

In other words, naturalism fails to explain statistically the first-person experience of an intelligent consciousness.

Things are different, if PREDOMINANCE is true, i.e., if we live in a world in which most of the mass is correlated to some intelligent mind. Let $M_{Int-Pred}$ be the mass of all intelligent matter in the world predominated by intelligent matter, and $M_{World-Pred}$ the mass of the entire world, given PREDOMINANCE. According to our probability assumption, we then have the following:

$$P(\text{EXPERIENCE}|\text{PREDOMINANCE}) = M_{Int-Pred}/M_{World-Pred} > 0.5$$

In other words, PREDOMINANCE explains the first-person experience of an intelligent consciousness statistically by a very safe margin. This first step of our argument can be summarised in the following argument schema:

- P1 EXPERIENCE: There is at least one person who experiences an intelligent consciousness that is correlated to some brain.
- P2 The probability that a person experiences the activity of some brain consciously is equal to the mass ratio of that brain.
- P3 Given NATURALISM, the ratio of the mass of all intelligent matter versus the mass of the entire world is much smaller than one percent.
- C1 (from P2, P3) NATURALISM does not explain P1 statistically.
- C2 (from P2) PREDOMINANCE explains P1 statistically.
- C3 (from C1, C2) PREDOMINANCE is a better explanation for P1 than NATURALISM.
- C4 (from P1, C3) PREDOMINANCE is more likely than NATURALISM.
- C5 (from C4) PREDOMINANCE: More than 50 percent of the world's matter is intelligent matter.

Therefore, it seems fair to say that it is rational to believe that we live in a world that is predominated by intelligent matter.

3.3 The Second Step: From PREDOMINANCE to THEISM

According to the first step of our argument, we live in a world in which intelligent matter predominates. In this scenario, a conscious experience is not surprising as there is a vast amount of intelligent matter. However, according to our everyday experience, intelligent matter seems to be the exception rather than the rule: The ratio of the mass of human brains versus the mass of, say, the planet Earth, is very small (even if it is continuously growing). Given roughly seven billion human brains of each 1.5 kg, and a planetary mass of 6×10^{24} kg, the mass ratio of human brains against the planet Earth is about 1.75×10^{-15} .

How can the world then possibly be predominated by intelligent matter? There are several scenarios in which PREDOMINANCE would prevail. A simple physicalist scenario that fulfils PREDOMINANCE is one where the whole world consists of one large, physical, intelligent brain, and nothing else. In that case, all the consciousness that can be experienced is correlated to parts of that brain.

Admittedly, this model has no resemblance to our empirical world. This could be accounted for by adding the assumption that our empirical world is a simulation only, run by the solitary brain that inhabits the physical space. In this second scenario, all rocks, stars, and ourselves are virtual only. In this model, all of the intelligent matter is transcendent, i.e., not empirically accessible to us. This type of transcendence is that of the brain-in-the-vat thought experiment famously

discussed by Putnam (1981, pp. 1–21), where a brain in a vat believes it has a healthy body in a normal environment, while in fact being connected to a computer that simulates sensory inputs. In a similar vein, Bostrom (2003) discusses the possibility that we are simulations on supercomputers built by more advanced beings. Both Bostrom’s supercomputers and Putnam’s computer and vat would be physical, though unobservable by the experiencing subject, and thus transcendent for that subject.

A third model for PREDOMINANCE is a world in which there is a mixture of transcendent intelligent and non-intelligent matter, but in which the mass of the intelligent matter dwarfs that of the non-intelligent matter. Also, in such a scenario (discussed, e.g., by Blondé (2019) using Smolin’s (1992) idea of cosmological natural selection in an evolutionary multiverse), our empirical world is a simulation only, which is run by the vast amount of transcendent intelligent matter.

A fourth scenario is classical theism, in which God not only creates but also governs and guides the world. In this scenario, the whole world is correlated with God’s infinite mind – and thus all the matter in the world is correlated with an intelligent mind and is thus intelligent matter. Here physical matter is explained by mind, rather than the other way around.

A non-classical theistic scenario is, fifth, cosmopsychism, which is the view that the world is itself a thinking intelligent being (Goff 2017, 2019). On this view, all matter is intelligent matter, because the thing that is composed out of all matter, the world, is an intelligent being.

Sixth, matter itself could be intelligent. This would be an extreme version of panpsychism. Panpsychists claim that matter itself has mental or proto-mental properties, at least at some grades of organisation, be it on the level of elementary particles (Brüntrup 2016) or on the level of biological cells (Clayton 2020). In itself, panpsychism is not strong enough to make PREDOMINANCE true. We need to claim that all elementary particles, say, do not only have (proto-)mental properties, but are in fact intelligent. We could dub this view panintelligentism. To our knowledge, it is not argued for or even held by anyone, and it would be difficult to motivate it beyond the standard arguments for panpsychism in general.

In fact, panintelligentism is problematic because it assumes that even very simple physical structures are correlated with very complex intelligent minds, which is not a plausible assumption. However, what all other models of PREDOMINANCE have in common is that there is either an infinite intelligent mind, or an intelligent mind that is very large (when compared to the world). Thus, the best explanation for PREDOMINANCE is that there is an infinite (or at least very large) mind correlated with enough of the world’s matter to guarantee the predominance of intelligent matter. Consequently, by our definition D3, we can conclude that God exists.

- This second step of our argument can be schematically summarised as follows:
- C5 (from step 1) PREDOMINANCE: We live in a world in which intelligent matter is predominant.
- P4 The existence of an infinite (or at least very large) intelligent mind is the best explanation for C5.
- C6 (from C5, P4) There is an infinite (or at least very large) intelligent mind.
- C7 (from C6, D3) THEISM: God exists.

4 Conclusions

In this paper, we presented a new argument for the existence of God. Like the argument put forward by Swinburne and Moreland, it starts from the fact that we experience our consciousness, and it argues for THEISM. Another parallel is that it is not a deductive argument, but of probabilistic nature. Unlike the Swinburne-Moreland argument, however, it does not start from the explanatory gap between physical nature and conscious experience, but from the exceptional-point-of-view problem. Another difference is that it is not committed to a specific stance in the philosophy of mind, but compatible with dualist as well as with physicalist positions on mind.

The latter point is its most important dialectical advantage, because, as we said in the beginning, physicalism and atheism often go together in the worldview of many. If an argument for THEISM is only plausible for those who already are theists, it is only preaching to the converted. It will thus be an advantage for any argument for THEISM if it can also raise the plausibility of THEISM for atheists. Now, if many atheists are at the same time physicalists, they have to change two important convictions if one follows the argumentative strategy of Swinburne and Moreland. In contrast, our own argument does not require any change of beliefs in the philosophy of mind. As we showed, our argument is compatible with a wide range of worldviews, including physicalist ones, which only have to admit that there is at least one consciousness that experiences an exceptional point of view. This is known by everyone's first-person perspective. Of course, the position also has to be compatible with the existence of an infinite (or at least very large) intelligent mind, i.e., God. But this is no assumption of our argument, but what is argued for. A third feature shared by all models compatible with our argument is that most matter is correlated with an intelligent mind. Again, this is nothing that we assume from the beginning, but an intermediary consequence of our argument.

Our argument can thus appeal to people subscribing to a wide range of convictions. It is this openness to a wide range of worldviews in general, and its

openness to different positions in the philosophy of mind, that gives our argument an interesting dialectical advantage: It can raise the plausibility of God's existence for people of quite different persuasions. In particular, it can directly appeal to the physicalist-cum-atheist, without the burden of converting her to substance dualism first.

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