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A RESPONSE TO SWINBURNE'S LATEST DEFENSE OF THE ARGUMENT FOR DUALISM

Kent Reames

This paper responds to Swinburne's recent article "Dualism Intact," which defends his argument for a body/soul dualism. It pays particular attention to his defense against the charges of Alston and Smythe, especially the appeal to the "quasi-Aristotelian assumption," on which the essence of a thing is necessary to its being the thing that it is. I argue that this defense does not save the argument, but only makes clear that its apparent plausibility rests on an ambiguity between two understandings of the nature of logical possibility. Swinburne's argument draws on and requires both understandings at different points in his argument, but the two are incompatible at the key point.

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*,¹ Richard Swinburne restates and defends against several attacks his earlier argument, originally given in chapter 8 of *The Evolution of the Soul*,² for body/soul dualism. In this paper, I look in particular at his defense of the argument in response to the charges of William P. Alston and Thomas W. Smythe. I will argue that Swinburne's defense does explain why Alston and Smythe's argument does not succeed, but that precisely in so doing it opens the argument to another line of attack.

1. Summarizing Swinburne's argument

The original argument is quite straightforward. Given (p. 69)

p = 'I am a conscious person and I exist in 1984'

q = 'My body is destroyed in the last instant of 1984'

r = 'I have a soul in 1984'

s = 'I exist in 1985'

x ranges over all consistent propositions compatible with (p and q) and describing 1984 states of affairs.

(x) = 'for all propositions x'

◇ = 'it is logically possible that'; & = 'and'; - = 'not'

Swinburne puts forward three premisses:

- (1) p
- (2) (x) ◇ (p & q & x & s)
- (3) -◇ (p & q & -r & s)



(1) states simply that I, a conscious person, exist in 1984. (2) says that it is logically possible that my soul (that is, that part of me which makes me me) will survive my bodily death (which will occur at the last moment of 1984) and live into 1985, no matter what other conditions obtain in 1984. Of course, there is nothing special about the moment of transition from 1984 to 1985; the claim is a general one. (2) may thus be restated more simply as a claim that it is logically possible that I will survive my bodily death. (3) claims that it is *not* logically possible that I survive my bodily death unless I have a soul.

From (2) and (3) it follows, according to Swinburne, that my lack of a soul (-r) does not fall within the range of propositions denominated under x. And since -r describes a 1984 state of affairs, -r is not compatible with (p & q).

$$(4) \quad -\diamond (p \& q \& -r)$$

Since whether or not I am killed at the last instant of 1984 is obviously irrelevant to whether or not I have a soul during the rest of 1984, q can be dropped, leaving

$$(5) \quad -\diamond (p \& -r)$$

or

$$(6) \quad p \rightarrow r.$$

My conscious existence in 1984 (or at any other time) implies that I have a soul.

In their response to this argument, Alston and Smythe grant that "the survival of a human person ... in a wholly different body, or in disembodied form, is logically possible."³ However, they argue, this logical possibility is entirely compatible with one's *in fact* having no soul: "if it is conceivable that I am partly a soul, why would it cease to be conceivable if in fact I am only a body?"⁴ That is, the conceivability of my soul-possession, like conceivability in general, does not rest on any contingent state of affairs in the world, and hence certainly not on my *actual* soul-possession. They speculate that Swinburne has made an all too common error surrounding issues of logical necessity, confusing the necessity of the consequence with the necessity of the consequent.⁵

Swinburne's defense of the soundness of the argument relies on what he calls "the quasi-Aristotelian assumption" (71), which states that a thing's continuity requires that it "continue to be made at least in part of some of the same stuff of which it was made previously" (68). If my desk tomorrow is the same desk as today, it must contain some of the same stuff. In other words, the desk has an essence; it is its essential features which continue in existence over time.⁶ Given this assumption, Swinburne continues, if I am only a body, then I am *necessarily* only a body, and could not have been otherwise. He cites Kripke as follows: "Supposing this lectern is in fact made of wood, could this very lectern have been made from the very beginning of its existence from ice, say frozen from water in the Thames? One has a considerable feeling that it could *not*."⁷ More generally, the actual essence of a thing — in the case of the desk, its made-from-woodness — is *necessary* to its being the thing-which-it-is; if it were made from something else, it would be something else. In the case of humans and souls: if my essence in fact is my soul, then that essence could not logically have been

other than it is. In general, it is not logically possible that a thing's essence be other than it in fact is. In short, when we are talking about essences, given the quasi-Aristotelian assumption, *possibility implies actuality*.

Now, Swinburne does not put the point quite so bluntly, so it is perhaps worth taking a moment to make it clear that this is indeed what he means to say. In the original argument, Swinburne had stated what he had shown thus: "From the mere *logical possibility* of my continued existence *there follows the actual fact* that there is now more to me than my body...."⁸ Again, as an introductory comment to his argument against Alston and Smythe's rejection of his original argument, Swinburne writes: "Alston and Smythe make what is in effect a claim that no mere assertions about logical possibility could have any tendency to show what I in fact am (e.g. that I am not only a body). But given the quasi-Aristotelian assumption..., their claim must be false." (71) When we are talking about essences, given the quasi-Aristotelian assumption, possibility implies actuality.

Moreover, it seems clear that this is the point of the original argument as well: it moves from the logical possibility of my possessing a soul to its actuality. Because on Swinburne's account, dualists define the soul as "the part of the person which is necessary for his continued existence,"⁹ his premise

$$(2) \quad (x) \diamond (p \ \& \ q \ \& \ x \ \& \ s)$$

(it is logically possible that I survive the destruction of my body), is already a claim that it is logically possible *that I have a soul* which may survive my body. The rest of the argument then moves from the logical possibility that I have such a soul, to its actuality.

In short, Swinburne argues that, within certain limits, possibility implies actuality. With respect to the particular question of soul-possession, he argues that it therefore follows from the logical possibility that humans have souls, that they in fact have them.

2. Swinburne on the nature of logical possibility and the quasi-Aristotelian assumption

In preparation for my response to Swinburne, I want to focus on the notion of logical possibility operative in his argument. What I call the "normal" understanding of logical possibility includes something like the following. Possibility is wider than actuality; in other words, the actual is a proper subset of the possible. Certain things exist, but they might not have existed; their existence is contingent rather than necessary. In short, normally, possibility does not imply actuality.

Swinburne, of course, has no stake in denying any of these claims as general philosophical propositions. But he *does* deny them with respect to a certain restricted set of claims. This is what his invocation of the quasi-Aristotelian assumption, backed up by reference to Kripke's argument, is intended to establish. Whatever essence a thing has, it has it *necessarily*. Within the realm of essences, Swinburne holds that in an important sense the actual is *not* a proper subset of the possible. Let us call this a *restricted* understanding of the nature of logical possibility.

Swinburne's argument, then, seems to assume that although most of the time the *normal* understanding of logical possibility applies, it does not do so all the time; when we are talking about the essences of things, it is the *restricted* understanding which applies. I want to emphasize that I have no problem with this. At least, it is a comprehensible way of talking, and it may help us to solve or at least think more clearly about particular problems. Let us therefore grant this claim. As applied to humans, the claim is as follows: whatever the essence of the human actually is, whether that be body alone, or body-plus-soul, or soul alone, it is the only essence that the human could possibly have.

3. Response to Swinburne

But while I have no problem with making this intellectual move, it is nonetheless a move which changes the shape of the nature of logical possibility in ways which undercut Swinburne's argument. In particular, my thesis is that once the move is made, Swinburne's claim that it is logically possible that the essence of the human includes a soul is an arbitrary claim which he has given us no reason to accept. In other words, Swinburne's defense of the soundness of his argument undercuts the argument's key premise.

I will pursue this argument in two stages. First, I will argue that from the quasi-Aristotelian assumption itself, and indeed from the validity of Swinburne's original argument, nothing follows about the actual nature of the human. Parallel reasoning can prove, given the premise that it is logically possible that I do not have a soul, that in fact I do not have a soul. If we want to know which is the correct description of the actual essence of humans, with-a-soul or without-, we will need to turn from a formal consideration of the argument to the particular content which Swinburne claims it ought to have. So in the second stage, I will take this up, arguing that Swinburne's attempt to ground the superiority of his claim (2) over a materialist version by appeal to apparent conceivability fails, because on the *restricted* understanding of logical possibility, apparent conceivability is not evidence for logical possibility.

3a. The parallel argument

The parallel argument goes as follows:

- p' I exist in 1997
- q' My body is destroyed in the last instant of 1997
- r' I do not have a soul in 1997
- s' I do not exist in 1998
- x' names all states of affairs compatible with (p' & q')

Given these symbols,

- (1) p'

means only that I exist.

- (2) (x') \diamond (p' & q' & x' & s')

means that it is logically possible, given all states of affairs compatible with my existence up until the last moment of 1997, that I will not exist in 1998. And

$$(3') \quad -\diamond(p' \ \& \ q' \ \& \ -r' \ \& \ s')$$

means that if after existing in 1997 but having my body destroyed at the last moment of 1997, I do not exist in 1998, then it is not logically possible that I have a soul. From these, of course, by parallel reasoning, it follows that

$$(6') \quad p' \rightarrow r'$$

— that is, that my existence implies that I do not have a soul.

At least two objections will be raised to this argument. The first objection is as follows. One might reject (3'), by putting forward the possibility that in 1997 I had a soul, but for reasons completely independent of my bodily death my soul too perished at exactly the same moment my body did. Perhaps God annihilated it. If so, then $(p' \ \& \ q' \ \& \ -r' \ \& \ s')$ is logically possible. However, this objection to the parallelism of my argument with that of Swinburne is to the point only if it cannot be applied similarly to Swinburne's own argument. But it can be. Against Swinburne's original argument, one can object that his own

$$(3) \quad -\diamond(p \ \& \ q \ \& \ -r \ \& \ s)$$

(I cannot survive the destruction of my body except by having a soul) fails to take note of the possibility that, despite my complete bodily destruction at the last instant of 1984, nonetheless I continue to exist without having a soul after God uses the same matter to miraculously reconstitute my body in another place, perhaps on another plane of existence, or otherwise intervenes to ensure my survival.

To this, it may be objected that God's keeping my body alive in another place or on another plane counts as the continuation of my bodily life, and hence my body was not really *destroyed* at all in the requisite sense. But I take it that the relevant question is whether or not I can survive this earthly life. Perhaps my body will be *changed* radically. As Paul says, we will have "spiritual bodies" after the resurrection. A materialist might want to say that in this life we are only bodies, but that nonetheless after the eschatological resurrection of the body, we will be miraculously reconstituted as spiritual bodies, bodies which are (say) the same in essence (made of the same "stuff") as our previous bodies, but without their corruptibility. (To hold that all bodies are essentially corruptible would violate at least many of the classic Christian treatments of the story of Adam and Eve.) Were this the case, a person who happened to die by bodily destruction the instant before the eschatological resurrection would thus be a counterexample to Swinburne's thesis that it is not possible for a purely material person to survive the destruction of his or her body.¹⁰

The point can be better stated as follows. Premise (2) ought to be understood to mean "It is logically possible that I *naturally*, as it were, which is to say without divine intervention, survive the destruction of my body." My (2') then denies this. For this is what is at stake in having a soul. If I survive my bodily destruction, but only by a miracle of God, which breaks into the natural order of things

under which I would *not* have survived my bodily destruction — an order of things which holds, let us say, for every other sentient being in the history of the universe — then it would be stretching things to say that before that miracle I had a soul. In this sense, the objection to (3') fails. The point is not what may happen in exceptional circumstances, but what happens most of the time, or at least what could happen without invoking supernatural assistance. If I have a soul, I "naturally" survive my bodily death — or at least I intrinsically have the potential to survive without divine assistance. If not, I lack that potential.

The second objection to my attempted construction of a parallel argument is that it begs the question against Swinburne. Swinburne says that Alston and Smythe beg the question when they object to Swinburne's premise

(2) $(x) \diamond (p \ \& \ q \ \& \ x \ \& \ s)$

by inserting an "x" — namely, "I am essentially material in 1984" — which they claim is compatible with (p & q) and nonetheless makes (2) false. (That is, if I am essentially material, it is not logically possible that I survive the destruction of my body.) Swinburne replies to this contention as follows.

"The claim ... that any x of the above type [that is, like Alston & Smythe's] is compatible with (p & q) amounts to the denial of my conclusion. Now it is true that my argument will not convince anyone who claims to be more certain that the conclusion is false than that the premises are true. But then that does not discredit my argument—for no argument about anything will convince someone in that position." (71)

Alston and Smythe thus beg the question against Swinburne. Does my parallel argument do so as well? It does not, because it does not assert anything about the reality of the objects in question. I am not more certain that Swinburne's conclusion is false than that his premises are true; I am bracketing that whole issue. I am saying only that before we come to any conclusion about the relative adequacy of dualism and materialism, we ought to be clear about what the argument presupposes about the nature of logical necessity. In other words, I am doing precisely what Swinburne suggests when, immediately after the sentences I just quoted, he writes: "My argument was designed explicitly for those prepared to set aside philosophical dogma concerned explicitly with the mind/body issue, and rely only on philosophical theses and intuitions about logical possibility relating to other or wider issues." (71) Setting aside any particular considerations in favor of dualism or materialism, I have only argued that the appeal to logical possibility by itself can be used equally well to support either side.

3b. Which argument is sound? Apparent conceivability and logical possibility

Given this conclusion, it is time to turn from the formal aspects of the argument to the content which Swinburne wants to give it. I will continue to focus on issues surrounding the nature of logical possibility rather than on dogma about mind/body issues. In particular, the key question is how we know whether something which purports to be logically possible is *in fact* logically possible. Swinburne suggests an answer to this question, but, I will argue, his sug-

gestion is only valid with respect to the *normal* understanding of the nature of logical possibility, and not with respect to the *restricted* understanding which (we have granted) applies to arguments about the essences of things.

Swinburne suggests that in order to show that a purportedly logically possible claim is in fact logically possible, we ought to give

arguments which spell it out, which tell in detail a story of what it would be like for it to be true and do not seem to involve any contradictions, i.e. arguments from apparent conceivability. Apparent conceivability is evidence (though not of course conclusive evidence) of logical possibility. (70)

The arguments and stories go together. The argument is that it is conceivable that a human may survive the destruction of his or her body. "If anyone does not see that [conceivability] at first, a story can be told in a lot more detail of what it would be like for it to be true, which would help the reader to see it." (71) To come to see it is not something which requires a great deal of philosophical training; Swinburne suggests "that most people not already having a firm philosophical position on the mind/body issue will grant my premises." (71)

However, all of this is problematic. On the restricted understanding of logical possibility which Swinburne has told us applies to questions of essences, apparent conceivability is *not* evidence of logical possibility. *Both* stories are apparently conceivable,¹¹ but only one of them (at most) is logically possible. This is the key point. Where logical possibility implies actuality, the assertion "It is logically possible that p and it is also logically possible that not-p" is self-contradictory, because it implies "p and also not-p."¹² So although the two stories are both apparently conceivable, they are *not* both logically possible. When both sides are apparently conceivable, the conceivability of one side is *not* evidence for its logical possibility in the restricted sense.

Once we understand this, it becomes clear that when properly understood Swinburne's claim (2), that it is logically possible (in the restricted sense) for a human to survive the destruction of his or her body, is not a claim which most ordinary people will affirm. They will affirm only that they can conceive of surviving, that *as far as they can tell* they might survive, their bodily destruction. But this conceivability does not imply logical possibility, because it depends on the telling of a particular story which itself may or may not be logically possible (in the restricted sense). Most people will say that they just don't know whether in that sense it is logically possible or not.

In short, when logical possibility is understood in the restricted sense, Swinburne has given no reason whatever to affirm his claim (2), that it is logically possible for a human to survive the destruction of his or her body. The apparent force of the argument rests on an ambiguity between the two sorts of logical possibility.

None of this, of course, does anything to show that metaphysical dualism is false. It is still a conceivable, and in that sense a possible, account of human nature, however unpopular among contemporary philosophers. However, Alston and Smythe are correct: we need to know more about dualism than that it is conceivable if we are to know it to be actual.¹³

NOTES

1. Richard Swinburne, "Dualism Intact." *Faith and Philosophy* 13/1 (January 1996), pp. 68-77. In my paper, page numbers in parentheses refer to this article.
2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
3. William P. Alston and Thomas W. Smythe, "Swinburne's Argument for Dualism," *Faith and Philosophy* (1994), p. 127.
4. *Ibid*, p. 130.
5. Swinburne is correct, in Alston and Smythe's view, to hold that "my being only a body and my surviving without a body are not jointly logically possible," but this does not imply "that if I am a body, it is not logically possible that I survive without a body." *Ibid*, p. 129.
6. The "Aristotelian assumption" is that this "stuff" is matter; the broader "quasi-Aristotelian assumption," which uses the broader term "stuff," simply allows that the relevant stuff can be non-material, e.g., soul.
7. Swinburne, *op. cit.*, 72, quoting Saul Kripke, "Identity and Necessity" in (ed.) Milton K. Munitz, *Identity and Individuation* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 152.
8. *The Evolution of the Soul*, 154, my emphasis.
9. *The Evolution of the Soul*, 146.
10. Of course, all this introduces specifically Christian notions, but that is hardly inconsistent either with Swinburne's project, or with some of his arguments. See, e.g., *The Evolution of the Soul*, 151: "We understand what is being claimed in fairy stories or in serious religious affirmations which affirm life after death" — and hence, whether or not we believe these stories or affirmations, we ought to take what they describe to be possible, and our philosophical theory ought to be able to make some sense of them.
11. I can tell you a story which makes it apparently conceivable that humans have souls, but then someone else can tell you a story which makes it apparently conceivable that humans do not have souls. Indeed, the existence of both sorts of stories is not only imaginable but real; we can and do imagine ourselves both as having a soul and as not having one. If only one side were apparently conceivable, there would be no argument between materialists and dualists in the first place.
12. In other words, contrary to Alston and Smythe's conjecture, Swinburne does not confuse the necessity of the consequence with the necessity of the consequent. On the contrary, he takes the unexpected step of asserting both that (a) it is not possible that I both have and do not have a soul, and that (b) if I have a soul, it is not possible that I do not have a soul. In other words, it is precisely the move to the "restricted" understanding of the nature of logical possibility which allows him to evade their critique.
13. I would like to thank Jamie Schillinger for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.