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Book Review: Consciousness And The Existence Of God: A Theistic Argument

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We can be grateful for such a book that tackles these difficult issues head-on and for its encouragement to probe these matters more thoroughly in the context of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument, by J. P. Moreland. New York, 2008. 244 pages. \$133 (hardcover).

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In his book *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument*, J. P. Moreland argues that the existence of conscious beings in the universe is evidence for the existence of God. In the first chapter, Moreland addresses naturalism, the main rival world-view opposed to theism. Strong naturalism is the view that all particulars, all properties, all relations, and all laws in the universe are physical. And there are no entities like mental properties, souls, angels or God inside or outside of the universe. The spatio-temporal universe (or universes) postulated by current science is all there is (8–9). By contrast, weak naturalism softens the definition of strong naturalism and accepts forms of emergent mental properties (ix, 8–9). Naturalism is committed to telling a “Grand Story,” a causal story of how all things there are now in the universe came to be. This story will include the Big Bang, the development of organic matter out of inorganic structures, the evolution of complex organisms and the emergence of consciousness (6–8). The ontology of a naturalist will be a physicalist ontology, and existence will be defined as belonging to the causal space-time system of our universe (8–10). If we accept naturalism, then we must either reduce consciousness to physical states (reductive physicalism) or deny that consciousness exists (eliminative physicalism). Naturalism faces the location problem: Naturalists allow only physical entities to exist. So they have the problem of what to do with entities like semantic content, mind, consciousness, qualia, and agency. Where should they be located? The naturalist faces the tough task of locating them somewhere in the mereological hierarchy which naturalists usually accept.

In naturalism, the ground level of the hierarchy consists of elementary particles. At higher levels there are sub-atomic parts, atoms, molecules, cells and living organisms. These entities are constituted by the elementary particles. Their properties and their behavior can be entirely explained in terms of the properties and behavior of the elementary particles. They can be reduced to the elementary particles. The relation between individuals at level n and individuals at level $n + 1$ is the part-whole-relation. Cells are parts of living organisms. Molecules are parts of cells. Atoms are parts of molecules. Sub-atomic parts like protons and neutrons are parts of atoms. Elementary particles like up-quarks and down-quarks are parts of sub-atomic parts (10–15). An emergent property is a unique new

kind of property different from the properties at the subvenient base level of the emergent property. For example, the feeling of pain is new and different from all the chemical properties of the underlying brain state (15). A structural property is a property that is constituted by the parts, properties, relations and events at the subvenient level. It is not a new kind of property. Rather it is a new configuration of the entities at the subvenient level. A structural property is necessarily caused by the properties at the lower level. A structural property can be causally and ontologically reduced to the properties at the lower level (15). The mass of a stone is an example of a structural property. It can be reduced to the sum of the masses of the elementary particles the stone consists of. Structural properties can easily be located in the naturalistic mereological hierarchy. By contrast, emergent properties like conscious qualia cannot. This is so because the naturalist wants to keep the causal closure of the physical domain. But it is obvious to us from introspection that mental states, by force of their qualia, are causal factors in our behavior. Joy causes us to smile. Pain causes us to sigh (16–18).

In chapter 2, Moreland presents the Knowledge Argument for the conclusion that conscious properties are mental properties and not physical properties (39–45). Mary is a neuroscientist. She knows everything scientific there is to know about perception. But she has been in a black-and-white room all her life. She has always lacked the experience of seeing a color. She does not know what it is like to see a red apple. Assume that she now leaves her black-and-white room. Then she learns something new. She acquires knowledge by acquaintance. She learns what it is like to see a red apple. Therefore, mental properties are not physical properties. For Mary knew all physical properties there are about perception. But she still did not know all the properties that are involved in perception. She did not know the mental property what it is like to see a red object. Since property dualism is true, the naturalist cannot hold her view by being an eliminative physicalist. Thus only the option of reductive physicalism remains. Can physicalism and naturalism explain the existence of consciousness? The Knowledge Argument moves from the fact that physical properties do not exhaust all properties involved in perception to the conclusion that there are non-physical mental properties. Here is another line of argument for the same conclusion: Physical properties have entirely different characteristics (spatially extended, measurable, observable, many are composed of parts) than mental properties (non-spatial, not observable by perception, privileged private access by introspection, simple entities). Therefore, by Leibniz's Law of the Identity of Indiscernible Entities, physical properties are not identical with mental properties. Moreland presents the Theistic Argument from Consciousness as an inference to the best explanation (32), as a Bayesian argument (32–37), and as a deductive argument (37–51). The main line of thinking is this:

- (1) The existence of conscious beings in the universe cannot be explained by naturalism. (Premise 1)

- (2) The existence of conscious beings in the universe can be explained by theism. (Premise 2)
- (3) Therefore, conscious beings in the universe are evidence for theism and no evidence for naturalism. (conclusion)

Premise 1 is true because the existence of conscious beings in the universe is not natural, but rather ad hoc for naturalism (29–30). Consciousness is not natural for naturalism, because it does not bear relevant similarity to the core entities of naturalism which are the elementary particles, the four fundamental forces and the initial parameters of the universe. It is ad hoc, because consciousness is not at home in naturalism, but it is at home in the rival world view theism. For theists, the fundamental entity, God, is a conscious being. So consciousness is a property at the fundamental level of reality. Premise 2 is true because the fundamental assumption of theism is that God exists and is a conscious being. He can create a universe with conscious beings in it and it is reasonable to assume that God so wills. The conclusion follows by the principle of theory confirmation. If a theory can explain the existence of *x*, then the existence of *x* is evidence for the theory. And if there is some *x*, then it confirms a theory, if the theory can explain the existence of *x*.

In chapters 3–7, Moreland shows in detail why the views opposed to theistic dualism cannot explain the existence of consciousness. Moreland criticizes three naturalistic approaches, panpsychism, and pluralistic emergentist monism. John Searle claims all the naturalist needs to do in order to explain consciousness is to provide contingent correlations between mental and physical states (53). In contrast, Moreland claims with Thomas Nagel that a contingent explanation of consciousness is not enough (58). Contingent correlations do not explain why mental properties emerge in organisms. The hard problem of consciousness is not why physical states are correlated with mental states, but why mental properties emerge at all. It could have been the case that organisms are not conscious. According to the Grand Story of the naturalist several billion years passed after the Big Bang without a conscious being in the universe. Why did consciousness emerge? Physics, chemistry, biology and neurology in principle cannot explain that, because their explanations only involve the pushing and pulling between atoms, molecules and neurons. The nature of consciousness is different from that.

Timothy O'Connor argues that the naturalist must explain why physical states necessarily cause mental states. Moreland agrees with this. O'Connor defends the view that agent causation can be accepted by the naturalist. Moreland disagrees with this (70–71). Agent causation is inconsistent with or at least difficult to harmonize with naturalism. This is so, because the only causation known in physics is the passive liabilities of physical objects. By contrast, we know by introspection that agent causation is an uncaused activity performed by an agent with intentions and reasons.

Colin McGinn claims that all naturalist attempts to explain the mental fail for in-principle reasons. McGinn offers a mysterian naturalist solution to the phenomenon of consciousness (95–98). He claims that there is no knowable solution to the origin of consciousness and the correlations between mental and physical entities. McGinn is a property dualist and rejects naturalistic accounts of consciousness. For they cannot fulfill the necessitation requirement of providing an explanation why necessarily mental entities had to emerge. According to McGinn, a solution to the problem of consciousness would imply the existence of three properties: (i) There must be some properties of matter that produce consciousness. (ii) There must be properties of the brain that unleash the properties of (i). (iii) Consciousness must have a hidden essence (98). Moreland criticizes McGinn mainly for two reasons. First, McGinn does not solve the problem of consciousness. McGinn only relocates the problem of consciousness into his three postulated properties (110). Second, it is not clear that McGinn's view is a version of naturalism. McGinn's three postulated properties cannot be known empirically. Nor are they similar to the rest of the naturalist's ontology. Hence it is vacuous to call these properties "naturalistic" (109–110).

David Skrbina advocates a version of panpsychism, according to which every object has singular and unified experiences for itself and every system of mass/energy counts as such an object. The universe as a whole has a mind, a world-soul (116–117). Moreland shows that some of Skrbina's arguments for panpsychism in fact favor theistic dualism over panpsychism and naturalism. This is so with the Argument from Design. The assumption of a designer outside of the physical objects can explain the internal structure of physical objects better than the assumption of mental properties inside the physical objects. For it is easier for a mind outside of a structure to give it law-like behavior, beauty and complexity than it is for many minds inside the physical objects (125–126). Beyond that, Moreland argues against panpsychism. In the Argument from Inconclusive Analogy, Moreland argues that the analogy between human beings and other objects is groundless. Therefore, panpsychism is groundless (127). In the No Signs Objection, Moreland argues that panpsychism predicts no empirical facts. Therefore, panpsychism cannot be tested and cannot be confirmed (127–128).

The final view Moreland addresses is Philip Clayton's view of pluralistic emergentist monism. Clayton's view is a form of monism, since Clayton claims that reality is one stuff. But Clayton's view is not a form of physicalism, since Clayton claims that physics is not enough to describe reality. According to Clayton, many emergent properties—emergent physical, chemical, neurological, biological, mental properties and so on—have arisen out of physical entities during evolution. The emergence of consciousness is no special case of emergence. Clayton rejects naturalism in favor of theistic dualism, because naturalism cannot answer why there is anything at all, why there are ethical obligations, why there are religious experiences and why human beings long for purpose and meaning in life.

So Clayton's view is a theistic view like Moreland's (135–139). Moreland argues that theistic dualism should be favored over Clayton's theistic pluralistic emergentist monism. One should not practice a shopping-list approach to metaphysics as Clayton does (140). Rather, one should reduce all emergent physical, chemical, neurological, and biological properties to the fundamental physical entities. These entities can be reduced, because they in fact are structural properties and not emergent properties. But mental entities cannot be reduced, because of their new kind of properties and their new causal powers. Thus Moreland advocates theistic dualism.

In the chapters 3–7, Moreland has argued that property dualism is superior to the other explanations of consciousness. In chapter 8, Moreland deals with the main objection to property dualism. It is the claim that dualism is anti-scientific. Moreland is convinced of the autonomy of philosophy (159–160). He assumes the central questions of philosophy and philosophy of mind can be answered only by philosophical reasoning, investigation and argument. The answers to these questions do not rely on science. The central questions of philosophy are autonomous with respect to science, because they are to a great extent unrelated to the hard sciences.

If a philosophical question is autonomous with respect to the hard sciences, it must be evaluated from case to case. The hard sciences have "almost no bearing on the nature of consciousness" (157). This is so, because even if we have evidence of the dependence of mental faculties on the brain, this is not sufficient reason to attribute these mental faculties to the brain rather than the soul. It is not natural to attribute mental faculties to the brain, because all the other properties of brains we know—for example, by neuroscience—are very different from mental faculties. Correlations between mental and physical properties are the most the hard sciences can deliver on the topic of consciousness. Even if we have evidence of many correlations between mental and physical properties, this leaves the philosophical possibilities open. Mental and physical properties could be identical, mental properties could cause physical properties or vice versa or in both directions. Mental properties could supervene on physical properties or vice versa. Or there could be no causal relations and no dependence relations between mental and physical properties, but just parallelism. Therefore, in spite of the progress of biology, neuroscience and cognitive science, the nature of conscious human beings is a philosophical question. So property dualism is superior to alternative views of consciousness. This is step 1 of the Theistic Argument from Consciousness (156):

- (1) The existence of consciousness is best explained by property dualism.
- (2) Property dualism is best explained by theism.

Step 2 of the argument is this: We now assume that mental properties exist. They are new kinds of properties compared to physical properties and they exhibit new causal powers. Mental states cannot emerge from physical states. For what is possible during evolution is only that new physical structures emerge by rearrangement of the physical elementary

particles. But one cannot see how properties of an entirely novel kind can emerge. If we assume theism, by contrast, then God as the conscious fundamental being can have created the finite mental entities in the universe.

In chapter 9 Moreland addresses the question why so many philosophers are physicalists in spite of the lack of evidence for physicalism. Moreland assumes that it is not rational arguments that drive many philosophers towards physicalism and naturalism. Rather, it is the climate in universities and it is fear of God (176–177). But from the perspective of Christian Theism, since God is merciful and benevolent, we do not have to fear God. Rather, since only God gives us forgiveness and eternal life as a gift, the only thing we have to fear is losing our relationship with God (Matthew 10:28–31).

J. P. Moreland's book is a must-read for everyone interested in theistic arguments. It is also a valuable source of information about different views in the philosophy of mind. In my view, Moreland has made a very strong and convincing case for the existence of God based on the existence of finite consciousness. He has presented and criticized five different views on the mind-body relation in detail. The failure of these views and the Knowledge Argument, which Moreland presents with brilliant clarity, show why at least property dualism is the best view to accept. Property dualism in turn is much better explained by theism than by naturalism. There are two ways in which Moreland's project could be expanded. First, one could present even more views on the mind-body relation and show that they are inferior to property dualism. Second, one could present more positive reasons besides the Knowledge Argument for the conclusion that mind-body dualism is true—for example, the Zombie Arguments by David Chalmers or the arguments by Alvin Plantinga in "Against Materialism." Overall, Moreland's *Consciousness and the Existence of God: A Theistic Argument* is the best publication available on the relation between God and finite conscious beings.