

On the particularity of each mind

Abstract

Among the mysterious and wondrous characteristics of minds, the deepest and most mysterious one, yet also the most overlooked, is their particularity. It is a special and most fundamental kind of particularity: each of us experiences life through their own, private, unique, and non-duplicable perspective, which is what fundamentally differentiates him/her from the rest of the universe and gives him/her their unique identity. There is an infinity of possible first-person perspectives, and each mind has a unique one. The particular perspective of each mind is accessible only from within that mind itself while from the outside it is indistinguishable from the infinity of other existing or possible perspectives. For the rest of the universe, what is particular about a certain mind is completely hidden. The paper begins with a consideration of the "pairing problem", i.e. of how minds are paired to bodies, which serves to elucidate this concept of particularity of minds. If the mind is reducible to fundamental phenomena associated with a body's physics or material constitution, then the pairing rule should be traceable there. Which particular mind will emerge from a particular body (i.e. whether it will be me, you, or someone else) should depend/supervene on either the particular structure of that body, or on the particular matter that constitutes it. But it can depend/supervene on neither: on one hand, bodily structure is duplicable but particular minds are not (if exact copies of my body were made, I would not also be paired to those other bodies; other persons would be. All those bodies would be structurally identical, so the structure of the body cannot determine the particularity of the person paired to it), and on the other hand the particular matter that constitutes our bodies changes every day but we remain the same persons. The paper then proceeds to deeper arguments: The uniqueness of a mind's particularity, its complete hiddenness from the rest of the universe, and its complete external similarity with the particularities of all other minds makes it impossible that it is dependent on anything external to it, making the mind an independent substance.

Keywords: philosophy of mind, persons, self, pairing problem, Cartesian dualism

1 Introduction

The paramount question of what we really are is investigated by philosophy mainly through her branches of the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of persons. The prevalent views in both are heavily imbued with the modern conviction in physicalism/materialism. As a result, the Cartesian perspective of the mind/self as an (in principle) independent and indivisible entity is, for the most part, no longer considered to be a tenable hypothesis worthy of investigation. In general, the philosophy of mind regards the mind as an epiphenomenon, and the philosophy of persons regards the person as an abstract idea, a mental construct. Both of these views seem oblivious to the fact that minds/selves are characterised by a special kind of *particularity*: each one of us experiences life through their own, private, unique, and non-duplicable perspective, which is what fundamentally differentiates him/her from the rest of the universe and gives him/her their identity. There is an infinity of possible first-person perspectives, and each mind has (or, in a sense, *is*) a unique one¹. This particularity does not consist of the mind's mental state, beliefs, character, temperament, memories, etc., all of which could be exactly duplicated in *multiple* minds, which may coexist. It is a special kind of particularity (in my opinion, the quintessential kind) had only by minds.

This particularity does not fit well into the frameworks of the prevalent theories in the philosophies of mind and person; it is incompatible with physicalism and materialism, to which these theories adhere, which is probably why it is overlooked. The aim of the present paper is to highlight and explore this particularity and its consequences concerning the nature of the mind/self (“mind”, “self” and “person” will be used interchangeably). In particular, it is asserted that this particularity rules out the possibility that a mind is

¹I use the term “first-person perspective” to denote the origin point of one's consciousness. Instead, some consider a person to be a being that has a “first-person perspective” in the narrow sense that it is self-aware, it is able to think about itself, it recognises its own self as a part of reality (Baker, 2000). However, self-awareness is only one among many mental capacities, any one of which implies the existence of a mind or person that has it. I consider a mind to be anything (actually, *anyone*) that can experience life through any kind of conscious experience, anything that “there's something like to be it”, in the parlance of the philosophy of mind; in this sense, any mind has a first-person perspective, whether it is self-aware or not. Sure, the ability of self-awareness is a sign of intelligence, and a requirement for following the arguments presented herein, but it is not a prerequisite for personhood. A baby that does not recognise its own image in a mirror is no less of a person than an intelligent philosopher. It is not self-awareness that the present paper is about.

analysable into more fundamental constituents, and hence a mind is something fundamental, primitive. Cartesian dualism is the only tenable conclusion about its nature. But first let us briefly review how the philosophies of mind and person, by assuming the mind/person to be an epiphenomenon, a constituted thing or an abstract idea, blind themselves to the reality that mental phenomena such as consciousness, thought, perception etc. do not exist independently but are necessarily experienced by a particular individual, whose particularity cannot be explained by any reference to factors outside of itself, nor is it just a mental construct but is objectively real.

Philosophy of Mind

Undoubtedly, the main driver for the modern conviction in physicalism is the spectacular advances in science and technology which have created the impression that science (i.e. physics and its derivative, higher-level sciences) is *the* method to get to the truth about everything. Physics has provided microscopic explanations to many macroscopic phenomena; the mechanical behaviour of materials, heat and thermodynamic phenomena, phenomena related to light and sound, etc. have been explained with reference to microscopic mechanisms pertaining to the physics of unobservable particles. The same holds for biological phenomena that govern the function and behaviour of our bodies. By extrapolation, it is generally thought that mental phenomena are also macroscopic phenomena reducible to, or emergent from, more fundamental microscopic physical phenomena.

However, the quest to explain the mind in terms of a physical substrate has run into “hard” problems such as the famous “hard problem of consciousness” (Chalmers, 1995, 2003) and the problem of intentionality (Horgan and Tienson, 2002). This has led some to acknowledge that not all of reality is physical, giving rise to views such as property dualism and panpsychism (Chalmers, 2015). Yet even these views remain fixated to the belief that the human mind is a macroscopic, derivative, illusory phenomenon that is analysable into more fundamental microscopic phenomena, albeit allowing the latter to be of some non-physical, mental nature. Indeed, this stipulated fundamental mentality, being a property of fundamental particles, would have very little similarity with our familiar macroscopic

consciousness: in order for the latter to emerge, innumerable fundamental particles have to be organised into an immensely complex structure such as the human brain. Rather, elementary mentality, as a property of matter, can be construed as merely a *potential* of matter to give rise to macroscopic minds, and is qualitatively closer to the impersonal physical world than to the realm of human minds.

“Macroscopic” phenomena are literally things “as they appear from afar” to our minds. Due to limitations in the perceptual capacities of our minds and bodies, appearances often give us an inaccurate impression which is at odds with what scientific investigation reveals the physical world to be. But extrapolating this to the case of the mind itself means that we assume our mind to be a phenomenon as perceived macroscopically and illusively by our mind. This idea is obviously circular and problematic. At the very least it should be acknowledged that the case of the mind is fundamentally different from macroscopic physical phenomena.

Philosophy of Persons

The philosophy of persons has a less scientific and more traditionally philosophical mindset. It tries to explain persons with the same philosophical toolset that is used for explaining macroscopic objects. It essentially assumes that “person” refers to a somewhat abstract idea, is a subjective notion, a human convention, a mental construct, that bundles together the physics of the body, mental phenomena, social relationships, ethics, personal identity etc. A person is an *ens per alio*, something that exists only relative to us and our subjective conception of it, not an *ens per se* (Chisholm, 1976, Chapter III), something that exists independently.

The material objects of the macroscopic world that we perceive are *entia per alio*: they only exist as individual entities in a relative sense – relative to the minds that perceive them. In reality, the physical space in which we live is filled with fundamental physical particles of matter and energy, which are not directly observable by us; nevertheless, groups of them have properties that do make them observable. Conceptually, these countless particles could be grouped together in practically infinite ways, but only a limited number

of these groups make sense to us, which we regard as objects. For example, a chair, a shoe, a laptop, a car and a house are groups of particles to which we assign an identity because of their utility and their function for us, and a pebble is viewed as an object because of the uniformity of its macroscopic material properties and the fact that we can handle it as a single object. So, the question of whether Theseus' ship remains the same if we change a plank or a sail does not have an objective answer, because a ship is not a substance but a mind-dependently constituted object. The answer to the question depends on how we define a ship, which we are free to do however we please.

The debate about persons seems very similar to that about the ship of Theseus (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984; van Inwagen, 1990; Baker, 2000; Olson, 2007; Lowe, 2014); it seems largely preoccupied with matters of mereology². While the debate purports to be about what persons objectively are, essentially it is about how persons should be conceptually defined. For example, some propose that the basis should be physical continuity of the body, while others suggest that it should be psychological continuity. Each of these proposals tacitly assumes a person to be a mental construct and, as for the ship of Theseus, unavoidably gives rise to dilemmas that do not have an objective answer. But, while it is a consistent proposition that macroscopic material objects exist as individual entities only relative to minds, the assumption that minds/persons also exist as individual entities only relative to minds is again circular and problematic (Sosa, 1999).

Mind / person / self: ens per se

The philosophies of mind and person share the common deep biased belief in the supremacy of the material over the mental, and in that persons/minds are something derivative, non-

²Swinburne's view (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984) is dualistic and, in my opinion, in the right direction. However, I disagree with his proposition that persons consist of a soul, which is an essential part of them, and a body, which is a non-essential part (he regards this view as consistent with a "wider Aristotelian framework"). I suspect that he expresses his view thus so as to align with the established Christian doctrine, because what he calls "soul" in this specific context seems to be the same as what he calls "person" elsewhere in the same treatise. So essentially what he is claiming is that a person consists of a person and a body, which is incoherent (see also Olson (2001)). Furthermore, if "person" as the centre of consciousness that each of us experiences themselves to be, is a compound of soul and body, then what does this leave for the soul to be? I think absolutely nothing, and even worse, it gives much room for misconception since, the first-person perspective being naturally assigned to "person", the "soul" is then imagined as a kind of immaterial substance that is nevertheless perceivable in a third-person manner, perhaps as a supernatural kind of energy, light etc., which is completely false.

fundamental, and subjective. This conviction stands in the way of even entertaining the possibility that minds are fundamental and (in principle) independent entities (Cartesian dualism). In fact, this possibility is so much disregarded that no one has publicly presented strong arguments against it (though some may have privately attempted and failed).

Despite the wide diversity of beliefs about what a mind or person is (e.g. that it is one and the same with the brain, it is an emergent property of the brain, it is constituted by the body, it is a compound of body and soul, it is a bundle of conscious experiences, it is nothing at all, etc.) deep inside we all have, perhaps unconsciously, a natural understanding of selfhood which is both innate and reinforced by personal experience of our own existence. In everyday life it is this sense of selfhood that we naturally, intuitively and automatically assume. For example, there are popular movies where the protagonist wakes up in a different body after a wish he/she made, or where the protagonists supernaturally swap bodies; movies where people have their memories changed artificially; movies where a person enters a virtual reality. Also, in real life, with age, people's bodies and appearance change (quite dramatically), their characters and ideas change (sometimes also quite dramatically), they lose some memories and acquire others, they may suffer from Alzheimer's disease, have organ transplants, enter a metaverse and transform into an avatar. People make plans for their future even though their future bodies, memories and character will be different; they regret their past mistakes. Most people throughout history have held the belief or hope that a person survives biological death, and even those who reject this idea find it intelligible. They also find intelligible the idea of metempsychosis, where a person changes their body, memory, and even the quality of conscious experience, as if one reincarnates, say, as a bat or a plant. In all these imaginary, real, or assumed scenarios, people instinctively have no trouble tracing a self/person through all these changes, without any ambiguity, according to the aforementioned natural innate understanding of selfhood. Their immediate, instinctive identifications of persons in all these scenarios are identical, whether they are materialists or not, bundle-theorists, religious or atheist, panpsychists, dualists, or whatever else, despite this identification often being at odds with their espoused theory of selfhood.

Modern philosophy usually views this innate understanding with scepticism, and thinks of the self as analysable in terms of other elements of reality which she chooses to consider as more fundamental³. This is a mistake in my opinion; the innate understanding that we have points to the truth, a truth much deeper and more profound than what the main alternative philosophical propositions assume. This truth can be obtained only by introspection. It is perhaps a hard and stressful process, but also necessary. Yet it does not require expensive equipment or specialised scientific knowledge and skill; everyone's own self is directly accessible to them and is what they are most intimately familiar with. This paper serves to facilitate this journey, marking a path of thought experiments that prompt introspective exploration of one's being and existence, thereby fostering profound insights about the nature of the self. This requires some effort from the reader: If minds/persons are fundamental then we cannot "define" them or precisely describe them in terms of other things or concepts; nevertheless, we are all intimately familiar with what we are, we have direct acquaintance with ourselves, even if we cannot precisely articulate this understanding. Hence in order for one to communicate to another their thoughts about the mind, both must traverse some distance and meet midway.

2 The pairing problem

We begin the exploration with a consideration of the "pairing" problem. I adopt the name given to this problem by the physicalist Jaegwon Kim who also considered it (Kim, 2001, 2005) – although he thought that it is a hard problem for dualism, whereas in reality it is rather a hard problem for physicalism. The problem is the following. Whether considered as a literal fact (by dualists) or as an illusion or macroscopic phenomenon produced by

³Often, downplaying the mind as much as possible is considered the "smart" thing to do, so as to avoid being tricked by the subjectivity of our own thoughts; investigating the mind from a first-person perspective is considered a recipe for self-deception, and an effort is made to instead examine it from a third-person, "objective" perspective as much as possible. But this strategy has two very serious problems. The first is that the mind is accessible only from the first-person perspective and hence trying to look at it from the third-person perspective leads to the illusion that there is nothing really there. This reductionist attitude towards the mind is therefore like a self-fulfilling prophecy, whose conclusion is the same as its premise. The second problem is that even when we analyse things from a third-person perspective, it is, inescapably, our very own "deceptive" first-person perspective that does all the work, with our faculties of reasoning and understanding.

biochemical processes (by physicalists, materialists etc.), we can say that each of us is a centre of existence, a mind that thinks, feels, senses, reasons, etc. which is interwoven with a particular body: *I see through my eyes, I can raise my hand, I feel pain if my foot steps on a nail, I lose my intellectual powers when my brain suffers from Alzheimer's disease etc.* I don't have this special connection with any other body, nor does my particular body connect in such a way with any other person/mind in the world. Then the question arises naturally of how each person is paired to a particular body. Why am I paired to this body and not to some other? What determines this?

As mentioned, Kim named this the "pairing" problem and thought that it disproves dualism, through an argument based on causation (it is essentially a more refined version of Elisabeth of Bohemia's objection to Descartes). His argument contends that since souls are not located in space, they could not cause physical events in the body as there can be no spatial connection between the soul and the body, something that is normally required in the causal relationships we observe in the physical world. He went further to suggest that, since a soul is not located in space, if it existed, it could not even interact with another soul, and hence would be "lonely", completely isolated from the rest of the universe. Personally, I find this argument weak and unconvincing because it assumes that all causation is physical – in other words, it presumes physicalism. To the best of my knowledge there are no compelling arguments against dualism (which Kim (2001) admits, and is his motivation for formulating his own argument) but its rejection is usually due to a deep conviction in physicalism, as inferred from the fact that the objections raised (including Kim's) commonly come down to the question-begging structure:

1. Physicalism is true.
2. Dualism is incompatible with physicalism.
3. Therefore, dualism is false.

It should be noted that even physical causation is ultimately inexplicable; when two physical particles interact with each other at a distance by exerting a force on each other, we cannot explain or further analyse this but accept it as an empirical fundamental fact.

Hence, although some undertook to refute Kim's argument (Foster, 1991; Audi, 2011) I do not think that this is necessary, because our inability to explain mental-physical causation does not imply that dualism is false any more than our inability to explain physical-physical causation implies that physics is false. Quantum mechanics and its randomness are very strange and unintuitive but that is not a reason to reject it.

On the other hand, a deeper contemplation of the pairing problem reveals that the mind/body pairing cannot be determined by physics, and hence physicalism is false. Let us first consider the pairing problem again, because sometimes seeing the question is more difficult than finding the answer, because we take things for granted. So, rather than focusing on the mechanism of interaction between a particular mind and a particular body, as Kim did, let us focus on the more fundamental question of why that particular body is paired to that particular mind in the first place. What is the cause of my pairing to this particular body that I am paired to? Speaking as if materialism is true, out of the billions of bodies currently alive on earth, why is it that mine, and only mine, gives rise to me? Why is it that I am experiencing life through this particular body and not, say, through a particular female body somewhere in China, or a particular 60-year old male body in Brazil, or a particular body of a child in South Africa, or the body of my brother, or that of my mother? Why am I not experiencing life through your body, and you through mine? I think that this is not only a meaningful question, but an extremely important one as well, for each of us. There must certainly be an answer to this question, whether trivial or complicated, and if physicalism or materialism are true then this answer must come down to physics and the properties of matter.

Furthermore, it seems to be the case that once a particular body, a material composite – my body – has given rise to me (again assuming physicalism) through intricate physical, chemical, biological structures and interactions, thenceforth “the seat is taken” and no other new body that is formed (biologically conceived) is allowed to also give rise to me: I cannot be paired to two bodies at the same time, for I would have to be two persons at the same time, since each body has its own memories, its own stream of perceptual input etc. How do other, newly conceived bodies “know” that they are not allowed to give rise

to me (or to any other person already in existence), even if they are located thousands of miles away from my current body (and are hence completely physically isolated from it, “unaware” of its existence, unable to physically exchange any information with it)? It seems very unlikely that such a prohibition could be explained physically. If my parents hadn’t met and my current body hadn’t formed, would it then be possible for some other body to give rise to me?

A physicalist may try to dismiss these questions as arising from a false premise that I am a separate entity from my body. But if we concede for the moment that my perception of myself and my body as separate entities is just an illusion and in fact I am identical with my body, that illusion still deserves explanation nonetheless. If everything ultimately comes down to physics, then this illusion should also be physically explainable: there should be a physical explanation for why this specific first-person perspective phenomenon I perceive as myself is generated by this particular body and not some other. Sure, every other body will also presumably generate such a first-person phenomenon, but it will be *another* one, not mine, even if exactly similar as viewed from the perspective of the person paired to that other body. If reality is entirely physical, and therefore all aspects of it can be explained in terms of physical principles, then the fact that I perceive myself as bound to this particular body (which is a fact of reality), whether my perception is an illusion or not, should be explainable in physical terms. So, let us first examine whether such a physical explanation is possible.

2.1 The body duplication experiment

Let us first consider the physicalist theory that the mind is a phenomenon produced by the physics of the body, and in particular by the neural machinery of the brain. That is, the brain is structured in a way that gives rise to complex chemical processes that function to produce consciousness. Now, my mind and your mind differ in many respects; we have different memories, we like different things, we have different tempers, different intellectual capabilities, etc. From a physicalist perspective, these differences are attributed entirely to differences in our brain structures, which make our brains to function differently. But

the most crucial difference between you and me is that we are different origin points of conscious experience, each experiencing life from a different, private and unique perspective. Why do the two brains, yours and mine, give rise to these particular two different perspectives, i.e. to you and me? This is a crucial aspect of the phenomena produced by the two brains – the most crucial, actually, because this is the most important aspect of a mind: *who* one is, their identity in the most fundamental sense. All other characteristics like memory, intelligence, temper, etc. are peripheral characteristics, changeable properties, attached to the unchangeable self. So, why does your brain give rise to you and my brain give rise to me? If every single aspect of the phenomena produced by the brain is determined by its functionality, which in turn is determined by its structure and physics, then *who* each brain will give rise to should also be determined by the brain structure; therefore, there should be some subtle structural difference between our two brains, that causes them to function slightly differently and produce different persons, you and me. Perhaps in my brain neuron A connects to neuron B whereas in yours neuron A connects to neuron C instead. Both the phenomenon that is I and the phenomenon that is you, which differ in an important sense, are then reducible to the physics of the two brains, and since the latter are slightly different this explains why your brain gives rise to you and mine to a different person, me. However, it is easy to see that this explanation is wrong and that it is impossible that the mind-body pairing is a map between minds and bodily structures/functionality.

That the cause of the particular mind-body pairings cannot be a physical mechanism can be shown by considering the following thought experiment: suppose that, many years into the future, technology has advanced to the point that there are 3D printers that can print any arrangement of molecules we desire, even a human body, with the molecules at exactly the right locations and states such that the body is instantly functioning and alive. Using this printer, we make an exact copy of a living person. Both persons have exactly the same bodies, meaning also the same brains, which arguably means that they would have the same memories (the new person would mistakenly think that he/she is the original person), they would have the same intellectual capacities, they would like the

same music and food, etc. Everything that can be mapped onto a physical structure in their bodies would be the same. But there would be a most important difference: they would not be the same person.

Imagine that you are one of these persons; say, you are the original person, and a physical duplicate of you has been created. If someone grasps the duplicate body's foot, would you feel it? If someone places something in front of the duplicate body's eyes, would you see it? From your own perspective, clearly there is a huge difference between the two bodies: you are paired to only one of them. But, if it is the intricate biological machinery inside your physical brain that gives rise to you, and the duplicate body's brain's machinery is exactly the same as yours, shouldn't the new brain also give rise to you? But it gives rise to another person⁴. If physicalism is true, then the pairing of bodies to persons should be determined by a physical mechanism, and there should be a physical explanation for why you are mapped to the original body and the other person to the new body. Of course, from a third-person point of view, you and the other person are completely similar, completely symmetric. But from your (or the duplicate person's) point of view, there is a remarkable difference between yourself and the other person, a striking asymmetry. Both the third-person symmetry and the first-person asymmetry are real facts, so physicalism should account also for the asymmetry; but obviously there cannot be any physical explanation for it, since the physical arrangements of the two bodies are identical. The structure of the body cannot, therefore, be mapped onto the person, it doesn't tell us who is who.

In private discussions, I noticed that some people regard the fact that there are two individual brains as sufficient explanation for there being two individual minds emerging from them, refusing to acknowledge that there is any further question needing to be

⁴Note that physicalism is also incompatible with the wild scenario that both bodies do actually give rise to you, to your unique first-person perspective, and you experience life through both bodies. This is because the existence of the duplicate body does not in any way physically affect the original body. Therefore, the original body, which produces you, and is unaffected by the construction of the second body, functions exactly the same way as it did before the duplication, and hence you, as a product of this unchanged body, should not experience any mental changes either. In other words, since there is no physical link between the two bodies, there should be no mental link between the persons they produce (and in particular they cannot be the same person, paired to both bodies). Hence physicalism has the conflicting implications that (a) identical bodies must give rise to the same person, and (b) identical bodies must give rise to different persons.

answered. It seems that, to them, the function of the brain is to produce consciousness, but *which* consciousness it produces is not part of its job. But whose job is it then? What determines this? Note that *who* the produced consciousness will be is not some insignificant, secondary matter; it is the essence of being a person/mind. Hence this is the most important matter, the most important question. Asking who a rock or a chair is, is indeed a non-question, because we assign identity to these things artificially; they have a relative existence as explained previously. But when it comes to minds/persons, identity and particularity are real, palpable, objective, and is what makes a person a person. It is the prototype based on which we figuratively project identities to objects as well. If one (perhaps unconsciously) thinks that the identity of the person given rise to by a brain is not dependent on the brain itself, but the brain is only responsible for the peripheral traits of that person, e.g. the way they perceive qualia, their memory, their rational capacity etc., then some contemplation should reveal to them that they in fact regard the core of the person, the owner of these traits, to be an independent substance.

Essentially, to think that two individual brains, even if identical, should imply two individual minds, is to regard the mind as a particular, not as a universal, i.e. not as a property of the body or a phenomenon produced by it. And this is incompatible with a physicalistic account where physics can completely explain a mind, including its identity.

2.2 The body swapping experiment

So the origin of the mind-body pairing cannot be sought in physics. Brain/body structure and associated physics and functionality are universals, and duplicable; minds are particulars (the quintessential particulars) and non-duplicable. But even if physicalism is false, perhaps a more general kind of materialism is true, like property dualism or panpsychism. The physical structure of a body is a universal, but a body itself is a particular. So, the mind-body pairing is perhaps a map from particular bodies to particular minds. This is what is essentially claimed by those materialists who protest that two individual bodies, even if identical, should, according to their intuition, produce two individual minds.

However, a body, as noted, is a human concept, a mere convention, just like any

composite object. In the mind-body pairing, the mind must be paired with something objective and concrete, and therefore we must be more specific as to what the mind is paired to, than simply a “body”. Having excluded the bodily structure as an element of the mapping, the only thing that remains is the particular matter, the particular physical particles that the body consists of. So, revisiting the body duplication thought experiment, we could argue that although the two bodies are exactly similar, they consist of numerically different particles. For example, if one body has an oxygen atom at its (x, y, z) position, then the duplicate body also has an oxygen atom at its own respective (x, y, z) position; but it is not the *same* oxygen atom; it is another one, albeit completely similar. So, in this scenario, the mind is paired to particular physical particles; the structure of the brain is perhaps responsible for endowing the mind with certain abilities, such as memory, reason, perception etc., but has nothing to do with the question of *who* that mind will be; rather, this question has to do with which specific particles make up the brain, not with how they are organised.

This possibility does not seem very likely. Later we will present deeper arguments against the possibility that the mind is *strongly supervenient* on the particular matter that constitutes its brain. But for now let us raise a simple, empirical objection: we know that the matter that constitutes our brains changes all the time (in fact, some of it may have previously belonged to other people’s brains), yet we remain the same persons. So, let us extend the previous body-duplication thought experiment in a way analogous to the thought experiment about the ship of Theseus. In particular, suppose that, after your body is duplicated and a new person has emerged in that new body, we also have the technology to replace particular ions or atoms in a body, and we use it to swap an oxygen atom from your brain with an oxygen atom in your duplicate’s brain. Arguably, this will not have any impact on you whatsoever, since our bodies exchange matter all the time yet we remain the same persons. Repeating gradually this procedure, we can end up swapping all atoms between the two bodies, so that you eventually possess the body originally owned by your duplicate, and he/she possesses your original body. Hence it seems very unlikely that the mind-body pairing is a pairing between a mind and a chunk of matter, contrary

to what perhaps a panpsychist, property-dualist, or identity theorist would assume.

2.3 Implications of the pairing problem

The practical ability to make an exact copy of a body will not be available anytime soon, but this does not take anything away from the power of the argument. Besides, we can ask the same question, of what determines the mind-body pairings, for monozygotic twins, whose bodies, although not exactly the same, are very similar, and were almost exactly the same during their early stages of development. But furthermore, the requirements of exact similarity can be relaxed since, for instance, my body changes every day but I am still the same person, myself, mapped onto a continuously-changing body. Therefore, there is a huge set of bodily configurations, from when I was a baby until I grow old and die, that map to the same person, me. And it is not only in terms of structure that these bodies differ, but also in terms of the specific particles that compose them; the vast majority of the atoms that made up my body as a baby have now been replaced⁵.

So, there are cases where different bodies (either in terms of structure, matter, or both) map to the same person (e.g. both the body I had when I was a child and my current body map to me), and cases where identical bodies map to different persons (e.g. in the body-duplication thought experiment, or the monozygotic twins case if we allow for some small differences between the bodies), and there is even the case that the same body maps to different persons at different instants in time (in the body-swapping thought experiment). Therefore, neither the physics of the body nor its material constitution can account for the totality of mental phenomena, and in fact they cannot account for the most important aspect of them, the identity of their owner.

The structure of the body and the particular matter it consists of completely define it. There is nothing more to a body than these two aspects. But if *who* is paired to a body is determined by neither of these, then obviously it is something completely independent

⁵While the vast majority of cells in our bodies undergo regular turnover and get replaced during a person's lifespan, some cells do not; for example, most or all of the neurons of the human cerebral neocortex are generated before birth and never get replaced (Bhardwaj et al., 2006). Even so, most of the particles that constitute these cells do get regularly replaced. The most stable part is the DNA which, however, can also be partially replaced as it undergoes repair processes in response to damage.

of the body. Our “peripheral” mental characteristics and traits such as our memories, our qualia, our reason etc. may be correlated with brain structures and events; perhaps in the future, by scanning one’s brain we will be able to tell that he/she is perceiving something red and round, or is engaged in mathematical problem-solving, or is remembering a certain friend, or feeling happy (we can already do that to some extent). In other words, the structure of a body and the physical events occurring therein are correlated with the *way* that the owner of the body experiences life (although these correlations are ultimately inexplicable, which is the “hard problem of consciousness” and the problem of intentionality). But they are not correlated at all with *who* that owner is. If my brain and 9 other similar brains, of people at a similar mental state to mine, are scanned, there is no direct way for me to tell which of the 10 brains is mine solely from information contained in these scans, no matter how detailed they are.

The preceding arguments go a step further from showing that a person’s identity is physically inexplicable, not derivable/deducible from the properties or composition of their body, not supervenient on the body in the strong sense (Horgan, 1993). They furthermore show that, strictly speaking, it even does not supervene on it in the weak sense: a clear pairing rule between bodies and persons cannot be established. Of course, a posteriori, once a person comes to life paired to a body, we are justified in regarding continuity of the body as empirical evidence for continuity of the self; yet “continuity of the body” is not precisely definable, and body-swapping is theoretically possible. Owners of bodies are, a priori, completely uncorrelatable with any aspect of the bodies per se. We will next proceed to deeper arguments about the independence of the identity of the self from anything material, and even from anything immaterial outside of the self itself.

3 Third-person symmetry and first-person asymmetry

The previous thoughts about the pairing problem can serve as a warm-up to proceed into a deeper investigation of the nature of the self. It is not really necessary to resort to thought

experiments involving identical bodies to see that the pairing problem is a hard one for physicalism and materialism. Moreover, it will be shown that any theory that claims that the self is explainable by factors external to it only, be they physical or mental, is problematic.

We know very well that we are all different in many peripheral respects, such as our memories, our beliefs, our tendencies, our likes and dislikes, the way we think, our intellectual and emotional capacities, perhaps even the way we perceive – one person’s blue may be another person’s red, or one person may lack the sense of vision altogether. Furthermore, the current mental state of each of us is different: one is reading this paper and contemplating about it, another is driving her car to work while listening to the radio, another is asleep and dreaming, another is trying to figure out ways for himself and his family to survive in a war-stricken area, another is enjoying the company of people she loves, feeling grateful and content about her life, while another may be struggling with thoughts about suicide, unable to find meaning in life. However, at their core, all persons are fundamentally similar: each is a centre of existence, of first-person perspective, of consciousness, each is his/her own self, a person, a mind, an ego. We are equally alive. In this respect, we are all equal, we are all the same. No one is any less his/her own self than any other. Of course, this is just a hypothesis from someone who has no direct access to anyone other than his own self, but it is a very plausible one (and intuitive one, being the basis for empathy, putting oneself in another’s place), since being a self seems to be an all-or-nothing thing; it is not possible to imagine different types or degrees to it. I will refer to this fundamental similarity between persons as *symmetry*. Again, I emphasise that this does not refer to the peripheral characteristics which may be different from person to person, but to the core quality of being a person, a centre of existence, a centre of consciousness. This quality is associated with the question of *who* a person is, while the peripheral qualities tell us about a person’s mental state and about his/her character, and could potentially be swapped between persons; today I am happy and another person is sad, tomorrow I could be the one who is sad while the other person is happy – but I still remain myself, and the other person remains him/herself irrespective of the peripheral

mental changes we experience and undergo. We can even imagine the swapping of peripheral characteristics that are normally considered to be very personal, such as memory contents or character.

Although objectively, from a third-person perspective, all persons are symmetrical i.e. exactly similar, from a subjective, first-person point of view there is a fundamental difference between one's own self and all others. From each person's own perspective, among all existing or possible persons only one is singularly different from all others: his/her own self; he⁶ is his own self and not any other, he directly experiences his own self and none other. Of course, intuition and reason lead a person to believe that the situation concerning all other persons is symmetric to his own; that, just like for him, for any other person, from their own point of view, the singularity concerns their own self compared to all others.

Let us explore this singularity a bit further. Between me and the rest of reality there is a discontinuity. I cannot continuously change into someone else or something else (of course, my peripheral qualities can). Being myself is an all or nothing thing. There are no persons or things that are more "me" than others, for example a person that is 25% me or 50% me. All of them are 0% me and I am the only one who is 100% me (a person peripherally identical to me, such as my bodily duplicate of the aforementioned thought experiment, is still a completely different person from me, inaccessible to me. He is 0% me). Likewise, there is a barrier between me and all material things; they are all equally foreign to me. There are no oxygen molecules that are more 'me' than others. By this I mean that the particular first-person point of view that identifies with me cannot be found in any degree in any oxygen molecule, whether inside or outside of my body; they are all equally unconscious (and even if they were conscious, their consciousness would be completely disjoint from mine), none of them being more qualitatively similar to me, as a particular centre of consciousness, than the others. Nor am I more special to them

⁶ For convenience I will sometimes refer to persons in the masculine gender (which is also more intuitive for me when I use introspection to explore the self). However, it should be clear that I consider gender to be a peripheral, changeable, contingent quality (or, rather, a group of qualities) of a person and not part of his/her innermost self. This innermost self, divested from all peripheral qualities including gender, is exactly similar for all of us; we are all the same. Whether someone is biologically or mentally male or female is completely irrelevant to the present arguments.

than any other person is, since all persons are exactly the same to all entities other than themselves. The same holds for structures. The neural circuitry in my brain, although contingently associated with me, is not more me than any other circuit; in fact, as argued in the previous section, there can be other persons whose brains have the exact same circuitry as mine.

With these considerations, let us revisit the mind-body pairing problem. What is so special about my own body such that it gives rise to me and not to someone else? “Special” means a characteristic of my body that ties better to me, i.e. to my particular, unique first-person perspective (stripped from all my peripheral qualities⁷) than to any other person. But since all persons are symmetrical, no such characteristic can exist: any special feature of a body would relate equally with all persons, since all persons are symmetric from an outside point of view. Consider two persons, say myself and my brother. If I prefer classical music and my brother prefers folk music then this could be attributable to the relevant structures in our brains being different. But this does not determine that I should be paired to my current body and my brother to his. Why could I not instead be paired to my brother’s body and he to mine, in which case our musical tastes would be swapped along with our brains (I would prefer folk music and he would prefer classical music)? Arguably, all our peripheral characteristics, such as our memories, our current thoughts, the current inputs from our senses, our likes and dislikes, etc., can be mapped to structures and processes in our bodies. But what about the most important characteristic: who is who. Why is my body paired to me, and my brother’s body paired to him? Since all persons are exactly similar in this respect, no particular physical feature of each body can be considered responsible for giving rise to that particular person that is paired to it instead of any other (existing or possible) person. The pairing cannot have a physical,

⁷In an effort to avoid the problem, one may contend that in the absence of all peripheral qualities there is nothing left, no person. This argument makes it appear as if a person is just an aggregate of conscious experiences: thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc. By taking a bunch of these and putting them together, one makes a person (Hume’s bundle theory). This is false, as it overlooks the fact that the peripheral qualities do not have an autonomous existence, they cannot be found independently of any existing person, let alone be put together to produce a person. They presuppose the existence of the person who is experiencing them. The nature of all mental phenomena is such that they are necessarily experienced by particular minds; *who* is experiencing them is part of their identity (Lowe, 2014). When it comes to non-personal entities (objects), whether or not there exists something beyond their properties is more debatable, but when it comes to persons, a mental experience disjoint from any person is something unintelligible.

structural, functional or material explanation.

What is so special about your body in relation to you, such that it determines that it is you that it gives rise to and not someone else? A contemplation will reveal that there can be nothing special about it. No genetic sequence, neural architecture, molecular composition, appearance, shape, etc. can have any a priori special connection to you compared to any other person; all such features are equally neutral towards all persons. The specialness of your body towards you does not follow and cannot follow from any of its physical/material characteristics; it is only special to you *because you happen to have this body*; it is an a posteriori specialness. There is no physical cause that can determine that this body shall be mapped to you and not to someone else.

I think that it would be beneficial for each of us to make the thought experiment of going back in time until before we existed, and wonder why when our body was formed it was us that came into existence. Billions of bodies were conceived before mine, and none of these conceptions had anything to do with my existence or not, despite there being nothing qualitatively different about them compared to the conception of my own body. Yet, the formation of my particular body was accompanied by an event which, from my perspective, is the most singular event possible, patently qualitatively different than anything else: my coming into existence. Would there be any difference if it was someone else that came to being instead of me when my body was formed? It would be a person exactly the same as me in every respect, except one: it would not be me but someone else. But this crucial difference is only a difference from the perspective of the persons affected, me and the other person. For the rest of the universe there would be no difference. There is an infinity of other possible persons, selves, that could have come into being instead of me paired to this body, and they are all indistinguishable from the outside, to a third observer, including the inanimate physical world. Even now, if I suddenly ceased to exist and was replaced by another person that suddenly came into existence and occupied my body, this would be an event that is invisible, unknowable and inaccessible to the rest of the universe, leaving absolutely no footprint or reflection on it; it would privately, secretly, affect only me and the other person.

These thoughts highlight the impossibility of there existing any a priori special relation between a person/mind and elements of the universe outside of it. As such elements we mostly considered material bodies and physical properties because that is the focus of physicalism and materialism, the currently prevailing worldviews. However, it is evident that such elements are not restricted to the material realm but could be anything, even other minds/persons. For example, in exactly the same way it is impossible for there to be any *a priori* special relation between a person and his/her parents compared to any other third person. All persons, including my parents, siblings etc., are completely symmetric and none of them has a first-person perspective that is closer, more related to mine than that of any other person. Hence the reason why my parents begot me specifically among all possible persons cannot be sought in any special relation of their selfhood to mine, since all selfhoods are completely symmetric and no special relations exist. The same holds for any purported micro-consciousnesses of the fundamental particles of matter that panpsychism believes to be constituting a macroscopic person such as you and me.

Summarising, from the point of view of a particular person, his/her own self is a singularity among all of the rest of the universe. However, from the point of view of the rest of the universe, that person is exactly the same as all other persons. This raises the question: how can a person's existence be explainable with reference to factors only external to it? If the singularity, particularity and uniqueness of a person can be found only within that person itself and nowhere else in the universe, then where does it come from?

4 The composition problem

With the aid of the previous arguments, let us examine whether the self is a composite entity, something analysable into constituents. This is the prevalent view, with several belief systems regarding it as such, among them physicalism, property dualism and panpsychism, which believe it to arise from the combination of the fundamental particles that form the body and their properties (they differ with respect to whether they consider these properties to be all physical or not). Another such theory (encountered in the philosophy

of religion) is traducianism, according to which a new soul is produced from individual contributions from its parents' souls. These theories may come in different flavours, but they all assume persons to be non-fundamental phenomena, explicable by reference to their constitutive fundamental parts and their arrangement and interactions. However, it follows from the previous discussion that the most important aspect of a person, *who* someone is, cannot be explained by reference to any constitutive elements. Persons are therefore fundamentally simple, non-composite.

I, as a person that is symmetric with all other persons, do not bear any special relationship to my alleged constituents, be they physical particles, elemental consciousnesses, the structure of my brain, parts of my parents' souls etc., compared to the corresponding alleged constituents of other persons, that could explain why (or determine that) they should give rise to me specifically and not to some other person. If I could hypothetically travel back in time to before I existed, and examined all possible combinations of material particles, elemental consciousnesses, or pairs of parents, it would not be possible to determine beforehand that one of them, the particular one that eventually was brought about by my parents' union, would give rise to me. Why that particular combination and not some other one? And conversely, why did this particular combination give rise to me and not to some other person, if all persons, including me, are exactly similar from the constituents' perspective? Do the molecules that make up my body have anything more in common with me than with any other person? No, because all persons are the same. Does the structure of my brain have some distinguishing feature compared to all other existing or possible brain structures that relates better to me than to any other person? No, because I am "I" in exactly the same way as anyone else is their own selves. Do I have something more in common with my parents than with any other person? No, since all persons, including my parents, are equally third, directly inaccessible persons to me, as I am to them. The same holds for my relationship to any hypothetical elemental consciousnesses: none of them is more "me" than any other; they are all the same to me, and all persons, including me, are the same to them.

Due to the symmetry between persons, any combination of any kind of elements is

necessarily a priori equally neutral towards any person. Two persons are exactly similar from any point of view outside of themselves, including the perspective of any alleged constituents; so, there is nothing to grasp onto to make the pairing between combination and person determinable. There is nothing to grasp onto to allow that the formation of a certain combination is the cause of the emergence of that particular person. Any manipulation and rearrangement of purported constituents does not inferentially bring us even the slightest step closer to a particular self, due to the complete symmetry between selves.

The coming into existence of a person coincides with his/her pairing to a body, which is indeed a composite entity, formed from constituents through a process. Hence, it may seem natural to many to assume that this process also determines that person's coming into being. However, this is impossible since all possible persons are exactly similar and no combination of pre-existing elements can determine a particular person among a pool of infinite identical possibilities.

Consider another thought experiment: Suppose I have the skills and resources to compose a human. I can design his/her body however I please, down to the most minute detail, to the last molecule. Let us assume that by doing so I can determine all the "peripheral" aspects of his/her mentality, such as memory contents, intellectual abilities, desires, emotional character, ethical mindset, artistic taste, mathematical prowess, etc. In other words, let us assume that all mental phenomena that can be experienced by a person have complete physical correlates in his/her body, and that I can design the latter however I please. But how can I set *who* he/she will be, i.e. which self will inhabit or emerge in that body? This is completely out of my control, despite all aspects of the body being directly under my control. All possible selves, infinitely many of them, are exactly similar, completely symmetric; they have no third-person difference, but only the (crucially important) first-person difference that for each one of them their own self is singularly different from all others in that they experience only their own unique life. The particularity of each possible person is accessible only from within that person, while from the outside all selves are exactly the same, and this lack of difference makes it impossible to establish a

correlation (let alone a derivation) from a particular bodily characteristic, such as genetic sequence, neuron connectivity, molecular identity etc., to a particular person. However a body is, all infinitely many possible egos are equally associatable to it. Therefore, if the person that arises due to my composing his/her body asks me: “How come you made *me* specifically instead of someone else?”, or “why did I not emerge from any other body in the world?”, what could I answer him/her? There is nothing that I could answer, despite my determining everything concerning his/her body.

This problem is faced also by panpsychism and traducianism. I could not answer that person’s existence question either in terms of elemental (proto)consciousnesses or of parents, as all of them are also equally associatable with each of the infinite possible selves that could emerge from the combination. Even an a priori correlation (weak supervenience) between the constituents and the infinite identical possible selves is impossible, let alone an explanation of the emerging self in terms of the constituents (strong supervenience), which is what panpsychism purports to offer.

Let me insist on this point a little further, by changing role and taking the place of the created person instead of the engineer. Suppose I am the person just created. If I ask my engineer “why am I good at trigonometry?”, he might reply “because I designed those neural circuits of your brain in such and such a way”. If I ask him “why do I have a hot temper?”, he might reply “because the design of your body is such that it produces an excess of that substance, which causes those neurons to be triggered more easily”. But if I tell him: “That’s all nice, but there is one pressing question that is burning me above all others: why *me*? Why did it have to be me that was created?”, then he could not answer me, because this is something that he did not, and could not, determine.

This is a compound problem. On one hand, from the outside all (infinitely many possible) selves are exactly the same. Hence, a self cannot be supervenient on anything external to it; supervenience is about correlation between features that can vary, but nothing identifiable from the outside varies between selves. And emergence requires supervenience, hence the self is not emergent from anything external to it. On the other hand, of course, selves are singularly different from each other in a crucial sense, but this

difference, the particularity of each self (which is also the essence of each self), is visible, accessible, palpable only from inside that self. It is something completely private, and alien, detached, inaccessible to the rest of the universe. In emergence, that which emerges is a mental construct that exhibits a macroscopic behaviour which differs from (it is a macroscopic average of) the microscopic behaviour of its constituents. Emergence introduces nothing really new into the universe, only seemingly new. On the contrary, the coming into existence of a self brings something completely new into the universe: that self's particularity, his/her first-person perspective, an entirely new, unique, inaccessible, private inner world, unrelated to anything else. Any theory that claims that a self is analysable into constituents and explainable by reference to their combination must first and foremost explain the particularity of each self in terms of the purported constituents and their combination. But this is impossible.

This problem is related to the “combination problem” of panpsychism, the most influential formulation of which was given by William James ([James, 1890](#)). There are several variants of this problem ([Chalmers, 2017](#)), but the one closest to the present arguments is the one put forth by James himself ([James, 1890](#)), called the subject-summing problem (here the term “subject” is used synonymously to what we have called mind or person or self in the present paper (macro-subject), and to the elemental consciousnesses of panpsychism (micro-subjects)): the aggregation of a number of selves does not necessitate the formation of a new self. In fact, the present arguments show that not only does it not necessitate it, but it seems impossible that a subject is the aggregate of other subjects. These constituent subjects have nothing more in common with their alleged aggregate subject than with any other subject. To each constituent subject all other subjects, including the alleged aggregate one, are equally foreign and inaccessible.

To me, this sort of introspective acquaintance with the self makes it clear that the core, the identity of each self, is something completely independent of anything else in the universe, it cannot be supervenient on anything, and therefore selves at their core are not composite but simple, fundamental, independent substances. In fact, I would go as far as to say that the self is the quintessential simple substance.

5 The creation problem

It is natural to take this argument a step further. Let us grant that a self is a simple substance. How then is it brought into existence? It is impossible that factors or agents external to it determine its existence, since the unique, defining aspect of a self is private and completely inaccessible to these factors and agents, whatever they may be, while from the external perspective of the factors and agents all, infinitely many, possible selves are indistinguishable. To appreciate the hardness of the problem that external sameness but internal uniqueness of selves raises in terms of their creation, we will consider another thought experiment.

Imagine that, rather than being an “engineer” of persons (i.e. someone that designs and composes persons from constituents, which we saw to be impossible), you are a creator of persons: you have been bestowed with the mysterious power to create any person you wish with a snap of your fingers. At first glance this may sound unambiguous, but on second thought, what does “any person you wish” mean? How would you go about selecting a particular person that does not exist? You would have to search in a pool of infinite possible persons, all of whom are identical from your perspective, and to each of whom you not only lack direct access, but also indirect access, as they do not even exist. For existing persons, we also do not have direct access, but at least we have indirect access: we can see their bodies move, hear their voices when they speak, etc., and we can track them by following the continuity of their trail of effects on the material world which is accessible to our senses. But this is not available for non-existing persons. They are completely out of reach.

Supposedly then, you decide to exercise the power that was bestowed upon you. How would you go about doing it? You would presumably think in your mind that you want such and such a person, e.g. intelligent, emotional, curious etc. (the peripheral qualities). But could you perceive in your mind *who* that person would be? You can imagine being that person, but this is just projecting your own self onto him/her. It is merely an illusion of direct access, not real direct access. It is essentially you, not that other person. So, suppose that after you have carefully thought and decided about how you want the new

person to be, you snap your fingers, and the new person is created. Do you think you could answer that person's question, "why is it *me* that was created"? Not really. You just imagined *a* person, not specifically *that* person (perhaps you imagined your own self in place of that person, with his/her peripheral qualities). You could not have determined that it be specifically him/her that was to be created rather than some other person among an infinity of identical (from your perspective) possibilities. Therefore, the real work, the selection/determination of the person, was not done by you but by some other, unknown factor or agent. And what could that be? There are no possible candidates. It could not be another person or consciousness (elemental or not), for the same reasons that it cannot be you. And it cannot be an inanimate material/physical factor because all of these are equally neutral towards all infinite possible selves.

To look at this argument from the other side, imagine again going back in time to before you existed, and imagine a universe without you, to whom you are inaccessible, detached, from which you are isolated. You are in a "third-person" relationship with all elements of that universe. How could that universe produce you specifically, if it does not have any access to you? It cannot distinguish you from any other, infinite in number, possible persons; in order to do so, it needs access to your particularity, which is at the core of your existence, but this is something completely out of reach, something accessible by you alone. The necessary ingredient for your creation does not itself exist prior to your creation.

Each person is unique, and this uniqueness, what distinguishes him/her from all persons and from all other things in the universe, can be seen, experienced and accessed only from within him/herself. It can be found nowhere else in the universe but in that person itself. This uniqueness is the person's identity, who he/she is. This is the quintessential kind of identity. Some take identity to be the ensemble of one's peripheral characteristics, which changes over time as his/her character and memory changes due to contingent external factors and personal choices. But this sense of identity is less fundamental; it is an abstract concept that refers to the peripheral, changing aspects of a person rather than to his/her unchanging core. For example, if we assume that one's peripheral mental state

is completely mapped onto the physical structure of his/her body, then according to this latter definition of identity the body-duplicates of the fictitious experiment of section 2.1 are the same person; yet in fact they are clearly not the same person, as anyone can see by imagining being one of them. In contrast, the former, fundamental, quintessential identity is not an abstract concept but it is objectively real and empirically known by introspective acquaintance. As argued in Section 1, all people have an implicit understanding, an intuitive grasp of this fundamental identity, even those who, on the surface, reject it: they refer to their past and future selves in the first person, not as others; they believe that they deserve recognition and praise for their commendable past actions; that they are owed reward for work they did in what is now the past; they accept responsibility for their past faults; they plan for their future; etc. Only persons have this sort of identity, an identity in the strictest sense. Everything else only has a relative identity.

This identity of mine is a unique place in the universe reserved only for me. It remains the same through any change in peripheral qualities, ageing, sleeping, even death. For, if I ceased to exist, my first-person perspective would still be inaccessible to anyone else; and any new person that was brought into existence thenceforth would either be someone else, with their own unique first-person perspective and identity, one that is disjoint from what mine was and that could exist alongside me if I had not perished, or it would be me, the unique and non-duplicable person that I am, brought back into existence, having the same first-person perspective as before (whether I have any memories of my previous life or not is irrelevant). My first-person identity, I myself, is a unique place in the universe, in all of reality, reserved only for me no matter whether I am alive and conscious or not.

This identity, the particular first-person perspective, the particularity of a self, is the main ingredient that would be needed for creating a person, it is the core of a person. Yet this ingredient exists nowhere in the universe but in that person itself. Hence, prior to that person existing, this core ingredient also does not exist, and not only does it not exist but it also cannot even be conceived, it is completely inaccessible; which makes it impossible for it to be brought into existence solely by factors/agents outside of it. I could not have been brought into existence solely by the action of agents or factors that are outside of

me and who therefore have a third-person relationship with me and are isolated from my existence. It is not possible for the world outside of me to somehow know me well enough to select me before I existed among an infinity of indistinguishable potential other selves and create *me*, because what distinguishes me from all other potential selves is knowable and accessible only by me.

Hence any self that is not currently part of the universe is impossible to be brought into it. And yet I now exist, whereas apparently there was a time when I did not exist. How can we get around this problem?

5.1 Solutions to the problem

Let us reiterate. The creation of something that did not previously exist is an event that is necessarily determined by pre-existing elements of the universe, while obviously the created thing cannot play a role (as it does not exist prior to its creation). In the case of a self, the core of his essence is his particularity. This particularity is inaccessible from outside of that self, separated by the impenetrable barrier of privateness, and is not even identifiable: from the outside, it is indistinguishable from the particularities of the infinity of other possible selves. Hence, a self is indeterminate by outside means, including everything that is available prior to his/her creation. Outside of him, there is nothing in the universe that can point to him specifically among an infinity of other identical potential selves. This makes it impossible to create a self. How a self comes into existence is a hard problem for any theory about the mind, not just for physicalism.

One solution to this problem might be that persons/selves are uncreated, have eternally existed. This is reminiscent of conservation principles in physics, and seems congruent with beliefs about reincarnation (metempsychosis) such as those held by Pythagoras, Plato, and some prominent Eastern religions. Of course, this solution does not completely satisfy an inquiring mind, as it does not provide an ultimate source of persons (a source that may transcend time if time is assumed to have no beginning). But then again any theory trying to explain reality is bound to run into the problem of recursion: if something is explained in terms of something else, then the question automatically arises of how that

“something else” is itself explained. This solution also has to face the problem of the impossibility of traversing an infinite amount of time (see, e.g., [Moreland and Craig \(2017, §25.2\)](#) or [Erasmus \(2018, §8.3\)](#)): if I have always existed, then I have lived through infinite events, infinite equal intervals of time (e.g. seconds, hours or millennia), until I arrived at the present moment. But this does not seem logically possible, or even intelligible. For example, it means that I could, if I wanted to, have recited all infinitely many natural numbers by now, even if I recited only one such number per millennium. The problem arises from the fact that I am here now, and therefore an infinite number of time units must have already passed – with the notions of “infinite” and “passed” being incompatible with each other.

Personally, I am not in favour of the aforementioned proposed solution. However, it seems to me that the creation problem is of the kind that teaches us that our ability to understand reality is not unlimited and that we should not place our own rationality at the seat of the ultimate judge⁸. No matter what we assume to be the foundation of reality, be it God, physics, or anything else, the problem of the coming into existence of a self defies a purely logical resolution. Rather, it must unavoidably be admitted that the coming into existence of every single self/mind is something miraculous and inexplicable.

Contemplations such as these, and empirical introspective acquaintance with other aspects of the nature of persons convincingly reveal that every single person has infinite value. It seems to me that a single person is incomparably more valuable than all of the vast impersonal material universe combined. It is for this that I believe the foundation and source of reality to be a Mind, a Person (“God” in religious terminology⁹) rather than something impersonal¹⁰ (e.g. time, space, energy, fundamental particles etc.). This Mind

⁸Such problems expose the limited, if existent at all, value of philosophical arguments that rely on the notion of “possible worlds”.

⁹The reader may at this point be concerned that my views on the nature of persons are motivated by my religious beliefs. Indeed, it should be disclosed that I am a Christian. However, my formation of these philosophical views pre-dates my embrace of Christianity, and these contemplations were conducive towards this embrace. Christianity emphasises the value of persons and highlights their similarity with God to an extreme extent. The origin of both my philosophical contemplation on persons and my acceptance of Christianity is my perception of the value of persons.

¹⁰Note that, as we analyse reality down to more fundamental levels, we will unavoidably at some stage reach the most fundamental level, whose elements are primitive, inexplicable and not further analysable; we just have to accept their existence as a matter of fact. Physicalists believe this most fundamental level to consist of impersonal, lifeless, non-conscious primitive elements, and life/consciousness to belong

is similar to us in some respects, but completely transcends us in others, in ways that are inconceivable to us. Being the source of everything, nothing is impossible for this Mind, even the creation of persons out of nothing. The fact that He¹¹ does in fact bring persons into existence means that he has *direct access* to each of us, in a mysterious way that transcends our epistemic abilities; otherwise, just like the creator of our aforementioned thought experiment who could create persons with a snap of his fingers, he could not be the determinant of who each person that comes into existence is. So the fact that God created me means that I am not actually the only one who has direct access to my own self, I am not really completely isolated and my inner world is not completely private, but God has direct access to these as well¹², in a way that transcends our understanding. When he created me he somehow knew me even before I existed and selected me, specifically, from a pool of infinite potential persons.

6 Epilogue

In this paper I have presented some thoughts the core of which occurred to me at an early age, decades before I even knew that there is such a thing as the philosophy of mind. Indeed I find it natural that people would engage in such thoughts and contemplations, as they pertain to the core of their own existence. Furthermore, they do not require scientific expertise, expensive laboratory equipment, or even philosophical training (although, the ability to articulate them effectively through language requires higher education and skill), but everyone's own self is like an open book to them to explore. Nevertheless, when I did find out about the academic discipline of philosophy of mind and begun familiarising myself with it, I was very surprised to discover that it is almost completely oblivious to the issues and questions considered in the present paper, which I found to be crucial for

to a much higher level; this, in my opinion, makes their reality ultimately nihilistic. However, I think that the arguments discussed in this paper present a strong case that minds are much more fundamental than assumed by physicalists, and that the case that a Mind, rather than something impersonal, is the foundation and origin of reality is much stronger and rational than physicalists present it to be.

¹¹I refer to God in masculine gender, as is customary, but do not consider him to have a gender (nor do I consider finite persons to have a gender, at the most fundamental level – see footnote 6).

¹²By this I do not mean merely that God empathises with us in the way that we empathise with each other by imagining what it is like to be in each other's place (Zagzebski, 2016), but that he really has direct access; he does not simply know what it is *like* to be me, but he knows what it is to be me, literally.

the understanding of our own nature and of utmost existential importance. Instead, it is captivated by issues pertaining to what I have referred to here as “peripheral” aspects of consciousness, i.e. aspects of the mind as abstracted away from the underlying particular possessor of the consciousness. Yet all the mystery and wonder lies in the possessor, the self, without whom consciousness is unintelligible. The issues with which the philosophy of mind is preoccupied, such as the nature of qualia and intentionality, are significant in their own right, but are only secondary compared to the nature of the self who exhibits these mental properties. In my opinion, the monopoly of focus on these secondary issues is misleading and conceals the true nature of selves.

Very recently¹³ I came across a very brief discussion of the independence of the identity of a self from the physical world, along lines similar to our present discussion, by Richard Swinburne in (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984, pp. 25–26). Swinburne states that this is an idea he took from a paper by John Knox with title “Can the self survive the death of its mind?” (Knox, 1969), which I proceeded to read as well. The title of that paper may sound strange, but Knox used the term “mind” to refer to what I called “peripheral mental qualities”, i.e. mental phenomena as abstracted away from the self that experiences them. Hence the title of that paper could be rephrased as: “Can the self exist in a state devoid of any conscious experience?”. It is a remarkable paper which discusses the same issues as discussed herein, and I very strongly recommend it to anyone who is interested in them. Unfortunately, it has not attracted any attention and has been mostly forgotten (only 12 citations in Google Scholar, 4 in Scopus, at the time of this writing).

Each of us is something particular, not a universal. And the particularity of each one of us, which is inextricably tied to the nature and essence of each self, is something that is independent from anything else in the universe, is something unique, non-duplicable. The particularity of persons is the quintessential kind of particularity, after which we figuratively assign particularity to objects as well. Each self’s existence is inexplicable and miraculous. Despite the immense existential implications that these have for us, the philosophy of mind seems uninterested and more intrigued with the peripheral mental properties abstracted away from their owner, considered as universals. And the philosophy

¹³At a time when most of this paper had already been written.

of persons seems completely blind to the ontological particularity of the self and tries to invent artificial notions of particularity such as based on psychological or material continuity. In response, we could repeat Knox' insightful observation:

“A person who maintains that what finally sets himself as an individual apart from others is the distinctiveness of his mind or personality (or is, for that matter, the mere instantiation of a certain set of personal traits) has not, I would suggest, paid enough attention to the sheer mystery of his being. Granted the existence of a world of some kind, isn't it surprising, even amazing, that I should be a part of it? I can easily conceive, after all, of times when I may well not have existed, or of times when, it may be, I shall not exist. Why, then, should I be in existence now, or indeed ever? On reflection, isn't my own seemingly contingent existence the most bewildering, unsettling fact I can imagine?” (Knox (1969, p. 92); Note that Knox uses “mind” in the sense of peripheral mental state).

What sense can we make of this? Perhaps, among the billions of people currently alive or who lived in the past, these thoughts did occur to many, whose contingent circumstances of life were, however, unfavourable for publicising them; perhaps they even took them for granted, it not occurring to them that they are worthy of publicising. And in the world of academic philosophy (as in every academic field) powerful currents emerge that pose challenges to exploring alternative paths or directions. Hopefully, the present paper makes a small contribution towards the appreciation and understanding of the wonder that is personal existence.

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