

The mind as a particular: Why Cartesian dualism is true

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Abstract

Modern philosophy focuses on the mind's *universal* features, such as qualia and intentionality, typically with the aim of reducing them to physical processes. This endeavour runs into so-called “hard problems”, much like the alchemists' pursuits in ages past. Meanwhile, the mind's *particularity* – its deepest, most distinctive, defining characteristic – is surprisingly overlooked. Each mind is a *particular*, in a quintessential sense: I experience life through my own, private, unique, and non-duplicable perspective, which is what fundamentally distinguishes me from the rest of the universe and gives me my unique identity. Out of billions of human bodies, it was the formation of what I call “my” body that led to *me* coming into existence. Why? There seems to be nothing inherently special about this body compared to the billions of others, and I can easily imagine it belonging to another mind and me experiencing life through another body or not existing at all. While for an inanimate particular, such as a chair, it is nonsensical to ask why, when it was constructed, it was that chair and not some other one that came into existence, for a conscious being the question “Why was it *I* that was brought into existence” is of the utmost relevance and should concern anyone that takes their existence seriously and marvels at its mystery. In this paper it is argued that the particularity of a mind can not be explained or deduced through any supposed *composition* of that mind, or even in terms of any *external* factors. Organisation of the brain's matter, architecture of neural circuitry, genetic sequence, combination of parents, or even hypothetical immaterial constituents as posited by panpsychism, cannot tell us anything about the particularity of the mind that possesses them. To begin with, all such combinations of constituents are duplicable (e.g. two or more minds could, theoretically, have identical bodies), or the constituents are exchangeable between minds (the matter constituting the body of one mind could, theoretically, be gradually exchanged with the matter of another mind's body), whereas the particularities of minds are not. Furthermore, the complete symmetry among the particularities of all minds implies that no combination of supposed constituents can have any *a priori* special relation to any particular mind; all such combinations are equally (a priori) neutral towards all particularities, lacking anything that could serve as a basis for pointing to a specific emergent mind, e.g. you rather than me. Finally, the particularity of a mind is something completely private to that mind itself and can be found nowhere else in the universe. The conclusion is that the mind/person/self is a simple (i.e. non-composite) entity, a simple substance, as Descartes proposed.

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

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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 non-composite 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, as a mental construct. Both of these views seem oblivious to the fact that minds, or selves, are characterised by a special kind of *particularity*: each one of us experiences life through their own, private, unique, and non-duplicable¹ 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 one². 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 essay is to highlight and explore this particularity and its consequences concerning the nature of the mind/self³. In particular, it is asserted that this particularity rules out the possibility that a mind is analysable into more fundamental constituents, and hence is itself fundamental, primitive. Cartesian dualism is the only tenable conclusion about its nature.

Let us begin by briefly reviewing the prevalent assumptions of the philosophies of

¹By “non-duplicable” I mean that while another person’s perspective may be exactly similar to mine, it is still theirs, not mine; it is a consciousness entirely separate from my own. There cannot be two of “me” in existence – only one.

²I 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 (e.g. [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 (or, more accurately, *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.

³In everyday language, “mind” can refer to one’s mental state or faculties, as in the phrases “she changed her mind” or “I did the calculations in my mind”. Similarly, “person” may refer to one’s character, as in “he’s a different person now”. But these are secondary meanings, and because the essence of being a mind or person is this special particularity that is the subject of this paper, I will use “mind”, “person”, “self” and “ego” as synonymous for the most part, though “mind” will occasionally be used also in the secondary sense, which will be clear from the context.

mind and person, which assume the mind/person to be an epiphenomenon, a constituted thing or an abstract idea. This conviction blinds these philosophies to the reality that the mental phenomena of consciousness, such as sensory perception and thought, do not exist independently but are necessarily experienced by a particular individual, whose particularity cannot be explained by any reference to factors outside of him/herself, 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.

One problem with this assumption is its circularity. “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 ultimately 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.

Furthermore, 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) (I discuss these problems in another treatise (Syraeos, 2023)). The gist of these problems is that the various mental processes of “phenomenal” consciousness, for example the way we experience, from a first-person perspective, sensory perception such as vision, hearing or pain, the way we experience thought, reason, emotions, memory, etc., are impossible to explain with reference to the physical properties of our bodies. All we can do is try to identify the physical properties and processes with which these mental processes are *correlated*.

There are various theories as to what the physical correlates may be (Kuhn, 2024) but, in accordance with the scientific mindset, the type of correlation sought is always that between mental and physical *universals*, i.e. mental or physical properties or characteristics as abstracted from any particular mind or body. For example, the conscious experience of “seeing red” or “feeling pain” (regardless of who is experiencing it) is perhaps correlated to a specific firing pattern of a network of neurons located at a certain area of the

brain (again, regardless of which brain that is). And this is the standard scientific point of view: all that matters about a physical system is its structure and physical properties; if, in such a system, an electron is swapped for another electron of the exact same state, or a mass of copper is substituted for another identical mass of copper, the system is considered to be the same as before, because its behaviour is unchanged. Therefore, physical laws as formulated by science never contain any reference to the “particularity” of the physical elements involved, but only to universal attributes such as mass, charge, distance, time, velocity, force, concentration, conformation, population, rate of change, etc. Given that scientific tradition has evolved in such a way that it is unthinkable that particularity could play a role in the workings of the physical world, it is not surprising that modern philosophy of mind (Chalmers, 2021), with its scientific mindset, seems to have completely overlooked the special particularity of minds. Her curiosity is limited to identifying the rules of correlation and to figuring out why physical universals are merely correlated with, rather than explanatory of, mental ones. While these questions are intriguing and valuable, the particularity of individual minds is a much deeper mystery to which the philosophy of mind seems oblivious.

Indeed, imagine two living human bodies that are identical, molecule-for-molecule; if all mental universals are correlated to physical universals according to universal laws, then the mental states of the two minds that are associated with these two bodies should also be identical – they should be making exactly the same thoughts, have the same memories, etc. But imagine that you are one of those two persons. While the other person would be someone *exactly like you*, it would not be *you* – for example, if someone touched his/her hand you would not feel it but they would. Obviously, there is an objectively real and crucial difference between you and the other person, and it has nothing to do with universals, since these are identical for both of you. Why are you this person and not the other? Why are you any of these two persons at all? These crucial questions, which are the topic of the present paper, seem to not have occurred at all to the philosophy of mind. They are meaningless for inanimate systems, such as two identical chairs, for which a description in terms of universals is exhaustive, whereas they are extremely meaningful for minds, whose mysterious particularity sets them apart from the rest of the universe.

While not daring enough to acknowledge that the scientific mindset is inappropriate for the exploration of the deepest nature of minds, some philosophers, prompted by the so-called hard problems, have taken the relatively bold step of acknowledging that not all of reality is physical. This has led to views such as property dualism and panpsychism (Chalmers, 2015). However, even these perspectives remain anchored in the belief that the human mind is a macroscopic, derivative, and illusory phenomenon that can be analyzed into more fundamental microscopic phenomena, albeit allowing these to be of some non-physical, mental nature. This fundamental “microscopic” mentality postulated by these theories, being a property of fundamental particles, has almost nothing in common with our familiar sense of human consciousness, since the latter does not emerge unless vast numbers of particles and their micro-mentalities are intricately organised into an immensely complex functional system such as the human brain. Rather, this postulated

elementary mentality, as a property of matter, can be construed as merely a *potential* of matter to give rise to macroscopic minds, and its flavour is that of the impersonal, inanimate, lifeless physical world, not that of the world of living minds.

Philosophy of Persons

Compared to the philosophy of mind, 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 with our senses are *entia per alio*: they only exist as individual entities in a relative sense – relative to the minds that perceive them. In reality, according to science, 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. There are practically infinite ways in which these countless particles could be conceptually separated into groups, but only a limited number of such groups, which we regard as individual objects, make sense to us. 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 function for us, while a pebble is viewed as an object because of the relative 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 retains its identity after 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 in the philosophy of 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 mereology⁴. 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

⁴Swinburne’s view (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984) is dualistic and, in my opinion, mostly correct. However, I disagree with his proposition that a person consists 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 the motivation behind this proposition is the alignment with the established Christian doctrine. However, what he calls “soul” in this specific context seems to be the same thing 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” is the centre of consciousness that each of us experiences themselves to be, then what does this leave for the soul to be if it is not synonymous with “person”? There are no candidate substantive meanings left, leading to the misconception that it is a kind of immaterial substance with quasi-physical characteristics, observable from a third-person perspective, perhaps imagined as a supernatural kind of energy, light, etc.

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 the minds themselves that conceive them is again circular and problematic (Sosa, 1999).

Mind / person / self: ens per se

The prevalent philosophies of mind and person share a deep biased belief in the supremacy of the material over the mental, and in that persons/minds are something derivative, non-fundamental, and subjective. This conviction stands in the way of even entertaining the possibility that minds are fundamental and (in principle) independent entities as suggested by Cartesian dualism. In fact, this possibility is so much disregarded that no one has publicly presented any substantive arguments against it – but perhaps this is also due to failed private attempts. Its widespread dismissal is implicitly taken as evidence of its falsity.

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 or body, 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. Consider the following: There are popular movies in which the protagonist wakes up in a different body following a wish, or in which two protagonists supernaturally swap bodies; movies that show people having their memories altered artificially; movies in which persons enter a virtual reality or “matrix”, transforming into superheroes; movies about demon-possession, where someone’s body is hijacked by one or more other persons/selves (the demons). In real life, as people age, their bodies and appearances change (quite dramatically), as do their characters and ideas (sometimes also quite dramatically); their old memories fade and new ones are acquired; they may suffer from Alzheimer’s disease or amnesia, take psychedelic drugs, have organ transplants, enter a metaverse and transform into avatars. They regret their past mistakes recognising them as their own, and make plans and worry about their future, even though their bodies, memories and characters are now different from what they were in the past and from what they will become in the future. Throughout history, most people have believed or hoped that a person survives biological death and the destruction of their body, and even those who reject this idea find it intelligible. Similarly, the idea of metempsychosis, where a person is reborn in a new body – human or animal – without any memories of their previous life, is universally conceivable. This idea extends to the notion that even the quality of one’s conscious experience can change dramatically, as in reincarnating as a bat or a plant. In all of these real, imaginary, or hypothesised scenarios, people instinc-

tively, unambiguously and effortlessly track a self/person through every change, guided by a deep, natural, innate understanding of selfhood. Their immediate, instinctive identifications of persons in all these scenarios align, whether they are materialists, Cartesian dualists, bundle-theorists, religious or atheist, panpsychists, or whatever else, even if this identification is at odds with their professed theories of selfhood.

If the body, memory, character, quality of conscious experience, or anything else that changes in the aforementioned cases, does not determine the identity of the particular person undergoing these changes, what is it that endures through change and allows one to track that person? Despite its intuitiveness, it is difficult to put into words; let me make an attempt to do so by saying that it is the origin of the unique first-person perspective from which life is experienced through all these changes. The universal attributes of the mind that the philosophy of mind explores, such as thoughts, emotions, sensations, etc., do not exist autonomously but are necessarily had by a subject (self) who experiences them. I am experiencing my own thoughts and nobody else's, and nobody else has direct access to my own thoughts. In theoretical discussions we may abstract mental experiences from the subjects experiencing them – for example, we may refer to a “sense of pain” – but in reality it is unintelligible that such experiences could exist without a subject. An experience is a mode of a conscious subject. This innate notion of subject or self is what we instinctively identify a person with and to track a person through changes such as the aforementioned is to recognise that these changes were experienced by the same subject.

To explain a concept typically means to analyse it in terms of more fundamental or familiar concepts. These latter concepts will themselves be more difficult to explain, requiring reference to even more basic or familiar concepts, and so on. Eventually, the explanatory chain will either degenerate into circularity, or terminate when the most fundamental concepts are reached, for which no further explanation is really possible. The concept of the self is the most fundamental and familiar concept that we innately have, and therefore it is the most difficult to express in terms of other concepts. Modern philosophy makes a serious mistake in viewing this innate understanding with scepticism, rejecting it as illusive, and thinking of the self as analysable in terms of other elements of reality which she chooses to assume to be more fundamental⁵. But our innate understanding points to the truth, a truth much 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 a necessary one. Yet it does not require

⁵Often, 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 flaws. 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 flaw is that even when we analyse things from a third-person perspective, it is, inescapably, in our very own first-person perspective that all the work is performed, with our conscious faculties of reasoning and understanding. Therefore, if we assume the first-person perspective to be deceptive, then we cannot trust third-person perspective judgements either.

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 essay 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: we all have direct acquaintance with our own selves, but the aforementioned difficulty in precisely articulating this understanding means that in order for one to communicate to another their thoughts about the self, 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). He thought that it is a hard problem for dualism, but it is actually a hard problem for physicalism. The problem is the following. Whether it is an actual fact (as dualists believe) or a macroscopic illusion produced by biochemical processes (as physicalists believe), 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 I hit *my* foot, *I* lose *my* intellectual powers if *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. 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? After all, I can easily imagine being paired to a different body and experiencing life through that instead of the one that I currently have.

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 Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia’s objection to Descartes). From Kim’s perspective, a soul, if such a thing existed, being non-physical and therefore not located in space, could not cause physical events in the body as there can be no spatial connection between it and the body, something that is normally required in the causal relationships we observe in the physical world. He went further to suggest that the non-spatial nature of souls means that they could not even interact with other souls, and hence would be “lonely”, i.e. completely isolated from the rest of the universe. According to Kim, this argument disproves the existence of souls. However, I personally find it weak and unconvincing because it assumes that all causation is physical in nature – in other words, it presumes physicalism. To the best of my knowledge (and also Kim’s⁶) there are no compelling arguments against

⁶Kim himself acknowledged that from the time of Descartes up to his own time the only objection against Cartesian dualism was that it is hard to imagine how an immaterial soul could interact with the material body:

“[A]s far as I know, that is pretty much all we get from Descartes’s critics and commentators. But as an argument this is incomplete and unsatisfying. As it stands, it is not much of an

dualism; rather, its rejection stems from a deep conviction in physicalism, as inferred from the fact that the objections raised (including Kim's) typically 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 through mutual forces, we cannot explain or analyse this further but accept it as an empirical fundamental fact. Hence, although some undertook to refute Kim's argument (Foster, 1991; Audi, 2011) I do not find it necessary, because our inability to explain causal interaction between a mental and a physical entity does not imply that dualism is false any more than our inability to explain causal interaction between two physical entities implies that physics is false. Likewise, quantum mechanics and its randomness are very strange and unintuitive but that is not a compelling 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 take a more careful look at the pairing problem, because sometimes unconscious presumptions make asking the question more difficult than finding the answer. 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 basic question of why that particular body is paired with that particular mind in the first place. What is the cause of my pairing with this particular body that I am paired with? Speaking as if materialism is true, out of the billions of bodies currently alive on earth, why is it that mine, and mine alone, 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 though 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 is 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 newly formed body is allowed to give rise to me as well: I cannot be paired with two bodies simultaneously, for I would have to be two persons at once, each body having

argument – it hardly gets started; rather, it only expresses a vague dissatisfaction of the sort that ought to prompt us to look for a real argument.” (Kim, 2001)

He then proceeded to present the “pairing problem” as a more refined version of this argument.

its own memories, stream of perceptual inputs, etc. How do other, newly formed 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? If my parents had not met and my current body had never formed, would it then be possible for some other body to give rise to me? For such a prohibition to have a physical explanation, my current body would need to possess some unique, non-duplicable physical feature. But why would it be impossible to duplicate any physical aspect of my body?

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 and my body are one and the same, 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 to be my own self is generated by this particular body and not some other. I can certainly imagine myself experiencing life through someone else’s body. Maybe this will turn out to be impossible; after all, I can also imagine a flying horse, but the laws of physics, including gravity, under conditions that typically apply on Earth, make this impossible. But the point is that there is a physical explanation for why it is impossible for there to be a flying horse. Similarly, if physicalism is true, then there must be a physical explanation for why it is impossible that I be produced by any other body but the one I happen to have. If all aspects of reality are explicable in terms of physical principles, then the undeniable fact that I perceive myself as bound to this particular body and not some other, whether my perception is an illusion or not, should be explainable in physical terms. Simply dismissing this important question is a lazy denial tactic. So, let us 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, primarily by the neural machinery of the brain. According to this view, the brain’s structure gives rise to complex chemical processes that ultimately produce consciousness. Now, my mind and your mind differ in many respects; we have different memories, preferences, temperaments, intellectual abilities, and so on. According to the physicalist view, these differences are solely the result of differences in our brain structures, which give rise to corresponding variations in brain functionality. But the most crucial difference between you and me is that we are different origins 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: its

particularity, *who* one is, their identity in the most fundamental sense. All other characteristics like memory, intelligence, temperament, etc., are “peripheral” characteristics, changeable properties of the unchangeable self. So, why does your brain give rise to you and mine to me? If every aspect of the phenomena produced by a brain is determined by its functionality which in turn is determined by its structure and physics, then *who* each brain gives rise to should also be determined by its structure. Therefore, there should be a (perhaps subtle) structural difference between our brains that causes a deviation in their function, leading to the production of 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 a very important sense (they have different phenomenal perspectives), would then be reducible to the physics of the two brains, and the structural difference between the brains would explain why your brain gives rise to you and mine to a different person, me – or, in more technical terms, why one brain produces one phenomenal perspective and the other brain produces a different one. However, it is not hard to see that this explanation is flawed, and that it is in fact impossible that the mind-body pairing is a map between minds and bodily structures/functionality.

That the mind-body pairings cannot be determined by a physical mechanism can be seen by considering the following thought experiment: suppose that, many years into the future, technology has advanced to the point that there are 3D printers capable of printing any arrangement of molecules we desire, even a whole human body, placing the molecules at exactly the right locations and states such that the body is instantly functional and alive. Using such a printer, we make an exact copy of a living person’s body (perhaps the original person would be sedated or “frozen” using some technology as the duplication is taking place). The original person and the new person have identical bodies, molecule-for-molecule, including their brains, which arguably means that they have the same memories (the new person mistakenly thinks that he/she is the original person), character and intellectual capacities, they like the same music and food, etc. Everything about the two minds that is correlated to physical structures in their bodies is the same. But there is a crucial difference: they are not the same person.

Imagine that you are one of these persons; suppose that you are the original person, and a physical duplicate of you has just been created. If someone grasps the duplicate body’s arm, will you feel it? If someone places something in front of the duplicate body’s eyes, will you see it? From your own perspective, clearly there is a remarkable difference between the two bodies: you are paired to only one of them. But if it is the intricate biological machinery inside your physical body that gives rise to you, and the duplicate body’s machinery is exactly the same as yours, shouldn’t the new body also give rise to you? But it gives rise to another person⁷. If physicalism is true, then the pairing of

⁷Note 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 in exactly the same way as it did before the duplication, and hence you, as a product of

bodies with 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: physics should explain why one body gives rise to one phenomenal perspective, while the other body gives rise to a different one; but obviously there cannot be any physical explanation for this, 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. *A person/self is not correlatable to any universal aspect of their body.*

In private discussions, I have noticed that some physicalist-minded 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 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 *which* consciousness (or *who*) a brain or body will produce is the most important question, as it concerns the essence of being a person/mind. On the contrary, asking who a rock or a chair is, is completely meaningless – we assign identity to inanimate things artificially; they have a relative existence, as discussed previously. But when it comes to minds/persons, identity/particularity is 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 thinks that the identity/particularity of the person given rise to by a brain is not dependent on the brain itself but that the brain is only responsible for the peripheral, universal traits of that person, such as their sensory experiences, their memories, their rational capacity, etc., then some contemplation should reveal to them that they in fact assume (perhaps unconsciously) the core of the person, the owner of these traits, to be an independent substance.

Essentially, to think that individual brains, even if identical, should imply individual minds, is to regard the mind as a particular, not a universal – that is, not as a property of the body or a phenomenon produced by it. This perspective conflicts with the physicalist account, which holds that physics fully explains the mind in all its aspects, including its identity/particularity, as a physical phenomenon arising from the body's physical properties according to the laws of physics. In the physicalist view, minds do not differ in "particularity" as they are not regarded as particulars but as phenomena; rather, individual minds are distinct phenomena (therefore requiring a difference in the physics of their respective bodies), differing in terms of the phenomenal perspectives that

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.

characterise them. The first-person perspective from which a mind experiences life is, according to physicalism, simply another property of the phenomenon that is that mind, supervenient on the physics of its body. Hence, according to physicalism, identical bodies or brains should produce the same mind – which is nonsensical.

2.2 The body swapping experiment

So the origin and explanation of the mind-body pairing cannot be sought in physics. Bodily structure and associated physics and functionality are universals, and duplicable; minds are particulars – the quintessential particulars – and non-duplicable. This disproves physicalism, the idea that everything comes down to physics. But even if physicalism is false, perhaps a more general kind of materialism holds true. While the physical structure of a body is a universal, a body itself is a particular. Thus, the mind-body pairing might be a map from particular bodies to particular minds. This is what is essentially claimed by those materialists who protest that two distinct bodies, even if identical, should, according to their intuition, produce two distinct minds. However, this perspective is not without problems either. For one, the question remains as to what determines which particular mind is paired with which particular body, and there seem to be no candidate determinants available, physics having been ruled out; it seems completely up to chance. Moreover, there is another reason why the mind-body pairing being a map from particular bodies to particular minds is rather unlikely, as will now be explained.

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 actually paired with than simply a “body”. With the bodily structure excluded as the physical side of the mapping, the only remaining option is the particular matter, the particular physical particles that the body consists of. So, perhaps the mind-body pairing is a pairing between a mind and the particular particles that make up what we regard as a body (or a certain subset of them, e.g. those making up a certain part of the brain). Then, 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. A possibility, then, is that a mind is paired to particular physical particles. The structure of a brain is perhaps responsible for endowing the mind with which it is paired with certain abilities, such as memory, reason, perception etc., but has nothing to do with the question of *who* that mind is; rather, this question has to do with which specific particles make up that brain, not with how they are organised.

This possibility seems unlikely. Later, we will present deeper arguments against the possibility that the mind is supervenient on the particular matter that constitutes its brain or body, but for now, let us raise a simple empirical objection: we know that the matter constituting our bodies changes all the time, yet we remain the same persons. In

fact, the current matter of our bodies may have previously been part of the bodies of others, perhaps of multiple people, who lived in the past or live now concurrently with us. Let us, therefore, extend the previous body-duplication thought experiment in a way analogous to the thought experiment about the ship of Theseus. Specifically, suppose that, after your body has been duplicated and a new person has emerged in the new body, we use advanced technology to swap an oxygen atom from your brain with the corresponding 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. If this is so, then by gradually repeating 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. All of the particles of the two bodies have been swapped, yet the minds have not been swapped along with them. Hence, the fact that our bodies change matter continuously makes it very unlikely that the mind-body pairing is a pairing between a mind and a chunk of matter, contrary to what perhaps a panpsychist or an 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 arguments, as even the theoretical possibility of these thought experiments rules out physicalism and materialism. 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 the early stages of their 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, paired with 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 of which they consist; the vast majority of the atoms that made up my body as a baby have now been replaced⁸.

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 times (in the body-swapping thought experiment –

⁸While most cells in our bodies are replaced during our lifetimes, some cells are 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). Nevertheless, most of the particles that make up these cells do get regularly replaced. Their most stable component is the DNA, most of whose constituent atoms remain the same during a person's lifetime. However, any of the DNA's atoms may be replaced during routine repair processes (McKinnon, 2013).

but also partially in the common case that some of a body's matter previously belonged to one or more other bodies). 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/particularity of the self that experiences them.

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: its universal aspect and its particular aspect. But if *who* is paired with a body depends on neither that body's structure nor the particular matter it consists of, then it is something entirely independent of the body. Our "peripheral" or "universal" mental characteristics and traits – such as our memories, qualia, 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 or she is perceiving something red and round, is engaged in mathematical problem-solving, is remembering a certain friend, or is feeling happy (we already have such capabilities to a certain extent). In other words, the structure of a body and the physical events occurring within it are correlated with *how* the owner of the body experiences life (although these correlations are ultimately inexplicable, which constitutes 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 nine other similar brains, of people in a similar mental state to mine, are scanned, there is no way for me to tell which of the ten brains is mine solely from information contained in these scans, no matter how detailed they are.

The preceding arguments demonstrate that a person's particularity is physically inexplicable and cannot be derived or deduced from the properties or composition of their body – it is not supervenient on the body in the strong sense (Horgan, 1993). But the arguments demonstrate something more: that, strictly speaking, the particularity of the mind does not even supervene on the body in the *weak* sense – it is impossible for there to be a clear and definitive pairing rule between bodies and persons. On the one hand, any universal aspect of a body can be replicated in any number of other bodies, and cannot, therefore, serve to determine the pairing. On the other hand, the particular matter constituting a body could, in theory, be exchanged with that of another body without the respective persons following suit, which makes it equally incapable of serving as the basis for a pairing law. The identities of the owners of bodies are, therefore, *a priori*, entirely uncorrelatable with any aspect of these bodies. Of course, *a posteriori*, once a person comes into existence paired to a body, experience justifies us in regarding continuity of the body as empirical evidence for continuity of the self; yet, strictly speaking, "continuity of the body" is not a well-definable concept. We will now proceed to explore deeper arguments concerning 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 / first-person asymmetry

The previous thoughts about the pairing problem can serve as a warm-up to proceed to 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 according to which the self is explainable, deducible, producible or determinable solely by factors other than itself, be they physical or mental, runs into a hard problem.

We know very well that we are all different in many “peripheral” or “universal” respects – for example, we differ in our memories, our beliefs, our tendencies, our temperaments, our likes and dislikes, the way we think, our intellectual and emotional capacities, perhaps even the way we perceive (one person’s red may be another person’s green, or one person may lack the sense of colour, or even 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 exactly alike: each of us is a centre of existence, an origin of first-person perspective, of consciousness. Each of us *is*, in the deep sense of existence – *cogito, ergo sum*. This is the essential, defining characteristic of a person, a mind, a self, an ego; in this fundamental respect we are all the same – we are equally alive, equally existent. I am my own self in exactly the same way that everybody else is their own selves. 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, universal 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/universal 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 memories or character.

Although objectively, from a third-person perspective, all persons are symmetrical, i.e. exactly similar in their core, 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. I am my own self and not any other, I directly experience my own self and none other. Of course, intuition and reason lead one to believe that the situation concerning all others is symmetric to his⁹ 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 little 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/universal qualities can). Being myself is an all-or-nothing thing. There are no persons or things that are more “me” than others; no person or thing 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 our previous thought experiment, or my identical twin brother, is still a completely different person from me, inaccessible to me. He is 0% me). Likewise, there is an impassable chasm 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 my particular first-person perspective, my particularity, my unique defining essence, 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 having any qualitative similarity to me, as a particular centre of consciousness. Nor am I more special to them than any other person is, since all persons are exactly the same to all entities other than themselves. The same is true 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 specifically and not to someone else? The required “specialness” would refer to characteristics of my body that make it more affine to me – that is, to my particular, unique first-person perspective stripped from all my peripheral qualities¹⁰ – than to any other person. But since all persons are

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ In 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 constitute 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.

symmetrical, no such characteristic can exist: any special feature of a body would, a priori, relate equally to all persons, as all persons are symmetric from an external perspective. Consider two persons, say me and my brother. If I prefer classical music but my brother prefers folk music then this divergence in musical taste could be attributable to differences in the relevant structures in our brains. But such differences cannot determine that I should be paired to my current body and my brother to his. Why could it not be the other way around, with me paired to my brother's current body and he to mine? In that case, our musical preferences would be swapped along with our brains: I would prefer folk music, and he would prefer classical music. Arguably, all our peripheral characteristics – our memories, personalities, current thoughts, sensory perceptions, and so on – can be mapped to structures and processes within our bodies. But what about the most fundamental characteristic: *who* is paired with a body? Why is my body paired with me, and my brother's body paired with him? Since all selves are exactly similar in terms of their particularity, no particular physical feature of any body can be held responsible for giving rise to that particular self that is paired with it instead of any other (existing or possible) self. The pairing, therefore, cannot be explained in terms of physics, structure, function, or matter.

What is special about your body in relation to you, that determines that it is *you* who emerges from it rather than any of the infinite other possible selves? Reflection reveals that there can be nothing inherently special about it. No genetic sequence, neural architecture, molecular composition, appearance, shape, or any other physical attribute can have an a priori special connection to you over any other self; all such features are equally neutral with respect to all selves. The specialness of your body towards you does not – and cannot – derive from any of its physical or material characteristics. Your body is special to you *only because you happen to be paired with it*; it is an *a posteriori* specialness. There is no physical cause that can determine that this body shall be paired with you and not someone else.

I think that each of us would benefit from making the thought experiment of travelling back in time to before they existed, and wondering why when their body was formed it was them that came into existence. Billions of bodies were conceived before mine, and none of those conceptions had any bearing on my existence, even though there was 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 different in quality from anything else: my coming into existence. What would be the difference if it was someone else that came into being instead of me when my body was formed? It would have been a person exactly the same as me in every respect, except one: it would not be me but someone else. But this is a crucial difference only from the perspectives of the persons affected, me and that other person. For the rest of the universe there would be no detectable difference. There is an infinity of other possible persons, selves, that could have come into being instead of me paired to this body that I now have, and they are all indistinguishable from an external perspective, including that of the inanimate physical world. Another self having emerged

from my body instead of me would be something that has absolutely no consequence for the rest of the universe, causes nothing to it, and is completely undetectable, unknowable and inaccessible to it.

Even now, if suddenly I ceased to exist and another self came into existence to take my place and occupy my body, this event would be invisible, unknowable and inaccessible to the rest of the universe. It would have absolutely no impact, and leave no trace, on anything external, affecting only me and that other person privately and secretly. Of course, even I and that other person would not be cognisant of the replacement – myself because I would no longer exist, and the other person because he would have inherited my memories and think that it was him that existed all along. Yet that event would have had a dramatic effect on both me and that other person, even if it evaded our awareness, whereas for the rest of the universe the event would not only be unknowable but also of absolutely no consequence – it would be a non-event¹¹.

These thoughts highlight the impossibility of any *a priori* special relation between a self and external elements of the universe. As such elements we mostly considered material bodies and physical properties, which are the focus of physicalism and materialism – the currently prevailing worldviews. However, it is evident that such elements are not limited to the material realm; they could include anything, even other minds/persons. For instance, for the same reasons, 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, and other biological relatives – are entirely symmetric in their particularity; none has a particularity that is intrinsically closer or more related to mine compared to the particularities of other persons. Hence the reason why my parents begot me specifically, rather than any other possible self, cannot be grounded in any special connection between their selfhoods and mine, since all selfhoods are completely symmetric and no special relations can exist. The same holds for any purported micro-consciousnesses of the fundamental particles of matter that panpsychism believes to be constituting macroscopic persons like you and me.

To summarise, 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 solely with reference to factors 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?

¹¹Of course, if agent-causal libertarianism is true (McKenna and Pereboom, 2016) then my replacement by another self may eventually have indirect consequences for the rest of the universe, as the new self could use his free will differently than I would. Here, however, I am referring to the direct consequences of the replacement event, of which there would be none – the replacement event per se would cause nothing to the rest of the universe.

Particularity of persons and particularity of objects

Let me pause for a moment and make a comment on the notion of particularity. This essay highlights and explores the particularity of minds, drawing what I believe to be profound conclusions about their nature from it. This may raise the superficial objection that these conclusions must be false since every object is a particular, yet to conclude from this that, say, a chair, rock, or spoon is a simple substance is clearly absurd. However, it should be apparent from the preceding discussion that the profound particularity of persons and the trivial particularity of objects share very little in common, the latter being merely a faint shadow of the former.

Indeed, as previously noted, macroscopic objects are particulars only by human convention – based on their utility, function, uniformity of properties, appearance, and so forth, relative to us. In reality, they are mereological aggregates, like the ship of Theseus. What remains, therefore, of the material world to be considered true particulars are the fundamental particles of matter, discovered and studied by science, according to which they are indeed simple, indivisible, and not mereological aggregates. However, even these cannot ultimately qualify as true particulars.

Recall the scenario that I suddenly cease to exist and another self takes my place in my body. Although this change is undetectable, unknowable, and inaccessible from an exterior, third-person standpoint, nevertheless the question of whether this replacement occurred or not has an objective (albeit unknowable) answer; it is either true or false that the replacement occurred, because it is something that would affect two small corners of reality, me and that other self. But consider an analogous scenario about a fundamental particle. Suppose that we are observing such a particle, and someone asks whether it is possible that as we were observing it, it suddenly disappeared and at the same time another particle, exactly similar and in the exact same state, appeared in its place. In other words, the question is whether we are observing the same particle as a moment ago. I suggest that in this case, unlike with persons, the question is not one that has an objective but unknowable answer, but rather one that does not have an answer at all; it is a question without real meaning. This is because in the case of an impersonal material particle the third-person perspective is all there is – there is no first-person perspective to be affected, no “inside world” of the particle, only the outside world. All there is to a material particle is its effects on its surroundings, which are the same whether the particle is “the same one” as before or was “replaced by an identical one”. There is no substantive meaning that can be assigned to the statements “it is the same one” and “it has been replaced by an identical one” – try to come up with one if you find my claim hard to accept.

The title of this paragraph, “third-person symmetry and first-person asymmetry”, applies to persons but not to identical non-mental, impersonal objects, for which only “third-person symmetry” holds. Without a first-person perspective, objects lack the “first-person asymmetry” that gives persons their particularity. One might even argue that just as the particularity of objects is a faint shadow of the particularity of persons, so too is the

existence of objects merely a shadow of the existence of persons. If we consider a world devoid of consciousness and of the possibility of consciousness, the question of whether or not such a world truly exists is, again, meaningless. What could it even mean for such a world to “exist”? Perhaps it was this sort of intuition that inspired some thinkers like Leibniz and the Russellian panpsychists to propose that matter must have some intrinsic mental nature.

4 The composition problem

With the aid of the previous arguments, let us examine whether the self is something composite, that can be broken down into constituent elements, or something simple, lacking constituents, as Cartesian dualism contends. The mainstream view is that it is composite, a perspective shared by belief systems such as physicalism, property dualism and panpsychism. These frameworks posit that the self/mind arises from the combination of the material particles that constitute the body, though they differ on whether the properties of these particles are entirely physical. In the philosophy of religion, a theory that makes a similar assumption is traducianism, which holds that a new soul is formed from contributions from the souls of its parents. While these theories vary in their specifics, they share the assumption that minds are non-fundamental phenomena, explicable by the arrangement, properties, and interactions of underlying components.

However, it follows from the previous discussion that the most important aspect of a person, *who* someone is – in the sense of which particular self it is among an infinity of completely symmetric alternative possibilities – cannot be explained by reference to any constitutive elements, nor can it be *a priori* correlated with any such elements. As a self symmetric with all other selves, I do not have any *a priori* special relationship with any supposed constituents, be they physical particles, elemental consciousnesses, networks of neurons, parts of my parents’ souls etc., that could explain why, or determine that, they should give rise to me specifically rather than to some other self. Persons are therefore fundamentally simple, non-composite.

Let me repeat the thought experiment of going back to a time when I do not yet exist, to when everything in the world is foreign to me, devoid of my particularity or selfhood. Innumerable processes are occurring in that universe, and they are all isolated from my selfness. Nowhere in that universe can my selfness be found. Then, at some moment, certain events occur that bring together elements of that detached universe into a certain combination – a combination of material particles (and maybe their panpsychistic micro-consciousnesses) into a human embryo, a sequence of nucleotides creating a DNA structure, a pairing of parents, etc. These particular elements and their combination have nothing inherently special with regards to my selfness or qualitatively different compared to the innumerable other parts of the universe, but are, at that stage, as foreign to me as any other element, combination, or event; yet somehow, as a result of that combination, *I* – my unique first-person perspective into the world – come to be. But why? Why this specific combination and not some other one? Conversely, why did this particular

combination give rise to *me* and not to some other self, when all selves, including me, are exactly the same from the third-person perspective of the detached universe? No particular combination or event is any more affine to me than any other, nor am I more affine to it than any other self among the infinity of possibilities. Do the particular molecules that make up my body have anything more in common with me than with any other self? No, because all selves are the same. Does my DNA sequence or the structure of my brain possess some unique feature that relates specifically to *me* more so than to any other self? Again, no, because I am “I” in exactly the same way as anyone else is their own self, and our particularities cannot be externally distinguished. Do *I*, as a centre of consciousness, have something more in common with the persons who are my parents than with any other person? No, since all persons, including my parents, are equally “third” to me, directly inaccessible, as I am to them. The same holds for any hypothetical panpsychistic elemental consciousnesses: none is any more “me” than another; they are all the same to me, and all persons, including me, are the same to them.

Now, one may naively counter: yes, this particular combination *is* special and more affine to you. For instance, you have this type of temper, you are good at mathematics, you are an introvert, etc. and these traits can be found in your parents and are reflected in your genes and in your brain structure. However, the response would be that these traits are not part of my innermost self. To ask why *I* came to be as a result of a particular combining event I must consider my deepest self, divested of all these “accidental” properties of mine. I can certainly imagine having different traits instead of these – after all, my own experience of life has shown me that these traits do change as I age, yet in the deep sense I remain the same. And similarly, I can imagine the same combining event having resulted in another self coming into existence instead of me, with that other self possessing these very same accidental traits – having the same temper, being just as good at mathematics, being an introvert, and so on. It is these accidental traits of a person that correlate with the characteristics of the particular combination associated with that person’s coming into being, but not the deep self, the essence, the particularity of that person.

Suppose that a higher power miraculously erases all my memories of life, such that I no longer recognise my parents, or even myself in a photograph. Then, this higher power shows to me the whole universe at a past moment in time when I did not yet exist, and imparts to me complete knowledge of every single fact about the state of that past universe. As I observe that universe, I can tell that certain humans are being conceived or will be conceived. From my perfect knowledge of the structure of their bodies and the physical laws, I can tell that this person, when he grows up, will be very good at mathematics, that person will possess a musical talent, that person will have a predisposition towards addiction, and so on. Although not essential to the argument, we could take this a step further and suppose that the higher being grants me with unlimited intelligence and perfect understanding of any deterministic laws that govern the universe, so that I can, like Laplace’s demon, predict the future and deduce that this person will indeed become a great mathematician, and that person’s musical talent will be squandered, and that other person will struggle with addiction but manage to overcome

it. However, what will be impossible for me to deduce, despite my perfect knowledge of all third-person truths about that universe, is that a certain one of these persons is *me*.

Due to the complete symmetry between selves, any combination of elements of the external universe, regardless of their kind, is necessarily a priori equally relatable, or equally neutral, towards all of them. From any perspective external to the selves themselves – including the perspective of any purported constituents – two selves are exactly similar. This symmetry leaves nothing to anchor the pairing of a specific combination of constituents with a particular self, making such a pairing fundamentally indeterminable. There is nothing to grasp onto to allow that it is the combining of certain elements in a particular way that causes the (apparent) emergence of *that particular self* rather than another. Any manipulation and rearrangement of the alleged constituents does not inferentially bring us even the slightest step closer to a particular self, due to the complete symmetry between selves.

The assumption that the self is something composite is intuitively justifiable for someone who relies on empirical sensory observation to understand the world. After all, each self appears to be paired with a physical body and seems to come into existence when that body is formed by combining pre-existing material elements in a certain way. Furthermore, the mental processes occurring within that self and the physical processes occurring within the paired body are very tightly intertwined. Thus, it may appear natural to assume that the biological process producing the body also determines and explains the emergence of the self associated with it. Moreover, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, virtually all macroscopic objects we identify in the observable world are composite and conventional – that is, they are defined by human perspectives, as discussed in Section 1. This pervasive familiarity with composite and conventional objects may condition one to automatically assume that the self is such an object as well. However, as explained, these intuitions are false: all possible selves are fundamentally identical, and no combination of pre-existing elements can determine the emergence of one particular self over an infinite array of identical possibilities. That a self is a simple and independent entity is also intuitive, but realising it requires introspection rather than reliance on the sensory world. It demands looking inward rather than outward.

Consider another thought experiment: Suppose you possess the skills and resources to compose a human. You can design his/her body in any way you choose, down to the finest detail, to the last molecule. Let us suppose that you can thus determine all the “peripheral” or universal aspects of his/her mentality – memories, intellectual abilities, desires, emotional character, ethical mindset, artistic taste, mathematical aptitude, and so on – exploiting their correlation with physical aspects of his/her body¹². But, how could you determine *who* he/she will be, i.e. which self will be paired with that body (or “emerge” from it, if you think physicalism is true)? If the person who arises from your composing their body were to ask you: “How come you made *me* specifically rather

¹²Presumably, there is some functional similarity between the mental and physical correlates, although in my opinion this is not always possible, as I discuss in [Syrakos \(2023\)](#). See also the literature on the problem of intentionality.

than anyone else?”, or “Why did I not emerge from any other body in the world?”, what could you possibly answer? It would be constructive to pause for a moment and try to think of possible answers. Is the particular self determined through some gene? Or, by connecting certain neurons in a certain way? Or, perhaps by selecting which particular carbon or oxygen atoms to use in composing the body? I think that none of these answers is plausible. All possible selves – infinitely many of them – are exactly similar, completely symmetric, having no difference from a third-person perspective that could be correlated to some bodily feature. No matter how a body is, all infinitely many possible selves are a priori equally associatable with it. The lack of objective difference between selves makes it impossible to establish a correlation¹³ (let alone a derivation) from particular bodily characteristics, such as genetic sequence, neuron connectivity, or molecular identity, to a particular self. Hence, although you can determine everything about the body, you cannot determine the most important aspect of the person paired with it: who that person is.

Or, let us reverse the roles, placing you as the created person instead of the engineer. Thinking as the engineer highlights the impossibility of externally determining a particular person from among an infinity of possible persons all of whom are identical from an external perspective. Thinking as the created person highlights that from his/her own perspective the creation event is so singular and produces something so foreign to the external universe that it seems inconceivable for the singularity that is him/herself to be produced and determined by that universe. If I examine every little corner of the universe, nowhere else will I find *me*, my selfhood, my unique essence that distinguishes me from everything else, my first-person perspective, or anything having even the slightest trace of it, but within my own self alone. This “me-ness”, my selfhood, my first-person perspective, is a singularity that is all-or-nothing – it is not something that can be built up gradually through construction. Its boundary with the rest of the universe is discontinuous. And not only is it singular, but it is completely inaccessible to the rest of the universe. By its very nature, it is something entirely private to me alone. How, then, could the engineer know *you*, your unique essence, your particularity, in order to create you, specifically? This is impossible, as this unique essence of you, your particularity, is knowable by you alone, and is something that the rest of the universe is devoid of, it is inaccessible to it. Only from your perspective can what is particular to you be discerned; and yet that

¹³For the mathematically inclined, here is an interesting consideration. The idea of there being some rule or law of correlation or mapping between the set of possible physical bodies and the set of possible selves encounters some serious problems. Firstly, while the set of possible physical bodies, vast though it may be, is finite, that of possible selves is infinite. There would, therefore, be an infinite number of possible selves not mapped to any body. But this does not make sense since those selves are in no way different than the ones who do get mapped. Moreover, for it to be possible to establish a mapping between two sets, the elements of each set must be identifiable. That is, they must possess properties that distinguish them from one another, allowing them to be enumerated or at least located within their set relative to the other elements through relationships such as “greater than”. In mathematics, for example, this identifiability allows the various sets of numbers, whether countable (e.g. integers or rationals) or uncountable (e.g. reals) to constitute one end of a mapping. Selves, on the other hand, lack any external distinguishing feature or property and are thus entirely indistinguishable from one another from an external perspective. Consequently, it is impossible to identify a particular self within the set of all possible selves (as discussed further in Section 5). This absence of identifiability renders it impossible to establish a correlation or mapping between the set of all possible selves and any other set of elements.

perspective does not exist prior to your creation. So, how could you be created by a universe to whose perspective you are completely invisible and inaccessible?

A problem similar to the present “composition problem”, acknowledged in panpsychism, is the so-called “combination problem” (Chalmers, 2017), which touches on part of the issue discussed here, although it does not fully capture its scope. Among its variations, the one most relevant to the present discussion is William James’ “subject-summing problem” (James, 1890), where “subject” refers to what we have called mind, person or self in the present paper (macro-subject), as well as to the elemental consciousnesses of panpsychism (micro-subjects). The subject-summing problem argues that the aggregation of multiple selves does not necessitate the formation of a new self (and therefore the aggregation of the micro-consciousnesses of the particles that constitute a body does not necessitate the emergence of the macro-consciousness paired with that body). The combination problem fails to fully grasp the problem’s depth as it does not occur to it to ask the critical question: *who* will the aggregate self/subject be, and why *him* among an infinite number of identical possibilities. According to the arguments presented here, the issue is not merely that the “aggregation” of selves (whatever that might mean, given that selves lack spatial properties) does not necessitate the formation of a new self, but that a self could not possibly be an aggregation of selves. These constituent selves share no more in common with their purported aggregate self than with any other self. To each “constituent” self, all other selves, including the supposed aggregate, are equally foreign and inaccessible.

The exact same can be said of traducianism. Combining parts of the parents’ selves, or souls, is completely implausible as a mechanism for producing the descended person. Furthermore, selves are all-or-nothing, lacking parts that could be inherited by the descended self. The essences of the parent selves are their own individual particularities, both of which are entirely absent from the child self, who has his own, unique particularity and perspective, symmetric with that of all other persons equally. More generally, there does not appear to be any explanatory or functional purpose that could be served by the transfer of whatever immaterial thing it is that traducianism posits as being propagated from the parents to the child.

I believe that the foregoing arguments reveal that the particularity of a self (which I am tempted to consider as one and the same with the self itself – such is the self’s nature) is necessarily independent of any external elements of the world, whether physical or otherwise. In philosophical jargon, the self does not supervene on any such elements (Horgan, 1993). It is not supervenient in the strong sense because the sameness of selves precludes answering the “who” question in terms of composition, structure, etc. Of course, selves are singularly different from each other in a crucial sense, but this difference, which is the essence of each self, is visible, accessible, palpable only from *within* that self. It is something completely private. To the rest of the universe, it is alien and detached, inaccessible and unknowable to any external perspective. The coming into existence of a self brings something completely new into the universe: the particularity of that self, his/her first-person perspective, an entirely new, unique, inaccessible, private inner

world, unrelated to anything else (unlike in emergence, where nothing truly new comes into existence, only seemingly new). This makes it even more impossible that the self could be explained in terms of other elements of the universe. Moreover, the self is not supervenient on external elements even in the weak sense, because any external aspect of the world to which a self seems to be related is either duplicable and therefore relatable to multiple (theoretically infinite) selves at once (as in the case of bodily structure), or exchangeable between selves (as in the case of the particular matter of the body), as discussed in Section 2.

To me, this introspective insight into the self makes it evident that the core – the identity, particularity, or essence – of each individual self is entirely independent of anything else in the universe. Thus, at their core, selves are not composite but simple, fundamental, and independent substances, as Descartes posited. I would go as far as to say that the self is the *quintessential simple substance*. This conclusion may seem scandalous to those fully immersed in the modern trend of interpreting all aspects of reality through a scientific-physicalist lens. After all, one might ask, if the mind and body are ultimately independent of each other, why are there correlations between the activities of a person’s mind and the physics of their body? In my opinion, the answer to this question is not scientific (as the hard problems of consciousness and intentionality highlight) but instead lies, at the deepest level, in *purpose* – a type of causation that is ultimately mental in nature and which science has sought to exorcise in favour of purposeless mechanistic explanations. And admittedly, science was justified and indeed correct to do so for most levels of reality – but not so for the most fundamental level. The idea that reality has a purpose is intuitive to those who, through introspection, perceive the mind as more fundamental than physics. The mechanistic and impersonal surface layer of reality serves to conceal the Mind who is its ultimate source. Interestingly, judging from the prevalence of materialist views within the philosophical debates about the nature of minds and free will, this concealment is mirrored in the way we, finite minds, are also hidden behind the mechanistic nature of our observable bodies!

5 The creation problem

It is natural to take a further step. Let us grant that a self is a simple substance. How, then, is it brought into existence? It is impossible that things external to it determine its existence, since the unique, defining aspect of a self is private and entirely inaccessible to anything external. From any external perspective, all possible selves – infinitely many – 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.

Granting that the self is a simple substance and, therefore, cannot be “engineered” into existence, imagine that, rather than being an “engineer” of persons, you are a *creator* of persons – not in the sense of composition, but in the sense of *creation ex nihilo*: you have been bestowed with the mysterious power to create any person you wish with a mere

snap of your fingers. At first glance, this may sound unambiguous, but on reflection, what does “any person you wish” mean? How would you go about selecting a particular person that does not exist?

To do so, you would have to search through a pool of *infinite possible selves*, all of whom are indistinguishable from your perspective. Not only do you lack direct access to any of them, but you lack even indirect access, as they do not exist. With existing persons, while we also lack direct access to them, we at least have indirect access: we can see their bodies, hear their voices, etc. – we can track them by following the continuity of their trail of effects on the material world, which is accessible to our senses. For non-existing persons, however, none of this is available. They are entirely beyond reach. So, on one hand, there are infinitely many possibilities to choose from; and on the other hand, every single one of these possibilities is utterly inaccessible and inconceivable.

Imagine, then, that you decide to exercise the power that was bestowed upon you. How would you go about doing it? Presumably, you would think in your mind about the kind of person you want to create – perhaps intelligent, emotional, curious and so on (the peripheral/universal qualities). But could you really perceive in your mind *who* that person would be? Some serious reflection should reveal that the answer is undoubtedly “no”. You can imagine being that person, but this is merely projecting your own self onto him/her. It is an illusion of direct access, not real direct access – it is still essentially you, not that other person. Therefore, after you have carefully thought and decided about how you want the new person to be, and snapped your fingers to bring him or her into existence, do you think you could answer his/her 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 decided or determined that it be specifically him/her that was to be created rather than some other person among an infinity of indistinguishable (from your perspective) possibilities. Therefore, the crucial task, the selection or determination of that particular self, was not performed 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 otherwise), for the same reasons that it cannot be you. And it could not be an inanimate material or physical factor, as all of these are equally neutral towards all infinite possible selves.

To look at this argument from the other side, imagine once again going back to a time before you existed, and imagine a universe devoid of you – a universe to which you are inaccessible, detached. You are in a “third-person” relationship with everything in it. How, then, could that universe produce *you* specifically, if it has no access to your identifying essence, your particularity? The universe cannot distinguish you from any of the other, infinite in number, possible persons who might exist. There is, of course, a crucial difference between any two individual selves, but it is a difference *only from the first-person perspectives of these two selves*. From the third-person perspective of the rest of the world, there is no difference at all. What distinguishes you from the rest of the universe is visible only from your unique first-person perspective (or, one could say, *is* your

unique first-person perspective). But, prior to your existence, this perspective does not exist anywhere in the universe. From the universe's own third-person perspective you are completely invisible and indiscernible. So, nobody and nothing can "see" you or discern you to single you out and bring you into existence. To do so, it would require access to your particularity – the very core of your existence – but this is something completely beyond its reach, something accessible to you alone. The essential 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 other persons and from everything else in the universe – can only be known from within him/herself. It can be found nowhere else in the universe but within that person. This uniqueness is the person's identity, particularity, essence, who he/she is. This is the quintessential kind of identity. Some regard personal identity as the ensemble of one's peripheral characteristics, including character and memory, which change over time 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, mutable aspects of a person rather than to his/her unchanging core. For instance, if we assume that one's peripheral mental state is entirely mapped onto the physical structure of his/her body, then according to this more superficial definition of identity, the body-duplicates in the thought experiment of section 2.1 are the same person. Yet this is clearly not the case, as anyone can appreciate by imagining being one of them. By contrast, the deeper, fundamental, quintessential identity that is the subject of this paper is not an abstract concept or convention but is objectively real and known by experience through introspective acquaintance. As argued in Section 1, all people have an innate 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 though they were others; they believe 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 mistakes and wrongdoings; they plan for their futures, acting with the implicit conviction that they themselves – not others – will experience the outcomes of those plans; and so on. This kind of identity belongs exclusively to persons – in fact, it is what defines a person. The identities of all other things are only relative, subjective.

This identity of mine is a unique place in all of reality reserved only for me. It remains the same through any change in peripheral qualities, ageing, sleeping, even death. Even if I ceased to exist, my first-person perspective would still remain inaccessible to anyone else; and any person that was brought into existence thenceforth would either be someone else, with their own unique first-person perspective and identity, disjoint from what mine was, who 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 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 essential ingredient for creating a person. It is the very core of a person's being. Yet this ingredient exists nowhere in the universe but within that person him/herself. Hence, prior to that person's existence, this core ingredient also does not exist – and not only does it not exist but it cannot even be conceived or thought of; it is entirely beyond reach. This makes it impossible for a self to be brought into existence solely by causes external to him. I could not have been brought into existence solely by the action of factors or agents that are outside of me and whose perspective is detached from my own and are therefore isolated from my existence. The world outside of me cannot possibly know me in order to select or point to *me*, specifically, before I existed, and bring me into being, because my essence, my particularity, what distinguishes me from everything else, is entirely private to me and unknowable and inaccessible to anyone and anything else.

Hence, any self that is not currently part of the universe is impossible to be brought into it. And yet I now exist, even though there was apparently a time when I did not. How can these be both true?

5.1 Solutions to the problem

Let us reiterate. The creation of something that did not previously exist is necessarily an event determined by pre-existing elements of the universe, while obviously the created entity itself cannot contribute to its own creation (as it does not yet exist). In the case of a self, the core of his essence is his particularity. This particularity is inaccessible from outside that self, isolated from the universe by the impenetrable barrier of privateness. It is not even identifiable: from an external perspective, it is indistinguishable from the particularities of the infinity of other possible selves. Thus, a self is indeterminate by any external means, including everything available prior to his/her creation. Outside of him, there is nothing in the universe that can point to him specifically. Before I existed, there was the *potential* for my existence, but this potential transcended the reach of the existing universe; it was sequestered from it. This renders the creation of a self impossible. How a self comes into existence is a hard problem for any theory about the mind, not just physicalism.

One solution to this problem might be that persons/selves are uncreated, and have existed eternally. This idea is reminiscent of conservation principles in physics, and aligns with beliefs about reincarnation (metempsychosis) such as those held by Pythagoras, Plato, and several prominent Eastern religions. Of course, this solution does not fully satisfy an inquiring mind, as it leaves unanswered the question of an ultimate source of persons – a source that may transcend time, if time is assumed to have no beginning. But, then again, any theory that attempts to explain reality is bound to run into the problem of recursion: when something is explained in terms of something else, the question naturally arises of how that “something else” is itself explained. Therefore, it seems inevitable that the existence of some things is inexplicable, and perhaps selves are such things.

The “uncreated persons” solution also has to face the problem of the impossibility of having traversed 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 an infinite series of events, through infinite equal intervals of time (e.g. seconds, hours or millennia), to arrive at the present moment. But this does not seem logically possible, or even intelligible. For instance, it means that I could, if I wanted to, have recited all infinitely many natural numbers by now, even if I recited just one 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. Consider, for example: How long ago did I recite the number 2024? Or, what was the last number I recited 10 years ago? These questions ought to have answers, but if it is assumed that I began counting infinitely long ago, they do not. Such contradictions illustrate the unintelligibility of having traversed an infinite temporal sequence.

Personally, I am not in favour of the proposed solution of eternal existence. However, it seems to me that the creation problem, a case in which something seemingly impossible is nonetheless true, serves as a humbling reminder of the limits of our ability to comprehend reality. It shows that we should not place absolute trust in the reach of our rationality or elevate it to the position of ultimate judge¹⁴. Regardless of what we assume to be the foundation of reality – whether it is God, physics, or something else – the problem of how a self comes into existence defies a purely logical resolution. Rather, it must unavoidably be admitted that the coming into existence of every single self/mind is something inexplicable and miraculous.

Contemplations such as these, along with empirical introspective acquaintance with other aspects of the nature of persons, reveal convincingly that every single person has infinite value. To me, a single person is incomparably more valuable than the entirety of the vast, impersonal material universe. It is for this reason that I believe the foundation and source of all reality to be a Mind, a Person – “God” in religious terminology¹⁵ – rather than something impersonal, such as time, space, energy, or fundamental particles¹⁶. This Mind shares certain similarities with us, but it also completely transcends us in ways that are beyond our comprehension. Being the source of everything, nothing is impossible for this Mind, not even the creation of persons out of nothing. The fact that He¹⁷ does bring

¹⁴Such problems expose the limited, if existent at all, value of philosophical arguments that rely on the notion of “possible worlds”.

¹⁵The reader may at this point become concerned that my views on the nature of persons are motivated by my religious beliefs. However, while I am indeed a Christian, my formation of these philosophical views pre-dates my embrace of Christianity, and in fact 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 infinite value of persons.

¹⁶Note that, as we analyse reality down to more fundamental levels, we will inevitably 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 hold that this most fundamental level consists of impersonal, lifeless, non-conscious primitive elements, while life/consciousness arise only at much higher, derivative levels. In my view, this makes their reality ultimately nihilistic. However, I think that the arguments discussed in this paper make a compelling case that minds are far more fundamental than physicalists assume. In light of these arguments, the idea that a Mind – rather than something impersonal – is the foundation and origin of all reality is much more rational and robust than physicalists typically acknowledge.

¹⁷I refer to God in masculine gender, as is customary, but I do not consider him to have a gender (nor

persons into existence means that He has *direct access* to each one of us, in a mysterious way that transcends our epistemic capacity. Without such access, He would be like the creator in our earlier thought experiment: unable to determine *who* the person brought 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 me as well, in a way that transcends our understanding¹⁸. When He created me he somehow knew me even before I existed, and selected me, specifically, from an infinite pool of potential persons. Therefore, no one is ever really alone. Moreover, in the relationships between us finite persons, God is the ultimate connection that transcends the privateness barrier and indirectly links us to one another as well.

6 Epilogue

This essay explored thoughts whose core occurred to me at a young age, decades before I even became aware that there is such a thing as the philosophy of mind. At the age of 13 or 14, the “creation” problem struck me as I wondered why I have the parents that I do (being a product of parents, or a composed product in general, implies determinism, which I found deeply depressing) and engaged in the thought experiment of going back in time to before I existed to find the answer. My initial reaction to the realisation of this problem was to assume that all persons are uncreated and have existed eternally¹⁹.

do I consider finite persons to have a gender, at the most fundamental level – see footnote 9).

¹⁸Some think that the privateness barrier is impossible to penetrate even for God (Knox, 1995; Zagzebski, 2016). For example, Zagzebski (2016) suggests that, due to this barrier, God empathises with us in a manner similar to how we empathise with one another by imagining ourselves in another’s place or, more precisely, by reproducing someone’s state of consciousness within His own. However, what I propose is fundamentally different: that God has *direct access* to each self. He does not merely know what it is *like* to be me; He knows what it is to be me, literally and absolutely. Furthermore, I believe that attempting to comprehend the Mind of God and imagining what it is like to be Him are completely futile endeavours, as he transcends everything. In fact, I think that our current mental faculties are insufficient to grasp even what our own state of being will be in the afterlife, let alone that of God.

¹⁹At that time, I thought that there is only one kind of person – that there is no transcendent Person, no God. In that sense, I could, therefore, be characterised as “atheist”, although I was never a physicalist or materialist – these ideas were always appalling to me. I developed the worldview that, for some unknown reason, we must pass through this ephemeral life in a limited form, but in the true life beyond – an immaterial realm where we have always existed and will continue to exist after our fleeting journey through this world – we exist in a higher, perfect form, our true state, with the full truth unveiled to us. I am disclosing these details about my personal journey in this epilogue to provide context for my perspective because, beyond the substance of the debate over the nature of minds – whether they are independent substances or not – the issue of the *motivation* that drives a person to adopt a strong position in either camp is a very intriguing and important subject in its own right. I would argue that it even has implications for the question of the nature of persons itself: why someone would *want* to believe or reject that he/she is an independent substance is not independent of what our true nature actually is. This topic does not seem to have drawn attention, with the philosophers’ motivations and desires usually hidden behind the presentation of their arguments as driven by rationality and objectiveness. A few philosophers have explicitly expressed their desire for physicalism to be true, some of whom I cite in (Syrakos, 2023). My encounter with such views was shocking to me as, while I can understand someone unwillingly accepting physicalism because they think that there is compelling evidence for it, actively wishing for physicalism to be true over dualism is unfathomable to me.

However, at age 16, after reading the New Testament, I converted to Christianity and came to conclude that our faculty of reason is limited and what seems impossible to us is possible for God, viewing my own coming into being as evidence of this. Furthermore, from a moral perspective, my introspective perception was, as it continues to be, that the worth of each individual person is so immense that it seems only fitting that God has a special direct, first-person connection with each of us, rooted in love; and this kind of God I found worth believing in. The nature of persons transcends that of the inanimate physical world to such an immeasurable degree that the foundation and source of all reality must itself have the attributes of a Person. It is fitting, then, that the purpose of the inanimate world is to be subservient to the development of finite persons, for the fulfilment of each person's intended end, which is likeness to the Prototype and loving communion with others. From my perspective, what is truly existent in all of reality are persons, selves, whereas the vast inanimate universe has only a relative existence.

It seems natural that many people throughout the ages would have contemplated similar thoughts (as evidenced by theories of the afterlife, transmigration, and related concepts), as these ideas pertain to the very core of our existence. Such contemplations do not require scientific expertise, expensive laboratory equipment, or even formal philosophical training (although, the ability to articulate them requires higher education and great skill); everyone's own self is like an open book to them to explore. As evidence of this I mentioned my own personal journey from a young age. Perhaps youth is even an advantage, as it takes fewer aspects of life for granted and approaches it with greater curiosity and openness to exploring ideas and hypotheses about it²⁰. Nevertheless, when I did find out about the academic discipline of the philosophy of mind and began to familiarise myself with it, I was very surprised to discover that it is almost completely oblivious to the issues and questions considered in this paper, despite their crucial importance for understanding our own nature and their utmost existential significance. Instead, the field appears captivated by questions concerning what I have termed the "peripheral" or "universal" aspects of consciousness, i.e. aspects of the mind considered in abstraction from the underlying particular possessor of consciousness. Yet all the mystery and wonder reside 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 that of the nature of the self who exhibits these mental properties. The exclusive focus on

²⁰For young people, life is still new and uncharted, allowing them to interpret it with greater freedom compared to older people whose worldview may have substantially solidified under the influence of the and prevailing perspectives and beliefs of the society in which they have lived. Moreover, their self-image has yet to solidify – they may perceive their body, appearance, physical and mental abilities, family, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on, not as inherent parts of themselves but as attributes externally assigned to them by unknown factors or chance. Consequently, it is natural for them to wonder why they possess these particular characteristics – or, indeed, why they exist at all. The choices have been made for them; they had no say in the matter. As people age, however, they become accustomed to these peripheral aspects of themselves and begin to take them for granted, so that such questions are less likely to cross their minds. Moreover, unlike the young, older individuals have usually made significant contributions to the shaping of the circumstances of their own lives through personal choices and efforts. As a result, they are more inclined to accept or endorse what they have evolved into as their identity.

these secondary issues obscures the pathway to understanding the true nature of selves.

Even Descartes, the father of modern dualism, did not address the subject of personal particularity, and while his intuition was powerful, his arguments for the mind being a simple substance are, admittedly, not as strong. So, how can this apparent lack of recognition or interest in the topic be explained? Given that the questions explored here arise naturally from the innate sense of personal particularity shared by all, it is likely that, among the billions of people who have ever lived, similar thoughts did occur to many. However, perhaps they lacked the skill to organise them and consolidate them into structured arguments, or their personal circumstances did not allow them the opportunity to share them publicly, or, if they did share them, to achieve any meaningful reach. Perhaps they simply took these ideas for granted, assuming them to be evident to everyone and seeing no point in communicating them. Moreover, in academic philosophy, as in all fields, dominant currents often emerge that discourage exploration of alternative directions or perspectives, which appears to be the case at present. Hopefully, this paper will make a small but impactful contribution towards the appreciation and understanding of the wonder that is personal existence. Nevertheless, I must admit that I find the lack of recorded acknowledgement of these fundamental issues to be quite puzzling.

Fortunately, there is at least one academic philosopher (the only one I could find) who did explore these ideas and publicised them, albeit without achieving hitherto any meaningful reach: John Knox, a professor of philosophy at Drew University. My initial literature review for the original draft of this paper was based mostly on the philosophy of mind, which exhibits more insight compared to the philosophy of persons (which mostly treats the person as a conventional notion) by acknowledging the “hard problems” of consciousness. However, during a more meticulous review of the philosophy of persons, lately I came across a cursory discussion of the independence of personal identity from the physical world along lines similar to those explored here, by Richard Swinburne (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 1984, pp. 25–26). Swinburne attributes this idea to a paper by John Knox titled “Can the self survive the death of its mind?” (Knox, 1969), which I therefore read as well. The title of Knox’s paper may sound strange, but he used the term “mind” to refer to what I have called “peripheral” or “universal” mental qualities – mental phenomena considered in abstraction from the self that experiences them. Hence, the title could be rephrased as: “Can the self exist in a state devoid of consciousness?” It is a remarkable work that addresses many of the same issues discussed here, and I very strongly recommend it to anyone who is interested in them. Unfortunately, it has not attracted attention and remains largely forgotten (only 14 citations on Google Scholar, 4 on Scopus, at the time of writing). Several years later, Knox published another remarkable paper (which received even less attention) which essentially discusses the creation problem (Knox, 1995). The conclusion he drew in response to that problem was that persons have existed eternally, deeming it impossible for the privateness barrier not to apply to God. To me, however, the idea that the source of all reality – God – somehow does not have access to parts of this reality but is separated from them by impenetrable barriers is unthinkable. Whatever exists, it is through God that it has its existence.

To summarise, each of us is something particular, not a universal. And the particularity of each one of us, which is inextricably tied to our nature and essence, is independent from anything else in the universe – it is something unique, non-duplicable, that can be found in us alone. 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 therefore inexplicable and miraculous. Despite the immense existential implications of these truths, the philosophy of mind seems uninterested and more intrigued with the peripheral mental properties abstracted from their possessor, considered as universals. And the philosophy of persons seems completely blind to the ontological particularity of the self, inventing artificial notions of particularity based on psychological or material continuity. In response, and as a fitting way to close this paper, we can repeat Knox’s insightful comments (noting that he uses “mind” in the sense of peripheral mental state):

“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? ... [T]he feeling of wonderment or bewilderment is occasioned ... by one’s awareness of a radical and inexplicable disconnectedness of oneself from one’s environment. One is conscious of a transparent barrier, as it were, inside of which the self is everywhere, and outside of which no trace of the self is to be found.” (Knox (1969, p. 92–93)).

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