

Holistic and Separate Entities

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What is a human being? Are they one part, or more? Are they a holistic system or are they a machine with various components that function independently? These two arguments are not new to philosophy and are at the core of what separates human beings from the rest of the natural world.

Roderick Chisholm and Dean Zimmerman argue against the “the thesis that we are *entia successiva*—‘successive entities’, things that gain and lose parts over time” (Zimmerman 493). Chisholm’s reasoning for this is that “the body that persists through time—the one I have been carrying with me, so to speak—is an *ens successivum*”. The primary concept is that the human is always in a perpetual stage of internal development, “that is to say, it is an entity made up of different things at different times. The set of things that make it up today is not identical with the set of things that made it up yesterday or with the set of things that made it up the day before” (Chisholm). This is very different from a piece of rock. That rock has been changed by outside factors such as pressure, weathering, erosion, heating, and melting—but those are all outside factors, not internal factors.

Humans (and potentially other living organisms) are unique in this perpetual internal development. If non-living matter changes, it is external factors causing those changes to occur—a rock is not perpetually replacing the atoms it is constructed from. Despite this difference between living and non-living matter, humans are merely developing, they are not transforming into something else. What does this development say of the mind? Chisholm continues

that an *ens successivum* has different ‘stand-ins’ at different times and that these stand-ins do duty for the successive entity at the different times. Thus the thing that does duty for my body today is other than the thing that did duty for it yesterday and other than the thing that will do duty for it tomorrow (Chisholm).

The critical component separating human beings from other forms of living and non-living matter is the lack of change despite the constant cellular revolution taking place. This body continuum varies wildly: eyebrows are renewed every 64 days, the skin is completely replaced over a period of 7-10 years, 1% of heart cells turnover per year, the taste buds are replaced every 10 days, yet the cells in the cortex of the brain are not renewed (Hamzelou).

Does this mean that the human being is *entia successiva*? Chisholm moves beyond the physical body to the mind, asking:

Am I an entity such that different things do duty for me at different days? Is it one thing that does my feeling depressed for me today and another thing that did it yesterday and still another thing that will do it tomorrow? If I happen to be feeling sad, then, surely, there is no other thing that is doing my feeling sad for me. We must reject the view that persons are thus *entia successive*. (Chisholm 1979)

At a minimum, Chisholm suggests that the mind and body are semi-permanent and that bodily organs are not independent. Zimmerman further develops Chisholm's argument into two primary premises:

#### **Premise 1**

If I am a thing that gains or loses parts, such as a brain or human body; then, each time I undergo a change of parts, there is another thing where I am, a mass of matter distinct from myself but having all the same intrinsic characteristics—e.g. size, shape, mass, and even mental states, like feeling sad. (Zimmerman 494)

The argument here is that despite the number of bodily changes that may take place, that particular human being is still that human being. Like the brain cortex cells, the human being is semi-permanent. There is a major “journey” component to this type of development. An individual may change physically: a child grows into an adult over a period of decades, that is

human development. Even though this a big change, they are still fundamentally the same individual. They may develop physical changes such as a darkening of the hair and becoming taller but that is a slow physical change. Their systems of thought and decision-making will develop as well but there are intrinsic characteristics that they draw from—it is not an instantaneous change. Similar occurrences occur as humans move into old age—the hair may grow white and muscle mass will be low, but still, that human being is that human being regardless of these changes. This argument is further developed in the holistic relationship between the mind and body in Premise 2.

### **Premise 2**

But it is false that, where I am, there is something else with all the same intrinsic characteristics; there is only one thing here that feels sad, not two. So I am neither a brain nor a human organism nor any other thing that changes parts—and therefore no version of sensible materialism can be true. (495)

This second premise asserts that despite the various number of components a human being is constructed of, there is a single process going. The example Zimmerman presents here is that the whole human is feeling sad, not the brain, or the arm, or the face, and etc. The mind and body are a holistic system and the parts cannot share an experience separately but only as a single being.

Zimmerman and Chisholm both appear to accept this holistic system with Zimmerman concluding that

the only versions of materialism left are such outlandish theses as that I am a tiny particle lodged in my brain; or that I am some matter that is sad right now but that was and will soon be a non-conscious scattered thing, since the matter now in my body was spread throughout the biosphere and will soon be again. If materialism really is more plausible than dualism, then one of the premisses [sic] of this argument must be false. (495)

The strongest objection to dualism accepted by Zimmerman is the notion of “temporal parts”, or that something exists “and only then; and for each longer interval of time, there is a distinct extended temporal part of the object that exists just during that period and is composed of all the instantaneous temporal parts falling within the interval” (498). By separating the human experience into physical components, the materialist attempts to dissect the dualist argument.

### **Temporal Parts**

The body has various components: the brain, the nervous system, the heart, the face, the eyes, the hands, the arms, the legs, and etc. The temporal parts materialist argues that that these various components are what experiences sensations—from mental states of emotion to physical sensations of pain. The temporal element factor is “something that exists then and only then; and for each longer interval of time, there is a distinct extended temporal part of the object that exists just during that period and is composed of all the instantaneous temporal parts falling within the interval” (498). This temporary existence means that experience is happening in rapid succession.

If you burn your hand while grabbing a hot cast-iron pan, the temporal parts argument is that you will have three successive experiences that all exist separately but follow this order: the hand will experience the pain, followed by the nervous system which will turn the burning sensation into a form that is communicated the brain. Once that signal reaches the brain, the person will know that their hand is being burned and can remove their hand from the hot pan, preventing further burning sensations. You did not experience the burning sensation, only your hand did.

The dualist (such as Chisholm or Zimmerman) would argue that you as a complete individual experienced the burning sensation at the same time. The hand, nervous system, and brain had a simultaneous experience. You as a complete individual had the whole experience, it is

not possible to separate out various components of the experience. There may have been a series of reactions.

The temporal parts argument fails here because the human function cannot be broken down as if it were machine. The entire mind and body function as a single unit. The mind controls the body—the hands cannot move unless the brain gives them some form of command. It seems very possible that the body cannot function without a functional mind—the ultimate natural example of this is dementia: the breaking down of neurons in the brain can cause the loss of fine motor skills even if there is nothing physically wrong with the hands. Therefore, the materialist must concede defeat as the mind and body that forms a human cannot be separated out as if they were the successive entities of a machine.

Works Cited

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