

Dualism and Human Duplication

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If there were a machine that could perfectly duplicate any physical thing, could it perfectly duplicate a human? Peter van Inwagen thinks your intuition will be yes, and he claims that that intuition should lead you to prefer physicalism (the view that human persons are physical things) over dualism (the view that human persons are non-physical things and are merely “attached” in some way to physical things which serve as their bodies). Putting aside the question of whether it is wise to put any trust in one's intuitions in this case, I want to argue that even if we were to have undeniable confirmation that Van Inwagen's intuition were correct, this confirmation would provide almost no evidence against dualism.

First let us set up the experiment in detail. Van Inwagen describes the hypothetical device like this:

The duplicating machine consists of two chambers connected by an impressive mass of science-fictional gadgetry. If you place any physical object inside one of the chambers and press the big red button, a perfect physical duplicate of the object appears in the other chamber. The notion of a perfect physical duplicate may be explained as follows. A physical thing is composed entirely of quarks and electrons. A perfect physical duplicate of the physical thing x is a thing composed entirely of quarks and electrons arranged in the same way in relation to one another as the quarks and electrons composing x are, and each of the quarks and electrons composing a perfect physical duplicate of x will be in the same physical state as the corresponding particle in x .¹

He goes on to assure us that an object and a duplicate of that object created by the machine would thus be completely indistinguishable, regardless of what means we might conceive of to try to determine which was the original (aside, of course, from simply observing which one was in the “in” tray and which one was in the “out” tray). After easing us into the discussion by asking what we believe would happen should we attempt to have the machine perform its function on a mouse, he raises the key issue: what outcome should be expected if the machine is used on a human? Van Inwagen expects the machine to perfectly duplicate the human – to produce a duplicate with no physical or mental differences whatsoever from the original – and he

1 Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics, Third Edition* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2009), pp. 248.

makes the bold claim that “[i]f this were indeed the outcome of running [some person] through the duplicating machine, dualism would be effectively refuted.”² This, I think, is an egregious overstatement. For the remainder of this paper, imagine with me that the experiment has been performed and the outcome was as Van Inwagen predicts. A reasonable defense of dualism can still be made.

This defense must consist of an explanation of why the operation of a machine whose only function is to duplicate physical things also resulted in the duplication of a non-physical thing. Van Inwagen himself is quick to point out that of course some such explanation, such as “whenever a human body is perfectly duplicated, God creates a perfect duplicate of the non-physical person who had been interacting with the original body and so arranges matters that the duplicate person is in interaction with the duplicate body,” can be easily concocted, but he asserts that “this would be a desperate move.”³ Van Inwagen does not spell out exactly what he believes is wrong with using such an explanation. Perhaps partly there is a straightforward appeal to Occam's razor: considering the duplication experiment in isolation, “physicalism is true” is certainly a far simpler explanation than the one just given. This observation would be valid, and does provide some support for physicalism, but few dualists are likely to be swayed by it (and rightly so): they would simply point out that, in their view, dualism provides a much more plausible way of explaining some other things (that is why they are dualists, after all), and that the simplicity of explaining this case with physicalism is outweighed by the complexity (or impossibility) of explaining those things on the assumption of physicalism.

The larger (and not unrelated) concern is that at first glance it seems this explanation (and any other potential dualist explanation) is *ad hoc*; that no dualist would believe God duplicated

2 Ibid., pp. 250.

3 Ibid., pp. 250-251.

persons whenever their bodies were duplicated, unless he or she were simply looking for any conceivable way to combine the otherwise incompatible beliefs that dualism is true and that physical duplication machines can duplicate human persons. To respond to such a criticism one could either try to develop a superior dualist explanation for the machine's behavior, or try to show that, in fact, someone who is both a dualist and a theist does have some good independent reason to believe God would act in this way; I will do both.

There is at least one workable alternative dualist explanation for the machine's behavior that does not make reference to divine intervention (although it requires denying something which only some dualists will be willing to deny). Consider the following, which I will call the Creation Rule (*CR*): “Whenever a physical human body comes into being, a new non-physical human person also comes into being and is attached to it.” This rule would explain why the body created by the duplication machine has a person attached, but it would not explain why that person is a duplicate of the original person. This problem goes away if we also assume the following, which I will call the Homogeneity Rule (*HR*): “No human person has intrinsic properties which differ from those of any other human person.” This rule entails that every person can be considered a duplicate of every other person. What remains to be shown is that there are reasons for a dualist to accept *CR* and *HR*, other than as a last-ditch attempt to save dualism.

If one had originally accepted dualism because one believes that there is force to some argument – Leibniz's, perhaps – which purports to show that certain properties of human persons could not possibly be had by physical things, such reasons are not difficult to provide. Acceptance of an argument of that sort would entice one to seek some explanation for how non-physical things come to be associated with physical things. *CR* seems to be a good candidate for

this; it is simpler than any explanation which makes God responsible for enacting every attachment of a person to a body. *CR* requires the existence of physical things, non-physical things, and laws to govern both; supposing that God creates and attaches persons directly also requires all of those things, and in addition requires God's existence and intervention.

It might be objected that *CR* is a highly improbable law, because it requires a very concrete result (creation of a person) to occur upon the happening of an event (creation of a human body) for which it is unclear why there should be any special status. (Why should a person be created when a human body is created and not, for instance, when a stick of dynamite explodes?) This charge may have some validity, but two points should be made regarding it. First, the force of the objection would be lessened if it was specified that the law was enacted by God. This would only partially compromise my previous claim for *CR*'s simplicity; it may still be simpler than the claim that God intervenes to perform each attachment of a person to a body because it only requires us to add one more law to the list of laws which God, if he exists, presumably enacts. Second, and more importantly, a similar objection might be applicable to physicalism: why, for instance, should the physical interactions corresponding to a certain brain event constitute an instance of pain, and a tire rolling down a hill not do so? Although *CR* might introduce some difficulties into any theory which endorses it, it is not clear that these difficulties are any worse than the difficulties faced by all theories of personal identity.

Once dualism has been accepted on the basis of an argument against physical things being able to have certain properties of persons, *HR* can be argued for as follows: every difference we perceive among human persons can be explained by differences in their brains.⁴ (This assertion would be unacceptable to some dualists, perhaps such as those who believe in

4 So differences in what people perceive are caused by differences in the sensory input their brains are receiving; differences in what they remember are caused by different memories being stored in their brains; differences in their personalities are caused by differing brain configurations; etc.

libertarian freedom, but the dualist argument from which we are currently working does not in itself give us any reason to oppose it.) Therefore, we have no evidence that any persons have differing intrinsic properties and thus no reason to suppose *HR* is false. Further, if persons do have differing intrinsic properties, we would expect there to be some reason to account for the differences in those properties. Although such reasons are easily conceived (for instance, perhaps a person's properties change over time in response to its interactions with its body), Occam's razor would here cut in favor of *HR*: since there is no evidence that intrinsic differences in persons exist, it is a much simpler way to account for the evidence to suppose that they do not exist than to suppose that they exist and that unseen principles exist to explain them.

Since a case can be made for *CR* and *HR* which does not involve the duplication experiment, the physicalist cannot complain they are *ad hoc*. And since combined they correctly predict the experiment's outcome, the experiment cannot be used as evidence against any variety of dualism which permits their affirmation.

Theistic dualists need not accept the preceding explanation of human duplication, though; the explanation Van Inwagen dismisses as “desperate” will work just fine. The theist can argue plausibly that, assuming only the truth of dualism and a reasonable account of God's nature, we would expect God to duplicate a person whenever that person's body is duplicated. God is often thought to have some characteristics in common with humans, including the capacity to appreciate beauty. Consistency and orderliness are not infrequently thought to be beautiful features. Now, imagine two universes in which human persons are non-physical things interacting with physical bodies and in which a physical duplication machine has just been used for the first time on a human body: one universe in which both the person and the body are duplicated, and one in which only the body is duplicated. In the former, every living human body

in existence has a human person attached to it.⁵ In the latter, there is exactly one exception to that rule. Thus the former universe displays – from this perspective – greater consistency,⁶ and a being which enjoyed consistency might be expected to prefer it over the latter, and therefore to take the steps necessary to actualize it.

Of course, a similar argument can be constructed to make the opposite prediction as well. In the second universe, every human person that exists has been created in response to some activities of the reproductive mechanisms of human bodies (for simplicity we will not inquire regarding the first humans); in the first universe there is exactly one exception to that rule; therefore a being seeking consistency would prefer the second universe and would not act to duplicate the human person. But this argument does not render the first one useless; rather the two arguments together illustrate that the God of a universe in which dualism is correct might be faced with conflicting interests when attempting to decide whether to take any special action in response to the duplication of a human body. Which interests would sway him most is difficult if not impossible to determine by mere reflection, so neither postulating that God would duplicate the person, nor postulating that he would not, is *ad hoc*; there are plausible reasons to expect each.

I hope to have shown that the successful duplication of a human would not count significantly against dualism, and would certainly not be a fatal blow. Dualists (at least, some dualists) would not be forced to account for such an event by inventing an arbitrary explanation of it; rather, there are reasonable interpretations of dualism in which it would not be surprising.

5 Or at least, every living human body that has certain of its parts functioning properly; we can assume, if we wish, that brain-dead bodies no longer have human persons attached.

6 I am assuming that in the universe where only the body is duplicated, the body is living but simply lacks an attached person. This assumption is not crucial; a universe in which the body is dead (or in which the machine fails to function) will appear inconsistent for a different reason: in that universe, the duplication machine is capable of perfectly physically duplicating any physical thing, except physical things attached to non-physical things.