Linguistic Conventions as a Barrier to Understanding the Mind-Body Problem

In "Interview with Science and Religion News (2006) on Mind-Body Dualism," Richard Swinburne argues that a non-physical soul exists within all conscious beings alongside the physical body. To support this view, Swinburne argues that there is a fundamental difference between physical events (events that take place in the brain relating to cognitive activity, such as neurons firing) and mental events (thoughts). In this paper, I will argue that mental events and physical events are not necessarily distinct events; rather, the perceived difference between them arises from linguistic conventions in which the two concepts are conceptualized and described separately.

In the interview, Swinburne essentially gives his answer to the age-old Mind-Body Problem. That is, how is it that things as complex and abstract as conscious thoughts come about from the moving around of particles in the brain? Swinburne argues that conscious beings are made up of more than just a physical body; every conscious being must also have a nonphysical element which allows them to be conscious. In other words, conscious beings are made of two different substances: the physical body and the nonphysical soul. Swinburne defines a substance as something that can have characteristics, or properties. In this case, the body is a physical substance with physical properties, such as cells and particles, and the soul is a nonphysical substance that has mental properties, or thoughts.

Swinburne believes that the soul must exist because the physical body alone is not enough to account for a conscious being's mental life. To demonstrate this, Swinburne first argues that (1) knowledge about physical activity in the brain is different from knowledge about mental experiences. For example, when a person has the thought "Today is Friday," an neuron might fire in the brain just as the thought occurs. Here, Swinburne essentially says that knowing that the neuron has fired is different from knowing that the thought "Today is Friday" has occurred. Next, Swinburne argues that (2) knowledge about physical events does not explain why certain mental events arise from certain physical events. In other words, an explanatory relationship between the two cannot be formed. Continuing the example of a neuron and a thought, Swinburne believes that understanding that a neuron fires when a thought occurs does not provide information on why "Today is Friday" arises in the mind, and not another thought. Swinburne follows this distinction with the premise that (3) mental events are distinct from physical events. Swinburne believes that while physical and mental events might be observed to occur together, the occurrence of a mental event (a thought) and a physical event (a firing neuron) are ultimately separate events because one event cannot explain the other. Swinburne then extends the discussion to conscious beings, which he assumes to have a

physical body and a mental life (thoughts, emotions, and related non-physical cognitive experiences). (4) Physical events in a conscious being's brain do not account for that being's mental life. To use Swinburne's example, a firing neuron does not allow one to differentiate between two distinct thoughts, "Today is Friday" and "Russia is a big country." Because these thoughts are different, but knowledge about the neuron does not explain why one thought arises instead of another, physical (neurological) events cannot fully explain a person's mental life. Swinburne then assumes that (5) something other than the physical body accounts for a conscious being's mental life. Finally, Swinburne concludes that (6) in conscious beings, a nonphysical substance called the soul exists alongside the physical body and accounts for mental events.

At the heart of Swinburne's argument for the soul lies premise (3), the idea that there is a fundamental difference between the physical event and the mental event, one so significant that no scientific achievement could link the two. In Swinburne's words, "Talk about persons is not talk about bodies and talk about mental properties is not talk about physical properties" (Swinburne 1). It is here that I disagree. To explain why, I must emphasize the words Swinburne has chosen in this statement: *talk* about mental properties is not *talk* about physical properties. Put another way, the words that we use to describe a neuron firing are not the same as the words we use to describe thoughts and feelings. While this is true, this reflects not, as Swinburne believes, an inherent difference between the two things, but rather a linguistic choice—we describe them with different vocabularies. Swinburne appears to believe that we are compelled to describe them differently because they *are* different, but I will argue that it is *because* we describe them differently that we believe them to be different.

Though mental and physical events seem clearly linked, there is an obvious reason why diverging vocabularies have emerged for them: one cannot observe both physical brain events and non-physical mental events from the same point of view. To examine and observe one's thoughts is an act of introspection, taking a first-person view of what is happening in the mind, while to investigate action within brain cells is to take on a third-person view of brain function, a look from the outside in. Nature has not afforded humans the ability to adopt both perspectives at once, and as a result, humans habitually observe and conceive of their thoughts and brain phenomena separately—it feels unnatural to conceptualize them as the same event when there is no way of experiencing them as such. Yet the fact that we are not naturally inclined to view these phenomena from the same perspective does not mean they must be different; it is common to use multiple vocabularies to describe a single phenomenon, but doing so rarely implies that the phenomenon has two inherently different aspects. One example might be visual experience: the

naked eye is given no insight into the complexities of atoms and wavelengths that determine form and color. One could argue that to "see" a red apple is actually to take in reflected light at a wavelength of about 700 nanometers, yet the more intuitive language to use in describing the experience is that we have seen and recognized an apple by its shape and color. One is a physical description of the occurrence, and one is a description of how a person experiences and understands the occurrence. Based on these two descriptions one is not inclined to argue that there are two inherently different aspects to the apple, because a person's experience of an event is just that: an experience, the way in which someone conceptualizes an interaction with their surroundings based on *learned conventions* for labeling and understanding such events. In other words, the "experience" of an event, or the mental understanding of it, is narrowly confined to how a person is accustomed to conceptualizing that event and describing it in words.

The mental experience that humans can describe, however, is limited to what occurs within conscious awareness. This is clearly not *all* that occurs within a person's mental life. Numerous mental operations occur outside conscious awareness, but they have not been incorporated into our language for mental events because they do not fit into our existing concepts for describing mental activity. Returning to the example of seeing an apple, these sub-conscious mental operations might include recognition of the fact that light is reflecting off a physical object and triggering certain responses within the brain, including those that allow one to recognize the apple as something familiar, and those that allow a person to label the object "apple" and express that verbally. Because humans have not had access to these sub-conscious mental activities, they are not a part of the language traditionally used for mental events. But if humans *were* capable of identifying specific mental events such as these subconscious ones, descriptions of mental events would likely begin to resemble those of physical events, and the perceived difference between the two would shrink drastically. In the example I have just mentioned, these expanded insights to how mental processes operate already begin to resemble physical explanations of vision. The gap between physical and mental events exists because it has historically not been convenient or intuitive to understand them in any other way.

For Swinburne, the fact that humans are not physically built to easily and intuitively understand physical and mental events from a single perspective may well be evidence that mental and physical events are distinct events. Given that Swinburne adopts a theistic approach, he may argue that it is God who imposes this limitation on whether humans can look at physical and mental events as the same event. In other words, there is a specific reason

why it is difficult for humans (without the aid of advanced technology) to look at mental and physical events as anything but distinct, individual events. This alludes to Swinburne's idea that God plays a role in creating consciousness. If God is indeed responsible for human consciousness, then it seems logical to conclude that humans do not easily see physical and mental events as the same event because they are indeed distinct events, and that consciousness exists separately from the body. This is a compelling argument if one supposes that God exists and engages in this sort of intervention.

Under the non-theistic view I assume here, however, it is more compelling to conclude that the disparate ideas we have of our mental experiences and of physical events in the brain arise from linguistic conventions surrounding our conceptualization of the mind and brain. This creates the convincing notion that physical and mental events must be separate and distinct; after all, this is the most intuitive way for us to organize information about it. However, this difference is not real but perceived, and Swinburne's argument that there is something inherently different about mental and physical events is not necessarily true. That the two events *seem* different is not evidence that they *are* different.

Works Cited

Swinburne, Richard. Interview with Science and Religion News (2006) on Mind-Body Dualism. 2006, http://users.ox.ac.uk/~orie0087/framesetpdfs.shtml.