

Topic neutrality and the parity thesis: a surrejoinder to Williams

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Abstract: In an important paper, Clifford Williams advanced a Lockean-style argument to justify the parity thesis, viz., that there is no intellectual advantage to Christian physicalism or Christian dualism. In an article in *Religious Studies* I offered a critique of Williams's parity thesis and he has published a rejoinder to me in the same journal centring on my rejection of topic neutrality as an appropriate way to set up the mind–body debate. In this surrejoinder to Williams, I present his three main arguments and respond to each: (1) The dualist rejection of topic neutrality is flawed because it expresses a conceptual approach to the mind–body problem instead of the preferable empirical approach. The latter favours physicalism and, in any case, clearly supports topic neutrality. (2) If the dualist rejects the first argument, then a second parity thesis can be advanced in which an essentialist view of soul and the brain are presented in which each is essentially a thinking and feeling entity. Thus, an essentialist parity thesis is preserved. (3) If the dualist rejects the second argument, a new topic neutrality emerges in the dialectic, so topic neutrality is unavoidable. Against the first argument, I claim that Williams makes two central confusions that undermine his case and that he fails to show how the mind–body debate can be settled empirically. Against the second argument, I claim that it leaves Williams vulnerable to a topic-neutral approach to God and it merely proffers a verbal shift with a new dualism between normal and 'special' matter. Against the third argument, I point out that it misrepresents the dualist viewpoint and leads to two counterintuitive features that follow from topic neutrality.

In recent years, philosophers of religion, most particularly, Christian philosophers, have focused more and more attention on topics in philosophy of mind. At least three aspects of philosophical anthropology have been of chief interest to philosophers of religion. First, there are issues involved in understanding the relationship between God, understood both as a spirit and as a person, and the ontology of human persons, as well as the bearing this area of study has on God-talk and religious knowledge. Second, there is wide interest in the application of insights in philosophy of mind to problems regarding the reality and

intelligibility of life after death, along with debates about personal identity relevant to life after death. Finally, there is an interest in the interplay between models of the image of God and end-of-life ethics that have at their core debates about the nature of human personhood.

At the centre of these areas of study is a growing debate about the relative merits of Christian dualism vs. Christian physicalism. In an important paper, Christian philosopher Clifford Williams advanced a Lockean-style argument to justify the parity thesis, viz., that there is no intellectual advantage to Christian physicalism or Christian dualism.¹ According to Williams, since there is no contradiction in the notion either that matter or non-matter thinks or that each does not think, all options lie within God's omnipotence to realize.

In my response to Williams, I raised a number of objections against the parity thesis, one of which was to reject the topic-neutral approach to the mind-body problem presupposed by Williams's defence of the parity thesis.² Among other things, I claimed that substance dualism is not primarily an explanatory theory, but rather a descriptive report of what we know about ourselves from first-person acquaintance with ourselves and our mental states. For this and other reasons, I argued that a soul is a special kind of immaterial substance with an unextended immaterial essence constituted by ψ properties and powers: (1) the various ultimate capacities to exemplify thoughts, sensations, beliefs, desires, and so forth such that these exemplifications are modes of the soul; (2) the ability to sustain primitive unity at a time, absolute sameness through change, and is *de re* possibly such that it could exist disembodied; (3) the ability to be a self-reflexive centre of subjectivity; (4) the power to exercise libertarian agency. The notion of 'being an immaterial soul' is, therefore, not some topic-neutrally described generic property that covers souls and sets alike.

Subsequently, Williams has offered a rejoinder to my rebuttal in which he claims to have re-established successfully the parity thesis, as well as a new form of topic neutrality. I am not persuaded by his rejoinder and remain an unrepentant Thomistic substance dualist.³ My surrejoinder to Williams begins with a presentation of his three main arguments and concludes with a response to each.

Williams's threefold defence of topic neutrality and the parity thesis

Critique of dualist rejections of topic neutrality

Williams begins by criticizing the dualist rejection of topic neutrality. According to Williams, a topic-neutral approach conceives of matter and non-matter neutrally such that the concept of thinking is not part of the concept of either; rather, they are defined without reference to the ability or non-ability to think. Dualists reject this, says Williams, because they take it to be a conceptual truth that matter cannot think and the mind, by definition, has that ability. Unfortunately, the dualist is claiming that our conceptual framework will not allow us to conceive

of matter thinking, but this is not so. Conceptually, the issue could go either way as topic-neutral definitions demonstrate and, thus, the parity thesis is correct. So rather than employing an inadequate conceptual strategy, materialists prefer to view the mind–body problem as an empirical one and, so understood, as a matter of fact, since the evidence points to the dependence of thinking on the brain, the empirical approach favours materialism and the parity thesis allows for this possibility. The issue should be factual not conceptual, says Williams, topic neutrality allows us to get at the facts, and materialism is probably correct.

Defence of an essentialist parity thesis

If dualists reject this argument for preferring topic neutrality, then Williams believes that he can concede this and still justify the parity thesis. Williams's move is to grant, for the sake of argument, that souls are essentially thinking things but to argue that brains are essentially a special kind of matter, viz., thinking and feeling matter. Here the concept of thinking is assumed to be essential to the concept both of a soul and of the matter of which brains are made. This gives rise to a new parity thesis: it is now an empirical issue, that is, a question of fact as to whether we are thinking souls or thinking brains. Since we can define a soul as a thinking thing and the brain as thinking matter, we now have a factual, empirical parity thesis and not a conceptual one: which are we? Since it is within God's omnipotence for either to be true, an essentialist parity thesis survives even with a rejection of topic neutrality.

Dialectical re-emergence of topic neutrality

If dualists reject this second argument on the grounds that it begs the question by simply asserting that there could be thinking matter and this is precisely the question, the dualist is assuming a new sort of parity, or so Williams opines. How? By claiming that the issue is whether or not matter can think, the dualist is starting with a generic type of matter that normally is not the sort of thing that can think, and asks whether we can conceive the ability to think being added to that generic matter. But this parallels the original topic-neutral approach of Williams which started with a generic conception of non-matter and went on to ask if we can conceive of the ability to think being added to it. These two questions, one about non-matter and one about matter, are parallel and topic neutrality has not been avoided.

Response to Williams's defence

I shall offer my response to Williams by taking each argument in order.

Dualism and topic neutrality

Williams's first argument represents an egregious misunderstanding of dualism rooted in two serious mistakes. For one thing, Williams's argument rests

on an inadequate twofold distinction, popular in Locke's day, in which propositions are divided into two and only two groups: analytic propositions which are true (or false) by definition and not in virtue of the way the world is, which exhibit a *de dicto* necessity due to their analyticity and which are known a priori since they are analytic; and synthetic propositions which are true (or false) in virtue of the way the world is and which are contingent and a posteriori since they are synthetic. However, in these post-Kripkean days, this twofold classification is inadequate. Today, it is widely recognized that the analytic/synthetic, a priori/a posteriori, necessary/contingent distinctions are not interchangeable nor do they map the same class of propositions. There are also synthetic propositions that express *de re* necessity and which are known in either an a priori (e.g., redness is necessarily such that it is a colour) or an a posteriori (e.g., water is necessarily H₂O) manner. According to dualists, from the fact that 'matter cannot think' is not, strictly speaking, a logical contradiction, it only follows that the proposition is synthetic, not that it expresses a metaphysical contingency. This confusion by Williams leads him to make a use/mention mistake in characterizing dualism. Whether right or wrong, when dualists claim that the mind is necessarily such that it has and matter is necessarily such that it fails to have ψ properties and powers, the dualist is not mentioning the relevant mental (or material) concepts, much less trying to define them; he or she is using them to talk about the relevant states of affairs in the world. Thus, dualism is not a conceptual thesis at all; it is a straightforward factual assertion and Williams is wrong if he thinks otherwise.

This leads to Williams's second mistake. He seems to limit factual claims to those that are empirical, where by 'empirical' is meant what can be sensed directly by the five senses or in some way related to what can be so sensed, allowing for scientific instruments that extend the five senses. The result is that Williams seems to think that claims based on non-empirical conceivings mention rather than use relevant concepts. Thus, a claim is factual for Williams if and only if it is empirical in the narrow sense just mentioned. But this is just false. Dualists embrace a number of factual claims that involve *de re* intuition that is not empirical, e.g., rational intuition into mathematical or logical entities and their various relations, and introspective (non-empirical) direct awareness of the self and its various mental states.

Dualist claims about the nature of mind or matter are not conceptual assertions that mention mental (or material) concepts in an attempt to define them. Rather, dualist claims are factual ones in Williams's sense, even if they are both defeasible and not empirical, and even if dualists use mental (or material) terms and concepts to state what they take themselves to be justified in believing. On the basis of introspection and other arguments, e.g., modal arguments from the strong conceivability of disembodied existence, dualists purport to offer defeasible claims as to the very nature of mental substances and properties themselves. Moreover, dualists believe that the history of physics and chemistry has given us defeasible

knowledge of the nature of matter such that it does not require psychological categories for it to be described accurately. Even if dualists are wrong in these assertions, Williams has simply misunderstood and, thus, misrepresented the dualist project.

These two misunderstandings – an inadequate classification of propositions and a failure to allow for non-empirical intuition as a source of information about real states of affairs – lead Williams to claim falsely that dualism is a conceptual thesis. Besides this, there is a third problem that plagues Williams's first argument: his assertion that the topic-neutral approach is superior because it depicts the mind-body problem as an empirical issue. I invite Williams to cite even one empirical issue that provides the slightest bit of evidence for materialism. It is widely recognized that physicalism and dualism are empirically equivalent in that identity and causal relations or correlations are each consistent with the 'empirical' facts. The only evidence Williams cites is the so-called one-way dependency of thinking on brains. But at least three phenomena indicate this is false: the possibility of disembodied existence based on strong conceivability, libertarian agency which entails that brain states are not sufficient to fix action, and studies showing that mental states such as anxious thoughts causally shape the brain and, thus, dependency is a two-way street. But even if one-way dependency is true, a dualist can appeal to correlation or causal dependency and not identity and nothing empirical can settle this issue. Thus, if the topic-neutral approach renders the mind-body an empirical issue, that approach is the worse for it.

Essentialist parity thesis

There are at least two problems with Williams's second argument – it leaves entirely unclear just what a spiritual substance is supposed to be and it is merely a verbal shift that replaces an old dualism with a new one. Let us take these in turn.

Regarding the first point, though I do not have space to justify this claim, it has always been a feature of the metaphysics of traditional substances that their essential nature can be characterized only dispositionally. This is not to say that traditional material or immaterial substances are mere bundles of dispositions; rather, they can be analyzed metaphysically only by combining formal characteristics (they are entities that sustain sameness through change, exhibit a primitive unity at a time, etc.) with material content cashed out in dispositional terms. This is true for both material and immaterial substances. Now Williams lists a group of immaterial substances that, in my view, are not substances at all, i.e., possible worlds, objective values, numbers. But waiving this, clearly there is a difference between a set and a soul even though each is immaterial. Thus, being immaterial is generic and not specific enough to capture what a spirit/soul is.

Now Williams is a Christian theist and, as such, he surely holds that God and angels are spirits. Thus, his understanding of spirit must allow for content in characterizing God and angels as spiritual substances. But here the topic-neutral

account clearly fails. Indeed, Locke's own implicit employment of topic neutrality in asserting that there could be thinking matter disallowed him from appropriating ψ properties/powers as the relevant dispositions for specifying the difference between a soul/spirit and a different immaterial entity such as a set. But then, just what is a spirit? About all Locke could say of it was that it had bare being. But this is hardly informative and, in fact, it is false because it most likely characterizes a bare particular or Lockean substratum which, since it has no particular property essentially, is neither physical nor spiritual. If the dispositions necessary to characterize a spirit as such are no longer relevant due to the possibility that there is parity between spirits and matter regarding them, then 'spirit' becomes formal and empty. Nor is this just a technical metaphysical point, for it is precisely Williams's line of argument that Mormons have used to justify the claim that God is a physical object. For example, the influential Mormon apologist Orson Pratt advanced arguments quite similar to Williams's against classic theists who insisted that God is spirit. Among other things, Pratt argued that God was composed of thinking, spiritual matter with the same properties classic theists attributed to God construed as an immaterial spirit. Moreover, Pratt claimed that, given the intelligibility of thinking matter, that the very notion of 'immaterial spirit' was empty and unintelligible.⁴ Given the topic-neutral approach implicit in Pratt's arguments, it is hard to see what Williams would say to Pratt or other Mormons who claim that the notion of 'spirit' is formal and materially empty and that, in any case, the ψ traits God possesses are consistent with His being a physical deity.

Secondly, Williams's strategy reminds one of St. Bonaventure's acceptance of spiritual matter which seemed to be matter in name only. Dualists claim that there is an essential difference between material and immaterial substances in that the latter are necessarily constituted by ψ properties/powers and the former fail to have these regardless of what else is needed to describe their essences, e.g., having atomic number seventy-nine for gold. Williams retorts that perhaps there are two kinds of matter: a special kind whose essence is to think and feel and all other examples of matter. But this just seems to be a verbal difference with dualism. What dualists call the soul Williams labels 'a special kind of matter'. A soul by another name is still a soul and it is up to Williams to distinguish the soul from this special kind of matter in such a way that there is a clear contrast between them.

Moreover, Williams claim about a special kind of matter seems false, as the vast majority of philosophers have seen. As physicalist David Papineau puts it, the history of science, especially physics, has given us enough empirical evidence about the kinds of properties and powers that will characterize any future descriptions of matter and irreducible, uneliminable psychological traits are not among those properties and powers.⁵ After all, there has not been a mind-body debate dominated by physicalists for fifty years over nothing. Papineau and the majority of physicalists would be shocked at the announcement that matter is the sort of thing that has ψ properties/powers. Advocates of type identity physicalism,

physicalist versions of functionalism, token physicalism, and eliminative materialism have pushed a physicalist agenda precisely because they take empirical research to justify not only the claim that we turn out to be material objects, but also the assertion that matter does not require psychological categories as part of an ideal physics adequate for its description. Since Williams himself takes empirical factors to carry weight in the mind–body problem, it is hard to see how he can justify the claim that empirical research warrants the former but not the latter.

Re-emergence of topic neutrality

Finally, Williams's third argument is that topic neutrality re-emerges in the dialectic and, thus, its presence is inevitable. But this point is dialectically misguided and it leaves Williams in the position of employing a philosophical notion that is problematic in its own right. Williams is dialectically misguided because he reinterprets the dualist inquiry in his own terms. When dualists ask whether matter can think, they do not start with a topic-neutral characterization of matter and ask whether or not thinking can be attached to it. That is Williams's project and it both begs the question and distorts the dialogue to represent the dualist inquiry in this way. Whether right or wrong, the dualist believes that for a number of reasons (e.g., our knowledge of matter, angels, God, and self-knowledge) we know that if a thing is essentially characterized by ψ properties and powers, it is not physical. This is why theists take God, angels, and the soul to be immaterial and this is why the physicalist research project has usually set itself against both property and substance dualism. I am not claiming that physicalists were right in doing this, though I believe that to be the case. I merely note that scholars on both sides of the divide have understood that the dualist inquiry is not an expression of topic neutrality and Williams begs the question and misrepresents the state of the debate in claiming otherwise.

Moreover, the topic-neutral approach is problematic in its own right as can be seen from two considerations. First, physicalist versions of at least some forms of functionalism are rightly seen as paradigm cases of a topic-neutral approach. But as inverted *qualia* arguments show, in a possible world in which, say, a Vulcan satisfies the relevant topic-neutral description of pain by grimacing and shouting 'Ouch!' after the relevant causal inputs, e.g., being stuck by a pin, the Vulcan is in pain according to topic-neutral functionalism even if the relevant mental state that obtains between inputs and outputs is the property of being appeared to redly. The dualist will say that the Vulcan is admittedly wired in an odd way, but still, he is not in pain since he experiences what it is like to see red after a pin stick and before shouting 'Ouch!', while the functionalist topic-neutral approach points in the opposite direction. Obviously, I cannot undertake a sustained critique of functionalism here, but for those of us who think it more reasonable to see the Vulcan seeming to see red and not in pain, the topic-neutral approach will be

judged inadequate. Perhaps all I can do here is to note the price to be paid by the topic-neutral strategy.

Second, on a substance dualist view, this very mental state I am currently experiencing is such that there is no possible world in which it could exist and fail to be mine, but on Williams's topic-neutral approach, there is such a possible world. The dualist will argue that the former is more reasonable and, thus, the topic-neutral approach should be rejected.

To understand this argument it is important to recognize that according to substance dualism, my various capacities for conscious states are essential to me and when actualized, the properties of consciousness that constitute those states are predicatively internal to me and characterize the type of thing I am. For example, if a sensation is internally related to me, then it is a mode of my self where a mode is an inseparable, dependent part of the thing it modifies. On this view, sensations do not stand to me by way of some external relation.

However, on the topic-neutral approach, if I am a physical object, then there is a possible world in which I exist without the capacities for consciousness (justified by strong conceivability) and, thus, those capacities are not essential to me. Moreover, when actualized, the properties of consciousness that constitute my mental states are externally related to me such that there is a possible world in which, say, those very sensations exist and are not mine. Mental states are attached to the brain instead of being modes (inseparable parts) of an immaterial substance.

To elaborate a bit more, it may be useful to clarify certain notions central to the claims above, e.g., 'being predicatively internal' or 'internally related to me', 'an external relation'. To begin with, let us take as primitive the notion of a constituent/whole relation. A constituent/whole relation takes place between two entities just in case one entity is in the other as a constituent. So understood, there are two main types of constituent/whole relations: the standard separable part/whole relation of mereology and the accidental or essential predication relation. When a whole has a part or an accidental or essential property, the part or property is a constituent in the whole. In the sense used here, when one entity is a constituent of a whole, it is internally related to that whole. By contrast, 'an external relation' in this context is one which relates one entity to another without the former becoming a constituent of the latter. Thus, 'to the left of' is an external relation in my sense.

Next, I need to clarify the notion of a mode. Here is a sufficient condition of some entity being a mode of another entity. If, for some substance *s* and property *p*, *s* exemplifies *p*, then the state of affairs – *s*'s exemplifying *p* (call it *a*) – is a mode of *s*. As such, the mode is a dependent part of *s* internally related to *s*. There is no possible world where *a* exists and *s* does not. Moreover, if at some time *t*, *s* has *a* (*s* exemplifies *p*), then at all times prior to *t*, *s* had the (first or higher order) potentiality to have *a*. And part of what makes *s* the kind of substance it is, is its potentialities.

Now the substance dualist takes sensations (and other mental states) to be modes of the substantial self. However, on Williams's topic-neutral approach, since thinking matter is possible, either mental properties or their tokens (for those who do not follow Locke's nominalism) are externally connected to a material (or immaterial) substance. In current debates about physicalism, if supervenience is taken as a relation, causal or otherwise, the relevant mental properties or tokens are externally connected to the brain or to some other relevant physical object (e.g., a physical simple in the brain). One reason for this is the possibility (justified on the basis of strong conceivability) of zombie worlds without the relevant properties or tokens. Williams's approach implies that it is not a necessary feature of one's individual mental states that they be his and dualists believe that this is highly counterintuitive.

As with the inverted *qualia* argument, I cannot develop this argument more fully against Williams. Instead, I rest content to show the price to be paid for the topic-neutral approach. But in my view, this argument, along with the others presented in this article, are among the reasons why I fail to be convinced by Williams's rejoinder to my critique of his version of the parity thesis.

Notes

1. Clifford Williams 'Christian materialism and the parity thesis', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **39** (1996), 1–14.
2. J. P. Moreland 'Locke's parity thesis about thinking matter: a response to Williams', *Religious Studies*, **34** (1998), 253–259.
3. Clifford Williams 'Topic neutrality and the mind–body problem', *Religious Studies*, **36** (2000), 203–207. For development and defence of Thomistic substance dualism, see J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis of Ethics* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
4. For an excellent discussion of Mormon physicalism, with special emphasis on Orson Pratt, see Craig James Hazen *The Village Enlightenment in America* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 15–64, especially 40–45.
5. David Papineau *Philosophical Naturalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 29–32.