

Are We Bodies or Souls?, by Richard Swinburne. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 188. \$14.99 (hardcover).

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Both: for we have both bodies and souls as parts. But mostly: souls. For it's our souls that make us who we are. So goes Swinburne's answer to the titular question, and such are the central claims of this short book. Swinburne's substance dualism is not as unusual as it once was. Indeed, though the view was unfashionable as recently as twenty years ago, it commands an increasingly diverse and distinguished range of adherents today. Swinburne's book stands out in three respects: it is aimed at a general audience, it is the latest of four books from the same author defending a broadly dualist perspective, and it weaves together themes from both personal ontology (what we *are*) and personal identity (what it takes for us to *last over time*).

Chapter 1 introduces the titular question and explains its importance. Saying whether we are bodies or souls will, Swinburne maintains, impinge on matters as diverse as machine ethics and criminal law (4). Theories here fall into two kinds: complex and simple. The former say it is in-principle possible to analyze claims about sameness of person in other terms (of bodily or psychological continuity, for example). Simple theories deny that claim.

Chapter 2 builds up a stock of definitions and theses. Some make good sense; but professional readers should be alert to Swinburne's idiosyncratic treatment of a few important terms. A sentence is said to entail another, for example, just if the latter "draws out something already implicit in" the former (14)—distinct from more familiar notions of logical consequence or necessitation. With his army of definitions in place, Swinburne tours some competing theories and finds them wanting. Analytical behaviourism and functionalism are dispatched on semantic grounds (24). Type-type identity theory and mind-brain supervenience views fail, too; for "however much you knew about some person's brain and other physical events, that would not prove conclusively what the other person was thinking or feeling" (27). Though he does not mention it, Swinburne's reasoning here echoes the widely-discussed Knowledge Argument (as in, for example, Frank Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1985): 291–295). Swinburne thus arrives at property dualism: mental properties are not identical to and do not supervene on physical properties. This property dualism forms the backdrop for the next three chapters that



together argue for *substance* dualism, according to which we are at least partly immaterial substances.

In Chapter 3, Swinburne presents two arguments against any complex theory; they trade on the mismatch between the degreed nature of physical or mental continuity and the categorical nature of identity. First is the problem of arbitrariness (52–53). What precise degree of physical or mental continuity is required for survival? There seems to be no non-arbitrary place to draw the line. Second is the candidates problem (53–55). What happens when a target person has successors that are equally good candidates for being her by, say, possessing the same proportion of original brain matter, or an equal number of apparent memories? There seem to be no good answers. Mere semantic indecision isn't enough to explain what's going on here, and partial identity is of no help. Swinburne concludes that complex theories are untenable, and so we must embrace a simple theory.

Chapter 4 moves from a simple theory to full-blown dualism using a familiar transplant case (68). Both of Alexandra's brain hemispheres are extracted; one of them is transplanted into the skull of Alex, from whom the corresponding hemisphere has been recently removed. Is the resulting person Alexandra or not? Both affirmative and negative answers seem possible; the facts about physical or mental continuity don't settle the matter. Swinburne then proposes this principle: "if a substance exists for a certain period of time and has certain substances as its parts, and these parts have the same essential and non-essential properties, then it is not possible if these parts exist in the same arrangement having the same essential and non-essential properties for that period of time that they could form a different substance from the one which they do form" (68–69). The principle implies that if it is indeed possible for the person resulting from the brain transplant to be Alexandra or possible for the resulting person to *not* be Alexandra, then there must be some distinguishing factor between the two possibilities. No physical features distinguish the possibilities; so they must be distinguished in some non-physical way. That distinguishing element must be a purely mental part, indivisible, and unique to each person: a soul (70).

Swinburne proposes—and in Chapter 5, defends—a variation on a classic Cartesian argument as an additional reason to accept substance dualism. The argument's key premise is that "while [I'm] thinking, it is possible that my body is destroyed" (78). That premise, together with the thesis that nothing can survive the instantaneous loss of all of its (proper) parts, brings Swinburne to the conclusion that "I am a soul, a substance, whose only essential property is the capacity for thought" (79).

Could we really be certain that we could think without our bodies? Swinburne argues in the affirmative. On behalf of that key premise, Swinburne claims that "I" is an informative designator for one who uses it (97)—a referring term where anyone who knows what the term means

must also know what it denotes and what it is to be the object it denotes (86–87). So also for terms referring to mental properties by those who have them (97). This peculiar feature of personal pronouns and mental terms guarantees that “our infallible knowledge of oneself is an infallible knowledge of oneself as existing at the moment at which we are aware of this” (107).

The claim here is as strong as it sounds. Not only do you know who “I” denotes when you use it, you also know that your essence is purely mental. Swinburne’s confidence here is impressive. But doubts linger. Do you really know the *entirety* of your essence? Perhaps there are non-mental aspects to your essence (origins, say, or more to the point, physical conditions) that are hidden from view. And even if we have infallible and complete knowledge of our own essences, it may not be obvious to all that the essence so revealed is purely mental. Some readers may perform the inspection and find, instead, something that seems partly or even purely physical. In spite of gnawing concerns like these, Swinburne’s optimism burns bright; he concludes that we know who we are—pure mental substances—and relying on such infallible premises can infer we could exist without our bodies (108).

Chapters 6–7 discuss the causal powers of souls and whether the existence and powers of souls could be subject to scientific explanation. Swinburne argues that souls indeed interact with brains, and so the physical world is not a closed system. Physical theories that don’t accommodate this result “must be amended to allow for it if they are to provide a well-justified theory of the physical world” (139). It’s unsurprising, then, that Swinburne finds it unlikely that there could ever be any fully general scientific theory of soul/brain interaction (160). Paradigm laws of nature—a necessary element of scientific explanation (156)—deal with “physical substances and concern only a few of their properties—their mass, shape, size, and position” (161). But a candidate law of nature relating souls to brains would “need to deal with interactions between things of very different kinds from each other—physical substances and pure mental substances” (162).

We can sum up Swinburne’s book, then, with these three words: *Descartes was right*. For those who need a bit more: we have bodies, to be sure, but we can do without them; it’s our souls that make us who we are. Swinburne’s book clearly isn’t lacking in ambition. But does it succeed, and is the book to be recommended? In what follows, we’ll flag a few reservations.

Swinburne’s approach is sometimes at odds with his broad target audience (1). The book oscillates between technical (and, as noted above, idiosyncratic) treatments and significantly more breezy discussions that omit detail. Swinburne’s book, in short, occupies an uneasy ground between the scholarly and the popular that doesn’t always make for smooth reading.

Along these lines, we note that the chosen semi-popular format has engendered peculiar omissions. A central claim of the book is that the simple view of personal identity supports substance dualism. It is a bit of a mystery that Swinburne doesn't acknowledge (or engage the arguments of) physicalists who join him in rejecting complex views about our criteria of identity over time (as in, for example, Trenton Merricks, "There Are No Criteria of Identity Over Time," *Noûs* 32 (1998): 106–124). Is there some problem with the view that we are wholly material beings—purely physical substances—but nonetheless have no criteria of identity over time at all? Swinburne doesn't say. But note that such a view could appropriate Swinburne's insights about vexing thought experiments (there really doesn't seem to be any criterion by which to figure out whether Alexandra is Alex, for example)—all without breathing a word about souls.

More odd is Swinburne's choice not to engage the work of allied substance dualists. Robin Collins has, for example and *contra* Swinburne, forcefully argued that very good sense can be made of psycho-physical laws expressed as surprisingly simple equations similar in form to known laws of nature (Robin Collins, "A Scientific Case for the Soul," in *The Soul Hypothesis*, edited by Mark C. Baker and Stewart Goetz (Continuum, 2011): 222–246). On Collins's view, souls can be subject to scientific explanation of a rather familiar kind, despite the fact that they are wholly immaterial. One suspects that Swinburne could offer illuminating arguments here. But the present text provides few clues as to how they might go.

Similarly, we note Swinburne's failure to comment on—or defend—the central dimension on which his view differs from that of most contemporary substance dualists. The majority report has it that we *are* our souls. Souls bear mental properties. And so do we, because we are them. Swinburne's view, by contrast, has it that we have our souls as proper parts: important—even essential—parts, but parts nonetheless. This turns out to matter quite a bit. Swinburne is quite explicit that your soul bears mental properties. It thinks and feels. But you bear mental properties too—you think and feel as well. But then there are *two* things thinking each of your thoughts and feeling each of your feelings: you and your soul. That's not an attractive consequence. It offends parsimony and raises thorny questions about how one could know whether one was a person or a mere soul. It is precisely to avoid that thicket that most contemporary substance dualists (and perhaps even Descartes himself) deny that our souls are proper *parts* of us in the first place. They are us, rather, and we are them. So one wonders: why doesn't Swinburne follow suit?