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Author(s): Katherine Hawley

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Merricks on Whether Being Conscious is Intrinsic

KATHERINE HAWLEY

Trenton Merricks argues against the following doctrine:

Microphysical Supervenience (MS) Necessarily, if atoms A_1 through A_n compose an object that exemplifies intrinsic qualitative properties Q_1 through Q_n , then atoms like A_1 through A_n (in all their respective intrinsic qualitative properties), related to one another by all the same restricted atom-to-atom relations as A_1 through A_n , compose an object that exemplifies Q_1 through Q_n . (Merricks 1998, p. 59)

Imagine a person, P . Microphysical Supervenience entails that there is an object, the finger-complement, wholly composed of all of P 's atoms except those in P 's left index-finger. After all, when we slice off P 's finger, we leave atoms micro-indiscernible from those in the finger-complement, and *those* atoms compose an object, maimed P . Moreover, if *being conscious* is an intrinsic property, then Microphysical Supervenience entails that the finger-complement is conscious, for maimed P is conscious. But this, argues Merricks, is "simply incredible". It cannot be the case that every large collection of P 's atoms forms a conscious object, for then there would be "a mighty host" of conscious objects sitting in P 's chair (Merricks 1998, p. 63). Even if there is a finger-complement, it is not conscious. So *being conscious* does not supervene upon microphysical arrangements: if *being conscious* is an intrinsic qualitative property, then Microphysical Supervenience is false. Merricks argues that *being conscious* is indeed intrinsic, and thus that Microphysical Supervenience *is* false. He has two reasons for supposing *being conscious* to be intrinsic, and I object to both of these.

First, says Merricks, *being conscious* bears the mark of the intrinsic: it could be instantiated by an object alone in the universe. This seems true. But Merricks himself warns that there are non-intrinsic properties which bear the mark, properties like *being the only object in the universe*. Indeed, Merricks's own arguments suggest that *being conscious* is one of those peculiar non-intrinsic properties which bear the mark of the intrinsic. It seems that the atoms of maimed P form a conscious being *because* they are suitably isolated. If so, then *being conscious* bears the mark of the intrinsic without being an intrinsic property.

Merricks gives a second reason to suppose that *being conscious* is intrinsic. His opponent maintains that *being conscious* is not intrinsic, although

it supervenes upon microphysical properties of the world. But even she will place limits on the relationality of consciousness, believing that

being conscious not only supervenes on microphysical doings, but on doings that are intuitively relevant ... she should be dismayed that whether one is conscious turns on whether one is next to the atoms of a left index finger, or on any of the other piddling *microphysical* relations *P* stands in but finger-complement and atom-complement do not. (Merricks 1998, pp. 67–8).

If my being conscious is not intrinsic, then it depends upon my piddling relational properties, and this is dismaying.

Why is it dismaying? We can all agree that if I had an extra toe, then I would still be conscious; if in the future I gain an extra toe, then I will remain conscious. But this fails to show that my being conscious is independent of my relational properties. The extra-toe scenario is *not* one in which I stand in different relations to my surroundings than I actually, presently do: it is a scenario in which I am bigger than I actually, presently am. In the extra-toe scenario, there is an object micro-indiscernible from the present actual me, but which differs in its relational properties from the present actual me, and is (therefore) not conscious. That object is not me, however, but my toe-complement.

Any object micro-indiscernible from the present, actual me is not conscious if it is suitably attached to toes, fingers, atoms and so on. But this is not dismaying, since it does not entail that *I* would not be conscious if I incorporated extra toes, fingers, atoms and so on. The extra-toe scenario is not a case of my standing in different relations whilst remaining conscious, so the fact that I am conscious in the extra-toe scenario does not show that my relational properties are irrelevant to my being conscious. Merricks shows that, given his assumptions, Microphysical Supervenience is inconsistent with the intrinsicness of *being conscious*. We are free, however, to retain Microphysical Supervenience and to reject the intrinsicness of *being conscious*.

Furthermore, if we take the opposite course, rejecting Microphysical Supervenience and retaining the intrinsicness of *being conscious*, we do so in rather strained fashion. The atoms of early *P*'s finger-complement and those of the later maimed *P* differ in two respects. The later atoms form a conscious being, whilst the earlier do not. And the later atoms are isolated in a way in which the earlier are not. Of course, the difference in respect of forming a conscious being may be independent of the relational differences, but the correlation is certainly mysterious, if *being conscious* is intrinsic.¹

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*Newnham College
University of Cambridge
Cambridge CB3 9DF
UK
kjh1002@cus.cam.ac.uk*

KATHERINE HAWLEY

REFERENCE

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