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IN DEFENSE OF THE WORDS 'HUMAN BODY'

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In his original and thought provoking paper 'Philosophers and the words "human body"', Peter Van Inwagen¹ argues that *typically* when philosophers utter sentences like 'A person is (is not) identical with his body', 'A person might have (could not have) different bodies at different stages of his career', they are talking *nonsense*.² In classifying such talk as nonsense, Van Inwagen is claiming that philosophers who engage in it normally represent themselves as expressing propositions (that is, making assertions or saying how things are) when in reality they are only uttering words. Van Inwagen's argument for this extraordinary claim consists of a careful examination and refutation of various attempts to define or explain what philosophers usually mean by 'body'. Van Inwagen concedes that there *may* be some adequate explanation which his discussion overlooks. Hence, his argument is best seen as a challenge to those who think that 'body' is, in the speech of philosophers, normally meaningful.

In what follows, I take up Van Inwagen's challenge. I propose a definition of 'body'; and I maintain that this definition captures what philosophers typically mean by 'body'.³

I

Van Inwagen begins his paper by laying down a criterion of adequacy for any definition of 'body'. He says that an adequate definition must not be *tendentious*. This requirement is elucidated in two ways:

- (1) An adequate definition of 'body' must not make any sentence containing 'body' that is used by any famous and respected philosopher to state his theories a trivial verbal falsehood.
- (2) An adequate definition of 'body' must not be such that any famous and respected philosopher who believes that the sentence

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'There are bodies' expresses a truth could be expected to reply to the definition by saying, 'If *that's* what the word means, then there are no "bodies"'.⁴

Van Inwagen illustrates (1) and (2) by reference to the following case. Suppose a Cartesian defines 'body' as 'the material thing animated by the immaterial person'. Then his definition is tendentious according to (1), since it turns the materialist's sentence 'A person is identical with his body' into a trivial verbal falsehood. It is also tendentious according to (2). For a materialist would undoubtedly respond to the Cartesian's definition in the way (2) mentions.

Although (1) and (2) yield the same classification for the above definition of 'body', it is not clear that they *always* yield the same classification, especially if they are extended to other terms which have played important roles in philosophical discourse. Take, for example, the term 'pain', and suppose that (1) and (2) are so modified that they elucidate adequacy criteria for definitions of this term. Applying (1), we find that the familiar attempt to define 'pain' as 'that which causes behaviour like groaning and wincing' is tendentious, since it turns the epiphenomenalist's sentence 'Pain does not cause anything' into a trivial verbal falsehood. Applying (2), I am not at all sure what the result is. Evidently the epiphenomenalist would not respond to the definition by saying, 'Since nothing at all causes groaning, wincing, and similar behaviour, "pain" in the given sense of the term does not exist'. Would any other respected philosopher respond in this way? It may seem not. Hence, it may seem that (1) and (2) conflict. But what of the philosopher who denies that the external world exists and hence that there is any such thing as bodily behaviour (the solipsist, say)? Is he 'respected' in the way that (2) requires? Even if he is, why should an adequate definition of 'pain' be compelled to take into account his apparently *atypical* linguistic responses?

I am uncertain how to answer these question. This is not a matter of great significance in the present context, if the only definitions of '*body*' which Van Inwagen is trying to rule out via his criterion of adequacy are those which fail to remain neutral between the view that persons are identical with their bodies and the view that they are not. For it seems to me that most philosophers who use 'body' would agree that such definitions should be excluded without further inquiry. But if Van Inwagen intends the tendentiousness requirement to play a stronger role (as I believe he does),

then questions like those above have to be taken seriously. (I might also add that, on any stronger reading, it seems to me that the tendentiousness requirement is itself tendentious and would be unacceptable to many philosophers.)

II

The form of words which Van Inwagen tries to define is 'x's body'. The reason for this is simple enough. If the concept of a human body exists, then philosophical uses of 'body' reveal that understanding this concept involves understanding what it is for a given body to be the body of a given human being. Hence, if it turns out that no adequate definition of 'x's body' is possible, then it is likely that most philosophers who use 'body' would be prepared to concede that there really is no such concept as the concept of a human body.

Of the various definitions which Van Inwagen examines and rejects, I find the following one most promising:

- (D1) x's body =_{df} The material object that is the bearer of all x's physical properties.⁵

This definition is based on one of the citations in the *O.E.D.* for 'body',⁶ and it has, I think, considerable intuitive support. Unfortunately, there is a difficulty. Consider, for example, 'Van Inwagen's body'. Since it is a simple truth of logic that Van Inwagen has (is the bearer of) all the physical properties Van Inwagen has, (D1), in this instance, trivially entails that either Van Inwagen is identical with his body or Van Inwagen's body does not exist. Obviously, no dualist who is aware of the fact that there is such a thing as Van Inwagen's body would accept this consequence. (D1), then, is not neutral between dualism and materialism; hence it must be rejected as tendentious.

In his paper, Van Inwagen shows that one way of revising (D1) so as to overcome the problem of tendentiousness results in a definition which is open to counterexamples.⁷ I want now to suggest that there is *another* way of revising (D1) which seems to me to produce a satisfactory definition.

One belief which materialists, dualists, and indeed all (or nearly all) respected philosophers share is that when, in the ordinary day to day business of everyday life, people utter sentences with the grammatical form '*N* is in *p* at *t*', where '*N*' is a singular term referring to a person and '*p*' and '*t*' indicate

a spatio-temporal location, they frequently say what is true. Take, for example, the sentence, 'Tye is in his office on September 18, 1979'. Philosophers who are apprised of the facts would not dispute that this perfectly ordinary sentence, as it is used to refer to me, expresses a truth.⁸ Disagreement would arise only with respect to the *analysis* of this truth. Thus, the Cartesian dualist would maintain that the truth expressed by the above sentence is that I animate a body (distinct from myself) which bears the property of being in my office on September 18, 1979, while the materialist would argue that since persons are material objects, the truth here is rather that I directly bear the given spatio-temporal property.

It appears, then, that there is *some* common ground upon which we can build. My suggestion is that we use this ground by revising (D1) in the following preliminary way:

- (D2) x 's body =_{df} The material object that is the bearer of all the spatio-temporal properties that enter into all the truths that are normally expressible, in ordinary language, in sentences with the grammatical form ' N is in p at t ', where ' N ' is a singular term referring to x and ' p ' and ' t ' indicate a spatio-temporal location.

Some comments on (D2): (1) Unlike (D1), (D2) does not entail that if x 's body exists then x is identical with x 's body. Hence, (D2) is neutral in a way that (D1) is not. (2) The *definiens* in (D2) is narrower than the *definiens* in (D1) in that it is limited to only one kind of physical property. This is because if we define ' x 's body' as 'The material object that is the bearer of all the physical properties that enter into all the truths that are ordinarily expressible in sentences with the form " N is ϕ ", where " ϕ " is a nonrelational or relational physicalistic predicate', then our definition has the ridiculous consequence that my body is luminous, say, since some physicalistic sentences which refer to me and contain 'luminous' (for Example, 'Tye wears a luminous watch') express truths. (3) It is perhaps worth stressing that (D2) does not demand that the truths which individuate human bodies be *expressed* in concrete utterances. Thus, even if no one ever happens to comment upon or describe the spatio-temporal properties which separate someone else's body from mine, still these properties exist and they enter into truths that are *expressible* as (D2) requires.

A difficulty remains, however. Ordinary everyday sentences of the form ' N is in p at t ', where ' N ' refers to a person, are vague. This vagueness is such

that some of my internal organs and limbs possess all the spatio-temporal properties that (D2) attributes to my body. Hence, nothing *uniquely* satisfies the condition laid down in the *definiens* for 'Tye's body'. In response to this difficulty, I am inclined to concede that (D2), as it stands, is too broad; and I propose the following restricted version as my final definition:

- (D3) x 's body =_{df} The material object that (i) is the bearer of all the spatio-temporal properties that enter into all the truths that are normally expressible, in ordinary language, in sentences with the grammatical form ' N is in p at t ', where ' N ' refers to x and ' p ' and ' t ' indicate a spatio-temporal location, and (ii) is the bearer of all the physical properties that enter into all the truths that are normally expressible, in ordinary language, in sentences with the grammatical form ' N is \emptyset ', where ' N ' refers to x , and ' \emptyset ' is non-relational physicalistic predicate.

I might add that I ignore *relational* physical properties in part (ii) of this modified definition for the reasons mentioned in my comment (2) on (D2). And I retain part (i) since arguably bodies with all the same *nonrelational* physical properties could still be distinct. I want now, in closing, to briefly examine two possible problems for (D3).

To begin with, it might be argued that if we are permitted to substitute certain sorts of relational descriptions for ' N ', ' p ', or ' t ', then, according to (D3), x 's body will have spatio-temporal properties which it actually lacks. If, for example, the sentence 'The tallest man in the world is now in the only town one hundred miles north of the village twenty miles due east of St. Louis' expresses a truth, then (D3) entails that the tallest man's body is not only north of St. Louis but also due east of it, as, of course, it is not. The way I choose to meet this difficulty is by stipulating that in (D3) relational descriptions cannot be substituted for ' N ', ' p ' or ' t '.

Secondly, it might be suggested that the following difficulty arises. Suppose that Cartesian dualism is universally accepted. Suppose further that the language in common use is governed by rules which *only* permit the formation of explicitly dualistic sentences about persons. Then it seems that ordinary language does not contain *any* sentences about persons with either the grammatical form ' N is in p at t ' or the form ' N is \emptyset ', where ' \emptyset ' is a non-relational physicalistic predicate, and hence it seems that in these circumstances (D3)'s *definiens* is never satisfied. So, with respect to any

given language-user in the imagined situation, (D3) seems to entail that his body does not exist in that situation. And this is absurd.

The simplest way to meet this problem is to say that 'ordinary language' in (D3) is short for 'our ordinary language' or, if you will, 'ordinary language in α ', where ' α ' is a *rigid designator* for the actual world.⁹

The onus now rests with Van Inwagen. I believe that my final definition suffices to explain what philosophers typically mean by 'body'. So, unless Van Inwagen can show that there is something seriously wrong with this definition, it seems to me that philosophers are *not* usually talking nonsense when they utter sentences containing 'body'.¹⁰

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NOTES

¹ Van Inwagen, P.: 1979, 'Philosophers and the words "human body"', in: *Time and Cause*, a Festschrift for Richard Taylor, ed. by P. Van Inwagen (D. Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland), pp. 283–299.

² Van Inwagen does not argue that nonphilosophers (that is, people who are not engaged in the philosophical enterprise either professionally or otherwise) are talking nonsense when they use the word 'body'. According to Van Inwagen, ordinary sentences like 'Alice told James she hungered for his body' and 'His doctor told him he must not go on abusing his body this way' can be satisfactorily paraphrased into sentences in which 'body' does not occur, say, as 'Alice told James she wanted to have sexual intercourse with him' and 'His doctor told him he must not go on abusing his health this way'. Van Inwagen's position is that no such paraphrase is possible for philosophical sentences containing 'body', as they are typically used.

³ There is an alternative way of meeting Van Inwagen's challenge which I shall not explore in this paper. Instead of proposing a definition of 'body', one can plausibly argue, as Van Inwagen himself notes, that from the fact that a certain word cannot be adequately explained, it does not follow that it is meaningless.

⁴ 'Philosophers and the words "human body"', *op. cit.*, 286–287.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁶ Murray, J. A., et al. (eds.): 1933, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), p. 963.

⁷ 'Philosophers and the words "human body"', *op. cit.*, pp. 288–289.

⁸ I ignore here the solipsist.

⁹ By a 'rigid designator', I mean a term which designates the same entity in all possible worlds in which it designates. For details, see Kripke, S.: 1972, 'Naming and necessity' in: *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. by D. Davidson and G. Harman (D. Reidel, Dordrecht, Holland), pp. 253–355. For other uses of ' α ', see Plantinga, A.: 1974, *The Nature of Necessity* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), pp. 46–65.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Peter Van Inwagen for some helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.