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Assessing Different Paradigms of Conception in the Modal Argument for Substance Dualism

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Abstract

The modal argument for substance dualism claims that our ability to conceive of a mental state absent its physical correlate, such as disembodied pain, is evidence that such a state is metaphysically possible. If this is true, the mental and the physical must be two distinct substances. But is our conceivability in this case a reliable guide to metaphysical possibility, or does it merely create the illusion of separability? This paper analyzes the competing explanations proposed by Saul Kripke and Christopher Hill of why it appears that we can conceive mental states without their physical correlates. While Kripke's view implies that such conceivability supports substance dualism, Hill argues that such conceivability results from splicing together two different forms of imagination: perceptual and sympathetic, meaning that this conceivability is an unreliable guide to possibility. This paper argues that existing arguments against Hill's paradigm are insufficient and presents a new argument showing that Hill's sympathetic and perceptual imagination divide is unnecessary. By identifying a case in which we can imagine a mental state absent its correlate without splicing together different forms of imagination, the paper undermines Hill's paradigm, thereby strengthening Kripke's paradigm and the modal argument as a viable argument for substance dualism.

Keywords: Mind-body problem, Conceivability, Modal argument, Footnote eleven, Substance dualism, Identity theory

1. Introduction

Substance dualism is the view that the world has two distinct kinds of substance: physical and mental, as opposed to physicalism, the view that all is physical. I define a mental substance as a persisting subject (self or soul), whose essential attribute is 'subjective experience.' It bears first-person conscious capacities such as belief or desire. Under substance dualism, the mental part of us may be considered an example of a mental substance, and mental states are states of that substance (Descartes, 1644/1985, p. 210). I will use Brie Gertler's definition of physical as non-mental. As Gertler (2011) puts it, the question is "Are mental states ultimately, fundamentally non-mental? Are mental states, states of mental things like you and me, ultimately identical (or reducible) to states that are also had by inanimate non-mental things?" (p. 308). The exact definition of physical, however, won't change the argument's course.

This paper argues that the modal argument for substance dualism succeeds because we can imagine mental states without their physical correlate. The argument hinges on which paradigm we adopt to explain how we conceive or imagine things. Philosophers Saul Kripke and Christopher Hill proposed competing paradigms for how we conceive of things, each leading to opposite conclusions on substance dualism.

I will explain the modal argument for substance dualism in section two, and explain a key factor in this debate in section three: the conceivability test. After explaining both Hill's and Kripke's paradigms in sections four and five and explaining why existing arguments against Hill's paradigm fail in section six, I lay out a new argument against Hill's paradigm in section seven. While many existing arguments against Hill either accept his paradigm outright or temporarily assume its truth to show it leads to absurd conclusions, this new argument asserts that Hill's paradigm

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relies on an unnecessary distinction between sympathetic and perceptual imagination by examining a case in which one can imagine a disembodied mental state without splicing together different forms of imagination. This ultimately shows our ability to conceive of something like disembodied pain is evidence for its possibility, thereby supporting substance dualism.

2. The Modal Argument for Substance Dualism

A modal argument is an argument that draws conclusions about reality based on what is possible or necessary. A statement like "1+1=2" is generally considered necessarily true because that statement is always true in all possible worlds, whereas "it will rain tomorrow" is only possibly true because it could be otherwise—there could be a world where it doesn't rain tomorrow. The modal argument for substance dualism attempts to prove substance dualism using this modal logic. A primitive form of the argument was first proposed by Descartes in his Meditations and has been improved upon by later philosophers. The argument rests on whether our ability to conceive of a world is evidence that the world is a possible world. Here is a modern formulation of the argument using disembodied pain:

1) If pain and C-fibers firing are identical, then every world with pain should have C-fibers firing.
2) There exists a possible world where the mental state of pain exists without C-fibers firing.
Conclusion: Pain is not identical to C-fibers firing.

This argument is valid, meaning the conclusion follows if the premises are true. Premise one is true by modal logic (Kripke, 1980, p. 148), as if two things are identical (water is identical to H2O), then to say one thing exists is to say that the other exists (if H2O exists, then so must water); however, premise two is contested. Premise two can be defended using the conceivability test for possibility. A conceivability test asks the question, "Can we conceive of this scenario?" and uses this result to determine whether the scenario is possible or not. For example, if we wanted to determine if a three-sided square could possibly exist, we would perform a conceivability test and find that we can't conceive of a three-sided square. In this case, the conceivability test succeeds because a three-sided square is impossible, and likewise, we cannot conceive of it. For premise two, this conceivability test asks us whether we can conceive of a world in which a mental state exists without its physical correlate (I will use the example of disembodied pain for most of the paper). If we can conceive of a world in which pain exists absent C-fibers firing, then that world must be a possible world according to the argument. Here is a fuller version of the argument:

1) I can conceive of a world in which I have the mental state of pain, absent C-fibers firing.
2) If I can conceive of a world in which the mental state of pain is present without the firing of C-fibers, then there exists a possible world where the mental state of pain exists without C-fibers firing.
3) There exists a possible world where the mental state of pain exists without C-fibers firing.
4) If pain and C-fibers firing are identical, then every world with pain should have C-fibers firing. Conclusion: Pain is not identical to C-fibers firing.

3. The Conceivability Test

A key question in this debate is whether conceivability is evidence of possibility. Generally, it is. A possible world is generally defined as a world without any contradictions. Since we can't generally conceive of contradictions (like a square triangle), conceiving of a world is generally evidence that it doesn't contain a contradiction and is therefore a possible world. Furthermore, we often use conceivability as a guide for reality. For example, we conclude that a book will fit through a door by conceiving of that book passing through a door. For these reasons, the burden of proof is initially on the physicalist to show that the conceivability test fails in this case.

How would a physicalist respond to the fact that the conceivability test is usually reliable? Physicalists argue that the conceivability test fails for necessary a posteriori identity statements (Kripke, 1980, p. 153). A posteriori identity statements are a key issue in this debate because these identity statements are a special case of identity statements where the identity must be discovered empirically. These identity statements show that the conceivability test doesn't always guarantee true possibility because we can imagine two distinct concepts that refer to the same thing. The conceivability test relies on conceptual distinctness, while identity statements rely on referential identity. Because

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conceptual distinctness doesn't entail referential distinctness, the conceivability test appears to fail for a posteriori identity statements. For example, heat and molecular motion are two distinct concepts but refer to the same thing. We can conceive of these concepts being separate (heat without molecular motion) even though they are referentially identical. Physicalists will say that this is what's happening with pain and C-fibers: we imagine the distinct concepts of pain and C-fibers firing, even though they refer to the same thing. Since the examples of heat and pain are both a posteriori identity statements, the dualist now has the burden to find symmetry breakers between something like heat and pain. The dualist must explain what makes pain different such that the conceivability test still works in its case.

4. Kripke's Paradigm

Now that we have established that for a posteriori identity statements, the conceivability test appears to fail, we will take a look at Saul Kripke's explanation for why this isn't the case for mental states in particular. Saul Kripke argues that conceiving a mental state without its corresponding physical state is still reliable evidence for their non-identity by giving a paradigm of how we conceive of two identical things being separate. He says that when we conceive of something like heat without molecular motion, what we are actually conceiving is the mental state that arises from heat without molecular motion. Kripke explains that when we conceive of heat, we use an intermediary property to pick out what is and isn't heat. For this example, the property (which I will call P) that we use to pick out heat would be how we feel when we experience heat—the mental state heat causes (Kripke, 1980, pp. 150-151). Let's imagine two distinct substances—one with heat, the other without heat, called X—that have virtually identical properties. This means that heat and X will feel identical to us; they will both cause the same mental state when interacted with. When we conceive of X and use P to pick out whether X contains heat or not, we will find that we identify X as containing heat, even though it doesn't. Therefore, when we conceive of X, we conceive of being in the mental state of feeling heat without conceiving molecular motion. Therefore, Kripke says that when we conceive of something like heat and molecular motion being distinct, even though they are identical, what we are actually doing is conceiving of something that may feel like heat to us but doesn't actually contain molecular motion (Kripke, p. 150).

With the example of heat, we use what heat feels like to pick out what is and isn't heat. We use this property because heat has a hidden essence (Gertler, 2011, p. 309). A hidden essence is a property that a substance must have in order to be that substance (essential property) that isn't apparent via normal interaction with that substance. For example, the hidden essence of water is H2O. If a substance weren't composed of H2O, it wouldn't be water. Moreover, a water look-alike that tastes and feels exactly like water but isn't composed of H2O wouldn't be water. We wouldn't be able to distinguish between actual water and the look-alike via normal interaction with our five senses; rather, we would have to test to see if the substance was composed of H2O. This is why the essence is hidden. Likewise, since substance X contained no molecular motion yet stimulated the nerves in our hands to give rise to the mental state that heat causes, an object feeling hot isn't enough to know whether it truly is hot. To truly know if something is hot, we must check for molecular motion. This hidden essence is what allows us to conceive of what we think is heat without molecular motion. However, when it comes to pain and C-fibers, this logic falls apart. Can we conceive of something that feels like pain, yet is not pain? No, because when we feel pain, we know for certain we are feeling pain. If pain had a hidden essence, it wouldn't be enough to feel pain to know that we were actually in pain (Gertler, p. 309). We can't create a pain look-alike that feels identical to pain, but isn't pain. Since the method we use to conceive of identical things being separate doesn't work with C-fibers and pain, we must conclude that the reason we can conceive of C-fibers and pain being separate is that they're not identical. Thus, the conceivability test is still evidence for the non-identity of pain and C-fibers.

5. Hill's Paradigm

Now that a comprehensive case for substance dualism using the modal argument has been laid out, we will look at a physicalist's response to this argument. The response that I will be covering in this paper is Christopher Hill's 'Imaginability, Conceivability, Possibility and the Mind-Body Problem.' Hill's article directly responds to Kripke

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about the modal argument. Hill exposes one of Kripke's underlying premises. That is, "The paradigm described in the fifth premise [Kripke's paradigm] is the only model for explaining appearances of separability away" (Hill, 1997, p. 64). The paradigm that is being referred to here is the argument that Kripke made about how, in the case of pain, there is no mental state that serves as a method to pick out whether or not what we are experiencing is actually pain. While Hill concedes that this paradigm could succeed in explaining why we can conceive of identical things being separate, he rejects the premise that this is the only way to explain how we conceive of identical things being separate. Hill contends that there is a better way of explaining conceivability.

Hill draws upon Nagel's footnote eleven in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat," which explains that there are at least two forms of imagination: perceptual and sympathetic. "To imagine something perceptually, we put ourselves in a conscious state resembling the state we would be in if we perceived it" (Nagel, 1974, p. 445). For example, I can perceptually imagine pain by imagining a conscious state of perceiving C-fibers firing. "To imagine something sympathetically, we put ourselves in a conscious state resembling the thing itself" (Nagel, p. 445). An example of this would be imagining the mental state of pain itself by imagining the feeling of pain. Hill claims that when we imagine pain without C-fibers firing, we sympathetically imagine pain (imagining being in pain) and pair it with the perceptual imagination of the absence of C-fibers (seeing the absence of C-fibers).

By taking slices of different types of imagination and combining them, we can conceive of two identical things being separate, even though that's not possible. Hill says that when we do this, our imagination becomes an unreliable guide to possibility. A modal interpretation of why this occurs is that when we create a mental image of something, we conceive of a possible world. So when we engage both our perceptual and sympathetic imaginations to create a mental image, we conceive of two distinct possible worlds and combine them. If these two distinct worlds are incompatible with one another, the combined mental image will depict something impossible. This makes combining sympathetic and perceptual imagination an unreliable guide to possibility (Doggett and Stoljar, 2010, p. 133).

6. Assessing the Arguments Against Hill's Paradigm

Given Hill's paradigm, let's now examine some proposed arguments against it. There are multiple ways that a dualist could respond to Hill's argument. Firstly, a dualist could try to use a reductio ad absurdum on Hill's paradigm. Instead of directly attacking Hill's paradigm, they assume his paradigm and show that it leads to absurd conclusions. Secondly, a dualist may accept Nagel's distinction between sympathetic and perceptual imagination but argue that we don't actually engage both types of imagination when imagining a mental state without its physical correlate. Thirdly, a dualist may reject the idea that there are two types of imagination. I will assess the first two methods and point out their shortcomings, and I will put forth an argument that falls under the third category.

Let's take a look at this first route. Philosophers Tyler Doggett and Daniel Stoljar argue in their paper "Does Nagel's Footnote Eleven Solve the Mind-Body Problem?" that Hill's paradigm overgeneralizes, and that accepting his paradigm will lead to absurd conclusions. They claim that if combining perceptual and sympathetic imaginations is an unreliable guide to possibility, then certain scenarios that we can conceive of would not serve as evidence for their possibility, even though it seems like being able to conceive of said scenarios is evidence of their possibility. Those scenarios are: 1) The physical facts are just as they are, and so are the mental facts (Doggett and Stoljar, 2010, p. 133), and 2) A certain mental state remains the same, but its physical correlate changes. This is the idea that a mental state like pain can be realized in multiple forms of physical mediums (multiple realizability). Doggett and Stoljar argue that we can clearly see that being able to imagine these two scenarios is evidence for their possibility (Doggett and Stoljar, 2010, p. 133).

While Doggett and Stoljar present these scenarios as challenges to Hill, I argue that these scenarios are insufficient to show that Hill's paradigm fails. While it does seem like our ability to conceive of these scenarios is evidence for their possibility, this intuition may be misguided. For the first scenario, I argue that it only appears that conceiving of the scenario is evidence of its possibility because we know that this is the scenario in the actual world. Our imagination of this occurrence is only reliable because the actual world must be a possible world, so to imagine the actual world will always be a reliable guide to possibility, since we are simply imagining reality. For the second scenario, I argue that part of the reason we believe our ability to conceive of said scenario is evidence that it's possible is again that this

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is what we observe in reality—octopi feel pain, yet lack C-fibers. Thus, our intuition that multiple realizability is possible is in large part derived not from our ability to conceive of that scenario, but rather from what we believe about reality based on our observations. Since imagining reality is always a guide to possibility, the reliability of our imagination to show us what's possible or not, in this case, isn't evidence that combining perceptual/sympathetic imagination is generally a reliable guide for possibility. For these two scenarios, the physicalist can argue that, generally speaking, combining perceptual and sympathetic imagination is an unreliable guide to possibility; however, in this case, our ability to conceive of these two scenarios is evidence for their possibility only because we know that these two scenarios are scenarios in the actual world. Finally, since arguments for multiple realizability are still heavily debated, this argument has shaky foundations as it relies heavily on an argument for multiple realizability being true—namely, that our ability to conceive of multiple realizability is evidence for its truth.

Now, let's explore the second route of argumentation against Hill's paradigm. Doggett and Stoljar argue that there are instances when we don't need to use both types of imagination to prove dualism. In Hill's original paper, he says that we can "sympathetically [imagine] the absence of pain while 'perceptually' imagining the presence of C-fiber stimulation" (Hill, 1997, p. 70). However, Doggett and Stoljar argue that we don't even need to use the sympathetic imagination at all to imagine the absence of a mental state, because there is no mental state to put ourselves in (Doggett and Stoljar, 2011, p. 134). Let's assume that this is the case. Is this a sound argument against Hill's paradigm?

No, to show why, let's examine two cases. One is imagining pain without C-fibers, and the other is imagining C-fibers without pain. In this first example, the problem is that the dualist can't argue that we don't use our perceptual imagination. The physicalist would say that to perceptually imagine the absence of C-fibers is different from not perceptually imagining anything, since putting ourselves in a state of perceiving the absence of C-fibers is different from not putting ourselves in any state. Because we are using both our perceptual imagination to imagine the absence of C-fibers and our sympathetic imagination to imagine pain, we are using both imaginations, and the response fails. Now let's move on to the second scenario. It's much easier to argue that we don't use our sympathetic imagination in this case, since putting ourselves in a state resembling not being in a mental state just seems like not putting ourselves in any state. However, the physicalist can retort that since we can be mistaken about C-fibers, we are not actually imagining C-fibers in the second case but are rather imagining a C-fiber-like substance that is not pain. Unlike pain, which we know for certain is pain once we feel it, we can misidentify C-fibers. Thus, this argument also seems to fail since we're not truly imagining C-fibers without pain.

7. A New Argument Against Hill's Paradigm

Finally, that leads us to the third route that a dualist can take: reject the idea that there are two forms of imagination—perceptual and sympathetic. Recall that using perceptual and sympathetic imagination together is unreliable because we conceive of two distinct possible worlds when doing so. If I show that engaging both forms of imagination doesn't cause us to conceive of two distinct possible worlds, then the perceptual/sympathetic divide is disproven. To do this, we must remember that perception itself is a mental state. To perceive an apple is to be in the mental state of seeing an apple. So why does this matter? Let's try to perceptually imagine an apple. To do this, we put ourselves in a state resembling that of perceiving an apple. Now, let's sympathetically imagine the mental state we would be in if we perceived that same apple. We put ourselves in a conscious state resembling that mental state itself (perceiving an apple). What we'll notice is that for both instances, we put ourselves in a state resembling the mental state we would be in if we perceived an apple. Every time we perceptually imagine an object, we are also sympathetically imagining the mental state associated with seeing that object at the same time. In short, imagining an object is the same as imagining what it's like to see that object. Since imagining something corresponds to imagining a possible world in Hill's paradigm, this illustration demonstrates that we can imagine the same possible world despite using different forms of imagination.

The physicalist may respond that this convergence of sympathetic and perceptual imagination doesn't disprove the sympathetic/perceptual divide because the object of imagination is different. In one case, we are imagining an apple, and in the other case, we are imagining the mental state of seeing that apple. It seems reasonable that imagining two different objects in a different way may lead to the same mental image. I will grant this objection, but there is a

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way to bypass it. Keeping in mind the fact that perceptually imagining any object is equivalent to sympathetically imagining the mental state corresponding to perceiving that object, if there is an object of imagination that leads to the same mental state whether we perceptually or sympathetically imagine it, we can show that it's possible to imagine a single thing both perceptually and sympathetically without conceiving of two distinct possible worlds. Think back to C-fibers and pain. When we sympathetically imagine pain, we imagine the feeling of pain. When we perceptually imagine pain, we imagine C-fibers. Is there a way to make these two mental images converge to the same mental image? Yes, but not with pain. Instead of thinking of pain and C-fibers, let's think about sight and the totality of the brain structure responsible for sight. For simplicity's sake, we will refer to the totality of the brain structure responsible for sight as S-fibers. When we perceptually imagine sight, we put ourselves in a mental state resembling that of seeing S-fibers. Since every instance of perceptually imagining an object is the same as sympathetically imagining the mental state of seeing that object, we can say that perceptually imagining sight is equivalent to sympathetically imagining the mental state of seeing something. This "something" can be the S-fibers themselves. One way to sympathetically imagine sight is to put ourselves in a mental state resembling that of seeing S-fibers. In this case, whether we sympathetically or perceptually imagine sight, we are putting ourselves in a mental state resembling that of seeing S-fibers.

To illustrate this better, let's construct a mental image of our own S-fibers. Two things can be said of this mental image. We are, by definition, sympathetically imagining sight by putting ourselves in a mental state resembling seeing S-fibers. We are also, by definition, perceptually imagining sight by imagining S-fibers since S-fibers are identical to sight. In this case, no matter which method I use to imagine sight, I can still get the same mental image of S-fibers. Getting the same mental image when imagining something both perceptually and sympathetically proves that we are not splicing together parts of the sympathetic and perceptual imagination when imagining a mental state. In this case, we are not conceiving of two distinct possible worlds and combining them. Rather, we conceive of one unified possible world that can be said to be both perceptually and sympathetically imagined at the same time.

The physicalist may try to say that just because there is a unified mental image doesn't mean the mechanisms behind perceptual and sympathetic imaginations are the same. They may give an example of our left and right hands feeling the same object and reporting the same sensation of that object. They may say that, for the hand example, even though our hands feel the same sensation, our left and right hands are nevertheless distinct. However, the key difference is that there is a clear distinction between when we are touching something with our left vs. right hand. When our left hand touches a table, our right hand doesn't necessarily touch the table at the same time. Whereas with the example of sight, when we perceptually imagine sight by imagining seeing S-fibers, we are, by definition and necessarily, sympathetically imagining sight at the same time. This means that the mental image can't consist of splices of perception combined with splices of sympathetic imagination. We can't look at that mental image and say "This part is perceptual, this part is sympathetic"; rather, for every part of that mental image, it is both sympathetic and perceptual imagination. This proves there is no sympathetic/perceptual divide because having the same mental image pop up when imagining a single thing means we are not necessarily imagining two distinct possible worlds by using a different form of imagination. In essence, we have identified a case in which using our sympathetic and perceptual imagination yields the same results. This refutes Hill's claim that there are two distinct ways to imagine a mental state.

To really illustrate why this matters, consider Hill's explanation of disembodied pain: we perceptually imagine the absence of C-fibers and sympathetically imagine pain. Let's instead use disembodied sight as the example. We would perceptually imagine the absence of S-fibers while sympathetically imagining sight. Recall that perceptually imagining anything is equivalent to sympathetically imagining the mental state associated with seeing that thing. By this principle, when we perceptually imagine the absence of S-fibers, we are sympathetically imagining seeing the absence of S-fibers. In other words, when we perceptually imagine the absence of S-fibers, we sympathetically imagine sight at the same time. In this case, however, we are imagining this in a single mental image; no part of it is only sympathetic or only perceptual. Instead of imagining two distinct, possible, incompatible worlds and combining them, we imagine one unified, possible world. And since we are not combining two possible worlds, we are no longer introducing modal unreliability, meaning Hill's paradigm fails to explain away our ability to conceive of disembodied sight as unreliable evidence of its possibility. In summary, Hill claims that conceivability is not a reliable guide to

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possibility in this case because utilizing both forms of imagination combines two possible worlds into one impossible world. However, because we have shown that we can create a unified mental image instead of using two distinct forms of imagination, we show that conceiving a mental state absent its physical correlate does not require combining two possible worlds into an impossible world. This unified mental image, then, must be a possible world. Because this possible world contains sight without S-fibers, sight and S-fibers must not be identical. This ultimately shows that Hill's paradigm fails to disprove the conceivability test, and in turn, the modal argument remains a sound argument for substance dualism.

8. Conclusion

The modal argument for substance dualism remains a solid argument against physicalism, grounded in the intuitive claim that conceivability is evidence for possibility. Kripke's paradigm explains why this still holds for mental states, explaining that mental states like pain, unlike physical things such as heat, don't have a hidden essence that needs to be discovered. This makes their conceivability apart from one another more than just an illusion. Hill's alternative paradigm based on perceptual and sympathetic imagination fails on closer inspection. These forms of imagination converge, meaning we can't be using both of them to imagine disembodied pain. Without this distinction, the physicalist cannot explain away the conceivability of disembodied pain as evidence for its possibility.

Even if Hill's paradigm didn't fail, Kripke's paradigm is still regarded as logically consistent and a possible explanation for conceivability, providing the modal argument a consistent way to remain intact even if another view of conceivability is proposed that supports physicalism. However, the proposed argument in this paper has limitations. For example, it relies heavily on Kripke's paradigm as the best paradigm to explain what happens when we conceive of disembodied pain. If major flaws in Kripke's paradigm are pointed out, or a new paradigm is brought forth that better explains the conceivability of disembodied mental states, this may be grounds to reject Kripke's paradigm and thereby reject substance dualism. Furthermore, this argument seemingly only works if we choose sight as the mental state. If physicalists can show that sight has a unique attribute that invalidates this new argument, then Hill's paradigm remains intact, and substance dualism could be rejected. While the physicalist can still object to this argument in many different ways, this new argument provides a new angle and line of argumentation under which Hill's paradigm can be critiqued. This undercuts physicalism, strengthening the modal argument as strong evidence for substance dualism.

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