

Omniscience and Physicalism: A Reply to Beyer

Abstract:

In a recent issue of *Sophia*, Jason A. Beyer introduced objections to the antitheist arguments that purport to show the inconsistencies between God's attributes. In this short response I argue that Beyer's objections are untenable.

1. Introduction

In a recent issue of *Sophia*, Jason A. Beyer notes various antitheist arguments that purport to show the inconsistencies between God's attributes:¹

Argument 1: If God is morally impeccable, then He cannot possess complete knowledge of what it is like to have lust and envy. However, an omniscient being must know fully what it is like to have lust and envy. Therefore, contrary to the tenets of traditional theism, God cannot be both impeccable and omniscient.

Argument 2: If God is omnipotent, then He cannot have complete knowledge of what it is like to feel fear, frustration and despair. However, an omniscient being must know fully what it is like to feel fear, frustration and despair. Therefore, contrary to the tenets of traditional theism, God cannot be both omnipotent and omniscient.

¹ Jason A. Beyer (2004), 'A Physicalist Rejoinder to Some Problems with Omniscience; or How God Could Know What We Know', *Sophia* 43, pp. 5-13.

Argument 3: If God is incorporeal, then He cannot possess complete knowledge of how to do gymnastic exercises on the parallel bars. However, an omniscient being must know fully how to do gymnastic exercises on the parallel bars. Therefore, contrary to the tenets of traditional theism, God cannot be both incorporeal and omniscient.

Beyer introduces objections to the above arguments by appealing to token physicalism. In this response to his paper I argue that his objections are untenable.

2. Beyer's Objections and How They Fail

Beyer contends that if we assume that token physicalism is true, we can undercut all of the above three antitheist arguments. According to Beyer, token physicalism “is the view that each token mental state is in fact a token physical state”.² His objections to the antitheist arguments are based on the general idea that if token physicalism is true, then God *can* know what the antitheist arguments say it is impossible for God to know; by having propositional knowledge about corresponding physical states, instead of being in relevant mental states.

In response to Arguments 1 and 2 Beyer says that, if token physicalism is true, God can know fully what it is like to have envy and lust, or what it is like to feel fear, frustration and despair, by having complete propositional knowledge of the physical states that correspond to the relevant mental states. He writes, “If TP [token physicalism] is true then the taste of pineapple is *not* essentially subjective or embodied. God can know what pineapple tastes like by having full knowledge of the brain state (or whatever

² Beyer (2004), p. 10.

other physical state) with which it is identical. If TP is true, then all subjective experiences are in fact identical to some objective physical state of affairs.”³

Beyer is correct in saying that if token physicalism is true then all subjective experiences are identical to some objective physical states. However, it is far from obvious that if token physicalism is true then *knowing* subjective experiences is identical to *knowing* some objective physical states. Indeed, a number of token physicalists deny that. They contend that although all subjective experiences are identical to some objective physical states, having complete knowledge of objective physical states does not guarantee having complete knowledge of corresponding subjective experiences, unless one undergoes these experiences. For, they claim, there is no *a priori* derivation from objective physical facts to subjective facts. In sum: Beyer is mistaken in saying that if token physicalism is true then the antitheist arguments fail. What he can say instead is only that if a *specific version* of token physicalism, *a priori* physicalism in particular, is true then the antitheist arguments fail. (*A priori* physicalism is the thesis that there is an *a priori* derivation from objective physical facts to subjective facts). It is worth noting that among contemporary philosophers of mind *a priori* physicalism is less popular than its rival, *a posteriori* physicalism, according to which there is not an *a priori* but only an *a posteriori* derivation from objective physical facts to subjective facts. I do not here contend that *a priori* physicalism is false. However, I do contend that in order to motivate his objection to the antitheist argument Beyer needs to defend not merely the claim that token physicalism is true, but the significantly more controversial claim that *a priori* physicalism is true.

³ Beyer (2004), p. 10.

In response to Argument 3 Beyer says that if token physicalism is true, God can know fully how to do gymnastic exercises on the parallel bars by having complete propositional knowledge of the actions to which the corresponding knowledge-how is reducible. He claims, “If TP [token physicalism] is true, then in principle knowledge-how, such as how to do gymnastics...can be captured by propositional knowledge.”⁴

Beyer’s claim is mistaken, because whether or not token physicalism is true is one thing and whether or not knowledge-how is reducible (or identical) to propositional knowledge is quite another. Many philosophers, including many token physicalists, think that knowledge-how and propositional knowledge are fundamentally distinct and that the former is not reducible to the latter. Hence, presupposing that token physicalism is true does not, by itself, really help Beyer’s objection.

However, there *are* also many philosophers, including token physicalists, who argue that knowledge-how is essentially identical to propositional knowledge. Can Beyer then defend his objection by appealing to their arguments? The answer is, unfortunately, negative. Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, for example, argue that knowledge-how is a form of propositional knowledge.⁵ According to them knowing how to *F* is knowing, of some way *w*, that *w* is a way to *F* and entertaining the proposition that *w* is a way to *F* under a practical mode of presentation. To take another example, John Perry argues that knowledge-how is simply a unique form of propositional knowledge, which involves a special kind of representation called an ‘executable schema’.⁶ Although these philosophers do agree with Beyer that knowledge-how is a form of propositional

⁴ Beyer (2004), p. 11.

⁵ Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2001), ‘Knowing How’, *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), pp. 411-444.

⁶ John Perry (2001), *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness* Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

knowledge they could well disagree with Beyer's objection to Argument 3. For example, they might claim that God cannot know fully how to do gymnastics because His incorporeality precludes Him from being in a relevant practical mode of presentation or adopting a relevant executable schema. In sum: Beyer has shown *not* that if token physicalism is true then Argument 3 fails, but that if it is true that knowledge-how is reducible to propositional knowledge *simpliciter*, then the argument fails.

One might think at this point that Beyer might be able to show that knowledge-how is, indeed, reducible to propositional knowledge *simpliciter*. However, this is impossible. For it seems plainly false that the possession of propositional knowledge *simpliciter* guarantees that one knows how to perform a relevant task in the fullest sense. (The word 'fullest sense' should be added here because we are considering God's omniscience). Consider, again, the example of gymnastics. Perhaps knowledge of how to do gymnastics is reducible to some propositional knowledge in some sense. However, the mere possession of that propositional knowledge *never* enables one to know how to do gymnastics in the fullest sense, even in principle. No one, even God, can know how to do gymnastics in the way, say, Olympic gymnasts know simply by learning relevant propositions. Being an Olympian is not that easy!

4. Conclusion

We can summarise what we have learned about Beyer's objections to the antitheist arguments as follows. Contrary to what he believes, it is not the case that his objections are successful if token physicalism is true. They are successful if (a) there is an *a priori* derivation from objective physical facts to subjective facts and (b) knowledge-how is

reducible to propositional knowledge *simpliciter*. I have claimed that (a) is extremely controversial and difficult to demonstrate and that (b) is false. Therefore, the antitheist arguments withstand Beyer's objections.^{7 8}

⁷ For further discussion of the antitheist arguments, see also: Torin Alter (2002), 'On Two Alleged Conflicts Between Divine Attributes', *Faith and Philosophy* 19, pp. 47-57; Yujin Nagasawa (2003), 'Divine Omniscience and Experience: A Reply to Alter', *Ars Disputandi* 3 (<http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000098/index.html>).

⁸ Acknowledgements.