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SUMMARY OF *ARE WE BODIES OR SOULS?*

This book is about the nature of human beings, defending a version of substance dualism, similar to that of Descartes, that each of us living on earth consists of two distinct substances—body and soul. Bodies keep us alive and by enabling us to interact with each other and the world they make our lives greatly worth living; but our soul is the one essential part of each of us.

After an introductory chapter, chapter 2 explains the crucial philosophical terms (which may be unfamiliar to non-philosophers) used in discussions of this topic, and then sets out the rival theories of human nature, beginning with different versions of physicalism, going on to property dualism, and finally to substance dualism. Chapter 3 begins the defense of substance dualism with a detailed discussion of theories of personal identity. These theories can be divided into many complex theories and one simple theory. A “complex theory” of personal identity claims that “being the same person” as an earlier person is analysable in terms of the later person having some of the same body or some of the same physical or mental properties as the earlier person—for example, having much of the same brain or many of the same memory beliefs as the earlier person—or some lesser degree of continuity with the body or properties of the earlier person. I argue that all such theories are open to one or two crucial objections—the arbitrariness objection, that there is no justification for taking any one particular degree rather than any other particular degree of continuity as the necessary and sufficient condition of personal identity: and the more-than-

one-candidate objection that many such theories have the consequence that there can be more than one possible later person which satisfies all its requirements, whereas only one later person could possibly be the same as a particular earlier person. In the light of such objections, many philosophers have claimed that personal identity is a matter of degree—more than one future person may be “partly the same as” some earlier person. I argue that all such theories are ultimately incoherent. Hence, I advocate a “simple theory” of personal identity that “being the same person” cannot be analysed in terms of having any of the same physical parts or physical or mental properties as, or any degree of continuity in these respects with, an earlier person.

I argue in chapter 4 that it follows from a “simple theory” that there is a non-physical part of each person, our soul, which makes us who we are. I then examine Descartes’s argument to show that it is logically possible that we could exist merely as souls; and after showing that Descartes’s original version of that argument fails, I defend an amended version of it. I claim that it is conceivable (that is, logically possible) that “while I am thinking my body is suddenly destroyed,” and claim that it follows from that that “I am a soul, a substance, the only essential property of which is the capacity for thought.”

I defend this claim by spelling out how each of us can make sense of the description of a situation in which “I” exist without a body, and so conceive that we exist without a body. Given the operation of the laws of nature existing currently on earth, our souls are kept in existence by the operation of our brains; but my claim is that if those laws ceased to operate and so to bind body and soul together, it would be the continuing existence of our souls—if they continued to exist—which would constitute the continuing existence of us. The theory of Thomas Aquinas also holds that humans have two parts—body and soul—and that a human soul can continue to exist as a thinking thing without its body; and so any differences between my Cartesian theory and a Thomist theory are almost entirely terminological.

Chapter 5 considers the objection to Descartes’s argument most prominent in modern philosophy, which, if it were cogent, would also defeat my amended version of the argument, as well as Descartes’s original argument. This is the objection that Descartes’s argument depends on a crucial assumption that when each of us claims that “while I am thinking, my body is suddenly destroyed,” refers to “I,” we know to what we are referring; we know what the “I” is, about which we are trying to assess the different theories. But that assumption, the objection claims, is quite unjustified; and so we are quite unjustified in supposing that we can draw any conclusions from it about any logically necessary or sufficient conditions for being the person who we are. I argue that this objection to Descartes’s argument rests on ignoring an important philosophical distinction between what I call “informative” and “uninformative” designators. A designator is an expression which picks out an

object, such as a substance or property; an “informative designator” is one such that if you know what the designator means, you know to what it refers, in the sense that you know a set of logically necessary and sufficient conditions for being that object. You may know these conditions either by being able to recognise under ideal conditions when the expression applies to an object and when it does not, or by having a definition of the expression in words which can ultimately be defined in terms of other words for which we know the conditions in the first way. Thus, ‘walks’, ‘shoe’, ‘cat’, ‘mouth’, and ‘face’ are informative designators of properties (or kinds of substance), and ‘London’ and ‘the Eiffel Tower’ are informative designators of substances since, in knowing what these expressions mean, we know to what they refer because—under ideal conditions—we can recognise instances of them. And words such as ‘philatelist’ or ‘influential’ and—I suggest—many of the technical terms of chemistry and physics are also informative designators since we can recognise instances of the words (such as ‘weight’, ‘particle’, ‘distance’, and ‘circular’) by which they are ultimately defined. An uninformative designator is a word such that one can know what it means without knowing to what it refers on any particular occasion. For example, when “the tallest building in London” is used, not to refer to a property, but to refer to a substance which has that property, we can know what the expression means without knowing which building that is; and we can know what “the car outside the window” means without knowing the make of the car or anything that makes it the particular car it is. The objection to Descartes’s argument then amounts to the claim that ‘I’ is an uninformative designator. I proceed to argue that ‘I’ is in fact an informative designator: and so, knowing what it is to be “I,” we are in a position to work out the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for each of us to be the person who we are. Hence, we can see by reflecting on its content that it is conceivable that “while I am thinking my body is suddenly destroyed,” and so that my Cartesian argument is successful.

I then go on in chapter 6 to defend the view that each person’s soul interacts with their brain. It follows that the physical world, including our bodies and brains, is not a “closed system”; not merely do our brains cause events in our souls, but we, that is our souls, cause events in our brains which cause us to move our limbs. I argue that any arguments by scientists purporting to establish the contrary, that is to establish “the causal closure of the physical,” would themselves depend for their justification on the assumption that the physical realm is not closed, and hence would be self-defeating. I come in chapter 7 to consider whether there could be a scientific explanation of the origins of human souls and their interactions with brains and so with bodies. I claim that it is plausible to suppose that there is a law of nature which brings it about that at a certain stage of its development each human foetus gives rise to *a* connected soul. Also, there are very many very detailed laws

of nature determining that brain events of particular types cause mental events of particular types in souls, and that mental events of particular types in souls cause brain events of particular types. However, in concluding chapter 7, I argue that it is logically impossible—because of what a law of nature is—that the operation of any law of nature could bring it about that a particular foetus gives rise to a particular soul. It is not possible that there is some law of nature which determines that a particular foetus would give rise to your soul rather than to any one of innumerably many possible souls.