



R. Scott Smith

# Could We Know Reality, Given Physicalism? Nancey Murphy's Views as a Test Case

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*Nancey Murphy develops an integrated case for physicalism across several disciplines, rejecting the soul as one's immaterial essence philosophically, scientifically, and biblically. Her physicalism is nonreductive causally, yet reductive ontologically. This article (1) explains her ontology; (2) examines her ontological resources for us to know reality; (3) argues that we cannot know reality on that basis; and (4) sketches a positive case for how we can know reality, which will require what she denies – immaterial essences, even souls.*

Various Christian scholars have advocated turning away from viewing humans as having a body and soul (substance dualism) to a form of monism, namely, physicalism.<sup>1</sup> Some work (or worked) primarily in the sciences, such as Arthur Peacocke, Warren S. Brown, and Malcolm Jeeves. Others specialize in theology, biblical studies, or philosophy, for example, LeRon Shults, Joel Green, or Lynne Rudder Baker.

I will focus upon the work of Nancey Murphy, who has developed a tightly integrated case for physicalism across several disciplines, including philosophy (and philosophy of science), neuroscience, psychology, theology, biblical studies, and ethics. Due to the scope of her influence, her work can provide an excellent vehicle to examine the prospects of physicalism, especially for Christians working in science and/or in philosophy and theology of science.

Murphy rejects the human soul as one's immaterial essence for philosophical, scientific, and biblical reasons. To her, contemporary biblical studies seem

to show that scripture does not necessarily teach body-soul dualism. Rather, word studies, such as those by Green, seem to show that, for example, the Greek word *psuche*, which usually has been translated in the Bible as "soul," could be translated as "life," thereby not requiring anthropological dualism.<sup>2</sup>

Murphy's version of physicalism is "nonreductive" causally, yet reductive ontologically. It is the hard core of a scientific research program and part of her Anglo-American postmodern philosophy, which also includes epistemological holism and her linguistic appropriations of the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. For example, all experience and knowledge are theory laden; there is no nontheoretical, direct access to reality.

Murphy clearly thinks that we can know much about the way reality is. She rightly presupposes that our thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and more can give us knowledge of reality. Yet, I want to call into question our ability to do that,

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given her ontologically reductive physicalist views. To do this, first I will try to explain her ontology. Second, I will examine her ontological resources for us to know reality. Nevertheless, third, I will argue that we cannot know reality on her views. Then, fourth, I will sketch a positive case for how we can know reality, which will require what she denies—immaterial essences, including that we have souls.<sup>3</sup> This finding should have vast implications for knowledge in science, theology, and other academic disciplines. But it may help to briefly define some technical philosophical terms and concepts before continuing.

### Some Philosophical Terms

Since Aristotle, philosophers have understood a *substance* to be an individual thing which is constituted as such by a deep principle of unity. A living thing would be a substance, and its life (or, its *soul*—as many have said, following Aristotle) would be its principle of unity. However, a conglomerate rock is made up of many different kinds of stuff that is not held together by a deep principle of unity. Thus, it is best thought of as an *aggregate*, not a substance. Here, “substance” is being used distinctly from its common understanding as material stuff.

On Aristotle's view, all substances have *essences* or *natures*, which are the set of properties that make it the *kind* of individual it is. A dolphin has a certain genetic “blueprint” and is a substance of the kind *Delphinidae*. An atom with seventy-nine protons in its nucleus is of the kind *gold*. We can identify substances properly as members of kinds by mentally grasping their essences. So, substances have a natural, intrinsic unity, which is not humanly contrived.

Substances also can have nonessential properties; that I know and understand natural selection is not essential to me, but it still is true of me. I have essentially the *capacity* for being patient, but whether I actually develop that virtue is nonessential to my being. I also can remain the same person through time and change. How? Aristotle's answer is that it is due to sameness of soul (our essential set of properties), not our nonessential properties (e.g., that I have brown hair), which can and do change.

Substances also are the *owners* and *possessors* of their parts and *properties*, but they are not “had” by

anything more fundamental. As a human substance, I *have* all my parts and properties *in* me, but I am not part of another substance. The same applies to our cat or our grapefruit tree. Properties also seem to have essences; for example, courage is essentially a kind of virtue, not a color or shape. For Aristotle, properties can be material or immaterial.<sup>4</sup>

Last, *intentionality* is a property of mental states, namely, their “of-ness,” “about-ness,” or representing quality. It is *not* identical with *intention* (purpose). We think *about* theories, chemical compounds, and more. We have beliefs *about* our scientific findings, God, and other things. When making observations, we have experiences *of* whatever we are observing.<sup>5</sup>

Intentionality does not seem to be just a linguistic feature. It seems to be a necessary feature of our mental states. It seems that if we pay attention to them, we can know these features to be so. If one doubts intentionality's being necessary, try having one of these mental states without it being of or about something (whether that “thing” obtains in reality or not).

### Murphy's Ontology

Though Murphy favors nonreductive physicalism, she criticizes reductive kinds.<sup>6</sup> She sees them in the light of the metaphysical reductionism of the modern period. Causation is bottom-up in such views, in which the behavior of the lowest-level parts of a system (the subatomic ones) determines all other levels of behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Murphy rejects this view for a variety of developments. First, she argues that there is the emergence of properties or processes that are describable only by concepts pertinent to a higher level of analysis than physics.<sup>8</sup> Some features of life cannot be described in the language of physics or other natural sciences. For example, she asks why there are apparently fine-tuned cosmological constants that are necessary for life, as opposed to all other possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, “Why are there any laws at all? What is their ontological status? What gives them their force?”<sup>10</sup> She thinks that science cannot answer these questions; they are the province of theology or of other religious or metaphysical views.

A second reason for rejecting causal reductionism is “decoupling,” understood broadly beyond its meaning in physics. By it she means to describe “the relative autonomy of levels in the hierarchy of the sciences.”<sup>11</sup> For example, she discusses the behavior of a gas in a container, in which “some average properties of the gas particles (the micro-level) matter for purposes of description at the macro-level,” such as the relationship of the average kinetic energy of the molecules to the absolute temperature of the gas.<sup>12</sup> But, she notes that the exact path of the individual molecules does not matter. There could be many paths that would yield equivalent macro-level results. By extension, she claims that “emergent laws (laws relating variables at the higher level) are coming to be seen as significant in their own right and not merely as special cases of lower-level laws.”<sup>13</sup> If right, causal reductionism should be rejected. Instead, we should realize the places for bottom-up *and* top-down causation, and whole-part constraint.

Laws at higher levels restrain lower-level processes, and higher-level states are multiply realizable. That is, an act can be described biologically, yet redescribed at higher levels. For instance, biologically, a person may kill an animal. Psychologically, the event becomes an action, since at that level we consider intentions, which involve the circumstances under which the event took place (perhaps putting the animal out of its misery). Socially, a different description could arise, such as whether an action is socially acceptable in that culture, which involves a different set of circumstances. Then, there could be legal and economic descriptions. In each level, there are different circumstances *and* different languages and descriptions at work. Circumstances play a significant role in each level. Certain lower-level properties can constitute a kind of higher-level property (psychological, moral, etc.) under proper circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

Murphy gives some additional examples about the emergence of new causal capacities, to demonstrate more fully the multiple realizability of higher-order properties.<sup>15</sup> First, goodness may be lived out in many patterns of life, and not just as St. Francis did. Second, she discusses how she may arrange with a friend to use a light in her window as a signal, to let her friend know if she is at home or not. If the light is on, it means she is home; if not, it means she is away. Murphy claims here that there is only one

state of affairs, but two levels of description. As she explains, “Turning the light on constitutes my sending the ‘at home’ message under the circumstances of our having made the appropriate arrangement.”<sup>16</sup> But, *that* message could have been realized differently; they could have used a different signal (the shade being up) to give the same message.

Third, Murphy considers how nonneural circumstances are “widely recognized” to make a difference in the multiple realization of higher-order properties in the role of “mental set” in perception. She considers a case in which

subjects receive a small electric shock on the back. Depending on their mental set, they will experience the sensation either as a burn or as ice. So at the subvenient level there is a series of physical events including the application of the shock, the transmission of a nerve impulse to the brain, and the set of brain events that realize the sensation of either hot or cold. The mental set will, of course, be realized neurologically, but it is multiply realizable: it could be the realization of a variety of perceptions of the environment (ice-cube tray on the counter, burn ointment), or the result of statements by the experimenters, or any one of an unbounded set of other devices resulting in what we can only meaningfully describe at the mental level as the *expectation* of heat or of cold.<sup>17</sup>

In these cases, Murphy intends to show that higher-level descriptions supervene upon lower-level ones, and circumstances (context) play a central part in what constitutes the higher-order ones. Higher-order properties are not identical with the lower-order ones, thereby arguing against causal reductionism.

While there may be different circumstances at higher levels of description, nonetheless there is one ontological state of affairs, which is physical. Put differently, Murphy is against causal reductionism, but she favors ontological reductionism. Humans are physical things, but they may be described variously—physiologically, mentally, ethically, sociologically. Indeed, we “only make causal sense of a series of human actions by attending to the mental-level description, which includes reasons, judgments [free will], and so on.”<sup>18</sup> Descriptions of the mental are not reducible to those of the physical.<sup>19</sup> Hence, she embraces nonreductive physicalism. Likewise, the creation is physical, but it can be described in ways that cannot be reduced to physical discourse.

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So, higher-level properties constrain lower-level ones in physical substances in a physical world. For Murphy, wholes are genuinely significant; this concept counts against reductive physicalism.<sup>20</sup> Wholes and parts mutually condition each other. Murphy explains this concept in regard to how the mental and physical can interact in human beings:

The nonreductive physicalist view ... attributes mental and spiritual properties to the entire person, understood as a complex physical and social organism. Since mental states ... are states of the whole person, no special causal problems arise.<sup>21</sup>

Murphy advocates nonreductive physicalism as the hard core of a scientific research program, which she sees as the most progressive such program available.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, I believe that she sees dualism as a degenerative one. Murphy thinks that

science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore,

philosophers have argued cogently that the belief in a substantial mind or soul is the result of confusion arising from how we talk. We have been misled by the fact that "mind" and "soul" are nouns into thinking that there must be an object to which these terms correspond.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, dualists have been unable to solve cogently how an immaterial substance can interact with a physical body.<sup>25</sup> So, for her, the soul is not an immaterial substance; rather, it is a "functional capacity of a complex physical organism."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, without a neo-cortex, there is no capacity for philosophical or other kinds of thought, and there would not be persons.<sup>27</sup>

Despite her clarity, I have observed peoples' confusion about her views of mental qualities. Due in part to her use of terms like "mental properties" or "capacities," it might seem to them that she is a property dualist who supports an emergence of immaterial mental states from the brain. Yet, this interpretation seems mistaken, for she clearly affirms ontological reductionism. So, for her, humans are physical, without any immaterial parts or properties. Yet, there is a plurality of discourses, each with its own language, which may supervene upon ontological and higher-order discourses. But these are different ways of conceiving what is ontologically real.

Now, Murphy clearly thinks that our thoughts, beliefs, and experiences can give us knowledge of reality, only not in a nontheoretical, unconceptualized, or immediate way. For her, all our access to reality is mediated and requires concepts. How might that work, given her ontological resources?

## Her Ontological Resources for Knowing Reality

Let me discuss one general criterion for our mental states to be together with what we are thinking about, observing, or believing. It is the "of-ness" or the "about-ness" (or, intentionality) of our mental states. For instance, I am having a visual experience of my laptop's screen, which experience can be together with the actual screen if it is present before me.

So, on Murphy's physicalism, how might our mental states be together with reality? I am not aware that she directly addresses this question. However, she does address related topics. For instance, the subject of reference appears in terms of its being one such topic, but not the main or only one. For her, the meaning of a term or sentence is not a matter of what a private mental state is about. Instead, it is the way the term is used in a language game in a community.<sup>28</sup> Though our words can be used to refer to and describe reality, that always is done under an aspect, or conceptual scheme, for we never have direct access to reality.

This discussion is related to her epistemology, in which she rejects *foundationalism* in principle. On foundationalism, there would be some beliefs that are directly, or immediately, justified, due to their being based, or "erected," upon a "foundation" that can be "anchored" in reality — to use a building metaphor. These are "basic," "foundational" beliefs. Other beliefs can be justified if they are based upon these, and even more theoretical beliefs can be justified by their being based upon other justified beliefs, much like a new story of a building is supported by the strength of the previous one, and the strength of the entire edifice is grounded ultimately in its foundation.<sup>29</sup> But as she says, even so-called "foundational" beliefs end up "hanging from the balcony"; they are supported by higher-order theoretical beliefs and cannot give us insight directly into reality.<sup>30</sup>

So, while she affirms roles for referring to objects in reality and our being able to know them, albeit always from under a theoretical aspect, nonetheless she seems to presuppose that our thoughts, experiences, and beliefs can be together with their intended objects. That is a good presupposition we live by every day. Still, she does not seem to address how that “togetherness” happens.<sup>31</sup> But perhaps other physicalists who have tried to address it can help.

Moreover, it could be important to address, since our knowing some things depends at least upon some broad conditions. First, *how* we know something depends in part upon what *kind* of thing it is we are trying to know. For instance, I will not come to know what logical inference is in the same way I know what garlic tastes like. Second, our knowing some things seems to involve what kind of thing *we* are. For instance, as image bearers, we have abilities to reason morally and know many abstract concepts, which other creatures seem to lack.

So, does her nonreductive physicalism have the ontology needed so that we can know reality? And, how might Murphy help account for our mental states’ intentionality, and how they can be together with reality, given her physicalism? Perhaps the most plausible story for physicalists in general is to appeal in veridical cases to a physical, causal story, in which an external object causes in us a mental state (an experience, for instance) as the result of a causal chain of physical states, originating with the intended object and terminating in us. For instance, the laptop I see causes in me the experience of it. So, that experience is *of* the laptop in the sense that it is *causally correlated* with it.

Surely there is much truth herein. Even on a dualist view, there is a causal story to be told about the light waves reflecting off the laptop, causing a series of physical states that impinge upon my retina, which, in turn, cause sensations in my optic nerve, and then brain state activity. Without such a causal sequence, I would not have that experience.

#### *Issues with the Reliable, Causal Chain View*

Still, there is a principled objection to causal chain accounts of perception. We have access only to the last physical state, without any way to traverse the lengthy chain and arrive at the originating object.

Hence, how can we know that it is indeed the originating object which the experience (or other mental state, like a belief) is about? However, Fred Dretske, a naturalist, has replied that we

don’t have to “traverse” the causal chain resulting in the belief in order to have knowledge of the external cause. All that is required is that the belief, in fact, be the result of some reliable process [because] this information [about the object] ... is being transferred in the perceptual process to the representation (experience) ...<sup>32</sup>

Dretske seems right. With an instrument, we do not have to know that it is, in fact, functioning properly in order to know that what it indicates is thus-and-so. I do not verify that my car’s engine temperature gauge is working properly each time I look at it before I am entitled to believe that what it indicates is correct.<sup>33</sup>

But, will his reply rebut this objection? Suppose a scientific researcher tries to observe the effect of a new selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) upon a particular patient’s brain. The scientist observes what appears to be a change in brain cell chemistry. But, suppose that the researcher’s experience actually is being produced by something else, or maybe by nothing whatsoever (i.e., a hallucination). How will the researcher be able to know the difference between veridical experiences of the effect from this SSRI and those that are not? On Murphy’s view, the scientist’s brain states, which are being conceived under the aspect of being of the SSRI’s effects, will perform the functional role of enabling the researcher’s experience to be together with its intended object, *even if* this SSRI is not actually being used. All these processes simply seem to happen to the researcher. And, the researcher cannot find out through more observations if the real SSRI is causing his or her experiences, since the scientist cannot traverse the chain to the originating object.

Another issue is that there is *not* a *necessary* connection between thoughts, beliefs, or experiences of an object and the object itself. A mental act’s mere “of-ness” is not sufficient, for we can think about many things, including possible states of affairs, without their having to obtain in reality (e.g., Pegasus or if my glasses are on my desk at home). The latter case parallels those in scientific testing, in which we form a hypothesis and test for its accuracy. Conversely, the existence of an object does not entail

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that there would be any thoughts or experiences of it. *Their connection, therefore, is not existential, thereby undermining causal chain accounts.*

What, therefore, could the “nature” of this connection be in veridical cases? Perhaps we can gain a clue by paying careful attention to what is before our “minds”<sup>34</sup> in conscious awareness. I think that we can notice that the intentionality of our thoughts, beliefs, and experiences have significant, even *essential* features. First, they are *particularized*. Consider my thought about tonight’s dinner, or my experience of being seated at a table. What they are of is not generic or undifferentiated.<sup>35</sup> In each case, their intentionality is directed “toward” some intended “object.”<sup>36</sup>

Second, these mental states *necessarily* have intentionality. It does not seem that we could have a thought, belief, or an experience in making an observation that lacks intentionality. Moreover, their intentionality seems to be *intrinsic*, or *essential*, to *each* mental state. My thought about tonight’s dinner could not be about anything else and still be the thought it is. I could think about the protons in gold, but that is a different thought, due to its different contents.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, I could observe a gas’s behavior, but *that* experience could not have been of my being seated.

### *An Issue from Quine*

So, how might these features help us explain the connection between our mental states and reality (in veridical cases)? W. V. O. Quine might help us in a discussion of what he calls the *indeterminacy of radical translation*. He considers how we could translate text from one language into another, radically different one, and yet not lose the author’s intended meaning. To him, the translation (and meaning) always will be an open question, since there are no intrinsic meanings to words. Daniel Dennett explains, “Quine’s thesis ... is thus of a piece with his attack on essentialism; if things had real, intrinsic essences, they could have real, intrinsic meanings.”<sup>38</sup>

For Quine, there are no essences to words because there are no immaterial essences (i.e., “essentialism” is false). As a naturalist, an essence could not be a particular physical pattern that is found in many instances. If it were, then the typed word “theory” (i.e., a word “token”) could have an intrinsic essence.

But, it does not, for we *could* have assigned a different meaning to that word token—perhaps even to mean, for example, a sandwich. Moreover, what do many instances of the word “theory” have in common? We could conceive of these instances abstractly, maybe as part of the set of six-letter words, but that would be just our *conceptualization*, which would not confer an *intrinsic essence* to “theory.” So, the word token “theory” itself does not have an essential, intrinsic meaning. It seems that it would need to be something nonphysical.

While Quine focuses on meanings (which also are intentional), an extension is that mental states also could have real, intrinsic intentionality if they had real, *intrinsic essences* (i.e., immaterial ones). Just as there could be a “deeper fact,” namely, an essence, beyond a mere attribution or interpretation that could settle a question about what an author really meant, there could be a deeper fact about whether one’s experience really is intrinsically of some object, or whether the person is just conceiving it to be so. Moreover, it seems that intentionality is a property that literally all thoughts, beliefs, and experiences used in observation have in common. How can that be? It seems that it is a *universal*—an immaterial entity that is *one* thing, and yet it can be present in *many* particular instances—that cannot be reduced to a physical representation, which always would be particular. It also seems that intentionality cannot be reduced to a physical property because it does not seem to have weight, mass, or density. Nor does it seem to be definable by being spatially related to, or heavier or harder than, some physical object. Yet, intentionality is intrinsic and essential to these mental states.

Now, since Murphy also rejects immaterial essences, there also would not be any real, intrinsically intentional states for her. But this means her view faces a major problem. For if so-called “mental” states really are ontologically just physical states, they have been conceived as being intentional by us, using the language of “mentalist” discourse. We have given them a linguistic attribution of being of or about their intended objects. But that attribution does not somehow add intrinsic intentionality *itself* to that state. And while a patient’s brain state is affected by how *that* person conceives of it, nonetheless that brain state *itself* is indifferent ontologi-

cally to how others conceptualize or describe it from a third-person standpoint.<sup>39</sup>

So, without real, intrinsic intentionality, it seems that we are left with only *taking* our mental states to be of such-and-such. This result fits with Murphy's overall philosophical views, since she holds that all experiences, beliefs, et cetera are theory-laden. But without a way to have our mental states line up directly with reality itself, apart from our interpretations, we are left without a way to begin the process to interpret (much less know) reality. For interpretations eventually must be of something that is not an interpretation, lest we have an infinite regress of interpretations without a way to start, not being able to access anything in the real world.<sup>40</sup> Consider an elementary school experiment: students observe ten ravens and notice all are black. They then reasonably infer that all ravens are black. Is their hypothesis defeasible? Yes; but that requires observing more ravens *themselves*, and not our interpretations of them.

The upshot seems to be that there is *no ontologically real, intrinsic intentionality* available to her, to help address how our mental states truly can be together with their intended objects in reality, or to preserve the essential features of intentional states. Accordingly, it seems that, on her ontology, our mental states and their intended objects cannot be together. If so, then it seems that there is no way we could know reality on Murphy's physicalism.

But perhaps she could reply along Wittgensteinian lines. That is, our mental states are together with their intended objects due to how we use our language in our community, according to our "grammatical rules."<sup>41</sup> Still, this move simply presupposes the very thing in question. Somehow, words need to become fixed with objects, and to even begin to make such rules seems to require the very togetherness we are seeking to explain.

Or, perhaps God somehow sovereignly and graciously acts to enable our mental states to be together with reality, so we can know it. Perhaps God moves at the quantum level to "impart" or reveal truths to us. Murphy has suggested that God moves at the quantum level in human beings to communicate with us, all the while not determining us or our actions in any significant way.<sup>42</sup>

Still, for her, quantum phenomena are not immaterial, given her ontological reductionism. Though physical, they have capacities such that we cannot predict (all?) their behaviors. So while God may have thoughts and beliefs he wants to communicate to us, nonetheless we will not be able to receive them, simply because we are working solely with physical stuff which will not have real, intrinsic intentionality. Therefore our mental states will not be able to be together with their objects.

## The Nature of the Connection and Various Objections

How then ontologically can our mental states be together with their intended objects? Surely they can be, for we do know many things. Since the connection is *not* existential, and since for the physicalist who denies immaterial essences altogether there is no real, intrinsic "of-ness" or "about-ness," it seems that we are left with a conclusion that undermines physicalism: *the needed connection seems to be due to immaterial essences*. That is, if a mental *act* is of the appropriate *kind*, then the objectivity of the object is knowable. For instance, to examine an argument's validity we would not smell it, nor would we tune a violin by tasting the strings. Rather, there seem to be *essential* kinds of constraints that determine which acts and objects can come together in what Edmund Husserl called a relationship of "fulfillment," or verification, a relationship we can be aware of, in which the object is present before us in conscious awareness and found to be as it is thought to be.<sup>43</sup> Wholes, such as balls, persons, theories, and more, can enter into that relationship with the mental states which are of them, due to the kinds of properties they have.

Moreover, this seems to be the only way to secure the intrinsic quality of intentional acts. A given mental act is intrinsically of or about its intended object (whether it obtains or not) due to *that* act's intentional nature, or essence—its being of or about that object.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the mere intentionality of, say, my thought about my apple that I will eat for lunch will not suffice for it to be together with it. I believe the connection that can obtain in veridical cases is due to the given intentional state's nature, along with the intensional properties' essence(s) in the intended object (that is, properties that object must have to be that *kind* of thing). There is a *natural*

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affinity between them, due to their natures or essences.<sup>45</sup>

Now, some might object that these concerns can be alleviated if Murphy is willing to admit into her ontology emergent, immaterial mental states whose essence is to be of their intended object. While intriguing, I do not think that this will help us know reality. For even if we have such states, of what *use* can they be to *us*? Somehow, *we* need to be able to *use* them to know reality. Consider my experience of some red, round object at a distance, such that I cannot discern if it is a ball, an apple, or something else. As I walk toward it, I can have more experiences of it. Eventually, I can see it more clearly, and it appears to be an apple, but of what kind? I can make more observations by looking at its shape and bottom. I can notice that it has the points which I know are characteristic of red delicious apples. I then form the belief that this is a red delicious apple.

Somehow, through a relatively short period of time, I have had experiences which I know have been of the same object. Other cases (e.g., scientific studies) may require experiences over much more time. I progressed to a point where I could form a true belief that it is a red delicious apple. Somehow, I must have a noetic unity through this process, that I am able to compare my experiences with each other, perhaps unconsciously, and even with my concept of what a red delicious apple is, finally to see it as such, and then form a belief based on these experiences.

Deliberately, I am calling attention to what we often take for granted. But, what must be true about me (and us) in order to be able to do these things? First, these mental states need to be present in me; *I have* and *own* them. But what kind of thing am I? If I am basically my brain or my body, that is, a physical thing with emergent, immaterial mental states, we might well wonder how something immaterial could arise from just the material. Worse, how could I have these mental states, in that they would be immaterial, whereas their owner would be material?

Second, just because an experience itself could be of its object, it does not follow that *I* may *know* that. I need to be able to *use* that and other mental states, as described above. However, I do not see how that

could happen if I am basically physical, yet these experiences are immaterial. This raises the interaction objection: how could a physical being (or brain) interact with an immaterial mental state? And now the objection arises in the context of our having seen that mental states and their essences need to be immaterial.

How might we explain this interaction? Substance dualists (particularly Aristotelian, as opposed to Cartesian) suggest that *I* am my essential set of properties (i.e., my soul), an immaterial entity that owns and unifies all my ultimate capacities, parts, and properties, including my body, brain, and mental states.<sup>46</sup> If so, I reasonably could have and use my various mental states, since my soul naturally would have immaterial mental states present in it.

Also, this case illustrates our need to be able to remain the same (identical) person through time and to be able to change throughout this entire process. If not, then the one who is having the experiences at one time is no longer the same person as the one having them at another time. What is the most plausible basis for our personal identity?

It does not seem that it could be the brain or body, for both change over time. As new neural pathways are developed, such as through psychotherapy, the brain changes. And the body's cells replace themselves over time, yet somehow I know that I am still the same person now who lived in Moraga, California, from 1969–1981; married in 1984; and who could lose an arm and still be me. What is the most reasonable basis for believing that commonsensical assumption? The substance dualist can answer reasonably that it is due to sameness of our essential set of capacities (our soul), even though other non-essential properties and parts may change, even "soulish" ones.<sup>47</sup>

However, some may object that I have not shown how the dualist can "account" for this interaction; thus, neither Murphy's nor the substance dualist's views must be true. Perhaps by "account," this objector means "fully explain," so an explanation would have to be given in terms of being empirically knowable or entailed by logical deduction.<sup>48</sup> If so, this is an unreasonably high standard to be required for knowledge. It would eliminate other well-established truths, for example, the validity of infer-

ence, a necessary component of science. It also would undercut empirical observation, for how do we know that we can trust the deliverances of our sensory faculties? It surely is not by empirical observation, which would be circular. Nor would it be by deduction. Moreover, there are extremely few things in life that we will be able to explain fully, yet we do not thereby discount what is real. Surely scientists and dualist philosophers cannot exhaustively explain our mental life; but why should we expect to do that to be entitled to our knowledge claims, even if we find evidence later that forces us to modify our beliefs?

Or maybe the objector means that I must show a *mechanism* for interaction in order to explain it. But this rebuttal seems to show a physicalist bias against dualism. If we pay close attention, I think that we can observe that *we* direct our bodies to make observations. And, as I showed above, the process of having a visual experience seems to require both physical and immaterial aspects.

Another objection might be that my reasoning is circular; that is, “people must have souls because unless one acknowledges that people are in essence an immaterial entity separable from their bodies, one does not know the reality of what people are.”<sup>49</sup> But this is *not* my point. We (physicalists included) can know many things. This knowledge is *not* due to what one *acknowledges* or *believes* about humans. Rather, it is due to what is *real* about us and our mental states. My point is ontological, *not* epistemological.

I think that we cannot know reality based on physicalism because, without immaterial essences to our mental states, we cannot match up with reality. And to have and use such states, it seems that substance dualism is needed. Therefore, I think that Murphy’s physicalism is mistaken.

## More Implications

These considerations seem to have broader applications than just to Murphy’s physicalism. Rather, they seem applicable to all varieties of physicalism, even to naturalistic ones.<sup>50</sup> Though physicalism is becoming more fashionable and influential among Christians in science and other disciplines, it exacts

a tremendous price—no knowledge of reality.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, we should reject it.<sup>52</sup> ×

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I will use “physicalism” instead of “materialism” because the latter often suggests a worldview that excludes God. See Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>2</sup>In this regard, see Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?*, 16–22. See also Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). For an assessment of Green’s physicalism, see R. Scott Smith, “Joel Green’s Anthropological Monism: Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Considerations,” *Criswell Theological Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 18–36.

<sup>3</sup>As immaterial, an essence would *not* be spatially or temporally located (i.e., it is “metaphysically abstract”). As such, an essence would be completely outside the metaphysical parameters of ontologically reductive physicalism.

<sup>4</sup>My thanks to Garry DeWeese for his suggestions in this section.

<sup>5</sup>I will be focusing in this article on three examples of mental states with intentionality: thoughts, beliefs, and experiences we use to make observations.

<sup>6</sup>See also Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), in which Murphy provides five distinctions (methodological, epistemological, causal, ontological, and atomist) concerning the “many faces of reductionism,” 47–8.

<sup>7</sup>Nancey Murphy, “Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, ed. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 129.

<sup>8</sup>See 78–84 in Murphy and Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, in which she has a section on “emergence.”

<sup>9</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 176.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 20. See also Murphy and Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, 56, 72.

<sup>12</sup>Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, Rockwell Lecture Series, ed. Werner H. Kelber (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 140.

<sup>13</sup>Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 21.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>15</sup>These examples are discussed in Murphy, “Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues,” 135–7.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>19</sup>Nancey Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, ed. Brown, Murphy, and Malony, 10.

<sup>20</sup>Murphy, “Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues,” 137.

# Article

## Could We Know Reality, Given Physicalism? Nancey Murphy's Views as a Test Case

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 150. She elaborates on this interaction: "This view of mental states arising from the functioning of the nervous system is consistent with what we know from science about the interactions between brain states and mental states: measurable effects on the central nervous system have psychological consequences; many psychological or mental states have physiological consequences."

<sup>22</sup>Also, in Murphy and Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, Murphy discusses nonreductive physicalism in the following places: 1-2; 7-9; 233-6.

<sup>23</sup>Murphy, "Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues," 18.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>26</sup>Preface to Brown, Murphy, and Malony, ed., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, xiii. See also Murphy and Brown, "Avoiding Cartesian Materialism," chap. 1 in *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*

<sup>27</sup>Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 93.

<sup>28</sup>For example, see Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 124. She also uses the term "form of life."

<sup>29</sup>See also R. Scott Smith, "Nonfoundationalism, Postfoundationalism, and the Truth of Scripture," in *But My Words Will Never Pass Away: The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, vol. 2, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, forthcoming, 2012).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>31</sup>Perhaps this lack of her addressing this topic might be due to her having imbibed much from the later Wittgenstein, who seemed to want to disabuse us from metaphysical cravings, from a search for the natures of things, instead drawing our attention to how we behave and talk in our forms of life. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), §§65, 109. Brad Kallenberg's interpretation also is helpful in his *Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 212. He was one of Murphy's students at Fuller.

<sup>32</sup>Fred Dretske, private e-mail, Feb. 10, 2007 (bracketed insert mine).

<sup>33</sup>Murphy might object to my use of Dretske, for he holds to a form of direct realism in which the external object can be directly present to us in an unconceptualized way, which, of course, she would deny. Still, his account can be useful in that he tries to explain how it is we can make epistemic contact with reality via a causal chain, even if we take into account her caveat that all epistemic access is done from an aspect.

<sup>34</sup>Here, I put "minds" in scare quotes so as to not beg the question against physicalism. I simply mean whatever aspect of us we use in conscious awareness.

<sup>35</sup>However, some mental states might seem quite generalized, such as a general sense of anxiety. This can occur, for example, due to chemical imbalances in the brain. But still, even those intentional states are differentiated; they are feelings of anxiety, and not of love or euphoria. Sometimes in psychological therapy, clients can experience feelings which they are not able to identify. For instance, I have experienced feelings of fear, yet I have not been able

always to pinpoint exactly their source or their specific object: am I feeling fearful of being rejected in general, or is that feeling being triggered by some specific situation? Even so, often in the therapy process, I have found that as I become more skilled in being aware of my feelings, I am better able to identify what specifically they are of or about. And even if not, they still have content to them—a feeling of fear versus one of joy.

<sup>36</sup>By "object" I simply mean whatever can be brought, or made present, before the "mind"—or perhaps brain, to not beg the question here—in conscious awareness. I am referring to what we can know. That would include, for instance, everyday objects in our natural and social world such as tables, cars, water, nitrogen, trees, or birds. It also would include our own mental states, such as when we reflect upon a thought or concept, a memory, or an experience. It also would include persons. But I do not mean to imply any unethical attitudes or behavior, such as a mistreatment of persons and especially God as mere "objects" or "things," to manipulate however we wish.

<sup>37</sup>I am not the only one to draw these distinctions within our intentional states; see also Edmund Husserl on his discussions of matter, quality, and *sensa* in his *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 740.

<sup>38</sup>Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 3rd printing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 319, note 8. See also W. V. O. Quine, "On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970).

<sup>39</sup>Interestingly, conceptualizations also are of or about things; they are intentional, and intrinsically so. So, where does this intentionality come from? The dualist has an answer, for intentionality is at home in such an ontology. And, a dualist's answer would help show that an immaterial mental state could interact with and even change that correlated brain state.

<sup>40</sup>See R. Scott Smith, "Finitude, Fallenness, and Immediacy: Husserlian Replies to Westphal and Smith," *Philosophia Christi* 13, no. 1 (Summer 2011), in which I develop this argument in much more detail.

<sup>41</sup>By "grammar" in a Wittgensteinian sense, I mean the rules of how we talk in our "form of life" (or community).

<sup>42</sup>See Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, 131-2.

<sup>43</sup>See Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; see also Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984), 231.

<sup>44</sup>For a more complete treatment, see Smith, "Finitude, Fallenness, and Immediacy," in which I do develop such a case, along with a fuller exposition of Husserl's views. See also chapter nine in R. Scott Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality: Testing Religious Truth-Claims* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2012). And see —, "Nonfoundationalism, Postfoundationalism, and the Truth of Scripture."

<sup>45</sup>Dallas Willard argues along these same lines in "How Concepts Relate the Mind to Its Objects: The 'God's Eye View' Vindicated?," *Philosophia Christi* 1, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>46</sup>Cartesian substance dualism usually is the variety that many reject today, and rightly so. Descartes posited that the soul and body are radically different substances, and they interact via a gland in the brain. But Descartes's version is not the only kind of substance dualism available. See,

e.g., J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body and Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), for more on Cartesian, Aristotelian, and Thomistic substance dualism.

<sup>47</sup>Following Leibniz's law of the "indiscernibility of identicals," two entities (e.g., persons) have to have the same properties in common, so that there really are not two entities, but only one. But, how can the soul be the basis for one's personal identity through time and change, since "soul-ish" properties, like mental states, also can come and go, or change? The typical substance dualist answer is that the soul is one's *essential* set of *capacities*, and what matters for one's personal identity is that one's essential set of capacities remain the same. If someone loses an essential capacity (e.g., to have relationships with other human persons and God), that person no longer exists, having lost something essential to them as a human person. But it does not mean that that person has to develop one's capacities in order to be a person. Such development could be called "nonessential" change. For instance, I have the capacity for rational thought, even in philosophy. Through much effort, study, and practice, I developed those capacities into acquired properties. Would I be the same person had I never acquired these properties, or even if I were to lose them in the future (e.g., through dementia)? Yes, for my essential set of capacities would have remained the same.

<sup>48</sup>I owe this objection to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>49</sup>This objection was suggested by a reviewer.

<sup>50</sup>See also Smith, *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality*.

<sup>51</sup>Besides entailing that we could not have theological knowledge, physicalism also would require vast doctrinal reconstructions which would take us far beyond the scope of this article, and, I think, well beyond orthodoxy. For a starter, see Smith, "Joel Green's Anthropological Monism: Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Considerations," where I briefly discuss sin, the incarnation of the Son of God, his priesthood, his resurrection, and the hope of eternal life.

<sup>52</sup>Also, this article has implications for "Relating Body and Soul: Insights from Development and Neurobiology," by Rodney Scott and Raymond Phinney Jr. (*Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 64, no. 2 [2012]: 90–107). I will focus on three now. First, they seem to realize the importance of having an adequate basis for our being the same person through time and change (p. 95), yet they overlook the importance of personal identity when they turn to assess monist and dualist versions of human persons (p. 96). This leads to confusion about the supposed "greater difficulty" for substance dualists (pp. 95–6) in explaining the sameness of a resurrected body. They merely raise a supposed problem, without any real assessment of the issue or explanation of dualist options, or whether the other problems that can be conceived of for the various views are truly of equal weight with that for dualists. But the Thomistic substance dualist has a ready explanation — as I have suggested, sameness of person is due to sameness of soul, and therefore I do not have to have exactly the same physical body parts to be me. Indeed, even Jesus's resurrected body did not have all the same properties as his pre-resurrection body.

Yet, they appeal in passing (without explanation) to the "philosophical resources" available to monists to account for the intermediate state, or, relatedly, sameness of person after death, and even after the resurrection (p. 95). It is one thing to assert this; it is another to explain how monists' views actually are cogent. Moreover, a monist like Green denies that there is an intermediate state (e.g., *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, 165), claiming that when the body dies, the person dies (p. 147). Instead, his argument for resurrection of the same person seems to rest on two possible options: (1) an immediate resurrection upon a person's death; and/or (2) our narrative unity that grounds our sameness (p. 180). But these moves have serious problems; the former does not seem to be taught in scripture, whether in the Old Testament (e.g., Dan. 12:2) or the New (e.g., John 11:24; 1 Cor. 15:52). The latter fares even worse; if our narrative is to maintain our personal identity, then somehow it needs to remain the same through change. But whatever else narratives are, they must be physical stuff for monists like Green. And as physical things, narratives would be changing continually. Plus, even if a narrative is not physical, it still is constantly changing, as new episodes are being authored or told. Either way, a narrative cannot sustain the needed personal identity of the person.

In that light, perhaps what Jesus said to the Sadducees in Matt. 22:23–33 (cf. Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40) is indicative of an answer. He was addressing persons who did not believe in the resurrection, yet he told them that God is the God of the living, including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But for a monist like Green, since their bodies had died, the persons also would be dead. And since they would not have been resurrected yet, we are left with the option that these people were alive, though not embodied. That seems to be strong support against monism and in favor of substance dualism.

As a second implication, Scott and Phinney ("Relating Body and Soul," 99) appeal to the work of Malcolm Jeeves and his dual aspect monism as key evidence that undermines a "strong form of dualism." Unfortunately for them, Jeeves's work does nothing to undermine the kind of substance dualism I have outlined in this article. Indeed, his duality of descriptions (or conceptualizations) of physical states should suffer from the same problems I have detailed against Murphy's views.

Third, and briefly, they fault Moreland and Rae (*Body and Soul*) for holding to a creationist view of the origin of the soul, when actually they are traducianists. This mistake also may have significant implications for their assessment of Moreland and Rae's view.

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