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Pećnjak, Davor

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DAVOR PEĆNJAK

Remarks on Disembodied Existence

The author examines some claims about the possible existence of disembodied persons. Contrary to G.R. Gillett, it is shown that disembodied persons could be disembodied ab initio and that they could have disembodied "modules" for learning in addition to those for perceptual, tactile and telekinetic abilities.

The possibility of disembodied existence is nowadays not often discussed. In an article entitled "Disembodied Persons", G.R. Gillett discusses the possible existence of disembodied persons.¹

Two kinds of problems are raised: epistemic and metaphysical. I intend to discuss a number of epistemic questions. Gillett describes the following situation, or thought experiment, on which philosophical discussion is based:

Consider a family called Brown who live in (...) normal semi-detached home. Imagine that things of an unusual nature start happening. Lights go on and off and things are moved in the house. Other things are "tidied" away or interfered with in unaccountable ways. Each member of the family is suspected but absolved of any blame. One day the father, Mr Brown, conjectures that the house may be haunted by a poltergeist. After he discusses with a family to the amusement of some members and the wonderment of the others, one of the children begins to receive premonitions of what is going to happen. She says that a person, an invisible person, P, has "talked" to her. She then qualifies this and says that the person has not really "talked" to her but rather "let her know" like "thoughts popping into her head" (...) That evening, at supper, P moves an ashtray across the coffee table, closes the curtain and lights the gas to boil the kettle. The family is amazed. Gradually they learn, over the next weeks, to recognize certain "thoughts" as being messages from P. They learn to identify certain moods as emanating from P. P becomes a family friend and lets them

¹ G.R. Gillett: "Disembodied Persons", *Philosophy*, vol. 61, 1986

know that her name is Polly. (...) the family become absolutely convinced that Polly is real.²

Gillett uses Dennett's conditions of personhood in suggesting why we regard disembodied Polly as a person rather than a spirit or presence.³ I think these conditions are clearly satisfied, except for verbal communication which is not satisfied in a straightforward way. Gillett says:

Polly communicates, although it may be argued that this was not clearly verbal communication. I think that if a human being were found who was a mute telepath, we would not, however, cavil at that.⁴

I would like to show that we can from what is said about Polly, strengthen this condition of personhood.

In the above story, Polly can move a vase, chairs, and other things in the Brown's house; she can make lights go on and off and do other things as well. But, if these abilities are ascribed to her, especially the ability to move things around. Why would she⁵ not have an ability to move particles and molecules of the air in such a way that she could in fact produce sounds which make up sentences in English that can be heard by the Browns and anybody else to whom she wishes to communicate? If we are prepared to ascribe many other common abilities to her (though realised non-ordinarily) why would not Polly possess the ability of ordinary talk that ordinary people possess. In this way, and I think it is absolutely legitimate in Gillett's consideration of disembodied persons, we would be able to say that Polly or such like disembodied persons really communicate verbally, and there will be no difficulty and hesitation about Dennett's fifth condition.

² *ibid.*, p. 377-378

³ Dennett, D., "Conditions of Personhood" in Rorty, A. O., *The Identities of Persons*, University of California Press, 1976. Conditions are the following:

- 1 Persons are rational;
- 2 Persons are intentional;
- 3 Persons are objects of attitudes taken towards them;
- 4 Persons can reciprocitate attitudes;
- 5 Persons communicate verbally;
- 6 Persons have a special kind of consciousness.

⁴ Gillett, *op. cit.*, p. 381-382.

⁵ I am aware that in that case Gillett's story should have to be construed somewhat differently, but nothing can block us from doing this. Perhaps we should add something like "sentences are heard in the Brown's house from certain direction where no one visible is present", etc.

I would like to say that this is not an objection to Gillett's story. Certainly, there possibly are disembodied persons who can not produce sounds and do not have an ability to move air particles so to form sounds that are sentences in a spoken language. I intended to show that there is nothing in Gillett's story and theory that can prevent our presupposition about disembodied persons who can produce sentences in English or any other natural language that can be heard (or even written and read, since disembodied persons can move things they can also move pencils or type on computer keyboards) by ordinary people, and thus allows us to regard them as persons who communicate verbally.

The real objection now arises. Gillett positively answers the question whether we might ever identify Polly as a normal human being known to have lived a normal life. This is correct. But it is not all. His conclusion goes further: "At some stage she must have been one of us (...)"⁶

This is inferred from several considerations: that Polly perceives, acts, communicates and develops abilities.⁷ On the other hand, Gillett agrees with Penelhum⁸ that Polly should be credited with having extraordinary powers for performing the actions she performs, and extraordinary powers of tactile and perceptual awareness, etc.⁹ Gillett also says:

What is clear is that any perceptual abilities Polly might have are supranormal and do not have the same basis as our own, which operate in a way that depends upon the condition of our bodily organs.¹⁰

I thus claim that there is no difficulty in saying that Polly could also have learning systems totally different from ours. For example, a system for learning a natural language. We can say the same thing for her learning systems for tactile, telekinetic and perceptual abilities. These are obviously not realised through the usual human neurophysiological system as Polly is disembodied. If she has a non-bodily perceptual, tactile, telekinetic system, why would not she have non-bodily learning systems? And, having developed her abilities neurophysiologically as Gillett suggested, when

⁶ Gillett, *ibid.* p. 382.

⁷ *ibid.* p. 379.

⁸ Penelhum, T., *Survival and Disembodied Existence*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970.

⁹ Gillett, *ibid.* p. 379.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 379.

her life as a mind-body human was over and when she had become disembodied, how could she use her abilities in a totally different way and on a totally different basis (due to neurophysiological development)?

How for example, can physical learning systems and abilities contribute to non-physical abilities and performance of non-physical actions? If I know how, or am able, to move things with my hands (the usual human way), this being learnt and performed through neurophysiological and physical systems when embodied, how can that ability help me when I am disembodied, when I have no hands or any other physical organ (a neuro-basis is also absent), to move things around in a totally different, non-physical and disembodied way? I think it more natural to say, that the neurophysiological basis for learning and acquiring all the skills mentioned does not help in performing actions that have totally different bases, namely supranormal non-bodily bases. If Polly has supranormal abilities for performing actions, perceiving, etc., she could have supranormal abilities to learn and acquire these skills. This is a more natural answer than Gillett's. It is certain, that we do not know how these (disembodied) abilities are realised and the skills performed in detail. However we also still do not know how exactly we — ordinary people — learn, for example, our mother tongue. Psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic controversies are still unresolved. Thus, I would argue that Polly can be a disembodied person *ab initio*. It is too soon to conclude that “she must have been one of us”. Not only can she be credited with supranormal acting, perceiving, etc. abilities, but also with supranormal abilities to learn, change her behavior, acquire skills, and etc.

Gillett agrees with Penelhum's suggestion that Polly would need to have visual and auditory experiences from a certain point and that her tactile and telekinetic abilities also need to be related to this point. Thus, I think that when she appeared into existence¹¹ and found herself in an extraordinary environment (let's say the Brown's house) she started having the mentioned experiences, in the same way as a little child or newborn has. Little by little, her learning system, which has a totally different basis to ours, is activated. Her learning system develops and after a while she learns the language of the people around her. There is nothing contradictory in making this supposition. She is even a participant in a set of referential practices in her disembodied way. Perhaps, she may even have a learning system functionally the same as ours, though realised in different, non-embodied “stuff”. Perhaps, her

¹¹ My failure to explain how disembodied persons appear disembodied *ab initio* is not theoretically less acceptable than Gillett's failure to explain the way in which the transformation from bodily to non-bodily existence occurs.

system is functionally very different from ours, but can enable her to acquire a knowledge of a natural language, other kinds of knowledge and various kinds of skills. Her “modules” for learning may well be “non-bodily”, “non-neurophysiological” modules. Her knowledge of some natural language and her perceptive and tactile abilities are not arguments that “she must have been one of us”. She can acquire the status of a disembodied person even if she is disembodied *ab initio*.

One final remark. Gillett says the following:

Suppose wan and retiring twenty-year-old girl had been known to live in the Brown's house some five years previously. Her character is said to resemble that attributed to Polly and she is said to have died without marrying. Say Polly confessed to this identity and led the family to the hiding place of a box of letters in the loft. In these circumstances the identification would be plausible although a sceptic might still believe “Polly” to be a deceptive spirit out to create a false impression. (...) (Most people would conclude that the house was frequented by a disembodied person called Polly who died some five years previously.¹²

Well, one need not be a great sceptic to identify Polly with the twenty-year-old girl who lived in Brown's house. We could say that Polly (disembodied person *ab initio*) lived with her, knew her very well, her secrets, modes of behavior and could imitate her to an incredible degree. We can conclude this just as easily as that that girl is now disembodied. We simply do not have enough data to make one epistemological attitude more likely than the other. I am not convinced that most people would conclude that the disembodied person in Brown's house is a girl who lived there and died five years earlier.¹³

¹² Gillett, *ibid.* p. 382.

¹³ I would like to thank Neven Sesardić and Tomislav Janović for helpful suggestions.