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Examining Avicenna's Concept of the Soul's Immateriality in the Context of Physicalism Critique

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Abstract

Two general perspectives have been proposed regarding the existential realms of human beings. Proponents of the first perspective believe in two existential realms: the immaterial essence (soul) and the material body, attributing human actions primarily to the immaterial essence. Followers of the second perspective consider humans to be unidimensional and confined to physical existence, reducing all human actions to their physicality, especially the brain, and denying any immaterial essence. The present study aims to elucidate the first perspective by examining Avicenna's notion of the soul's immateriality in the context of critiquing the second perspective. The research method is descriptive-analytical. The findings and results indicate that Avicenna, by presenting elements of proof and various arguments, has endeavored to substantiate the immateriality of the soul through an explanation of the soul's actions. Accordingly, in Avicenna's paradigm, the immateriality of the soul is based on three pillars: intellect, immanence, and independence. Physicalists believe that the belief in an essence independent of the body to explain and understand human perceptions arises from a lack of sufficient awareness regarding the brain's and nervous system's functions and complexities. Furthermore, the claim that bodily changes are due to the body's instrumental relationship with the soul is unprovable. Thus, the denial and critiques of physicalists are formed around three axes: the capability of the brain and nervous system, the ambiguity of philosophy in logically explaining the soul-body relationship, and cognitive ignorance. Avicenna, with seven arguments in proving the immateriality of the soul, responds to the corresponding physicalist critiques. However, two physicalist objections remain ambiguous in Avicenna's paradigm: the inexplicability of the soul-body connection and the objection based on the premise of intuitive understanding.

Keywords: Avicenna, Physicalism, Dualism, Immateriality of the Soul.

Introduction

One of the most frequent questions in the realm of human complexity concerns the dimensions of human existence. Avicenna, with a rational approach to anthropology, considers the human soul (spirit) to be immaterial. However, physicalists, with a sensory and empirical approach, do not believe in an immaterial soul. Physicalism claims that all information and changes attributed to the soul are entirely physical. Therefore, matters attributed to the "mind" are actually brain activities and the result of "neuron stimulation

located in the occipital lobe or the frontal lobe" (Shah-Goli, 2018: 254). According to this view, immateriality has no meaningful definition, and all dimensions of human existence are material. The present study aims to elucidate the prevailing perspective by examining Avicenna's paradigm of the soul's immateriality and addressing the critiques posed by physicalism.

Research Findings

Avicenna has presented seven arguments regarding the immateriality of the soul, highlighting some of the most significant ones and defending them against objections. According to the "inhabitant and place" argument, if the "inhabitant" (intellectual form) is not divisible, then the "place" (soul) is also indivisible. If the human soul, which is the "place" of the intellectual form, were a body, it would necessarily be divisible like other bodies. This is an invalid conclusion; since the intellectual form and human perception are not divisible, the premise that the place, i.e., the soul, is divisible is also invalid (Avicenna, 1996a: 294-295). Two objections from physicalism are based on the impairment of perception in case of brain damage and the correspondence of mental changes with brain changes (Rosenthal, 1994). In response to these objections, it can be said that the souls of most humans in this world are at the level of nature and sensation, and therefore require bodily faculties and tools to perceive sensory objects. Thus, if perception is disrupted by brain damage, it is due to the brain being an instrument for the soul's perception. Additionally, it cannot be logically claimed that the coincidence and simultaneity of psychic acts with bodily instruments indicate the identity of the soul and body. According to the argument of infinite intellect, the rational soul comprehends infinite intellectual forms. The physical body does not have the capacity to comprehend infinite matters; therefore, the rational soul is not physical (Avicenna, 2000: 364). Based on the argument of abstracted intelligibles, the soul abstracts intelligibles. Abstracted intelligibles are not physical; therefore, the soul is not physical (Avicenna, 1996a: 294). The physicalist objection is that this ability can be attributed to the imaginative power of the mind, suggesting that the human mind constructs abstract concepts and can abstract what it has imagined. The response to this objection is that imagination cannot envision a single concept in various forms; with the rational faculty's influence on imagination, intelligibles are comprehended, and this process is intuitive. Based on the argument of the soul's resilience and non-impairment, bodily faculties weaken with excessive and strenuous activity, but the rational soul does not weaken with excessive and strenuous activity. Additionally, according to the argument of non-impairment, if the rational soul were a bodily faculty, it would necessarily weaken with the body's aging. The rational soul does not necessarily weaken with age; therefore, the rational soul is not a bodily faculty. The physicalist objection to these arguments is that the soul is influenced by bodily faculties, their effects, and the preoccupations that arise from managing the body, thus making the soul bodily (Burns & Iliff, 2009). In response, it can be said that the rational soul has two main actions: one related to its own essence and another related to what is below it (the body). Sometimes the soul's preoccupation with perceptual or motivational faculties or their effects causes the soul to be distracted from its essential action (intellection). The soul's preoccupation with bodily concerns and material affairs does not negate its immateriality (Avicenna, 1996a: 301-302). According to the argument of the clear sky, if



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an individual were created in a vacuum, they would be unaware of their limbs but would perceive themselves (Avicenna, 1996a: 348). Therefore, the soul is not material because if the soul were part of the human body, perceiving the soul would necessarily entail perceiving the body. The first objection is that this argument is invalid because the premise is based on Leibniz's law (Muslin, 2009: 91-92). The second objection is that while Leibniz's law is one of the fundamental and self-evident principles, it cannot be stated that because an aspect of a person is unknown, its nature must be different from the known aspect of the person. In response, it can be said that Avicenna's argument is a second-figure syllogism, so it cannot be said that the argument is based on another law. Furthermore, Avicenna's argument is about the existence of substances in simple propositions, not compound propositions; thus, the objection pertains to attributes (compound propositions). Moreover, human knowledge of oneself is immediate (presential), and if the soul were the body, one would also have immediate knowledge of the body when having immediate knowledge of oneself.

Conclusion

Although Avicenna's arguments can be defended against the objections of physicalism and can address many of these objections, two physicalist objections cannot be answered based on Avicenna's arguments. The explanation of the connection between the immaterial and the material, and the reliance of some of his premises on intuitive matters, are the most significant physicalist objections that remain unanswered in Avicenna's philosophy.

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