

# Substance dualism arguments

***The Substance of Consciousness: A comprehensive defense of contemporary substance dualism***

Brandon Rickabaugh and J.P. Moreland

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This philosophy book is 408 pages long, with the main text being 343 pages divided into 11 chapters. The authors, philosophers and substance dualists Brandon Rickabaugh and J.P. Moreland (figure 1) cover a cornucopia of arguments for substance dualism, as well as respond to objections against it. For reasons of space, only a small fraction of these arguments and objections are discussed in this review.

In chapter 1, Rickabaugh and Moreland write that substance dualism, “roughly, the thesis that the human person is comprised of a substantial immaterial soul and a physical body”, was widespread at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>



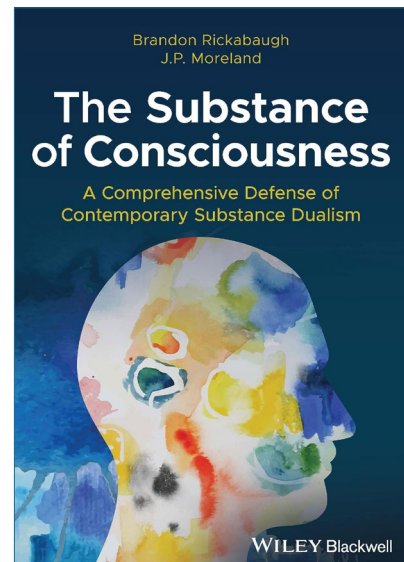
**Figure 1.** Photograph of American philosopher, theologian, and Christian apologist J.P. Moreland. Moreland is co-author of *The Substance of Consciousness*.

century (p. 3). Although much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is portrayed as a revolt against dualism, the authors seem more optimistic about substance dualism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, writing that the “20th-century’s *certain-defeat-of-dualism* narrative can no longer be presumed [emphasis in original]” (p. 13). They state that the goal of their book is to defend what they call “*Mere Substance Dualism* [emphasis in original]”, defined as “substance dualism in its broadest form” (p. 13). The thesis they defend for *Mere Substance Dualism* (referred to by the authors as ‘SD’ or ‘substance dualism’ for brevity) is as follows:

“The human person (i) is comprised of a soul (a fundamental, immaterial/spiritual substance) and a physical body, (ii) capable of existing without a body, but not without his/her soul, and (iii) the mental life of which is possessed and unified by his/her soul” (p. 14).

## Naturalism and physicalism

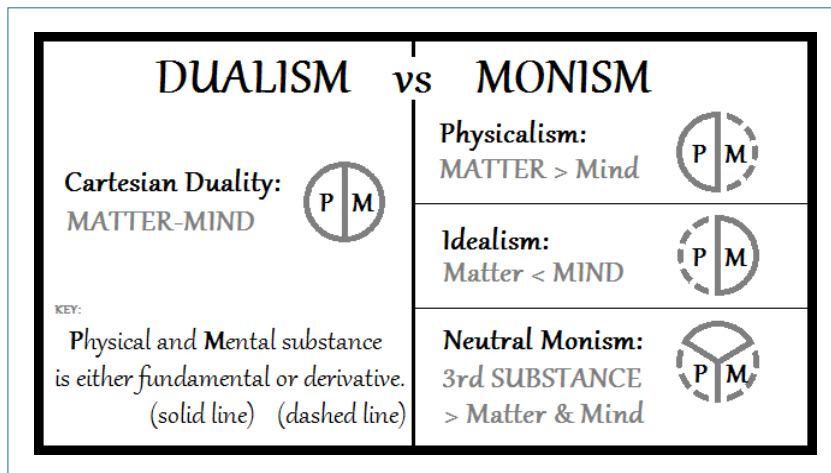
Chapter 2 deals with worldview issues related to philosophy of mind, in particular naturalism. As such, staunch naturalism is defined as “the view that the cosmos and all entities within it—e.g., particulars, properties, relations, events, processes—are and only are physical” (p. 17). Strong physicalism adopts the same ontology as staunch naturalism “concerning consciousness, the human person, and other entities studied in the philosophy of mind” (p. 17). Both staunch naturalists and strong physicalists are said to “eschew *sui generis* [unique], irreducible, ineliminable emergent properties [emphasis in original]”, whereas faint-hearted naturalism and weak physicalism “differ only in that



they embrace emergent entities, usually properties” (p. 17). The authors write that “Examples of staunch naturalism’s influence in philosophy in general, and philosophy of mind in particular, are ubiquitous” (p. 18). As “faint-hearted naturalism embraces the existence of *sui generis* emergent properties [emphasis in original]”, the authors critique emergent properties after discussing staunch naturalism (p. 20). See figure 2 for an illustration of the ontologies of dualism versus monism.

The Grand Story is the label Rickabaugh and Moreland put on the scientific naturalists’ “account of how all things whatever came to be” (p. 27). The core of this story is stated as being evolutionary theory and the atomic theory of matter, where any “appeal to the existence of emergent properties violates this ontological constraint” (p. 27). This is most consistent with strong physicalism and staunch naturalism, where

“... everything that exists is fundamentally matter, most likely, elementary ‘particles’ (whether taken as points of potentiality, centers of mass/energy, units of spatially extended stuff/waves or reduced to/eliminated in favor of fields), organized in various ways according to the laws of nature. ...



**Figure 2.** About the illustration, Dustin Dewynne writes: “An illustration of the ontologies of dualism versus monism showing how physical substance relates to mental substance (i.e., body & mind) as either fundamental or derivative. Monism is further divided into physicalism, idealism, or neutral monism where the physical and mental are both derivative of a third substance that is neither body nor mind. An alternative term for *derivative* is *emergent*. For example, a typical ontology held by physicists is that the physical realm is fundamental, and the phenomenon of consciousness is emergent from that (physicalism). Likewise, a typical ontology held by many in religion is that spirit is fundamental, with both mind and matter being emergent from that (neutral monism).”

By keeping track of these particles and their physical traits we are keeping track of everything that exists. No nonphysical entities exist, including emergent ones” (p. 27).

According to the authors, the staunch naturalist believes “matter at the most basic level—the microphysical level—is or will be completely describable within an ideal physics” (p. 29). Such an ideal description, entailing “that basic matter is bereft of any mental entities”, is something that a faint-hearted naturalist is said to agree with (p. 30). However, the latter “... go on to affirm that when matter reaches a certain, ‘appropriate’ level of complexity, a completely new range of *sui generis* emergent properties, especially conscious properties, appears from a subvenient base wholly bereft of, say, consciousness or conscious potentialities [emphasis in original]” (p. 30).

Rickabaugh and Moreland critique such an appeal to emergent properties as an explanation, stating that “‘*emergence*’ is not a solution but a name for the problem to be

*solved* [emphasis in original]” (p. 35). According to them,

“... there are two ways to incorporate the irreducible properties that constitute consciousness: they are either emergent properties or properties exemplified by a new substance, a soul. We believe the choice here is a metaphysical and not a scientific one. We also find the widespread employment of emergence in this context to be question-begging, usually without so much as a nod toward the alternative view. One of the goals of this book is to provide adequate grounds for believing in a simple, substantial soul. If this is correct, then the properties constituting consciousness are not emergent; they are properties exemplified by a specific sort of new substance, viz., a soul” (pp. 40–41).

### Subjects, parts, wholes, and unity

Chapter 3 is titled “A Brief Ontological Detour: Subjects, Parts,

Wholes, and Unity” (p. 43). Separable parts are said to be “independent in that they can retain their identity and exist without the whole of which they are a part” (p. 44). Inseparable parts are described as dependent “on the whole of which they are a part for both their identity and existence”, and “cannot be conceived of nor exist as an independent whole separate from the whole of which it is a part” (p. 44). A substance with inseparable parts is said to be mereologically simple (p. 45). The authors state:

“... only mereologically simple entities, substances without separable parts, are holistically unified, as true unity is grounded in the kind of dependence or ‘foundation’ that exists uniquely between wholes and their inseparable parts” (p. 49).

Defining consciousness neuroscientifically is said to be “problematic for a variety of reasons” (p. 51), and the “capabilities of neuroscientific research regarding the nature of consciousness” are stated as being “far more inadequate than most realize” (p. 52). When analyzing consciousness, the authors take a first-person approach (p. 52), it being from the “first-person perspective that we have conscious experience” (p. 53). They find contemporary notions of the self to be muddled (p. 53). To them, the “self, the subject of consciousness, is a concrete, permanent, naturally occurring substance”, and does not disappear by seemingly being ignored by physicalism (p. 54).

The authors use the terms ‘self’, ‘person’, and ‘subject’ interchangeably (p. 54). They also emphasize the necessity of a subject, stating that just “as there could not be an instance of motion without a mover, there could not be an instance of a mental property without a mental subject” (p. 54). According to the authors, “Returning to Husserl’s mereology, we can divide the logic space regarding the ontology of subjects mereologically”, and “Doing so gives us two theses” (p. 56). One is that, regarding subject

complexity, “Subjects of consciousness are mereologically complex—have at least one separable part” (p. 56). The other, regarding subject simplicity, “Subjects of consciousness are mereologically simple—they have no separable parts, are not comprised of separable parts” (p. 56).

### Introspection arguments

Introspection involves examining one’s own thoughts, ideas, feelings, etc. Rickabaugh and Moreland state that introspection provides significant data “about the nature of consciousness and its subject”, and that this “data, and introspection itself, have proved challenging for physicalism, which some have taken to support arguments for SD [substance dualism]” (p. 59). In chapter 4, the authors respond to Paul Churchland’s objections to the argument from introspection (AFI). They say their responses apply “to all such objections to AFI” (p. 60). According to Churchland, his first objection is that AFI

“... commits the intentional fallacy by mistaking different descriptions of or names for the brain (for example, ‘mind’, ‘soul’, ‘spirit’) as picking out something different than the brain when, in fact, they do not” (p. 61).

Churchland’s second objection to AFI involves his claim that mental states are brain states:

“The claim here is that we have *de re* [about the thing] beliefs of our brain states and lack *de dicto* [about what is said] beliefs that what we are aware of in introspection are brain states. Consequently, we do have knowledge by acquaintance with brain states. We simply lacked the propositional knowledge that they are, in fact, brain states [emphasis in original]” (p. 68).

The authors give detailed responses to the above objections, with a brief summary in their conclusion. Against the first objection, one of

their arguments is that “it results in an absurd introspective skepticism” (p. 73). Against the second objection, one of their replies is that “this objection presupposes physicalism” (p. 73).

### Dualist seemings

In chapter 5, the authors state:

“... we focus on the phenomenologically and empirically established fact that dualism in general and SD in particular seem true, and what we will call *dualist seemings* are ubiquitous, diverse, and hard to deny. The best explanation of this large data set is that we are directly aware of our self as a mereologically simple, immaterial substance [emphasis in original]” (pp. 74–75).

As such, David Barnett’s argument that subjects of consciousness are mereologically simple (i.e., a substance with inseparable parts (p. 45)) is analyzed and defended against extant objections (pp. 75–82). Rickabaugh and Moreland then move on to discuss the nature of intuitions, where they “talk of intuitions as *rational seemings* or *seemings* for short”, where a “*seeming* is a way of being appeared to by a purported intentional object [emphasis in original]” (p. 82). Discussed is the Hard Meta-Problem of consciousness, this being the difficulty of explaining why it seems “that dualism and or SD are true”; i.e., “explaining a specific kind of state of phenomenal consciousness—*dualist seemings*—that seem to resist mechanistic explanation [emphasis in original]” (p. 83). The authors state:

“... dualist seemings have not been dismissed as insignificant by most philosophers whose own views would be more secure by such a dismissal. At the same time, dualist seemings about the subject of consciousness are ignored” (p. 83).

Furthermore, the authors state, “Not only does SD seem true to almost everyone, but physicalism also seems

false” (p. 84). Discussing dualist seemings, they note:

“Perhaps surprisingly, common-sense dualism and dualist seemings are common among consciousness researchers. ... Dualist intuitions are even prevalent in the conceptual framework of the neurosciences as a form of explicit substance dualism or a ‘Cartesian materialism’” (p. 85).

They also write that “It seems to many that subjects of consciousness are metaphysically unified and mereologically simple” (p. 85). According to the authors, there is a massive amount of data suggesting “that SD is a naturally formed belief, that dualist seemings are ubiquitous and strong” (p. 88). They describe 18 distinct dualist seemings, many of which correlate with SD (pp. 88–90). Three features of dualist seemings are said to be particularly strong; i.e., their diversity, ubiquity, and strength, and any materialistic alternative to dualism must explain this data plausibly, and why materialism appears to be so wrong if it isn’t wrong (p. 90–92).

The authors argue that facts about dualist seemings, including the three mentioned above, “are grounded in facts about one being directly aware of oneself, which reveals oneself as a mereologically simple, immaterial substance” (p. 92). They state that “Dualist seemings are explained by the fact that we are directly acquainted with ourselves, such that SD seems true, and physicalism seems false” (p. 93). In explaining this account, the authors give a detailed clarification of what they “take to be the ontological structure of knowledge by acquaintance, intentionality, and self-presenting properties” (p. 93). They also argue that their Direct Self-Awareness Account (DSA) unifies the eighteen diverse dualist seemings by grounding facts about them “in facts about one’s direct self-awareness”, and so “provides explanatory unity” (p. 102). The authors address, in detail, objections to their argument

from direct self-awareness. They end the chapter by stating that “the SD argument from direct self-awareness is foundational to the debate about the constitution of human persons and their conscious states” (p. 116).

### Phenomenal unity

According to the authors:

“The oldest argument for substance dualism begins with the direct first-person awareness of the holistically unified nature of consciousness and concludes that the subject of consciousness is likewise holistically unified, which is not a feature of any physical thing, but a feature of a simple, substantial, immaterial self or soul” (p. 119).

In chapter 6, it is argued that the unity of phenomenal consciousness is a problem for physicalism and panpsychism with respect to “the possessor of consciousness”, and that the best explanation “is a true unity, a substantial soul” (p. 120). As noted already, a conscious subject could hypothetically be either mereologically complex (having separable parts) or mereologically simple (having no separable parts) (p. 120). In accounting for the unity of consciousness, the naturalist/physicalist is restricted to supposing that subjects are mereologically complex (p. 121). As such, the physicalist has a difficult task:

“Juxtaposing holistic phenomenal unity with the extraordinary mereological complexity of the brain highlights this problem. If phenomenally unified consciousness is distributed, it is over various subregions of the brain, hundreds of thousands of synaptic inputs of which each synaptic cleft hosts more than 300,000 separable parts, and across one hundred billion neurons and roughly 86 billion cells in total or roughly 37 trillion cells if phenomenal unity is distributed across the organism. The physicalist must explain how phenomenally

unified consciousness, which has no separable parts, is somehow distributed across billions of separable parts” (p. 123).

The authors state that a phenomenal conscious state (p-consciousness) is holistically unified and so has no separable parts (p. 124). Hence, if the phenomenally unified state E, of which S is the subject (S being “the subject of a phenomenally unified state of consciousness”), “has no separable parts, then there are no such parts of E to distribute. Distribution seems impossible” (pp. 123–124). They point out that it can be argued that the phenomenal modalities of E are non-phenomenal parts, but this faces the process problem, “the problem of explaining how something with no phenomenal properties can process a phenomenally unified state” (p. 124). Panpsychism, the view that all matter has elements of consciousness, is also addressed by Rickabaugh and Moreland in this chapter. Panpsychism is said to have its own recalcitrant problem, the Combination Problem, which is

“... the difficulty of explaining how the phenomenal states of fundamental physical entities combine into a holistic, phenomenally unified state of consciousness” (p. 134).

### Endurance of the soul

In chapter 7, the authors argue that the fact that we endure over time, e.g., a person who begins reading this review is identical to the person who finishes reading it, “is best, if not only, explained by substance dualism” (p. 144). They begin by stating the argument, followed by clarification of the argument. Basically, the argument is that the physical body and brain, being composed of separable parts, do not endure over time as the same object, whereas a human person does. Therefore, a person is not a body and brain, but rather a “simple enduring soul” (p. 146). The authors state that

“when we use simplicity or simple, we mean these in sense (ii)—extensionless and not composed of separable parts [emphasis in original]” (p. 147).

Analysis of the Standard Mereological Hierarchy (MH) is next, “which constitutes a set of broader worldview considerations in terms of which defenses and criticisms of the mereological argument must be advanced” (p. 144). In the final two sections of this chapter, the authors state:

“... we seek to establish the fact that if, according to naturalism, we were ordinary-sized macro-physical objects—bodies, brains, subregions of brains (understood on standard naturalism ...)—then we would be mereological aggregates (MAs) and, consequently, would not be enduring continuants. Along the way, we provide arguments against different persistence accounts of diachronic personal identity, sometimes called complex views. In the final section, ... we evaluate two views of organisms that claim to provide an account of human beings as enduring continuants without appealing to a simple, substantial soul: the atomic simple view and the dynamic systems depiction of organisms” (p. 145).

### Modal argument for substance dualism

The authors, in chapter 8, present their version of the modal argument for substance dualism (SD).

I am not a philosopher, but to me the modal argument for SD appears unconvincing. The authors go to great lengths in defending their modal argument, which at times was difficult to follow or mundane, even getting into discussions about ‘angelic parts’ (pp. 206–207).<sup>1</sup> However, they admit that it doesn’t prove SD:

“We acknowledge that, granting the success of my modal argument, it doesn’t follow that SD is true or

the best philosophical anthropology to adopt. That judgment would need to be done in light of all of the relevant considerations, and the modal argument is just one of them. But it is an important one, and in any case, we trust this chapter will provide resources for further dialog” (p. 233).

### Staunch libertarian agency

In contrast to their modal argument, the case for SD is on much sounder footing when the authors argue for free will and against determinism. That we have free will is intuitively obvious. Only because their flawed ideology demands it does the diehard naturalist/physicalist deny we have free will, but their arguments amount to nothing more than grasping at straws. In chapter 9, Rickabaugh and Moreland argue the case for SD “from certain features of free will” (p. 234). They state:

“It is widely acknowledged that worldwide, commonsense,

spontaneously formed understanding of human free will is what philosophers call libertarian freedom ... One acts freely only if one’s action was not determined—directly or indirectly—by forces outside one’s control, and one must be free to act or refrain from acting; one’s choice is ‘spontaneous,’ it originates as a fundamental exercise of active power with the agent, and it is often done for reasons construed as teleological ends” (p. 235).

The authors call the above view Staunch Libertarian Agency (SLA), and lay out their case for SLA (i.e., free will) in this chapter (p. 235). There are said to be six features that constitute SLA “that make it difficult and, indeed, virtually impossible to reconcile with the naturalist standpoint” (p. 241). These are that free agents: are substances, have active power, are first movers, have categorical ability, act for the sake of teleological ends, and exhibit top/down causation (pp. 241–249). They also examine representatives of alternatives to SLA, by Daniel Dennett, John Searle (figure 3), Robert Kane, and Kevin Timpe (p. 249), none of which fares well (pp. 249–262). The authors conclude:

“We have argued that genuinely non-physical mental entities, including the ontological commitments entailed by SLA, are the paradigm case of such a system of phenomena [i.e., resists physical explanation]. And if we have succeeded in showing that SLA is the preferred view of free will, it follows that we are simple, substantial, enduring souls” (p. 271).

### Defeaters against substance dualism

In chapter 10, the authors address what they say “is a set of regularly proffered objections to SD”, pointing out, “that some who don’t ascribe to

SD are now arguing that standard anti-SD arguments are not as triumphant as previously thought” (p. 275). They first deal with problems of mental causation: how mental entities causally interact with physical entities, that this violates the conservation of energy principle, and that it falls prey to the problem of causal pairing (pp. 276–283). After this, they respond to nine neuroscientific objections to SD, including “soul-of-the-gaps objection” (pp. 284–285), and the explanatory impotence of SD (pp. 285–288). There is too much material to iterate their responses to the objections here.

In a later section, they respond to objections to SD which claim “that postulating a soul does not explain at all the occurrence of conscious states” (p. 301) and “that a soul is composed of some sort of mind stuff which is virtually impossible to characterize and, if described, it is done so by an inadequate negative one (e.g., immaterial)” (p. 302). In response, the authors state:

“SD is not intended to provide a *causal explanation* for the occurrence of conscious states; SD is an ontological theory as to what sort of thing must an entity be to capture adequately several features, not of mental states, but of the thing that *has* them [emphasis in original]” (p. 303).

The authors list eight such features, including the appropriate entity for exemplifying mental properties, holistically unifying mental properties, being an enduring mental continuant, and “exercising active power and teleologically guiding a deliberative process toward an end” (p. 303).

### New research programs

Rickabaugh and Moreland discuss (in chapter 11) developing SD research programs as the ‘next phase of SD’, particularly as a lack thereof has rightly or wrongly been ammunition for critics



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**Figure 3.** Photograph of American philosopher John Searle at the Faculty of Christ Church, Oxford, 2005. Searle denies dualism, believing instead that the mind is caused by the physical processes of the brain.

(p. 311). Hence, they make proposals for research projects under four broad umbrella categories: conceptual, methodological, developmental, and applied (p. 312). Only a select few are discussed here.

Conceptual projects involve charting the logic space of SD. There are various understandings of substance, and so it follows there will be “just as many types of substance dualism”, and so recognizing this logic space is said to provide “ways to advance the discussion” (p. 314). According to the authors:

“In contemporary philosophy of mind, it is virtually axiomatic that one should dismiss the ‘first-person point of view’ and the unique information gained thereby. And for those who still retain it in their methodology, epistemology, or ontology (inclusive disjunction), it is usually mischaracterized. An example of the first approach is Paul Churchland’s dismissal on evolutionary grounds and by associating substance dualists, including their employment of ‘introspection’, with the Catholic Church, who oppressed Galileo due to fear of scientific progress” (p. 319).

However, as stated by Rickabaugh and Moreland, “If SD is true, the ‘first-person point of view’ is not a property we have; rather, in a certain sense, it is something we are” (p. 319). They state that “it is identical to a substantial soul having conscious states of a personal kind” (pp. 319–320). Hence, the authors encourage using a “first-person approach” in doing philosophy of mind, where substance dualists should “embrace and do research in light of analytic phenomenology and a consciousness-first methodology” (p. 320). One developmental proposal revolves around the topic of gender, race, and disability:

“Other related research should be developed on issues such as the

value and significance of gender (is the soul gendered or just the body? If so, does the sex/gender of the soul need to match the sex/gender of the body? What implications, if any, do the answers to these questions have for transgender questions?), the value and significance of social kinds (is my soul or just my body, or neither, racial?), and finally, issues concerning disability (is my soul disabled or just my body or both or neither or it depends, etc.?)” (p. 329).

I am not sure how you could do research projects to get any meaningful answers to the above questions. One applied proposal is that substance dualists work on furthering “an SD understanding of the limits of human enhancements and the implications that might follow from implementing transhumanist programs” (p. 340). The transhuman view of the body and moral vision, where “Curing the human condition requires altering the ‘human’ part of the equation”, is rightly said to be “incompatible with at least some versions of SD” (p. 340).

The issue of “mind-uploading or whole brain emulation” is a related area that substance dualists are encouraged to explore (p. 341), particularly as it would seem impossible with SD, where the soul/mind is an immaterial/spiritual substance, not an aggregate of ordered information. According to the authors:

“The Transhumanist eschatology is that of transferring a person—a conscious mind—from a biological substratum (the brain and central nervous system) to an artificial substratum (a computer), which can then be placed in a robotic or virtual body or perhaps a new biological substrate. It will be by person emulation [‘A mind emulation that emulates a particular mind’], not mind emulation [‘A brain emulator that is detailed and correct enough to produce the phenomenological

effects of a mind’], that I am uploaded just prior to the death of my bio-body so that I can persist in an artificial afterlife” (p. 341).

They further state:

“But is person emulation possible on SD? It is not easy to see how personal emulation does not assume that a person is not a substance (immaterial or otherwise), but an aggregate of information ordered in some specific way. That is what is transferred from a bio-body to an artificial body. But this runs counter to the common charge that transhumanism assumes SD. SDists have much to explore here” (p. 341).

## Conclusion

I believe that arguments for substance dualism (SD) are important in the ongoing worldview battle against naturalism/physicalism. Hence, the authors’ work on this topic is important, and they should be commended for their effort in putting together this in-depth book on SD. As a non-philosopher, my background being neuroscience, I found much of the book heavy reading, with long sentences at times hard to follow, particularly when accompanied by philosophical jargon. Since the book says on the back cover that it is a “work for consciousness researchers, philosophical theologians, and religious studies scholars”, this diminishes such criticism—which would be more valid if the intended audience was the general reader. Hence, I recommend the book to the above audience. However, I don’t recommend it to the general reader with no specialized knowledge of the subject, for reasons mentioned above.

## References

1. Compare Moreland, J., [The modal argument and a rejoinder to contingent physicalism](#), *TheoLogica* 7(2):229–247, 2023.