

Dualism & Reductionism: Putting it all Together

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I won't pretend to have read even a semi-defendable portion of mind-body problem, much less theory of consciousness, writings to develop a cogent compilation. But here goes.

Through this project, I read seven writings. One neuroscientific study, one philosophical breakdown of physics, two cornerstone essays by important contemporary philosophers, and two excerpts from writings I'd describe as fundamental philosophical texts relating to theory of consciousness. I perhaps failed to get as great a variety of perspectives as I'd set out to originally, but reading Descartes, Chalmers, and Nagel, amongst others, is not a trivial venture.

What did it all come out to? That philosophers tend to err on the side of dualism, even if the modern connotation of the word may be a bit unflattering to them. Of course, that is the business of the philosophers. It is no surprise that those like Chalmers and Broad who chose to dedicate much of their lives to explaining consciousness find it at least a little bit mysterious. Frank Jackson said physicalism was too optimistic. I don't know if I'd say exactly that, but it certainly does involve some sort of inflated confidence, some refusal to accept the unknown.

For that is what dualism involves, right, some level of unknown? For Descartes, the physical and nonphysical was unknown, so there was little courage (or cowardice) involved in claiming both were present in our world. Broad's emergentism refused to venture out of safe territory, using only vague analogies to convey his theory. Yet, when you parse it all, his claim that you can only study the mind as itself, and not based on its components is really stating that you can't study the mind very well, because our concrete knowledge is of the components. Same goes for all the other dualists. Even Chalmers, who sort of-kind of devised a description of experience by simply making it fundamental, was still admitting a vast world of unknown. By saying experience is, in effect, nonphysical matter... well, we know a whole lot about the workings of matter; better get cracking on experience.

There is an interesting dynamic. Much of the basis for subjective experience seems to come from intuition. Chalmers pretty much says so directly with his dismissal of physicalism, and Jackson literally does say so, although he then tries to strengthen the position. Yet, so much of pro-dualist writing is defending the theory against any number of immediate roadblocks. Averill and Keating's paper is almost the pinnacle of this. It's logic isn't flawed, but it's hard to not feel like there is a bit of desperation here, grasping at anything, anything that neither off-handedly disproves dualism nor forces the dualist to abandon physics (and enter the forsaken "spiritual" zone).

I have a tough time thinking of many other things where intuition is so able to withstand such immediate suggestions of unlikeliness. We have certain (mis)representations as children which we abandon as we grow up and they appear less and less possible, but the sanctity of the space between our ears is often able to avoid victim to that. Maybe our consciousness, and therefore our individuality and, by extension, our purpose, is too integral to sacrifice.

To me, as well, qualitative experience is intuitive. I know not whether this is due to the comfort in believing in such a thing or a tendency of my pattern-forming, representation-computing, self-reflecting brain to assume emergence in its perception. Perhaps the computer has been coded to think it's more than an information processor. Or, perhaps, qualitative experience is real.

If I were to express a personal view, it'd be something like the beliefs of Jackson with the writings of Nagel. Despite it's fame, Jackson's hypotheticals fail to convince me, but his beliefs definitely resonate with me, especially his indirect endorsement of philosophy at the end of "Epiphenomenal Qualia." Furthermore, I'd—like many contemporary philosophers—be reluctant to call myself a dualist, even moreso than a reductionist, because of the mysticism associated with it. It seems the case that it can only survive in the world of uncertainty Descartes lived in.

That being said, that's not the same thing as an aversion to mystery, for I can't accept that consciousness *isn't* a mystery. How curious, that within the mind-body dynamic, all of the power lies in the side which has no ability.