Property dualism: objections[1]

Property dualism is the view that, although there is just one kind of substance, physical substance, at least some mental properties are not physical properties (as type identity theory claims) nor functional properties (as functionalism claims), nor are they behavioural dispositions (as philosophical behaviourism claims). While mental properties are possessed by physical substances, they are a fundamentally different kind of property from physical properties.

Physicalism is the view that everything that exists – every substance, every property that substances have, every event that occurs – is either physical or completely depends upon something that is physical. 'Physical' means something that comes under the laws and investigations of physics, and whose essential properties are identified and described by physics. According to physicalism, the physical properties of the world determine all the properties of the world, not just causally but metaphysically. Property dualism rejects this. It claims that some mental properties are properties that are not determined by physical properties in the way that physicalism claims. They are something new, something in addition to physical properties.

Interactionist property dualists argue that these distinct mental properties causally affect both other mental states and physical states. Epiphenomenalist property dualists claim that mental properties have no causal powers. While physical properties cause changes in mental properties, mental properties cause nothing at all. Both views face objections.

INTERACTIONIST PROPERTY DUALISM

Nothing seems more obvious than that the mind and the body interact with each other, e.g. I decide to phone a friend and move my body to do so. Cartesian substance dualism – the claim that mind and body are distinct substances – has great difficulty explaining how this can be true. How is it that a mental substance, which is not in space and has no physical force, can affect a physical substance, which is in space and moved by physical forces?

In 'Consciousness and its place in nature', David Chalmers argues that property dualism doesn't face this particular issue, because mental properties are properties of physical objects. The claim is simply that these mental properties make a difference to how the physical world changes. For instance, having a painful experience makes a difference to what I do next, e.g. jumping up and down – my bodily movements are caused by my being in pain.

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 321-7, 328-9

How? Can interactionist property dualism provide any details of how mental properties would cause physical effects? It seems not. In reply, Chalmers notes that this is true of any fundamental causal relationship. For instance, for many years, physicists had no account of how gravity works. Then Einstein suggested that it was the result of mass bending space. But at present, we have no account of how mass bends space. But this is no objection to accepting the claim that mass does bend space. Property dualism claims that mental properties are fundamental in the same sense as fundamental physical properties. There is no further explanation in other terms available. But there is no special problem of mental causation here.

(Chalmers notes that there are interpretations of quantum mechanics that actually suggest that consciousness plays a causal role in physical events. If you are interested in physics: this is the interpretation that maintains that conscious observation of a quantum system collapses its superposed state to a determinate state.)

We can object, however, that the claim that mental properties cause physical effects is incompatible with neuroscience. Current science indicates that movements of the body are caused by physical events in the brain. So, if mental properties move the body, they do so by changing what happens in the brain. We may object that we have no evidence of mental properties changing what happens in the brain.

That is true, but we have no evidence that the claim is false either. This is because, while neuroscience is making good progress, we still have no clear account of the very complicated causation involved in something like making a choice. But we may think that neuroscience could discover the complete story in time. If interactionist property dualism is true, then it seems that what it must discover is that some events in the brain have no physical cause, because they are caused by mental properties.

EPIPHENOMENALIST PROPERTY DUALISM

If the knowledge and zombie arguments work, then property dualism is true, it seems. (See the handouts ‘The knowledge argument’ and ‘The ‘philosophical zombies’ argument’.) On the other hand, Chalmers argues, the claims of physicalism that physical laws govern all events in space-time and that every physical event has a sufficient physical cause seem appealing in light of the success of empirical science. Epiphenomenal property dualism allows both sets of claims to be true. Some mental properties are neither physical nor supervenient on physical properties, but they don’t make any causal difference to the world. Physicalism is right about causation, it just isn’t right about what exists.

The phenomenology of our mental life

We can object, however, that epiphenomenalism is very counter-intuitive. It is part of our experience of having mental states that our mental states, e.g. feeling pain or wanting chocolate or believing that Paris is the capital of France, cause other mental and physical states and events. Most obviously, mental states can cause our behaviour, such as wincing or going to the food cupboard, and they can

be part of a causal mental process, such as thinking about how to get to Paris. The 'phenomenology of our mental life' involves experience of such causal connections, doesn't it?

The epiphenomenalist property dualist replies first, that it is only those mental properties that they are dualist about that are epiphenomenal. So, for Chalmers, it is only phenomenal properties of consciousness that are epiphenomenal. We can say that beliefs and desires have causal powers, since we can analyse these states in terms of physical properties and functions. Nevertheless, that the feeling of pain or longing of love is epiphenomenal is still counter-intuitive. So, second, the epiphenomenalist property dualist offers an alternative explanation of why it seems this way to us, even though such mental properties never cause anything.

The physical process in the brain with which phenomenal properties are correlated causes both the phenomenal property, e.g. the painful experience, and the behaviour which we think is caused by the phenomenal property, e.g. jumping up and down. So the experience and the behaviour are correlated because they are both effects of the same cause. It is this correlation that makes us think that the experience causes the behaviour. But it doesn't.

This may be counter-intuitive, but that is not sufficient reason to reject epiphenomenalism.

Natural selection

The property dualist believes that mental properties are properties of physical objects, namely certain living creatures. Suppose that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is true. According to this theory, millions of genetic alterations randomly take place. Most disappear without a trace. But some that coincidentally help a creature to survive and reproduce slowly spread. That creature and its descendants reproduce more than others without those traits, so more and more creatures end up with them. The features enables the creature to reproduce more, so its descendants also have that feature and they reproduce more and so on.

So, according to the theory of evolution, the traits that evolve over time are ones that causally contribute to the survival and reproduction of the creature. We can assume that mental properties, including qualia, evolved. But how, if they make no difference to what creatures do and so whether they survive and reproduce? Epiphenomenalism conflicts with our best account of the origin of consciousness.

In 'Epiphenomenal qualia', Frank Jackson considers this objection and replies that natural selection is more complicated than just described. In fact, there are lots of traits that have evolved that don't contribute to survival or reproduction, but are instead by-products of traits that do contribute. For instance, polar bears have thick, warm coats which help them survive in the Arctic. A thick coat is a heavy coat. But having a heavy coat doesn't contribute to the polar bear's survival, because it makes the bear slower. However, it is better to have a thick, warm and heavy coat than a thin, cool and light coat. Having a heavy coat is a by-product of having a thick, warm coat, and having a thick, warm coat contributes to survival.

Likewise, there are brain processes that make a difference to how a creature behaves and which are very conducive to survival. Consciousness, according to epiphenomenalism, is simply a by-product of these brain processes. It just happens to be a fundamental law of nature that these physical properties are correlated with certain properties of consciousness.

We can object that this response presents us with a very divided picture of the world. Consciousness sits entirely outside the rest of the natural world, and has no effect on it.

Jackson accepts this: we shouldn't expect to understand the world. Our abilities to understand the world themselves relate to survival. As a result of evolution, we are equipped to learn about and understand what we need to know in order to survive. Consciousness doesn't make any difference to this, so it is no surprise that we can't understand it well.

Introspective self-knowledge

Epiphenomenalism makes it hard to understand how we have knowledge of our own mental states. How do I know that I am in pain when I am? The obvious answer is that my belief that I am in pain is caused by my pain itself. I can tell that I am in pain just from introspection. But if epiphenomenalism is true, pain doesn't cause anything, even my belief that I am in pain. This threatens a natural account of our knowledge of our mental states. If my thoughts and feelings don't cause my beliefs about my mind, then I could have those beliefs whatever my mental states, just as long as the causes of my beliefs (whatever they are – perhaps brain processes, perhaps God) operate in the same way. In other words, whatever causes me to belief that I am in pain could cause me to have this belief even when I am not in pain. And so my beliefs about my mind, therefore, are unjustified and unreliable. So I can't know my own mind.

Epiphenomenalists can reply that knowledge of something doesn't always require that thing to cause one's belief. I can know that I am in pain without the painful experience causing this knowledge. For instance, suppose the brain state that my belief that I am in pain is also the same brain state that causes my pain. In this case, I wouldn't, under normal circumstances, have the belief that I am in pain unless I was in pain – the same brain state causes both. So even though my belief that I am in pain isn't caused by the painful experience, I can know that I am in pain because my belief is caused by a reliable mechanism.

Chalmers gives a different response. Knowledge of my experiences is knowledge by acquaintance. I am directly aware of my experiences, but this is not a causal relation. My belief that I am in pain is partly constituted, not caused, by this direct awareness. My being in pain makes my belief the belief that it is. So my knowledge that I am in pain depends on my being in pain, but is not caused by it.

PROPERTY DUALISM MAKES A 'CATEGORY MISTAKE'

Gilbert Ryle calls substance dualism 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine'. The mistake that it makes, he argues, is a 'category mistake'. What does that mean? Suppose someone is shown around Oxford University – they see the colleges, the

buildings with the different faculties and departments, the administrative buildings. But then they ask, 'I've seen the colleges, the faculties, the administration. But where is the university?' They have misunderstood the concept of 'university', thinking that the university is another thing, alongside the colleges, faculties and administration. The person has made a category mistake. The university is not like this; it is how everything that the person has seen is organised.

Concepts belong to different logical categories – different ways in which it makes sense to use a concept. A category mistake is to treat a concept as belonging to a different logical category from the one it actually belongs to. According to Ryle, substance dualism makes the category mistake of thinking that the mind is like the body – another 'thing', a distinct, complex, organised unit subject to distinct relations of cause and effect. The mistake is to think that physical and mental concepts operate in the same way, in the same logical framework of 'things' and 'causes', 'substances' and 'properties'.

We can apply his objection just as easily to property dualism. While property dualism doesn't claim that the mind is a distinct substance, it does think of mental properties – or at least phenomenal properties of consciousness – as part of the same metaphysical framework as physical and functional properties, only not physical.

Ryle would argue that the concept of phenomenal properties (let alone qualia) misunderstands our talk of sensations, feelings, images, and so on. These are not each a 'something' that has peculiar properties of 'what it is like'. The whole metaphysical picture here is wrong.

So how should we understand our talk about conscious experiences? On Ryle's behalf, we could argue that when we express our experiences, we use words that derive their meaning from describing physical objects. To say 'what it is like' to see red is simply to describe what we see when attending to the colour of a red object, or if it is not in front of us, we give a report of our memory of seeing it. The redness that we experience is the redness of the rose, not a property of our experience of it.

People don't normally talk about 'sensations' or 'what it is like' in the sense of qualia in everyday language, before being exposed to some theory. If you ask someone 'what it is like' to see a rose, they will usually respond evaluatively, e.g. 'it's wonderful' or 'it's calming'. Of course, experiences differ from each other. But this isn't because what each experience 'is like' differs. We can express the difference between what experiences 'are like' in terms of what the experience is of (red roses look different from yellow roses – this is a difference between roses, not between experiences of roses), and how we evaluate experiences, e.g. whether we enjoy one and find another boring. The property dualist has misunderstood our mental concepts.

For example, in response to the knowledge argument, what we should say is this. In knowing all the physical facts, Mary can't yet understand our normal way of talking about experiences. She has no experiences of coloured objects that she can

express and report, and as a result, she has only a limited understanding of our discussions of them. But none of this has to do with knowledge of facts, either facts about some ‘inner’ conscious experience or facts about the brain. To think otherwise is a category mistake.