

Property dualism¹

THE THEORY

Philosophy of mind is a branch of metaphysics, and different theories in philosophy of mind disagree on metaphysical questions about *what* exists and its nature. Questions about what exists are questions about ontology. According to a traditional metaphysics, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. A central question in metaphysics of mind is ‘is the mind a substance?’ Can your mind exist on its own, independently, or is it dependent on something else in order to exist? In particular, is your mind dependent on your body, perhaps especially your brain, in order to exist at all?

Substance dualism claims that minds are not bodies, nor parts of bodies, nor properties of bodies, but substances that are distinct from bodies. Rejecting this claim can lead us to physicalism, the view that not only is the only substance physical, but that everything that exists is either physical or supervenes on the physical properties of physical substances.

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). Instead, they are properties that do not supervene on physical properties in the way that physicalism claims. While mental properties are possessed by physical substances, they are a fundamentally different kind of property from physical properties.

Property dualism most often defends this claim for phenomenal properties of consciousness. Consciousness, especially the sort of consciousness involved in perception, sensation and emotion, has a ‘feel’ to it, a distinctive ‘experiential quality’. The phrase often used to try to capture this experiential quality is ‘what it is like’. There is something it is like to taste beer, to see a red rose, to feel sad. These properties can’t be reduced to physical, behavioural or functional properties. These properties, at least, are a completely new type of property. (For more on phenomenal properties, see the handout ‘What do we mean by mind?’.)

Rejecting physicalism

Property dualism rejects physicalism, and claims that there are some mental properties that exist that are neither physical nor do they supervene on physical properties. It argues that the properties identified by physics do not form the

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. 283-88, 289-91

complete fundamental nature of the universe, because in addition, there are properties of consciousness. Physics misses something fundamental. When all the physical properties of the world are finalised, this does not fix or determine the properties of consciousness the way distributing paint on a canvas determines its aesthetic properties.

Property dualists are happy to allow that there may be correlations, even natural (though not physical) laws, that connect particular physical and mental properties. So it may be a law of nature that when a creature has a certain neurological property, it has a certain conscious experience. But it is metaphysically possible for these correlations to be different, for the properties of consciousness to come apart from any physical properties with which they are correlated. Mental properties are an entirely new kind of property in the world, and do not supervene on physical properties in the way that physicalism claims.

Some property dualists argue that these mental properties have their own causal powers, which can affect physical events. This is a second way in which property dualism may reject physicalism, in rejecting physicalism's claim that non-physical causes do not contribute to the way the physical world changes over time.

CHALMERS ON EXPLAINING CONSCIOUSNESS

Consciousness is intimately connected to the idea of 'subjectivity' and undergoing experiences. In *The Conscious Mind*, David Chalmers argues that this aspect of consciousness, the subjective quality of experience, is very different from anything else in the world, anything else that can be investigated by science, that we think of as objective.

Chalmers begins by identifying consciousness in terms of phenomenal properties. Consciousness is not the same thing as the mind, since there can be unconscious mental states (beliefs or desires that someone isn't aware that they have) and even unconscious processes, such as thought and even unconscious perception. Consciousness is characterized by a subjective quality of experience, so that some being is conscious if there is something it is like to be that being, and some mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that mental state.

This sense of 'consciousness' needs to be distinguished from the ability to introspect and report on what one thinks or believes or wants. It also needs to be distinguished from the ability to focus one's attention on something or to voluntarily control one's behaviour. In all these senses, one is 'conscious of' an object (e.g. by looking at it or listening to it) or 'conscious of' what one is doing. These are intentional mental states, being 'conscious of' something in the sense of knowing about it.

Cognitive science has investigated a great deal about the mind, including the nature of consciousness in the sense just described. It has and continues to make progress on what it is for something to be conscious in these ways, including being awake, introspection, reporting mental states, self-consciousness, attention, voluntary control and knowledge. But cognitive science has had very little to say about consciousness in the first sense, the subjective quality of experience.

Chalmers argues that we really need two concepts of mind. The first is a 'phenomenal' concept, where minds or mental states are characterized by the subjective quality of experience. The second is a 'psychological' concept, characterized by what the mind does and how we explain behaviour. The phenomenal concept deals with first-person aspects of mind, the mind as experienced by the subject; the psychological concept with third-person aspects, the mind as accounted for by others and in scientific theories. Cognitive science has said little about the mind as phenomenal because, as a scientific discipline, it deals just with those states relevant to the causation and explanation of behaviour, and not subjectivity as such.

The two concepts are complementary, but distinct. In particular, the phenomenal concept can't be reduced to or explained in terms of the psychological concept. For example, while the brain is very complex, there is no *deep* mystery about the idea of brains processing information, reacting to stimuli and exhibiting complex cognitive capacities like learning, memory and language. We can offer plausible evolutionary explanations of why such functions should emerge through natural selection, and plausible physical explanations of how they occur (although lots of the details are still missing). But why does subjective conscious experience occur? If we only knew facts of physics and information processing, there would be no reason to suggest that such a thing exists at all. It seems, Chalmers suggests, like a *new feature* of the world; it is surprising. Only our first personal experience gives us reason to think it exists.

Functionalism argues that the analysis of mental states in terms of causal functional role can be applied not just to psychological states, but to all mental states, including phenomenal ones. But, says Chalmers, while we can understand how some state could have a certain causal role, it remains mysterious why it should have phenomenal properties. Functionalism gives a good account of psychological properties, including Intentionality, but not conscious experience. After we have explained the physical and computational functioning of a conscious system, we still need to explain why this system has conscious experiences.

Just as we can talk of phenomenal and psychological concepts of mind, we can also talk of phenomenal and psychological concepts of mental states. For example, we can distinguish a phenomenal concept of pain - how it feels - from a psychological one - that it is caused by damage and leads to aversive behaviour. We don't normally distinguish the two concepts, because the two properties usually go together. In the human mind, (phenomenal) conscious experience always also involves (psychological) cognitive processing. And so we don't have the words for describing phenomenal qualities independent of their psychological, functional properties. We tend to pick out phenomenal properties in terms of their external qualities or causal role, e.g. we define 'a sensation of green' in terms of being typically caused by grass, trees, etc.. But 'a sensation of green' isn't just 'a state caused by grass, trees, etc.'. We are talking of the phenomenal quality that typically occurs when we undergo a visual experience caused by grass, trees etc. We can draw similar distinctions in our concepts of emotion, desire, and other mental states.

As long as we recognise that there are two distinct concepts here, we don't need to argue over which is more essential to pain or colour experience or emotion... itself. But we should recognise that the co-occurrence of the two properties is not a conceptual truth. This is shown by the kind of thought experiments we looked at above - we can coherently imagine the phenomenal and the psychological properties coming apart.

Thus, we can talk of 'psychological consciousness' and 'phenomenal consciousness'. Many philosophical theories and psychological studies account for psychological consciousness but not phenomenal consciousness. As with other mental concepts, phenomenal consciousness involves some psychological processing, especially 'awareness' - having access to some information and able to use it in controlling behaviour, e.g. give a verbal report of what one sees. But while awareness may be necessary for phenomenal consciousness, as a purely psychological phenomenon, it isn't sufficient - it is possible to be aware of some fact without undergoing an experience with a particular subjective quality.

The easy and hard problems

We can also talk of two 'mind-body problems'. The easy problem is how a physical system could have psychological properties, e.g. learning and memory. This is technical, but as we said above, it is not mysterious, since it is an account of causal roles and functions. The 'easy' problem involves the 'psychological' concept of consciousness, analysing and explaining the functions of consciousness, e.g. the facts that we can consciously control our behaviour, report on our mental states, and focus our attention. Chalmers thinks that understanding how the brain works will eventually provide the solutions. So this doesn't threaten physicalism.

The hard problem is how a physical system could have phenomenal properties, what it is like to undergo conscious experiences. How and why are certain physical processes in the brain associated with such experiences? It is significant that the progress of cognitive science with the first problem has shed little light on the second.

Setting aside philosophical behaviourism, physicalists say that these conscious experiences just are certain physical processes or certain physical states playing a particular functional role. But, Chalmers argues in 'Consciousness and its place in nature', a physical account of something can only explain its physical structure and function - how something is constituted and how it works. And this, he objects, is not enough to explain phenomenal consciousness. Such explanations miss out how experiences 'feel', what it is like to undergo them, their subjective or first-personal aspect. There is more to phenomenal consciousness than structure and function. This thought is fundamental to arguments for property dualism.