

## Defending Dualism

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### Abstract

**It is the contention of this paper that the arguments in philosophy given both for and against dualism are less than decisive. In this paper I examine some of the standard arguments or objections to dualism, and try to show they are unconvincing. Although I do not think that any good arguments have been given for being a dualist, I shall not pursue that here. Instead, I will engage in a relatively unpopular enterprise of defending dualism against some common objections. I make no claim to cover all of the objections.**

**Key Words:** Dualism, Mind, Body, Causation, Emergence.

### DISCUSSION

Dualism has it that a person has both physical properties and mental properties that are nonphysical. But mental properties cannot just float around unattached. One way is to see them as epiphenomena that are given off like the steam whistle on a train and are causally idle. This view was defended by Aldous Huxley. Another dualist view was that given by Baruch Spinoza known as the double aspect view. Mental properties and physical properties that belong to a substance that is neither mental nor physical and the mental states and physical states are irreducible to each other. I will not treat either of these forms of dualism.

The dualism I will defend is two substance view where a person is a combination of both a mental substance and a physical substance that causally interact. Mental substance is nonphysical and capable of consciousness, and physical substance is the body that is spatially spread out and nonconscious. To make sure this is dualism, the soul or spiritual substance is conscious, while the body is spatially extended and quantitatively measurable. The soul is spatially unextended and has qualitative states. The soul can be wholly outside the physical world, just like angels and God. Some dualists hold that the soul is separable from the body, and has a real possibility of existing as a disembodied mind. I will follow this traditional conception that holds that a person is a combination of such a mental substance and physical substance. There is a real possibility of souls existing in a disembodied form.<sup>1</sup> A real possibility is stronger than a logical possibility.<sup>1</sup>

The first objection I will consider is that it is difficult to say much about what a spiritual or mental subject actually is. We can only define it negatively, but not positively. We can only say what it is not—that it is not spatial, while physical things can be described positively. The positive nature of the mind remains a mystery, while physical things are easily describable positively.

In answering this objection we did say something positive about the soul, that it is a substance or thing, and it is conscious. Only being spatially unextended is a negative characteristic. Of course, “substance” and “consciousness” have their how mysteries. What about the

characterization of the “physical”? It is difficult to say what a physical thing is or what a physical property is. Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor have argued that physicalism has not given any clear meaning to the term “physical,” and that the mental-physical distinction itself has not been worked out with any clarity.<sup>2</sup>

One can positively describe the soul as being the thing that has mental states such as sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions. This is a positive description of the properties of the soul. It doesn't tell us what a “substance” is, but this has been a problem in philosophy for both the mental and physical domain.

The second objection is taken from David M. Armstrong, although it has been made by others. If a person is a combination of a mind and a body, what accounts for their unity? Dualism doesn't make for a close enough unity between the mental and physical substances that make up a person. Armstrong says there are relations of temporal contiguity and simultaneity as well as causes that tie mental substance to the body.<sup>3</sup>

Armstrong thinks there should be a further relation between the mind and the body that ties them together, otherwise we cannot see how they are so intimately related.

A dualist could say that there is no further relation, and that temporal simultaneity and a causal relationship are sufficient to unite the mind and the body. After all, the mind and body are only contingently related and each can subsist without the other. On the other hand, the issue should be why temporal simultaneity and cause are not enough to unite them. I do not think that the dualist is obliged to specify any further relation between mind and body. As we will see later, there is a dependence of the mind on the body that is compatible with dualism.

A third objection is related to the problem of numerically differentiating mental substances. If we consider physical things, we can say that what makes two different things is that they are in different places. Physical things are individuated by difference of place. But mental things are not in space, so how can we individuate them? How do we know when we have one mind rather than two, or for that matter, a thousand minds? Peter F. Strawson, who developed a theme found in Immanuel Kant, is among those who raise this objection.<sup>4</sup> If minds are things or entities, what is to stop those from advancing the supposition that there are many minds associated with a given body, all thinking in parallel? What is the difference between there being one mind and several exactly similar minds? The point is that bodies are better off than minds because two qualitatively identical bodies can be distinguished by their places, but minds that are qualitatively the same cannot be so distinguished. What can be said about this objection?

It should be pointed out in replying to this that there are three different issues here. One is the issue of what individuates souls or mental substances. The other is the epistemological issue of how we know or can tell when we have one mind rather than two or two hundred. These are different issues. These issues are different from another one; the epistemological issue of how we can tell whether we have one rather than a thousand minds or souls associated with a given body.

To the issue of what individuates minds or souls I suggest that we can use memory or past histories. Minds are to be individuated by their memory. The problem of two souls sharing identical histories can be answered by the dualist by simply denying that there can be two or more qualitatively indistinguishable minds. The dualist can insist that this is not a problem. I

can see no reason to believe otherwise. Two souls cannot share qualitatively indistinguishable histories.

To the issue of distinguishing or individuating bodies we can point to the different places that they occupy. We can individuate bodies by places and places by bodies. There can be other ways of 3 individuating bodies. One can point to their past histories and modal properties. Some are committed to collocation, the view that two or more physical things can wholly occupy the same spatial boundaries. They point to modal properties to distinguish the collocated bodies.

One might use bodies to individuate minds on the suggestion that one body is associated with an individual mind. One way of doing this is in terms of memory. In multiple personality disorders we differentiate personalities by what the subject can remember. So two different mental substances could have the same past histories, like synchronized clocks. But the psychological disorder that used to be called "multiple personality disorder" has been renamed "dissociative identity disorder" because it is far from clear that there are two minds at work. Rather, what seems to be going on is a radical dissociation of consciousness in the individual's mind. But there are cases of divided consciousness, where the two hemispheres of the brain have isolated conscious experiences. But here we may have a case of one body being animated by two bodies at the same time. In either case it is problematic to individuate minds by the bodies associated with them. We can again appeal to memory and the past histories of such minds. I see no other way to do it. The dualist can also appeal to simplicity. We can assume the same body is animated by the same mind unless there is sufficient reason to believe otherwise. This is the simplest view. We do not have to multiply mental substances beyond necessity.

This brings us to the fourth objection. It concerns the evolutionary origin of the mind. Armstrong formulates the objection by saying the dualist is committed to the following.

At some time after conception, when the nervous system of man and higher animals reaches a certain level of psychological complexity, a completely new, nonspatial entity is brought into existence in a completely new relation to the body. The emergence of the new existent could not have been predicted from the laws that deal with the physical existence of things.<sup>6</sup>

We are told that a dualist must find a definite point in time when a mental substance comes into existence while a materialist can say that human organisms develop by insensible gradations from complexity to further complexity. The dualist is expected to say at what point, and why, the mind emerged from living organisms. We are never told why a dualist has to answer this question while a materialist doesn't. We are only told that a materialist says the mind developed gradually. Perhaps he can say human minds develop by small steps and insensible gradations.

However, it seems the question of how minds emerged is a question that both materialists and dualists have to answer. Why can't the dualist say the same thing as the materialist? Both have to say that the nervous system developed to a level of complexity where it became possible to attribute sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desire, and intentions to some creatures. Neither position is in a better way to answer this. I suggest that the question "When did minds emerge?" has no answer, and is not a criticism of either dualism or materialism. But it is a real question.

Perhaps a more tractable investigation could be made of the origin of sensations, desires, and beliefs. If animals have no capacity for language and are capable of wants and beliefs, we can speculate that desires and beliefs came rather early in the evolution of organisms. A worm can be said to want some food, and believe that by moving it can get some. Mind goes wherever conscious awareness begins. If a paramecium is conscious, it has a mind. The dualist does have to say where a spiritual substance appears in the great chain of being, but the dualist can say that when we get a fuller range of attributed to animals with complex nervous systems and brains we get nonphysical spiritual substance. I do not see why the dualist has to say at what point conscious wants and beliefs emerged anymore than a materialist does. Nor does the dualist have to say how whether it exists now if reasons can be given for believing that mental substances that are conscious do exist. I do not think there are any such good reasons to believe in nonphysical mental substance. But if there were, such arguments could possibly defeat the argument from evolution. For all that I have said, there does remain the real question of how minds emerged in the process of evolution.

The fifth objection to dualism can be stated as the argument from the neural dependence of mental states on the physical. It was stated by Lucretius, but I will use Paul M. Churchland as my source. According to Churchland, we should not expect the mind to be as dependent on the brain as it is if the mind were a separate entity. Churchland says "one would expect reason, emotion, and consciousness to be relatively invulnerable to direct control or pathology by manipulation or damage to the brain." He then gives some examples such as alcohol, narcotics, emotion controlling chemicals, anesthetics, caffeine, and something as simple as a sharp blow to the head that only make sense if reason and emotion are activities of the brain itself.

This is an objection from what we can expect. If dualism were true we would not expect to find the level of causal dependence of the mind on the body that we do in fact find. But this is not a knock down argument against dualism, and is logically compatible with two substance dualism. Nevertheless, it is certainly surprising and not what we would expect. Thus the empirical data of the dependence of the mind on the brain is noteworthy.

We now come to the sixth and last objection I will treat of dualism. It is a more current problem and a serious one. In a book by Peter Smith and O.R. Jones these authors argue that a dualist must hold that mental events, that occur in immaterial souls, cause physical events that we can all observe. But science happens to presuppose a fundamental principle that is incompatible with such mental causes in the physical world. It is the principle that the physical realm is causally closed. The principle says that for any physical event in the world, this event can be completely and sufficiently explained in terms of physical causes. This is a principle that guides all empirical scientific inquiry. It is not itself verifiable or falsifiable by any empirical evidence, but using the principle is said to be fruitful. It has been fruitful because there is abundant empirical evidence that scientists have been successful in their search for purely physical explanations for many physical events.

According to the authors, we ought not reject this principle that guides scientific inquiry for two reasons. First, scientists say that the behavior of such macrophenomena as human cells are the causal results of macrophenomena such as atoms and molecules. Second, the physical laws governing low-energy particles at the atomic level are now well known, and leave no room for immaterial mental causes.<sup>5</sup>

There is more than one point run together here. First of all, we do not have an explanation of human behavior and actions in terms of atoms and molecules. Mental explanations are at another level from such macrophenomena. Second, explanations in terms of atoms and

molecules are not necessary or sufficient to motivate the causal closure of the physical. We need to be more careful about mental causation.

The problem of the causal exclusion of the mental arises in the following way. We take a physical event and ask what explains it. Then we assume it has a sufficient explanation in terms of other physical events. So how could a mental event be a cause of a physical event? What causal work is left over for any mental property to do? Any brain event can be sufficiently explained by neurobiological research. Any behavior can be explained completely in terms of physical variables. It follows that the dualist cannot use mental causation to explain anything physical because the dualist must assume there can be no complete physical theory of physical phenomena. Since physical science assumes the causal closure principle, dualism must be rejected and closed off from the physical.

This presents a real difficulty for the view that there are mental causes of behavior. But this problem does not just beset a substance dualist. Jaegwon Kim has argued that similar difficulties arise for non-reductive and noneliminativist physicalism. <sup>9</sup> His arguments are generally taken to raise a serious problem for mental causation for anyone who takes physical science seriously whether they are a substance dualist or a non-reductive physicalist. The problem is a general one for anyone who believes in mental causation.<sup>10</sup>

This leads us to the traditional problem of causal interaction. The problem is formulated in different ways, and depends upon who you read. It is tempting to start off with the difficulties Rene Descartes had. In his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia she asked "How can the soul of man, being only a thinking substance, determine his bodily spirits to perform voluntary actions?"<sup>11</sup>

How are we to interpret this question? Exactly what is the problem? One way of formulating it is to ask is to ask how two such different things as a mental substance and the body to causally interact. This question was asked in such a way that it assumed a cause must be like its effect. I kick a ball, the motion of my foot transfers energy to the ball causing it to move. We have here a transfer of energy from one thing to another that is like it. But are all cases of causation cases of like cause and effect? Consider the position of the moon and the movement of the ocean tides. This appears to be causation between two different and seemingly unrelated things. Hence things that are different from each other can stand in causal relationships. <sup>12</sup>

Let us keep in mind that there is two way interaction here. Mental events cause physical events, but physical events also cause mental events. The latter is less discussed and problematic. I put my hand on a doorknob and it causes a roundish sensation. Mental to physical causation is more problematic. Armstrong says the mind must act on the body by acting on the brain.<sup>13</sup>

He continues that if the mind acts on the brain, there must be some point or spot on the brain where the first physical effects of the mental cause appears. Descartes thought he has found such a place in the pineal gland. About this Armstrong says that later research failed to back Descartes up on this. Armstrong goes on to say that research on the brain has not turned up any other point or points where the physical effects of any 6 mental causes appear. I think we are supposed to conclude that the thesis of mental causation is mistaken.

Notice the kind of causation Armstrong seems to be assuming. A body acts on another body at some point by impulse or contact. The basic concept of cause is one of pushing or pulling. This is based on a mechanistic physics of objects banging into each other. But this is not the only type of causation. Consider the position of the moon and the movement of the tides again.

There is no mechanistic causation in this case, yet there is a causal relationship. There does not seem to be any reason why mental states have to act on some place in the brain to cause me to perform an act like raising my arm.

Then how do mental events cause physical events? Suppose I want to vote for Bill. How does a want bring about a physical arm movement? In their book, Smith and Jones claim that this question is like asking how a mosquito bite causes a malarial attack. In the mosquito bite case we assume that there is some underlying causal mechanism at work, even if we do not yet know what it is. Since in most cases of causal relationships there exists a linking mechanism, we would expect one in mental causation. But all the dualist can do is point towards what happens on the mental side of things, by pointing to other wants and beliefs. Or the dualist can fill in the physical side further; neural occurrences causing impulses down some nerves, causing muscle contractions, causing the arm to go up. But we never get the mechanism linking the last mental event with the first physical event. There is a similar difficulty for physical causation of mental events. The authors conclude that there cannot be any causal interaction between physical bodies and immaterial minds.

The only way the dualist can escape this criticism is to declare that there is no underlying causal mechanism between mental events and physical events. Instead, the dualist can claim that mental causation is a basic causal relation that cannot be explained by anything further. I think this is a line the dualist can take.

The authors go on to point out that there is a multiplicity of causal relations between mind and body. I can decide to wiggle my right forefinger. Then wiggle my middle finger, then wave my arm vigorously. All these are different causal relations. Such a list could be multiplied to an extent that is only limited by our imaginations. The existence of so many basic causal relations cries out for an explanation, but none is forthcoming. The authors conclude that this is an embarrassment for dualism.

My reaction to this criticism is that in ordinary language there are many examples of mental causation. These are mysterious, but these are mysterious for a non-reductive physicalist as well. The physicalist has to account for mental causation as well. To do so he needs to find the physical realizations of mental events if he is going to account for mental causation in physical terms. This currently is as much a mystery as mental causation is for a dualist. It is nothing more than a promissory note.

My contention is that ordinary discourse yields a myriad of causal relations between the mental and the physical. They are all mysterious and inexplicable in terms of anything else. But there are physical-physical laws that are just as mysterious. Take the law of gravity, for example. There is nothing more basic that explains the force of gravity, or action at a distance. Yet the law of gravity is a perfectly

respectable law of physics. So why can't the myriad causal relations between the mind and body be tolerated even though they are basic and inexplicable?<sup>14</sup>

It will be helpful at this juncture to give a reason why there are such basic relations in ordinary discourse of mental causation. I can make causal claims like "I moved my finger." But we cannot say "I moved my neurons." or "I contracted my muscles." Ordinarily, I cannot ask how I moved my finger. To ask how I moved my finger implies that I had some technique for doing it. You can ask how I moved it, if I moved it with my other hand. I have some control over my finger movements. But I do not have any control over my heart beating or my neurons firing.

I cannot fire neurons in my brain in order to make my finger move. But I can move my finger in order to cause a disturbance in my brain. We cannot answer how I moved my finger. I just do it. There is no physiological story that tells me how I moved my finger. I can move my finger because it is under my control. I simply decide or intend to move my finger and my finger moves. This is a basic action that is not explainable by physiology. We should not expect our causal claims from the mental to the physical in ordinary language to have any underlying mechanism. It looks like we are saddled with a plethora of basic causal actions. But, as has been pointed out, that is the case for anyone who believes there is a causal relation between the mental and the physical. Again, this does not refute dualism because, as we have seen, there are cases of physical causation which are every bit as mysterious.

This completes my defense of dualism against some of the more popular objections. I make no pretense to have exhausted all the objections. As I said, the arguments for dualism are at least as weak as the difficulties that have been raised against two substance dualism. Dualism is a metaphysical theory that has few adherents today in philosophy and psychology. It does remain an option for those who cannot understand how a materialist view on the nature of a human being could possibly be true. But I see little reason to adopt dualism. This paper aspires to point out the indecisiveness of arguments against dualism.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. I use "mind," "spirit," and "soul" interchangeably.
2. Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor, "There Is No Question of Physicalism," *Mind*, Vol. 99, (1990), pp. 185-206. They investigate four criteria for the physical and argue that all four are inadequate. One traditional criterion for the physical is extension in space. But weight is a physical property that has no spatial extension. Other criteria offered in the literature have suffered a similar fate.
3. David M. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, (Humanities Press, 1968), p. 25.
4. Peter F. Strawson, "Self, Mind, and Body," reprinted in Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment*, (Methuen: London, 1974). *Ibid.* p. 30.
5. Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (MIT Press, 1990), p. 20.161. Jaegwon Kim, "The Non-Reductivist's Troubles With Mental Causation," in John Heil and Alfred Mele, eds., *Mental Causation* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1995).
6. Kim explains that a reductive materialist holds that mental states are explainable in terms of the physical states they are so reduced to, so mental causation is just an instance of physical causation or eliminativism, *Ibid.*, p. 161.
7. Rene Descartes, *Philosophical Letters*, translated by A. Kenny, (Oxford University Press, Blackwell, 1970), p. 136.
8. Of course, there are degrees of difference. Tides and orbiting the moon are both physical movements. *D. M. Armstrong, op. cit., p. 32.*
9. It should be pointed out that mental causation need not be lawlike, like the law of gravity. I doubt that there is any lawlike connections between deciding to wiggle the

toes on my right foot, my deciding to wiggle the toes on my left foot, and the toes wiggling. Not all causal relations instantiate laws. In fact, some have argued that there are no psycho-physical laws. I Pmovements. D. M. Armstrong, p. 32.

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