

Towards a Proper Monism

Filip Radovic

Dept. of Philosophy, Göteborg University

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1. Summary

My analysis of the mind-body problem suggests that the mind-body problem is a "problem" because:

- There are discrepancies in use between scientific notions like "physical" and philosophical notions like "phenomenal character".
- Phenomenological conceptions of the mind are primarily used as *contrast-terms* in arguments against metaphysical physicalism.
- "Qualia" and similar terms - properly analysed - reveal that they *do not*, as

often claimed, have a "folk-psychological" origin. Rather these terms should be described as highly sophisticated technical terms and should not be confused with non-philosophical notions expressing experiential content.

Dualists are obliged to offer us a positive, thus substantive, account of what they mean by "subjective experience" and similar idioms. This is, as I shall point out, a very hard task, mainly due to the strong contrast-mode in which these terms are used. When disconnected from the paradigmatic contrast-context these terms appear more or less out of place. But when faced with a hard-core reductionism the appeal to "phenomenal qualities" seems very appropriate. In my analysis, terms like "what it is like" and "experiential character" are concepts that, as such, make perfect sense, but only in a limited context. The strong contrast mode in which these terms are used, I think, also explains why it is so hard to give a satisfactory semantic account for these terms.

2. Introduction

The lure of dualism is very strong despite intuitions that a Cartesian version of dualism is false. On the other hand, many philosophers feel attracted to reductive materialism and the scientific enterprise associated with it, although they simultaneously believe that physicalism leaves something out. This philosophical ambivalence, I will argue, is partly due to a simplified picture of what dualism and materialism are and what kind of metaphysics these positions entail.

In this paper I will outline my philosophical program which I call "proper monism" and explain why I believe it to be an attractive alternative to both dualism and materialism. "Proper monism" is not a well defined ready-made doctrine. I rather see it as a conceptual framework which may entail many different styles of solutions. I shall give three examples of what I regard as proper monistic "solutions". First, a possible scientific solution, then a naive pre-theoretical solution and finally a metaphysical solution in the classical sense.

Modern dualism has emerged as a response to the alleged difficulties involved in describing the relation between "phenomenal qualities" and the scientific world-view¹. Since there seems to be no better label around I will call this version "property-dualism". Defenders of property dualism tend to frame their arguments as pure epistemological arguments. Nagel (1974) challenged physicalism by introducing the concept of "what-it-is-like", arguing that the subjectivity of

mental states could not be captured in an objective scientific framework. Jackson (1986) presented what would be known as "the knowledge argument" essentially emphasising the same point that Nagel had done before. The primary orientation towards epistemology is in a sense odd since the arguments presented suggest strong ontological conclusions.

An essential feature of what I understand as property-dualism is the *acceptance of the categories "phenomenal mind" and "body" (or brain) as such*, i.e., as in some sense being complementary categories. A dualist is typically one who believes that phenomenal states are *not identical* or *reducible* to any physical state - what so ever.

¹ See Nagel (1974).

3. False and proper monism

I would like to introduce a distinction between "false" and "proper" monism in order to achieve a clearer conception of the traditional mind-body problem. I aim to show that monistic claims made by typical reductionists, in fact, are conceptually conditioned by an acceptance of the very Cartesian model they want to reject. I will refer to this fallacy as the error of false monism. Materialists as a rule, typically tend to represent the mind-body problem as, basically, a choice between materialism and dualism. Materialists often portray their target enemies as Cartesian dualists; those defending the view that there exist an immaterial substance in a ghostly medium - somehow interacting with the body². I don't know whether this is meant as a rhetorical move or if they really believe that the majority of dualists subscribe to Cartesian substance dualism. However, the *serious* and decisive mistake consists in believing that the physical is an *ontologically neutral* category - conceptually independent - from dualism. On the contrary, materialism is just one pole in the original Cartesian two-pole framework (see fig 1). It is in this respect we may say that materialists are in a way implicitly accepting the original distinction proposed by Descartes.

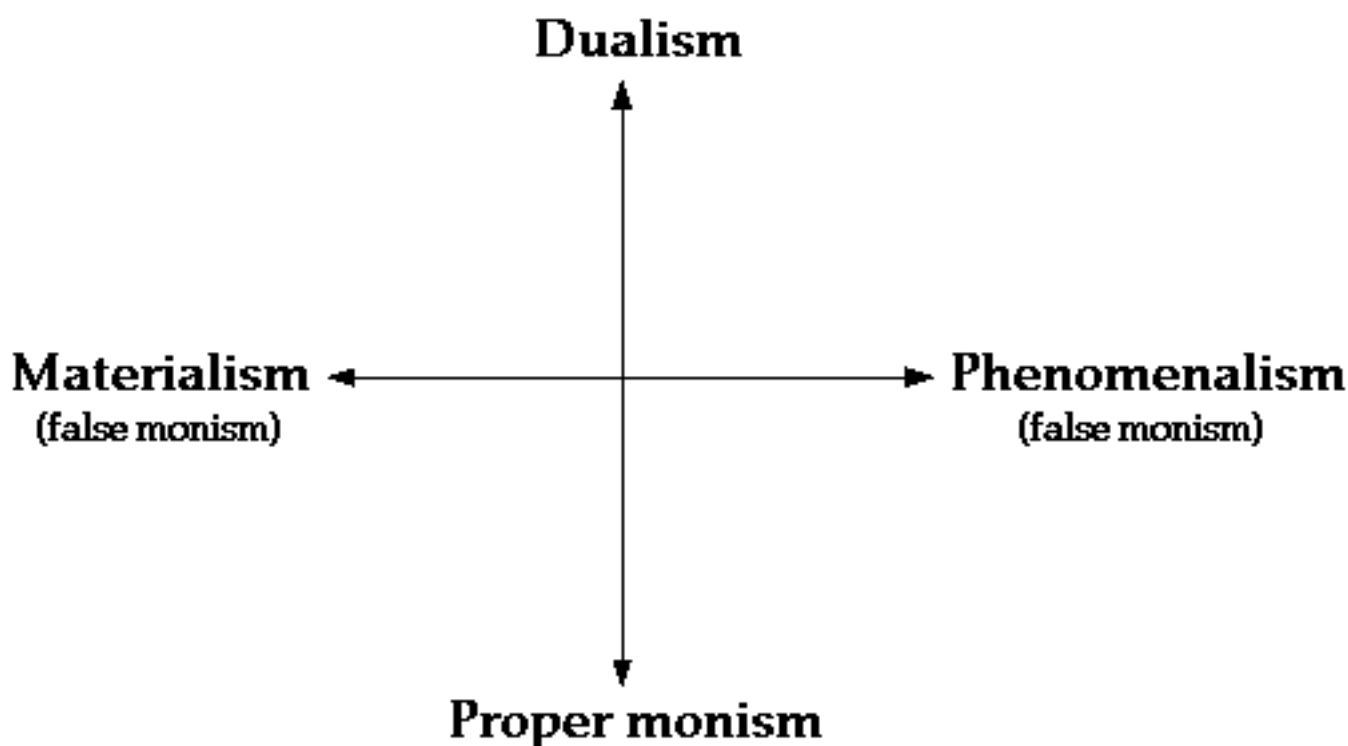


Fig. 1. A scheme representing the relations between dualism, materialism, phenomenalism, and proper monism. The arrows indicate the diametrically opposed view. Notice that materialism and phenomenalism are monistic positions in a very different sense than Proper monism.

The "real" metaphysical opposition is not between materialism and dualism but between materialism and phenomenalism! However, as argued earlier, there is a tendency among modern materialists to represent the problem as a choice between materialism and dualism. This is very misleading as a reductive materialist position in no sense provides an escape from the dualistic framework. Searle (1992) recognised this problem, but did not push the issue far enough. Searle argues against both dualism and materialism, aiming at a solution somewhere in between. However, his account is confusing on mainly two grounds. First, Searle does not make use of any distinction between *proper* and *false monism*. Secondly, Searle's account therefore lacks a clear definition of "dualism". I dare say that Searle eventually commits the very same mistakes he accused his opponents of. (I will make some brief comments on Searle's position below and compare his view with other recent accounts.)

In a classical formulation of monism, defended by Spinoza (1632-1677), he claimed that body and mind were both aspects of *the same* underlying substance. It is important not to interpret the identity statement in accordance with the Fregean model of "reference-identity", since the Fregean scheme allows for, what I call, trivial cases of reference-identity. For instance one might argue

that the terms "mind" and "brain" both refer to the same thing, namely the physical brain itself. On the contrary, Spinozian metaphysics implies that both mind and matter are aspects of something more fundamental - which in a deeper sense - comprises both the mental and the physical.

In the light of my proposed distinction between false and proper monism, it may be worth calling attention to a version of monism called "neutral monism" suggested by Bertrand Russell (1921). Unfortunately, Russell's version of monism is but nominally *neutral*, it should rather be denominated as a "false monism", since it is heavily biased towards phenomenalism. This is the main reason why I choose the term "proper monism" naming a monistic position that is "neutral" in a proper sense. A final remark; there are also what might be called *metaphysical* and *pre-theoretic* versions of "proper monism". Every solution which in some sense transcends the original Cartesian categories - are in one way or another - proper monistic solutions.

² See for instance Churchland (1986), Fodor (1981) and Dennett (1978).

4. A note on Descartes' demarcation of the mental and the physical

There is yet another sense in which reductive materialism may be regarded as Cartesian. Almost all branches of materialism endorse the Cartesian cognitive/intentional notion of the mental, with only one reservation: the mental is regarded as a subset of the physical rather than as an independent immaterial substance. The concept of the mental has, however, undergone historical changes and the mind-body problem with it; in current discussions the emphasis lies on the phenomenal-experiential aspect of consciousness rather than on the cognitive/intentional. Meanwhile Descartes' conception of matter has remained relatively unchallenged at least in philosophical contexts. This, I think, gives us an important clue how to approach the mind-body problem. The current practice in cognitive science, i.e. to use *a part* of Descartes' original definition of the "mental" however, suggests that the real opposition between mind and matter does not, *per se*, rely on Descartes' positive account of the key concepts involved, but on something else. Let me explain this line of thought.

Descartes' original distinction between mind and matter contains three decisive components.

(i) Mind and matter are understood as instances of *different substances*. I will refer to this as the "contrast-element" in Descartes formulation of dualism. The physical is spatially extended substance and the mental is an instance of immaterial (thinking) substance. (A "substance" in the classical sense is an entity that exist in itself, independently of any other entity.)

(ii) "Matter" is defined as "res extensa" (spatial extension)

(iii) "Mind" is defined as "res cogitans". In a modern terminology we might express Descartes' mark of the mental as a definition in terms of higher cognitive capacities, such as, the ability of "thought", or of intentionality in general.

Now, if we abstract from the contrast-element (the substance-claim, see (i) above) we get no real metaphysical split between the mental and the physical. Descartes definition "res extensa" can still be employed in a strict phenomenalist framework as an essential definition of matter. What I mean is this: a stone, for instance, can still be regarded as *phenomenologically extended* in a way a number is not! In short, the categories "mental" and "physical" are internally consistent as long as the distinction is not supported by a contrast-element. This shows that it is feasible to incorporate Descartes' definition of "mind" (Cognitive capacities), with a physical system supporting these capacities, provided that the contrast element is missing (the split in terms of substance, see (i) above).

5. "Phenomenal experience" as a complementary contrast term

I will now present an analysis of philosophically inspired notions of the mental as instances of what I will call "complementary contrast-terms". In short, my basic idea is very simple it purports to show that terms like "qualia", "phenomenal character" and "what-it-is-like" are primarily used as sophisticated contrast-terms (in a similar way Descartes' used the notion of substance as a contrast-term.)

Stating contrast may be described as a special case of stating a *difference*. However, there are degrees of contrast-use which allow for more or less non-problematic uses of mental terms. Contrast may vary in degree, but also, and notably in kind. Consider the following examples.

Normal contrast-free use of "ordinary" psychological concepts

A. "My knee hurts!" The ordinary use of this sentence does not indicate a fundamental split between mind and body nor does it suggest any other interesting difference between them. The sentence, as it is normally used, intends to give other people information that I feel pain in my knee. My point here is that when we, under normal circumstances, say that a part of our body hurts we do not emphasise any kind of *difference* between mind and body. I think this holds for all

"ordinary" psychological concepts.

Ordinary contrast use

B. "He suffered both in his body and in his soul." As a way of speaking, this sentence may be used to express that somebody was very sad but also had a terrible pain in his knee. In this case the contrast is between *kinds of pain*, rather than between kinds of ontological stuff.

C. "My body wanted, but my soul did not." This is what e.g. a catholic priest might say after being seduced by a woman. This use of "body" and "soul" points towards a stronger difference between mind and body than the other two examples. Still, the contrast might be explained in terms of *differences between desires* rather than between two different entities (body and mind) having these desires.

Extreme contrast-use with strong philosophical emphasis

D. "The phenomenal mind is not reducible to the brain or any other physical state". Compare this with: "mind and body are different substances".

The emphasis on *non-reducibility* (or "phenomenal character" or "qualia") indicates that we have to do with a *modern contrast-element*. However, the contrast-element in modern discussions is harder to detect than in Descartes' case.

6. The exaggerated emphasis on the subjective character of mind.

Since Nagel (1974) it is customary to emphasise on the subjective character of experience. Some suggestions of how this subjective character is to be described are: phenomenal consciousness, qualia, what-it-is-like, subjective aspect, first person perspective. All these phenomenological notions appeal to our naive intuitions of what it means to be conscious in the first person sense.

Unfortunately, this class of terms seems very hard or even impossible to specify in any informative philosophical vocabulary. On this issue I agree with Dennett (1988) but I do not reach his conclusions. The problems with "qualia" do not warrant physicalism in the simple sense Dennett believes. Dennett also adopts a view concerning the origin of "qualia" that is commonly accepted among materialists. This view, I think is seriously flawed: "qualia" is understood, and identified with so-called folk-psychological concepts: I shall challenge this view in the following section.

The problem as I see it is that "friends of qualia" more than any other fraction in philosophy of mind strengthen the dualistic position. In general it is very easy to sympathise with the phenomenally oriented philosophers since an over-emphasis on the subjective aspect of experience seems very plausible if one argues against a hard-core reductionism. Who wants to deny the existence of plain experience? Simultaneously, however, an exaggerated emphasis on the subjective character of experience will predispose us to a strong form of dualism.

7. The assumed status of "qualia" as a folk-psychological notion

First I would like to pin-point my disagreement with Dennett, as concerns the analysis of "qualia". My point is that there is no such thing as a "folk psychological" conceptualisation of "qualia" in analogy with there being folk psychological beliefs about (material) solid objects. Maybe there is something like a "folk theory" about memory, perception, and even intention but there is no such pre-theoretic understanding of qualia. I have now reached the point where it easily seems as if I am denying the existence of experience. Of course, there are pains and feelings of pain but there are no "qualia" in any equally obvious sense! Let me explain: the notion of qualia is a theoretical concept on the same level as the modern scientific conception of physical objects with one important exception: the highly refined concepts of the "physical" *have experimental and predictory plausibility which "qualia" lack*. The different modes of use can be explained by reference to the different contexts where the concepts were originally developed. This becomes apparent once we ask *why we use these*

concepts and for what purposes. These questions, properly answered, demonstrate that "qualia" is neither a scientific concept nor a folk-psychological concept. It is a technical *philosophical* term used mainly to establish contrast (when arguing against reductionism).

Let me put it this way: nobody has ever seen or experienced "qualia". On the other hand, many people have seen trees, red and blue things and so on. But one might reply, this is exactly the same thing! But I insist, it is not! However, the highly sophisticated notion of qualia gives connotations in direction towards normal experience - this is the peril. We typically project the supposed semantic content of "qualia" into what is *de facto* experienced in a particular case. We, so to say, confound the concept with what we come to think of when we use it. But as I have tried to demonstrate, the *actual use* of "qualia" (and "phenomenal quality" etc) is radically different from the vocabulary used for describing "ordinary" experiential content.

8. Can we solve the Mind-Body problem?

I think that the mind-body problem is impossible to solve in its current "hard" formulation. I will substantiate this claim later. First I want to examine some recent responses to the question whether it is possible to "solve" the mind-body problem.

Materialism (Churchlands)

Yes: because current (or a future) neuroscience can provide a scientifically satisfactory account of consciousness. In short, the mind-body problem is presented as an empirical matter. It is a hypothesis that the mind eventually will turn out to be nothing but the brain. The standard argument is "the argument from ignorance" and it goes like this: it is premature to say something about the prospects of a scientific solution of the mind-body problem. Theories have been wrong before and given some future evidence it might turn out that the mind actually is the brain.

Naturalistic dualism (Chalmers)

Yes: because we have to take *phenomenal experience* as a fundamental property just like "mass" or "charge". The business left is to map psycho-physical laws

connecting the mental and the physical (so-called bridging principles)³.

No: if we aim to reduce phenomenal qualities to physical states.

*Epistemological agnosticism (McGinn)*⁴

Yes: but not by means of using human cognitive capacities. A Martian mind with a radically different cognitive constitution would, in principle, be able to know what mechanism or property it is that makes nervous tissue give rise to phenomenal experience.

No: since we are "cognitively closed" (epistemologically limited) when it comes to trace the mechanism which is responsible for the possibility of consciousness. Consciousness is noumenal with respect to the outside observers of brains. A weak version of physicalism might still be true (everything mental is dependent of a physical basis) but we are not able to prove it by means of scientific investigation.

Biological naturalism (Searle)

Yes: if we can account for the relation between mind and brain in an appropriate terminology avoiding the errors of dualism and materialism. The solution is: nervous tissue *cause* the mind which itself is a *higher order feature of the brain*.

No: if we aim to reduce the mind to the brain

I find Searles' proposed "solution" very interesting because it is mistaken on important points: some aspects of the mind-body problem which I have tried to clarify in this paper. In one sense, Searle is just as much an implicit dualist as those he criticises for being influenced by the dualistic way of thinking. When Searle insists *on non-reducibility* he is introducing the *contrast-element* into his account and, hence he makes the same mistake he accuses others of making. Further, the appeal to *causal relations* seems very weak when it comes to explain *why* nervous tissue give rise to phenomenal experience.

Searle intimates that there may be "other solutions" to the problem. The impossibility of reduction, he says, is due to our paradigmatic models of reduction. But, he adds: "No one can rule out a priori the possibility of a major intellectual revolution that would give us a new-and at present unimaginable conception of reduction, according to which consciousness would be reducible"⁵.

So, in the end, Searle's view is not that different from those who argue that a conceptual revision would indeed "solve" the problem.

Proper monism (Radovic)

No: because the same thing which keeps the problem "a problem" also guarantees its insolubility. On my interpretation, the a priori impossibility of a solution is not due to certain epistemological limitations, as McGinn (1991) has argued. The problem is conceptual rather than epistemological. A real "solution" requires a step that altogether transcends the original dichotomy.

Yes: because the categories involved are theoretical artefacts. If we avoid them we do not violate any given fundamental metaphysical order. We need a new framework that goes beyond the traditional mind-body problem but which is still compatible with current and future scientific practice.

Non-dualistic solutions, are those that deny "matter" and "consciousness" as sound philosophical categories. As I see it, all bridging-strategies involving a heavy revision of our present conception of matter are consistent with this kind of non-dualistic solution, since a re-conceptualisation of "matter" will (eventually) entail the possibility of phenomenal qualities⁶. A non-dualistic solution is also compatible with a (common sense) naive pre-theoretic approach in line with the anti-theoretical style employed by Wittgenstein (1953) among others⁷. Finally, the Spinozian way of presenting a pure classical metaphysical theory - transcending both matter and mind can also exemplify a non-dualistic solution. I have proposed three feasible routs to escape dualism. All of them are instances of what I call proper monism⁸.

A recent trend in philosophy of mind is to argue for a radical re-conceptualisation of present physical theory⁹. The Churchlands appeal to a future neuroscience can be read as a move in this direction. Even Dennett who is known to be one of the most uncompromising physicalists admits that he is "saving a call for a revolution in materialism as a last resort"¹⁰. I regard it as an open question whether new knowledge of physical properties will offer some understanding, making it possible to give a non-dualistic solution to the mind-body problem. Even if *one* particular non-dualistic "solution" turns out to be impossible there are still many yet unexplored possibilities left.

³ It is not clear to me whether Chalmers supports some version of monism, since his "dual aspect theory of information" gives connotations in this direction. But he prefers to call his

own position "naturalistic dualism" which definitely sounds more like dualism than monism.

⁴ I borrow the name for this view from Flanagan (1992).

⁵ Searle (1992) p. 124.

⁶ A future revision of physics is only one example of a "scientific solution". For instance, I am inclined to regard Gibson (1979) and his "ecological approach to visual perception" as a metaphysically neutral framework.

⁷ See, for instance Merleau-Ponty (1962).

⁸ Even if the Wittgensteinian and the Spinozian "solution" could not be said to be clearly compatible with scientific practise, these accounts would have little or no impact on natural science. It is in this sense the proposed kinds of monistic solutions would not "contradict" science.

⁹ See Penrose (1990) and Nagel (1993).

¹⁰ Dennett (1991).

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