

Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition: Michaelmas term 2025

1st Prize: **Michael Pare** (Canada), studying the online course in Philosophy of Mind (tutor Istvan Musza)

Can One Reasonably Be a Dualist in This Day and Age?

Mind-body dualism is the view that consciousness and/or the mind is a fundamentally different kind of thing from the physical body and brain. In an age dominated by the impressive ongoing successes of physics, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology, the notion of a non-physical mind appears to most as an antiquated relic, a mere ghost in the machine that has been decisively purged by the hard light of empirical science. However, I'll argue that it's nevertheless rational to be a mind-body dualist. While traditional substance dualism (à la Descartes) is now largely rejected by scientists and philosophers due to overwhelming evidence for the mind's dependence on the brain, other forms of dualism, such as property dualism (non-reductive physicalism) remain perfectly rational positions within the philosophy of mind. The most powerful case for contemporary dualism rests not on new scientific discoveries, but on the persistent, ancient, and recalcitrant problem of conscious experience itself.

The Hard Problem of Consciousness and the Explanatory Gap

One central pillar of any reasonable modern dualism is the "hard problem of consciousness," a term coined by philosopher David Chalmers. Science excels at investigating the so called "easy problems" of consciousness: explaining how the brain integrates information, focuses attention, or triggers behavioral responses. These problems are about the functions a system performs. The "hard problem" is the problem of subjective experience: why and how do all these physical processes give rise to the subjective, qualitative, inner life ("qualia"): the redness of red, the painfulness of pain, the feeling of what it is like to be something?

Materialist philosophies, such as reductionistic physicalism or functionalism, assert that consciousness is simply a certain kind of physical or functional state or process. The dualist retorts that this identification or reduction is an article of faith, not a logical necessity or scientific finding. There is an explanatory gap between any fully physical description of brain states and the subjective reality that they are supposed to be identical with. As philosopher Joseph Levine argued, we could (potentially) know everything physical about the firing of various neurons and the release of certain neurotransmitters, but the connection between that scientific explanation and the actual subjective feeling of pain remains a brute, unexplained gap. We can certainly correlate brain events with mental events (the so-called "neural correlates of consciousness"), but we cannot yet see why one is identical with or could be fully explained or reduced to the other.

Thomas Nagel powerfully illustrates this intuition in his seminal paper "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" Nagel argues that even a complete objective, physical account of a bat's sonar system would necessarily leave out the subjective, first-person experience of what it is like for the bat to navigate the world through echolocation. This subjective character of experience is, he contends, a fundamental fact of the universe that cannot be captured by a purely objective, third-person physical description. This points to a dualism called property dualism (or non-reductive physicalism). For the modern property dualist, this gap is not a temporary failure of science but a sign of a deeper ontological divide. Chalmers states, "Consciousness is the one thing in this

world we cannot explain away, and it may be the one thing that ultimately resists integration into the scientific image of a purely physical universe.”¹

The Knowledge Argument and the Nature of Facts

Another powerful intuition supporting dualism is the “knowledge argument,” famously formulated by Frank Jackson through the thought experiment of Mary the colour scientist. Mary is a neuroscientist who has lived her entire life in a black-and-white room. As a brilliant neuroscientist she knows every physical fact about color: The wavelengths of light, the cone cell responses in the retina, the neural pathway from the retina, through the optic tract leading to the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) in the thalamus, which relays the information to the primary visual cortex in the occipital lobe for initial processing, and then beyond. The crucial question is: when Mary steps out of the room and sees a red tomato for the first time, does she learn something new? Jackson argues compellingly that she does: She learns what it is like to see red. She had known all the physical facts and yet she learns something new when she finally sees a red apple for the first time, suggesting that this new, subjective experience is a non-physical fact. As Jackson writes, “It is just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false.”² This argument suggests, in confirmation of Nagel and Chalmers, that no amount of objective, third-person data can fully explain or encapsulate first-person subjectivity.

The Challenge from Neuroscience and the Causal Closure of the Physical

To be reasonable, a modern dualist must directly confront the strongest argument against their position: the problem of causal interaction. The principle of the “causal closure of the physical” states that every physical event has a sufficient physical cause. If you want to explain why a neuron fired, you must look to other physical events: The release of neurotransmitters, the electrical potential across its membrane, etc. There is no evidence, and seemingly no need, for a non-physical “mind-stuff” to intervene in this causal process.

Why accept the causal closure of the physical? For one, if the non-physical mind truly influences the body (say, by causing a finger to move), this will require a violation of physical law (e.g., conservation of energy). Second, neuroscience has produced an overwhelming catalogue of correlations between brain states and mental states. Damage to the hippocampus impairs memory; chemicals like serotonin alter mood; stimulating the cortex can evoke specific sensations.

A reasonable dualist has a couple of potential responses. First, they could adopt a form of dualism which is non-interactionist, such as epiphenomenalism according to which mental properties are distinct from physical properties and dependent upon them. In this case, there’s no mental-to-physical causation and so the causal closure of the physical isn’t violated and yet dualism is true. (That being said, the epiphenomenalists will need to explain away the apparent fact that our mental states do cause our physical behavior.) Alternatively, a property dualist can defend interactionism by arguing that the causal closure of the physical is a philosophical principle which is applied to nature, not shown by any direct scientific evidence. Energy

¹ David Chalmers, *The Character of Consciousness*, 2010.

² Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” 1982.

violations may not occur in the context of fundamental physics, such as quantum mechanics. So, the dualist has several ways of addressing the problem of interaction.

What Would Constitute a Reasonable Dualism Today?

Given these arguments, how might one be a reasonable dualist in the 21st century? First, it would require a deep engagement with science. A reasonable dualist acknowledges the overwhelming evidence for brain-mind correlations and indeed dependence. Evidence from brain injury, psychoactive drugs, and neuroimaging all demonstrate this beyond any doubt. In my opinion, property dualism offers the best prospect of this.

Second, the reasonable dualist is inspired by the incompleteness of any fully materialist explanation. Their dualism is based on rigorous philosophical engagement with the problems of qualia, intentionality (the “aboutness” of thoughts), and the first-person perspective. Ultimately it is a conclusion forced by the data of experience, not a preordained article of any religious faith.

Finally, a property dualist must grapple seriously with the causal problem. They do not posit a “ghostly” mental substance that mysteriously pushes neurons around. Instead, the modern dualist adopts a sophisticated version of property dualism that seeks to naturalize consciousness and does not violate established physical laws. But on the other hand, they may instead question, what are indeed fully established physical laws (causal closure of the physical is just a metaphysical proposal not an established theory or law of science).

Conclusion

One can reasonably be a mind-body property dualist in this day and age. Dualism’s strength lies in its ability to take the reality of subjective experience as the primary datum, a datum that continues to resist complete assimilation into the reductionistic physicalist paradigm. The property dualist resists the leap from objective brain processes to explaining away, subjective feelings. A reasonable property dualist today entirely agrees with that negative assessment of any extra mental ‘substance’ and concurs with physicalism and yet advocates for a non-reductive type of physicalism.

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