Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition: Michaelmas term 2026

2nd Prize: **Sabila Shaikh** (Canada), studying the online course in Philosophy of Mind (tutor Istvan Musza)

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

The relationship between mind and body remains one of philosophy's most persistent puzzles. Since Descartes distinguished res cogitans from res extensa (Descartes, 1641/1996), attempts to explain consciousness have shifted between efforts to naturalise it within physical science and efforts to preserve its irreducible character. Cartesian dualism is no longer tenable, largely because of its metaphysical rigidity and the unresolved interaction problem, yet the intuition behind it, that subjective experience resists reduction to physical processes, continues to endure.

In this essay, I argue that while substance dualism should be rejected, a modern form of dual aspect theory remains reasonable in light of contemporary philosophy and recent developments in physics. To defend this claim, I proceed in three stages. Firstly, I examine why major physicalist theories, including type identity theory and functionalism, fail to account for the qualitative character of experience and therefore leave the explanatory gap untouched. Secondly, I show how developments in theoretical physics challenge the assumption that matter is metaphysically fundamental, which undermines the classical physicalist worldview. Finally, I argue that a dual aspect framework, developed historically by Spinoza and later articulated by Russell and Schlick, and more recently revived by Kastrup and Hoffman, offers a coherent way of understanding the mental and the physical as two perspectives on a single underlying reality (Spinoza, 1677; Russell, 1927; Schlick, 1932; Kastrup, 2019; Hoffman, 2019).

Physicalism and Its Limits

During the twentieth century, philosophy of mind shifted decisively toward physicalism, the view that mental states are identical with or dependent upon physical states of the brain. The earliest version, type identity theory, equated specific mental states with specific neural states, for example pain with C fibre firing (Place, 1956; Smart, 1959). This promised scientific clarity by linking psychology to neurophysiology.

However, type identity theory quickly encounters difficulties. If pain simply is C fibre activity, then organisms lacking C fibres, such as octopuses or birds, could not feel pain, which seems implausible. Kripke strengthened this

argument by observing that while physical identities such as water is H2O are necessary, mind brain identities do not share this necessity (Kripke, 1980). It is conceivable that pain could occur without any C fibre activity, and this conceptual possibility undermines the claim that mental states are identical with particular physical states.

Functionalism was introduced partly to address this difficulty. Instead of defining mental states by their physical realisation, functionalism defines them by their causal roles (Putnam, 1967). Pain is whatever state arises from injury and leads to avoidance behaviour, regardless of its material substrate. This allows for multiple realisation and avoids the biological narrowness of identity theory.

Yet functionalism also struggles to capture subjective experience. Block's Chinese Nation example imagines a system that instantiates every functional role of pain but lacks any felt quality (Block, 1978). Putnam later noted that mental content depends not only on internal states but also on environmental relations (Putnam, 1975). Functionalism therefore explains the cognitive and computational structure of mind, but not the felt character of experience. The explanatory gap remains.

Why Scientific Progress Does Not Close the Gap?

Some physicalists respond that as neuroscience advances, the gap will eventually close. However, empirical success does not guarantee metaphysical success. A brain scan that records neural correlates of vision describes the event from a third person standpoint, while the event itself has a first person character that no scan can display. Jackson's Mary thought experiment makes this vivid: even if Mary knew every physical fact about colour vision, she would still learn something new when she saw red for the first time (Jackson, 1982). Physical description cannot fully capture phenomenology.

Another difficulty concerns explanatory perspective. Human life becomes intelligible at the level of reasons, commitments and subjective points of view. These explanations do not compete with neural accounts; they operate at a different explanatory level. Eliminating the vocabulary of experience for the sake of parsimony would sacrifice significance. A theory that cannot explain why experience matters cannot replace the standpoint from which human beings understand themselves.

A Shift in the Foundations of Physics

Contemporary physics complicates classical physicalism. Work by Nima Arkani Hamed suggests that spacetime and particle behaviour arise from deeper

mathematical structures such as the amplituhedron (Arkani Hamed, 2014). What is fundamental, on this view, is not matter but relational and algebraic form. This shift undermines the assumption that matter is the fundamental building block of reality.

Carlo Rovelli's relational quantum mechanics reinforces this direction. According to Rovelli, physical properties exist only relative to interactions (Rovelli, 1996). The world consists of networks of relations rather than independent substances. This relational perspective aligns naturally with dual aspect theories. The physical may be the outward, measurable profile of processes whose inward aspect is experiential.

These developments in physics do not directly entail a mental foundation to reality, yet they weaken the classical picture in which matter forms the unquestioned bedrock of explanation. If what is fundamental are relational structures rather than discrete material objects, then the traditional physicalist claim that everything real must ultimately be described in material terms loses much of its force. Instead, physics appears to be converging on a view in which the physical world is the outward expression of deeper relational patterns. This shift opens conceptual space for interpretations in which the mental and the physical are complementary aspects of a single underlying order.

Dual Aspect Theory

Against this backdrop, philosophers have renewed interest in dual aspect theory. Spinoza argued that mind and body are two attributes of a single substance (Spinoza, 1677). Russell and Schlick later suggested that the intrinsic nature of the physical world might be accessible through consciousness (Russell, 1927; Schlick, 1932).

Modern proponents offer updated versions of this idea. Kastrup argues that matter is the extrinsic appearance of a universal mental field (Kastrup, 2019). Hoffman proposes that perception evolved as an interface that hides the deeper nature of reality (Hoffman, 2019). Although these accounts differ in detail, they share a common insight: the mental and the physical may be two perspectives on one underlying reality.

Why Dual Aspect Theory Remains Reasonable?

A common objection to dual aspect theory is that it risks collapsing into either property dualism or idealism. Critics argue that if the mental and the physical are two aspects of one underlying reality, then nothing distinguishes this view from traditional dualism except terminology; alternatively, if the underlying reality is conceptualised in mental terms, dual aspect theory may simply

replicate idealism under a new name. However, this criticism overlooks the structural commitment of dual aspect accounts. They deny that either aspect exists independently or is ontologically prior. On this view, experiential and physical descriptions pick out the intrinsic and extrinsic profiles of the same process. This avoids both substance dualism, which posits two fundamentally different kinds of things, and reductive physicalism, which collapses experience into structure. The theory's strength lies in refusing this binary.

Dual aspect theory incorporates the successes of neuroscience while acknowledging that experience cannot be reduced to physical description. It aligns with developments in physics that shift emphasis away from matter toward relational or structural foundations. And it makes sense of the fact that consciousness is always present from the first person standpoint, even when physical processes are described with increasing precision from the third person standpoint.

Importantly, dual aspect theory respects Nagel's claim that an organism has conscious mental states only if there is something that it is like to be that organism (Nagel, 1974). No amount of third person data can replace this first person reality. Instead of treating experience as an afterthought, the dual aspect theorist treats it as an essential expression of reality.

Conclusion

To be a dualist today does not require reviving Cartesian substances or rejecting physical science. It requires recognising that consciousness cannot be fully captured by physical description. Physicalist theories explain structure and function with increasing success, but they do not explain the felt character of experience. Meanwhile, physics places pressure on the assumption that matter is fundamental.

In this context, dual aspect theory provides a coherent and scientifically compatible framework. It preserves what physicalism explains while accounting for what it leaves out. Until science can explain why there is something it is like to undergo the very processes it describes, dualism in this modern form remains reasonable. More broadly, dual aspect theory invites a reconsideration of the categories through which we understand ourselves. If the physical and experiential are two faces of one reality, then the divide between inner and outer, subject and world, may be less rigid than traditional metaphysics suggests. A framework that honours both perspectives without erasing either may offer not only a more complete philosophy of mind, but also a more integrated picture of our place within the natural world.

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