Dissertation Summary

Property Dualism as a Solution to the Mind-Body Problem
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The mind-body problem challenges us to explain how consciousness relates to the physical world. Is being conscious nothing over and above instantiating the right pattern of physical properties, as physicalists believe, or do we need to posit non-physical phenomenal properties, as dualists would have it? If the dualists are correct, can we rest content with non-physical properties, or do we also have to posit non-physical substances to bear those properties? This dissertation defends property dualism as a solution to the mind-body problem. There must be fundamental phenomenal properties, ontologically on a par with the fundamental physical properties, but these phenomenal properties are borne by physical things. There are no souls or minds, if these are understood as non-physical conscious entities. In chapter 1, I advance a novel argument for dualism. In chapter 2, I criticize an argument that is often taken to support substance dualism over property dualism. In chapter 3, I argue for property dualism over a monist alternative. In chapter 4, I critically assess the prospects for a functionalist account of mental vocabulary.

The standard arguments for property dualism, e.g., Jackson’s knowledge argument and Chalmers’ zombie argument, all proceed from intuitions about what follows from a full physical description of the world. If a full physical description of the world does not imply the facts about consciousness, then those facts must be independent of the physical facts, and dualism follows. In chapter 1, I advance an argument that starts instead from the intuition that there cannot be borderline cases of consciousness. Consider the case of a mosquito. It is difficult to say whether a mosquito is conscious or not, and it would plausibly remain difficult even if we knew every fact about mosquito physiology. However, one thing we can say for sure, even in our present state of knowledge, is that the answer is determinately yes or no. The lights are either on or off. This shows that, if a physicalist theory of consciousness is to succeed, it cannot identify consciousness with a physical phenomenon picked out in vague terms.

I then argue that two broad classes of physicalist theories, those that attempt to pick out consciousness in functional terms and those that attempt to do so in neuro-biological terms, fail to satisfy this condition. This is because these theories use inexact concepts drawn either from folk discourse or from the non-fundamental sciences rather than perfectly precise concepts.
built up out of fundamental physical and metaphysical concepts. These two classes cover all the major physicalist theories of consciousness that have been offered so far, so the physicalist must return to the drawing board. She must be willing to go beyond the concepts of psychology and neuroscience in order to find a perfectly precise property that is even a candidate for being identical to consciousness. To close this chapter, I raise some concerns about the possibility of this project’s success, and I explain why I think the dualist is in a better position.

In chapter 2, I criticize a popular argument for substance dualism. According to this argument, if conscious subjects are high-level physical objects, then every conscious subject will overlap a multitude of other objects that all seem to have an equally good claim on being conscious. Intuitively, there is only one conscious subject sitting in my chair right now, but it seems that the property dualist must deny this. The substance dualist, on the other hand, can say that all the many overlapping, human-shaped objects in my chair right now are related to a single soul, and it is this soul that is the unique conscious subject in my vicinity.

I think this argument should be somewhat worrying to the property dualist, but I do not think it can support substance dualism over property dualism. To see why, note that for the substance dualist, there will be a determinate fact of the matter about which high-level physical objects causally contribute to a particular soul’s existence or phenomenal state. The fusion of all of these, then, will be the unique, perfectly precise object that contains all and only the physical bits of the world that are relevant to that subject’s conscious life. I see no reason why the property dualist could not simply identify this object as the conscious subject.

In chapter 3, I take stock of the relative advantages and disadvantages of a monist alternative to property dualism. On this view, which I will call Russellian monism, the intrinsic natures of fundamental physical objects, the categorical bases of their dispositional profiles, are constituted by phenomenal or proto-phenomenal properties. The phenomenal properties of a more complex entity, like a person or a brain, are then composed out of the phenomenal or proto-phenomenal properties of the fundamental objects that make up that complex entity. Russellian monism is standardly taken to have several advantages over property dualism. First, because it is concerned with the properties that ground physical dispositions, one could argue that it is itself a form of physicalism. Second, because it finds a place for the phenomenal within a full physical description of reality, it seems to be
more parsimonious than property dualism. Third, it provides a causal role for our phenomenal properties while maintaining the causal closure of the physical. Fourth, it does not require any metaphysically questionable form of emergence.

My goal in this chapter is to make Russellian monism less attractive in relation to property dualism. I do this by first taking its alleged advantages and showing that they are overblown. I then argue that if Russellian monism is true, it is impossible for functional duplicates with different constitutions to be phenomenal duplicates. Intuitively, however, this possibility should be left open. Finally, I close this chapter with a short discussion of the combination problem, which stands as the most serious issue for Russellian monism.

In chapter 4, I press an argument against functionalism about the mind. The issues discussed in this chapter are somewhat orthogonal to questions about consciousness, but functionalism is one of dualism’s main physicalist rivals, so its failure can only make dualist views more attractive. The Blockhead thought experiment describes a creature that uses a look-up tree to reproduce intelligent behavior in all possible circumstances. In this way, it convincingly simulates having a mind without having a mind. This is often taken to tell against functionalist analyses of mental terms, but Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson argue that their common-sense functionalism evades this objection. They identify a clause of common-sense functionalism, the causality condition, that they think Blockhead fails to satisfy. Thus, they think they can correctly rule out Blockhead’s having a mind. The causality condition says basically that the later states of a creature must causally depend on the earlier states of that creature in the right way. Because the whole look-up tree is already present when Blockhead is created, its later states only minimally depend on its earlier states.

I argue that the causality condition is ambiguous, and once we precisify it, we can see that it must be either too strong or too weak. If it is too strong, then it rules out things that we should count as intelligent. To make this case, I use a novel thought-experiment that I call “the brain swapper.” The brain swapper is a creature that changes brains every few seconds, and I claim that we should think of the brain swapper as genuinely intelligent. Strong versions of the causality condition rule this out, however. On the other hand, if the causality condition is too weak, then Blockhead can in fact satisfy it. This shows that the causality condition is not enough for common-sense functionalism to rule out Blockhead’s having a mind. I close
this chapter by showing that there is an isomorphism between Blockhead’s internal states and the internal states of a genuinely intelligent person. This means that, unless functionalists can motivate a non ad hoc condition that rules out Blockhead’s having a mind, functionalism cannot give us the correct verdict that Blockhead is only simulating intelligence.