Property Dualism, Substance Dualism, and the Mental Problem of the Many

Joshua O’Rourke

Introduction

A phenomenal property is the property of feeling a certain way. Being phenomenally conscious just consists in bearing phenomenal properties. The word “consciousness” is used in many ways, but in this paper, I use it to mean “phenomenal consciousness.” Property physicalism is the view that phenomenal properties are fully grounded in the physical properties. Property Dualism is the view that phenomenal properties are not fully grounded in the physical properties.\footnote{I do not know of a property dualist who thinks that phenomenal properties are partially grounded in the physical properties, but such a view at least seems coherent.} The kind of grounding we need here is metaphysical grounding, on which the grounded phenomenon is nothing over and above its (full) grounds. Using grounding to frame the debate between physicalists and dualists allows us to cut a middle path between reduction, which is too strong, and supervenience, which is too weak.\footnote{For more discussion of grounding, see Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), and Fine (2012).}
What kinds of objects bear phenomenal properties? Substance physicalism is the view that the bearers of phenomenal properties are physical objects. Substance dualism is the view that the bearers of phenomenal properties are non-physical objects. To clean up the terminology, I will hereafter use “physicalism” to refer to the conjunction of property physicalism and substance physicalism, “property dualism” to refer to the conjunction of property dualism and substance physicalism, and “substance dualism” to refer to the conjunction of property dualism and substance dualism.

What reasons are there for favoring physicalism? Physicalism has an appealingly simplicity, but this sort of consideration cannot be dispositive. A stronger consideration in its favor is the fact that our conscious episodes seem to play a role in causing our behavior, but the physical realm appears to be causally closed, meaning that non-physical entities cannot have physical effects. Another strong consideration in favor of physicalism derives from the striking success achieved by the sciences of the mind. If the mind is non-physical, then the prospects for investigating it through the methods of empirical science should be dim, but that is apparently not the situation. For these and other reasons, physicalism is usually taken to be the default position.

Many philosophers nonetheless share the persistent intuition that there is something more to consciousness than mere physics. As Chalmers (2003)
puts it, physics can only give us “structure and dynamics,” and consciousness
does not seem to be explicable in those terms. This intuition is put to work in
different ways in the standard arguments against physicalism, such as Jack-
son’s knowledge argument (Jackson 1982) and Chalmers’ zombie argument
(Chalmers 1996). If correct, these arguments commit us to non-physical phe-
nomenal properties. Property dualists think we should stop there. On their
view, phenomenal properties can be borne by physical objects, so there is
no reason to go beyond a physical ontology. Substance dualists disagree.
On their view, the non-physical phenomenal properties must be borne by
non-physical minds or souls. In this paper, I write from the perspective
of a property dualist. I am convinced by the standard arguments against
physicalism, but I would like to hold the line against positing non-physical
objects.

Which physical objects would physicalists and property dualists identify
as the conscious subjects? Different theorists will give different answers, of
course, but most will want to say that only certain high-level physical objects,
things like bodies or brains, are candidates for being conscious subjects. This
is because consciousness seems to require a certain level of organizational
complexity. Of course, as pointed out by Unger (1980), any such high-level
physical object will overlap many distinct but very similar physical objects.

I follow Unger (2004; 2006) and Zimmerman (2010) in referring to non-physical bearers
of phenomenal properties as ”souls.” This is not meant to imply anything else about the
nature of these objects.

By “conscious subject,” I simply mean “bearer of phenomenal properties.” I do not
wish to build in any other assumptions about what being a conscious subject entails.
If we think that one of these objects is conscious, then it is difficult to deny that many of them are. However, the idea that there are multiple conscious subjects all sharing space with me right now is extremely counterintuitive. I cannot shake the impression that I am the only conscious being currently at my desk.

Unger (2004; 2006, ch. 7) and Zimmerman (2010) have argued that these considerations support substance dualism. Even if there are many equally good candidates for being my body all sitting at my desk right now, they could all be linked to one and the same soul. According to the substance dualist, souls, not bodies, are the conscious subjects, so we need not conclude that there are multiple conscious subjects all sitting at my desk right now. Both the physicalist and the property dualist will have to say something about this issue, but I think it presents a particular challenge for the property dualist. My goal in this paper is twofold. First, I wish to show that the mental problem of the many raises a significant challenge for property dualism that has not yet been met. Second, I wish to show that any adequate solution the substance dualist comes up with can be turned into an adequate solution for the property dualist. Thus, the mental problem of the many cannot be used to support substance dualism over property dualism.

In section 1, I present the the mental problem of the many, and I explain why I think it presents a particular challenge for the property dualist. In section 2, I consider some replies that have been offered on behalf of the property dualist and argue that they do not work. In section 3, I go over
the way that Unger and Zimmerman think that substance dualism can avoid this challenge, and I argue that, to the extent that their solution works, a very similar solution is available to the property dualist. In section 4, I discuss an issue that is particular to Zimmerman’s treatment of the mental problem of the many, and I argue that it does not support substance dualism over property dualism. Finally, I conclude by assessing the dialectic and discussing where we should go from here.

1 The Mental Problem of the Many

Consider a particular high-level physical object, say, the desk before me. The problem of the many (Unger 1980) challenges us to reconcile the following commitments. The desk is nothing but a hunk of matter, and it overlaps many other hunks of matter that are all equally desk-like. It would be unacceptably arbitrary to say that one of these hunks of matter is a desk while denying that the others are. Yet there is only one desk before me. There is no consensus on how to resolve the problem of the many, but I pass over discussing possible solutions to the general problem because I am interested in issues that arise only when we apply this line of reasoning to conscious subjects.

To that end, consider a particular high-level object that is supposed to be a conscious subject. For the sake of definiteness, let us consider my brain.6

---

6In this paper, I will focus on brains as the high-level physical candidates for being conscious subjects, but nothing turns on this. The arguments will go through for nervous
My brain overlaps many hunks of matter that are all very similar to it. It seems strange to say that one of these hunks of matter has a greater claim on being conscious than the other ones do, so we should conclude that they are all conscious if one of them is. Thus, we are lead to the conclusion that I am actually sharing space with a multitude of distinct conscious subjects. Of course, nothing in this argument turned on any peculiarities of my situation, so we should conclude that every conscious subject overlaps many other conscious subjects. Intuitively, however, this seems utterly unbelievable. Surely I am the only conscious subject sitting at my desk right now. The mental problem of the many (Unger 2004; Unger 2006, ch. 7) challenges us to resolve this apparent antinomy.⁷

What is special about the problem as it applies to conscious subjects? It seems much more objectionable to claim that there are multiple conscious subjects all sharing my space right now than to claim that there are multiple desks before me, but what could explain this asymmetry? I think we can trace it back to the intuition that being conscious is more metaphysically heavy-duty than being a desk.⁸ Of course, the physicalist is already committed to denying the intuition that there is anything metaphysically special about systems, human organisms, and all the other high-level physical objects that have been proposed as candidates for being conscious subjects.

⁷Zimmerman (2010) focuses on a slightly different aspect of the problem. I address his arguments in section 4.

⁸How might we explicate the intuitive notion of A being more “metaphysically heavy-duty” than B? One possible way is in terms of A being more fundamental, or perhaps more natural, than B. I do not put the notion to technical use here, so I will not commit to a technical definition.
consciousness, so, for her, the mental problem of the many should be no more worrying than the general version of the problem. That this seems like an unsatisfactory thing to say is just a consequence of our anti-physicalist intuitions, so it cannot be a further reason for rejecting physicalism.

On the other hand, the property dualist thinks that consciousness is a fundamental feature of the world, so there really is a sense in which it is more metaphysically heavy-duty than deskness. It is easy to see how all the different instances of deskness before me overlap, just as their bearers do. Each instance of deskness is, or is grounded in, an assemblage of lower-level property instances, and these assemblages overlap by sharing parts. To make the example vivid, consider that all the many billions of desks before me have the property of weighing about 50 pounds. However, when I put the conglomeration of desks on my scale, I do not expect the scale to break. Rather, I expect it read about 50 pounds. This is because all those instances of weighing about 50 pounds very nearly coincide. They, just like their bearers, are “many, but almost one,” to use Lewis’s memorable phrase.

---

9 That is, understood as a metaphysical issue, the mental problem of the many should not trouble the physicalist any more than the general problem does. However, there might be ethical stakes to the mental case that are not shared by the general case. After all, we tend to presume that conscious beings have moral status, so the question of exactly how many conscious beings are sharing my space right now at least seems to be morally significant. If one thinks that important ethical joints should track important metaphysical joints, this might provide an independent route to dualism about phenomenal consciousness. Simon (2017) gives an argument along these lines.

10 It is easiest to make this point in terms of property instances, but they are not strictly necessary. If we wanted to avoid reference to property instances, we could instead make this point in terms of facts, like the fact that object o bears property P, or just in terms of o’s bearing P.
Fundamental property instances, on the other hand, are not grounded in assemblages of lower-level property instances,\textsuperscript{11} so they cannot overlap in this way.\textsuperscript{12}

\section{Unsuccessful Responses}

Mackie (2011), writing in response to Zimmerman, suggests the following response to the problem. Perhaps the psychophysical laws directly pick out some precise thing that is a part of all the overlapping brains in my skull.\textsuperscript{13} Brains might still be said to bear phenomenal properties, but in a derivative sense. Just as we say that I am injured in virtue of my foot being injured, we could say that brains are conscious in virtue of one of their parts being conscious. Thus, although there would be a multitude of conscious subjects all sharing space in my head, there would be just one that was conscious non-derivatively. Because the multitude would be conscious only in a metaphysically light-weight sense, the mental problem of the many would cease to be any more worrisome than the general problem.

\textsuperscript{11}I take it that this is part of what it means to be fundamental.

\textsuperscript{12}The situation is actually a bit more complicated than this. To see why, note that there are also billions of overlapping instances of \textit{weighing exactly 50 pounds} before me. Treating this as a mass property, it looks like it actually is fundamental, as the whole continuously gradable family of mass properties features in the ontology of fundamental physics. Thus, the problem seems to arise not for all instances of fundamental properties but for instances of fundamental properties that are borne non-derivatively. I do not think this complication affects the arguments of the paper, so I will not discuss it further.

\textsuperscript{13}In this paper, I will write as though all the very brain-like objects in my head are brains, but this is merely for the sake of convenience. If you prefer, you can read “brain” as “very brain-like object.”
There are two major issues with this sort of response. First, there is nothing that is a part of all the different brains in my skull. To see why, consider a brain $b$ that is on the higher end in terms of size and a molecule $m$ within that brain. Now consider $b^-$, the object that includes everything in $b$ except for $m$. Because we chose $b$ to be on the higher end in terms of size, $b^-$ is not too small to be considered a brain. Furthermore, $b^-$ is extremely similar to $b$, so, by the same reasoning that lead us into the problem of the many in the first place, we should conclude that $b^-$ is a brain. I made no assumptions about $m$, so for every molecule in $b$, there is a brain overlapping $b$ that does not have that molecule as a part. Thus, there are no molecules and, in fact, no parts of molecules that are parts of all the brains inside my skull. This rules out any material object from being a part of all the different brains in my skull.

Second, even assuming there is an object that is part of all the brains in my skull, as long as this is a high-level physical object, the mental problem of the many will still apply to it. We might not have a predicate that picks out that sort of object, as we do with brains, but it will nonetheless overlap many distinct but very similar objects, and it will seem arbitrary to say that just one of those objects is conscious while the others are not. Although I do not think Mackie would endorse this move, one could respond to the worry by claiming that the psychophysical laws pick out a low-level object, like a molecule. This, however, is implausible for all sorts of reasons. Unger emphasizes the fact that a conscious subject cannot be identical to a par-
ticular molecule in her brain(s) because she could survive the destruction of any one of these molecules. Zimmerman argues that the position arrived at is still arbitrary because no molecule inside my brain(s) is clearly privileged. A further consideration against this view is that something like a molecule just seems too simple to underlie a rich and complex mental life. It may be that we have to take on board a measure of implausibility whichever way we go, but the molecule view seems particularly unattractive.

Bynoe and Jones (2013), writing in response to Unger, offer a different sort of solution. On their view, conscious subjects are not brains but a new type of material object they call “experiencers.” Experiencers satisfy the following condition. For every brain $b$, one and only one experiencer fuses all the brains that overlap $b$. Thus, there is only one experiencer in my head at the present moment.

I think that this sort of solution is on the right track, and I will develop something like it in the next section, but the particular proposal advanced by Bynoe and Jones suffers from two major problems. First is the matter of higher-order vagueness. I have spoken up to this point as though my head contains a well-defined collection of overlapping chunks of matter that are all clearly brains. However, the situation is far more complex than that. Among the overlapping chunks of matter in my head, there is no bright line between

---

14 This is not meant to be a definition of “experiencer.” Experiencers need not be mere fusions. Unger (2006, pp. 437-8) anticipates the sort of response given by Bynoe and Jones, but he seems to miss this possibility. He objects that we cannot be mere fusions because we do not have any of our parts essentially, but this objection does not apply to the experiencer view.
the ones that are brains and the ones that are not brains. How brain-like these chunks of matter are drops off gradually from ones that are clearly brains to ones that are clearly not brains, and we could make the cutoff in any number of places. This means that it will be vague exactly which chunks of matter an experiencer is supposed to fuse, and these are the conditions in which we can get a problem of the many going. Bynoe and Jones recognize this issue, but they choose to set it aside.\textsuperscript{15} This will not do. If the view is to be made plausible, the experiencer-theorist must say something about the situation as it actually stands, in all its meaty messiness.

Second, it is not clear how experiencers are meant to embed in a broader theory of consciousness. Bynoe and Jones wish to stay neutral between physicalism and property dualism, but in so doing, they arrive at a view that is unfriendly to both. The physicalist, when it comes to picking out the conscious subjects, sees nothing special about experiencers. A given experiencer is just another high-level physical object that overlaps many distinct but very similar objects, and merely stipulating that only experiencers can be conscious is as arbitrary as stipulating that only the left-most brain in a given head can be conscious.\textsuperscript{16} For the property dualist, on the other hand, more needs to be said about why it is plausible to think that the psychophysical

\textsuperscript{15}They do this for two reasons. One, they claim that the existence of higher-order vagueness is controversial, citing Wright (2010) and Fara (2004). Two, Unger claims that his problem is independent of issues arising from vagueness, so Bynoe and Jones think they can adequately respond to him without adverting to vagueness.

\textsuperscript{16}Alternatively, if it is definitive of experiencers that they are the unique kind of thing that can be a conscious subject, then the class runs the risk of being empty.
laws pick out experiencers rather than some other kind of object or objects. Again, mere stipulation does not get us anywhere.

These two solutions, “going minimal” and “going maximal” as Unger (2006, pp. 437-9) calls them, are the only ones that have been specifically addressed to Unger and Zimmerman in print. As I noted, I think the strategy of “going maximal” is on the right track, but more needs to be said to make such a view plausible. I will attempt to do just that in the next section, but before I do, I will present and criticize one more solution that has been proposed in a different context.

One way the property dualist could respond is by appealing to restricted composition. Suppose one thought that some simples composed a complex whole when and only when their activity constituted the functioning of a brain.\textsuperscript{17} If this were true, then we would not need to talk about different overlapping chunks of matter. There could be just one brain in my skull.\textsuperscript{18} If this is the only high-level object in my vicinity, then it must be the thing that bears my phenomenal properties.\textsuperscript{19}

One serious issue with this proposal is that it does not help without a further, seemingly \textit{ad hoc}, assumption, namely that no two brains overlap. To see why this is so, suppose we have a collection of particles whose activity constitutes the functioning of a brain. The restricted composition theorist

\textsuperscript{17}This view is typically advanced by people who think that the conscious subjects are human organisms, but, in this context, we can assess the merits of the view on the assumption that the conscious subjects are brains.

\textsuperscript{18}Or, rather, one brain contained within my particles arranged skull-wise.

\textsuperscript{19}This assumes that phenomenal properties cannot be borne by pluralities of objects.
would then say that there is a brain with all and only those things as parts. Now consider a different collection that shares some particles with the first and whose activity also seems to constitute the functioning of a brain. Without some principled reason for saying that the activity of these particles does not constitute the functioning of a different brain, it would seem that the restricted composition theorist is forced to say that we have two distinct but overlapping brains, and thus our problem reemerges. Whereas we might have hoped that restricted composition would give us an independently motivated reason for thinking that there is just one brain in my head, we can now see that this principle is in fact independent and must be added to the theory to deal with the problem at hand.

A second issue is that restricted composition either requires us to believe that existence can be vague or to believe that composition draws arbitrary distinctions, and neither option is very appealing. If we have some particles whose activity is right on the borderline of constituting the functioning of a brain, then we can go one of two ways. First, we could say that this is a case in which it is vague whether or not a complex thing, the brain, exists. However, existence does not seem like the sort of thing that can be vague. Either something is part of the furniture of the universe or it is not.

Second, we could say that there is always a determinate fact of the matter as to whether the activity of some particles constitutes the functioning of a

\footnote{Van Inwagen, probably the most famous restricted composition theorist, defends this option (Van Inwagen 1990, pp. 271-84).}

\footnote{For a more detailed argument that existence cannot be vague, see Sider (2003).}
brain. Thus, it would never be vague whether or not a complex thing exists. The problem with this option is that the condition on some simples composing a complex whole could not really be their joint activity constituting the function of a brain, as there is just no eliminating the vagueness from this condition. The condition would really have to be some gerrymandered, perfectly precise thing, indescribable in terms of our pre-theoretic concepts, and then the view loses much of its plausibility. Why should composition pick out such a seemingly arbitrary condition?

3 Piggybacking on a Substance Dualist Solution

Unger and Zimmerman both think that the substance dualist has any easy response to the mental problem of the many.

Each of the many nervous systems in my situation, or each of my many nervous systems, causally promotes just the same single experiencer, just a certain single being that’s engaged in just a single (present process of total) experiencing, namely, my total experiencing. Of course, this experiencer is nobody but me. (Unger 2006, p. 380, emphasis in original)

With many overlapping patterns of neural firing, each lawfully sufficient for the existence of a soul with the same phenomenal
states, there could still be just one soul, its existence and phe-
nomenal state simply *overdetermined*. There need be no vague-
ness about which pattern generates the subject of consciousness—
In fact, on this supposition, many are equally responsible—nor
about how many subjects there are (Zimmerman 2010, pp. 146-7,
emphasis in original).

Thus, according to Unger and Zimmerman, the substance dualist should
think that I might have many brains but that all of these brains interface
with just one soul. Since it is this soul that is the conscious subject, we need
not conclude that there are a multitude of conscious subjects all sharing my
perspective at this moment.

On this sort of substance dualist view, what would the psychophysical
laws have to look like? On a first pass, they might look something like this:
When a brain $b$ and all brains overlapping $b$ are in physical state $P$, generate
a soul $s$ in phenomenal state $C$. This cannot be exactly right, however,
because whether or not something is a brain is vague, and vague conditions
cannot appear in the fundamental laws of nature. Thus, the substance dualist
is committed to the existence of a perfectly precise condition that picks out all
and only the physical objects that directly interact with the souls. We might
never be able to know what this condition is, but that is not important for my

---

22I set aside here interesting questions about how to prevent the laws from generating
a new soul at every moment. Souls could be momentary, of course, and we could identify
persisting conscious beings like you and me with collections of momentary soul-stages, but
if souls are meant to endure, then the law as I formulated it would lead to a vast profusion
of them.
purposes. For a given soul \( s \), then, this condition will pick out a determinate set of physical objects, and this set will have a determinate fusion, containing all the physical activity directly relevant to \( s \)'s mental life. Call this object \( s \)'s brain*.\(^{23}\)

One point to make here is that the emergent character of the substance dualism detailed above plays no role in the argument. As long as one thinks that there is a fact of the matter about exactly which physical objects interact with which souls, then one is committed to the existence of a brain* for each soul. It does not matter whether the souls are generated by physical goings on or whether they exist independently.

Let us suppose, then, that the substance dualist has a worked-out theory on hand. We could transform this theory into a new theory by replacing reference to souls with reference to brains*.\(^{24}\) This new theory would be a form of property dualism, rather than substance dualism, but it seems like it would give us just as good a solution to the mental problem of the many. It would agree with the substance dualist theory about exactly which phenomenal properties would be tokened in which circumstances and about how many times they would be tokened, so these sorts of considerations could not support the substance dualist theory over the property dualist version.

\(^{23}\)Over time, the set of physical objects that directly interact with \( s \) will change its membership. To treat the diachronic case, then, we should identify \( s \)'s brain* with the object that, at each time \( t \) that \( s \) exists, fuses the set \( \{ x : x \text{ directly interacts with } s \text{ at } t \} \).

\(^{24}\)If the substance dualist theory is emergent, we would need to eliminate reference to generation as well. Brains*, unlike emergent souls, exist prior to the operation of the psychophysical laws.
Arbitrariness considerations seem irrelevant as well. It is no more arbitrary for the laws to single out a brain* as the bearer of phenomenal properties in a particular situation than it is for them to single out a set of brain-like objects as the physical objects that directly interact with a particular soul. In both cases, the laws must make sharp cutoffs where, intuitively, there are none.

It seems to me that the substance dualist should grant that my brain* looks like a plausible candidate for being the unique bearer of my phenomenal properties. It is very brain-like, it is in my head, and it contains all of the physical goings on that she thinks are directly relevant to my conscious life. Furthermore, the substance dualist already believes that my brain* is privileged by the psychophysical laws. All of this goes to show that, even by the substance dualist’s own lights, the property dualist’s derived solution to the mental problem of the many looks at least as good as the one originally provided by the substance dualist. Thus, the property dualist can construct an adequate solution to the mental problem of the many out of an adequate solution given by the substance dualist. This means that the mental problem of the many cannot support substance dualism over property dualism.

25 Depending on the psychophysical laws with which we started, my brain* might contain some extra stuff as well. That is, it might have parts that do not directly bear on my phenomenal properties. For example, suppose that the physical property $P$ mentioned in the manifestation conditions of the laws only concerns the outer surface of each overlapping brain. Then there will be particles in the interior of at least one of the brains that do not directly contribute to whether $P$ is instantiated for any of the brains. If one is worried that this makes my brain* a less plausible candidate for being the unique bearer of my phenomenal properties, we can move to the smaller object that fuses only the things that directly contribute to $P$ being instantiated for at least one of my overlapping brains.
One disadvantage of this property dualist proposal is that two intrinsic physical duplicates can differ in their phenomenal properties, even holding fixed the psychophysical laws.\textsuperscript{26} As an example, my brain* minus one atom would presumably be conscious if it existed on its own, but since it is actually a part of my brain*, it is not conscious. On the substance dualist view, by contrast, it is possible for intrinsic physical duplicates to always give rise to the same phenomenal state.\textsuperscript{27} This is a fair point, but it is not clear to me how important it is. After all, phenomenal properties are themselves intrinsic, so the property dualist can still claim that objects which share all of their intrinsic properties, not just their physical ones, will be phenomenal duplicates. Furthermore, whether or not the psychophysical laws cause a soul to bear a certain phenomenal property depends on what is happening in the physical realm, so the substance dualist must grant that it will not supervene on an intrinsic description of the soul in question. This shows that the issue is not that property dualism makes an object’s phenomenal properties causally depend on physical things that are extrinsic to it. Rather, the issue is the narrower one that property dualism allows intrinsic \textit{physical} duplicates to give rise to different phenomenal states. This might be surprising, but I do not think it is too strange to suppose that a physical object’s causal powers might depend on the situation in which it is embedded.

\textsuperscript{26}This disadvantage is shared by all maximalist views, including the one advocated by Bynoe and Jones.

\textsuperscript{27}Of course, nothing I have said forces the substance dualist to deny that the psychophysical laws are sensitive to extrinsic physical properties.
Recall the view of Bynoe and Jones on which a conscious subject is an experiencer, i.e., an object that fuses a maximal set of overlapping brains. I raised two objections to this view, first that it is inconsistent with the presence of higher order vagueness and second that it is unclear how experiencers are supposed to be picked out by the psychophysical laws. I have not presented a definite opposing view in this section. Rather, I have presented a recipe for creating a definite property dualist view out of a definite substance dualist view. Regardless of the details, the view that a property dualist arrives at by following this recipe should be able to avoid both of these objections. To take the second one first, the psychophysical laws pick out brains* using a perfectly precise condition provided by the substance dualist. The substance dualist thinks of this condition as picking out all and only the physical objects that directly interact with the souls, but the property dualist repurposes it to pick out the objects that compose the brains*. Without a definite substance dualist proposal on the table, we cannot say what this condition is, but this is no problem for my present purposes, as all I am trying to show is that there is an acceptable property dualist view as long as there is an acceptable substance dualist view.

The perfectly precise condition provided by the substance dualist also allows us to avoid the first objection. Brains* exhibit no vagueness, higher-order or otherwise, because they are defined in terms given to us by the substance dualist’s proposed psychophysical laws. In assuming that the substance dualist has presented us with an acceptable solution to the problem
of the many, we must assume that she has eliminated any vagueness from her proposed laws. One might worry here that the property dualist has introduced a sharp cutoff where, intuitively, there is only continuous variation. Did we not object to restricted composition for just this reason at the end of section 2? Of course, the substance dualist requires this kind of sharp cutoff just as much as the property dualist does, so this consideration does not affect the dialectic of this section. Nonetheless, I think it is instructive to go over why this objection misses the mark. The key point here is that the laws of nature are allowed to be arbitrary, whereas the laws of metaphysics are not.  

One reason for thinking this is that the laws of metaphysics are given by the structure of possibility space while the physical laws are given by our position within that space. The structure of the space of possible worlds does not seem like the sort of thing that can be arbitrary, while which world is actual seems like exactly the sort of thing that can be arbitrary. Objecting to the idea that the psychophysical laws make sharp distinctions in a gradual world would make as much sense as objecting to the idea that the gravitational constant has the particular value it has. The rules of composition, on the other hand, are metaphysical laws, so it seems like there must be a sufficient explanation for why they work as they do.

Perhaps the natural way of extending the experiencer view to deal with higher-order vagueness is to suppose that experiencers fuse all objects that

---

28 I do not wish to build anything particularly substantive into the notion of metaphysical laws. If that phrase is objectionable, simply replace it with “the necessary truths of metaphysics.”
are candidates for being brains to any degree. Thus, the experiencer that is identical to me fuses all of the determinate brains in my head, but also all of the things that are determinately borderline brains, and the things that are determinately borderline cases of borderline brains, and so on. This object would reside in my head, it would be extremely brain-like, and it would be perfectly precise. My worry with this proposal is that, on the assumption that vagueness is a linguistic or epistemic matter, it would make the boundaries of conscious subjects objectionably dependent on facts about how we use language. To see why, note that on both linguistic and epistemic theories of vagueness, the exact extent of the vague halo around our term “brain” depends on highly contingent facts about how we use that term. On the proposal we are considering, a conscious subject is the fusion of everything in the vague halo around a particular thing picked out by our term “brain.” Thus, the exact extent of a conscious subject seems as though it will depend on highly contingent facts about how we use language. If we could motivate a principle that ties the reference of our term “brain” to phenomenal properties in some way, then we might be able to answer this objection. However, if we were to examine such a proposal in detail, I think it would look very much like the brain* view.29

29The worries expressed here echo some points made by Zimmerman. I discuss these points in the next section.
4 Speculative Materialism

Zimmerman, unlike Unger, does not think that the idea of many conscious subjects all sharing space in my head is unduly worrying on its own. He is at least provisionally willing to accept this conclusion. What he is most worried about is the possibility that conscious subjects might not turn out to be “garden variety objects.” A garden variety object is a high-level object of a kind familiar from before we started doing philosophy. Thus, desks and brains are garden variety objects while brains* are not. If we are forced to conclude that conscious subjects are not garden variety objects, but we continue to insist that they are physical objects, then we are led into “dark speculations about the true location and physical nature of persons” (Zimmerman 2010, p. 145). Speculative materialism of this sort, he claims, is no more attractive than substance dualism. The idea here is that speculative materialism involves going beyond our common-sense physical ontology, so someone engaged in such a project should not look down her nose at a substance dualist who also goes beyond our common-sense physical ontology. In this section, I very briefly go over why Zimmerman thinks that the mental problem of the many shows that conscious subjects cannot be garden variety objects. I then discuss why I do not think that Zimmerman’s argument supports substance dualism.

A garden variety object, like my brain, has vague boundaries. Zimmerman proposes to cash this out in the following way. There are many different
perfectly precise objects that all have an equally good claim on being the referent of “my brain” because our use of that phrase is not exact enough to decide between them. This is what it means to say that “my brain” is vague. Zimmerman further endorses a supervaluationist view of the truth conditions of sentences containing vague terms. This means that Zimmerman thinks we can truly predicate some property of my brain only if every perfectly precise candidate referent of “my brain” bears that property. Otherwise, this predication would be false, if none of the candidates bore the property, or neither true nor false, if some of the candidates but not others bore the property.

Thus, we can say that my brain is a conscious subject if all the candidates for being my brain bear phenomenal properties, and Zimmerman allows that the psychophysical laws might be “prodigal,” meaning that they can assign phenomenal properties to distinct but overlapping chunks of brain matter within the same skull at the same time. However, the psychophysical laws exist independently of us, while what counts as a candidate for being my brain is dependent on highly contingent aspects of our thought and talk, so we should not expect the objects picked out by the psychophysical laws to match up with the candidates for being my brain or any other garden variety material object. To do so “would be to attribute to nature itself a touching deference to our linguistic practices and to our rough-and-ready

\[30\text{Does this proposal not already entail speculative materialism, if that just means countenancing objects that are not garden variety? The perfectly precise candidates for being my brain are certainly not garden-variety objects.}\]
concepts” (Zimmerman 2010, p. 142). Even if, by some miracle, this match up did occur, it would still not be true to say that my brain was a conscious subject. This is because “my brain” exhibits higher-order vagueness, as do all garden variety objects, whereas the psychophysical laws must pick out a precise set of objects to bear the phenomenal properties.

All this shows that no garden variety object is a conscious subject. If we assume that our pre-theoretic ontology contains only garden variety objects, then the property dualist will have to go beyond our pre-theoretic ontology in her search for the conscious subjects. Zimmerman points out that this is just what the substance dualist is doing as well, so we should not think there is a presumption in favor of property dualism over substance dualism, and we should assess each theory on its merits.

The issue with Zimmerman’s argument is that, as established in section 3, he must think that the psychophysical laws pick out some perfectly precise object or objects to be a soul’s body. This means that Zimmerman must give up the claim that bodies are garden variety material objects, and this is just as much a part of our commonsense ontological outlook as the claim that conscious subjects are garden variety material objects. We are no bet-

---

31This is only true if the garden variety object in question is not picked out in terms of its phenomenal properties. Why not just think that conscious subjects are garden variety objects such that each candidate for being a conscious subject is a bearer of phenomenal properties? In fact, Zimmerman thinks that something like this is going on with the semantics of the term “I.” In my mouth, “I” is ambiguous over all the objects in my vicinity that share my phenomenal state, but he thinks that this does not ensure that I am a garden variety material object. The next point made in the text is relevant to why he thinks this, but he also seems to assume that genuine garden variety objects are picked out in third-person, i.e., non-phenomenal, terms.
ter placed to speculate on the “true location and physical nature” of human bodies than we were to engage in those same speculations regarding human persons. Thus, the substance dualist must go beyond our pre-theoretic ontology in basically the same way as the property dualist, by engaging in speculative materialism, as well as going beyond it in a totally separate way, by positing novel non-physical substances. To the extent that we think we should minimize violence to our pre-theoretic ontology, this actually does support a presumption in favor of property dualism over substance dualism.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have not addressed whether the property dualist should identify conscious subjects with brains*. Rather, I have shown that a substance dualist solution to the mental problem of the many can be transformed into an equally acceptable property dualist solution to the problem. Thus, the existence of a substance dualist solution to the mental problem of the many cannot support substance dualism over property dualism.

For all I have said, it is entirely open to the property dualist to embrace the multiplicity of conscious subjects. Perhaps this is not as counterintuitive as we originally thought. Consider split-brain patients. In certain circumstances, these people seem to behave like two conscious subjects rather than one. If this is the right way of thinking about these cases, then it is not too far-fetched to think that each brain hemisphere, even when it is connected to
the other, is a separate center of consciousness. If we can accept that, then why should we recoil at the thought that a multitude of conscious subjects are all seated at my desk right now? There are costs to going this way, however, even setting aside considerations of intuitiveness. Here, I will briefly discuss two them.

First, embracing a multiplicity of overlapping conscious subjects would seem to rule out views of free will on which subjects can make conscious decisions that then affect their behavior. After all, if a decision is truly free, then we should not expect all the conscious subjects that inhabit your body to make the same decision. Unger (2004; 2006, pp. 414-24) makes much of this issue because he subscribes to this sort of view on free will. One could suppose that all the conscious subjects sharing one body implement some sort of voting procedure, perhaps majority rule, but Unger points out that this leaves us without an explanation for why you always seem to win. Surely every one of a set of overlapping conscious subjects should find themselves on the losing side at some point, but we never experience that. One could instead suppose that, although each overlapping conscious subject’s decision is free because it is undetermined by the prior state of the world, the overlap between these subjects is enough to ensure that they all break the same way. As an analogy, think about a truly indeterministic coin flip. The problem of the many might convince us that there are a multitude of distinct coins present, and thus a multitude of distinct coin flips, but the overlap between these coins would ensure that they all come up the same way. The issue with this response
is that, as I argued in the introduction, distinct instances of consciousness cannot overlap, even if their subjects do. If, as Unger seems to assume, a subject’s free decision depends only on the particularized phenomenal state borne by that subject, then we do not have the overlap we would need to ensure that each subject chooses the same thing.

Second, the fact that there are a multitude of conscious subjects where we previously thought there was only one might mess with our ordinary moral reasoning. To give a concrete example, suppose I am a brain surgeon deciding whether to remove a tumor. I cannot do this without removing some of the patient’s healthy brain tissue as well, but let us suppose that I am good enough at my job that I can remove the tumor without affecting the patient’s mental functioning at all. We would normally think that I have every reason to go ahead with this procedure, but if the view under consideration is true, then even if I only remove one healthy brain cell, I have thereby ended the existence of a conscious subject. Does this mean I am not morally permitted to perform the surgery? This question seems absurd, but one who embraces a multiplicity of overlapping conscious subjects would have to take it seriously.

I think the best option for the property dualist is to posit perfectly precise, maximal conscious subjects. If there is a substance dualist proposal on the table, we could identify the conscious subjects with the brains*, but even without such a proposal, we could explore different perfectly precise conditions for picking out maximal conscious subjects. There might be epistemic problems with figuring out exactly where one’s boundaries are, but that is a
Panpsychism might provide a solution to the mental problem of the many that does not fit neatly into this dichotomy between embracing a multitude of metaphysically heavy-duty, high-level subjects and searching for sharp lines in our gradual world. Panpsychism is the view that everything, down to fundamental particles, is conscious. The phenomenal state of a composite thing is then just composed out of the phenomenal states of its parts. The question of how this kind of phenomenal composition is possible is called the combination problem, and if a panpsychist could solve it, she would be able to explain how distinct instances of consciousness can be “many but almost one” (Lewis 1993). This would open up the sort of deflationary solution that is popular for the general problem of the many. However, it is not clear that the combination problem can be solved. Furthermore, panpsychism is highly counterintuitive and in a very similar way to the conclusion we are trying to avoid. Panpsychism embraces the idea that there are many conscious subjects at my desk right now. If that idea is repugnant to us, then panpsychism is not an attractive option.

\[32\]

References


---

\[32\] Panpsychism might provide a solution to the mental problem of the many that does not fit neatly into this dichotomy between embracing a multitude of metaphysically heavy-duty, high-level subjects and searching for sharp lines in our gradual world. Panpsychism is the view that everything, down to fundamental particles, is conscious. The phenomenal state of a composite thing is then just composed out of the phenomenal states of its parts. The question of how this kind of phenomenal composition is possible is called the combination problem, and if a panpsychist could solve it, she would be able to explain how distinct instances of consciousness can be “many but almost one” (Lewis 1993). This would open up the sort of deflationary solution that is popular for the general problem of the many. However, it is not clear that the combination problem can be solved. Furthermore, panpsychism is highly counterintuitive and in a very similar way to the conclusion we are trying to avoid. Panpsychism embraces the idea that there are many conscious subjects at my desk right now. If that idea is repugnant to us, then panpsychism is not an attractive option.


