

Where Explanation Stops

What Physicalism and Idealism Actually Disagree About

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Authorship Note: Co-authored with AI as a disciplined thinking instrument—not a replacement for judgment. Prioritizes epistemic integrity and truth-seeking as a moral responsibility.

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Abstract

Contemporary debates between physicalism and idealism often generate more heat than light—critics charge idealism with denying science while defenders of physicalism insist emergence handles everything. This essay argues that the core disagreement is not about mechanisms, complexity, or scientific legitimacy, but about something more fundamental: **where explanation is allowed to stop**. Every explanatory framework must terminate somewhere; these terminal points are brute facts. Emergentist physicalism places its brute fact at the existence of organization-enabling laws and structures. Analytic idealism places its brute fact at the existence of mind, treating organization as intrinsic to the primitive rather than as an emergent anomaly. Both frameworks accept the same science; they differ on what grounds the reality that science describes. This essay is diagnostic, not advocative. Naming where explanations stop is not metaphysical excess; it is philosophical responsibility.

I. The Hidden Question

Contemporary debates between physicalism and idealism often generate more heat than light. Critics of idealism charge it with denying science; defenders of physicalism insist that emergence handles everything. Both sides frequently talk past each other.

This essay argues that the core disagreement is not about mechanisms, complexity, or scientific legitimacy. It is about something more fundamental: **where explanation is allowed to stop**.

Every explanatory framework must terminate somewhere. At some point, further “why” questions receive the answer: “That’s just how things are.” These terminal points are **brute facts**—the primitives that a framework accepts without further grounding.

“Brute fact” here is **framework-relative**, not absolute. Neither emergentism’s stopping point nor analytic idealism’s is inherently more “natural” or less metaphysically costly—they are differently located, not differently weighted.

The question is not whether a framework has brute facts (all do), but **where it places them**.

This distinction is rarely stated clearly. Making it explicit clarifies the landscape, prevents misreadings, and identifies what is actually at stake between competing ontologies.

II. What Science Explains

Science explains *how* things work:

- How quantum fields give rise to particles and forces
- How embryos develop into complex organisms
- How neural activity correlates with mental states
- How evolutionary pressures shape biological form
- How feedback loops and attractors generate stable patterns
- How bioelectric signals coordinate cellular behavior

These explanations involve mechanisms, dynamics, control architectures, and mathematical regularities. They are powerful, predictive, and continually refined through empirical inquiry.

Crucially, these explanations are ontologically neutral—not in the sense that science floats free of all constraints, but in the sense of **underdetermination**: the same mechanistic account is compatible with physicalism, idealism, panpsychism, or neutral monism.

The mechanistic account of embryogenesis does not presuppose physicalism. A developmental biologist describing morphogen gradients and gene regulatory networks is doing science, not metaphysics.

Science describes *how reality behaves*. It does not, by itself, settle *what reality fundamentally is*.

This distinction is often missed. When a scientist says “we now understand how X works,” this is sometimes heard as “we now know that X is nothing but physical processes.” But the first claim is scientific; the second is metaphysical. They are not equivalent.

III. Emergentism: The Sophisticated Physicalist Explanatory Position

The most sophisticated contemporary physicalist position is **emergentism**—the view that complex organization develops from simpler components through non-linear dynamics, feedback, and systemic interaction.

Emergentism, as a methodological framework, successfully explains *how* organization develops and stabilizes:

- **Non-linear dynamics:** Small changes can produce large effects; systems exhibit sensitive dependence and bifurcation.
- **Feedback loops:** Outputs influence inputs, enabling self-regulation and adaptive behavior.
- **Attractors:** Systems converge toward stable states defined over state-space, not observable at the micro-level.
- **Control architectures:** Goal-directed behavior emerges through error-correction and homeostatic mechanisms.
- **Evolutionary shaping:** Selection pressures tune these dynamics over deep time.

This is genuine explanatory progress. It shows *how* complex organization can develop and stabilize without invoking vitalism, souls, or non-physical forces.

Analytic idealism **does not contest any of this**.

The mechanistic and control-theoretic accounts are fully accepted. Analytic idealism does not deny that feedback loops exist, that attractors shape dynamics, or that evolution tunes biological systems. These are empirical discoveries about how reality behaves—and they are ontologically neutral.

The disagreement lies elsewhere.

IV. Where Emergentism Stops

Emergentism explains how organization develops and stabilizes. But it does not explain **why reality is the kind of thing that supports such organization**.

Consider: emergentist explanations presuppose that the universe contains:

- Laws that permit non-linear dynamics
- Initial conditions that allow complex organization to develop
- A mathematical structure that makes feedback, attractors, and control architectures possible
- Regularities stable enough to support evolutionary shaping over billions of years

These are not explained by emergentism. They are **presupposed** by it.

When asked “Why does reality have these organization-enabling features?”, emergentism must answer: “That’s just how things are.” The existence of laws, regularities, and organization-friendly initial conditions is treated as a **brute fact**.

This stopping point has a structural parallel in fundamental physics. Cosmological explanation eventually confronts the fact that the laws and constants of nature fall within ranges that permit complex, stable structures—the “fine-tuning” observation. No dynamics *within* the universe explain why those laws have this form rather than another. In both cases, the issue is not mechanism but *precondition*.

Every explanatory framework must stop somewhere. Emergentism stops here: it presupposes an **organization-fertile ontology**—a reality whose fundamental character already has the capacity to generate complex, stable, self-organizing structures. This fertility is not explained by emergentism; it is the unexplained condition that makes emergentist explanations possible.

The question is whether this is the right place to stop—or whether there are alternatives.

V. Where Analytic Idealism Stops

Analytic idealism places its brute fact differently.

Under analytic idealism, the fundamental nature of reality is **mental**—experiential, intentional, organized. Physical structures are the **extrinsic appearance** of underlying mental processes, not the ground floor of reality.

On this view, organization is not an emergent anomaly that requires special explanation. It is **intrinsic to the nature of mind itself**.

Mental processes are inherently:

- **Goal-directed:** Intentions, purposes, and aims are characteristic of mental activity.

- **Self-organizing:** Thoughts cohere, narratives unfold, attention structures experience.
- **Error-sensitive:** We notice when things go wrong; correction is native to cognition.
- **Integrative:** Mental life binds disparate elements into unified wholes.

If reality is fundamentally mental, then the organization we observe in physics and biology is not surprising. It is what we would expect mind to look like “from the outside.”

Analytic idealism’s brute fact is: **reality is mental in nature**.

Just as emergentism takes the existence of laws and regularities as given, analytic idealism takes the existence of mind as given.

Analytic idealism faces its own explanatory burden: accounting for why mind presents itself with **stable, lawlike, intersubjective structure**—a challenge it addresses explicitly (see Appendix B). The brute fact is not that order exists, but the **specific character of mentation**—why mind has the particular structure it does. The burden is differently located than emergentism’s, not lighter.

The difference is in **what kind of primitive** each framework accepts.

VI. The Real Disagreement

We can now state the disagreement precisely:

Dimension	Emergentist Physicalism	Analytic Idealism
Accepts mechanistic science	Yes	Yes
Accepts emergence, feedback, attractors	Yes	Yes
Brute fact	Organization-enabling laws and structures exist	Reality is mental in nature
Organization is...	An emergent feature requiring explanation	Intrinsic to mind, not anomalous

Both frameworks accept the same science. They differ on **what grounds the reality that science describes**.

This is a metaphysical disagreement, not a scientific one. It cannot be settled by discovering more mechanisms, because both sides accept whatever mechanisms are discovered. The question is what those mechanisms ultimately rest upon.

VII. Misreadings and Limits

This distinction prevents several common errors:

“Analytic idealism denies science.” False. Analytic idealism accepts mechanistic explanation fully. A biologist who is an analytic idealist gives the same account of embryogenesis as one who is a physicalist. The science is identical; the metaphysical interpretation differs.

“Emergentism solves the problem.” Emergentism explains *how* organization develops given organization-enabling laws. It does not explain *why* reality has such laws. This is where emergentism places its brute fact—not a failure, but a stopping point.

“Physicalism is more parsimonious.” Parsimony depends on what you count as primitive. Physicalism must explain how mentality arises from non-mental primitives; analytic idealism must explain how non-mentality appears from mental primitives. Neither is obviously simpler.

What this essay does not establish: That idealism is correct. That physicalism fails. That one framework is more scientific. That the question can be settled. The value is clarity, not resolution.

VIII. Implications for the Project

This analysis connects to several themes in the broader *Return to Consciousness* project:

- **Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality (mmn):** The claim that science is metaphysically neutral is correct at the level of mechanism. But the choice of where to place brute facts is not neutral—and this choice is often made implicitly, without examination.
- **Asymmetric Methodological Restraint (amr):** If the disagreement is about grounding rather than mechanism, then dismissing analytic idealism as “unscientific” is inappropriate. Both frameworks accept the same science; they differ on interpretation.
- **Biological Competency (bio):** The constraint established in that essay—that biological explanation requires control-level primitives—is accepted by both physicalism and idealism. They differ on what grounds the reality in which such control architectures are possible.

The question of where explanation stops is not peripheral to this project. It is central. Many apparent disagreements dissolve once it is recognized that the debate is about primitives, not mechanisms.

IX. Conclusion

Every explanatory framework stops somewhere. The question is where.

Emergentist physicalism stops at organization-enabling laws and structures. Analytic idealism stops at the existence of mind. Both accept the same science; they differ on what grounds it.

This disagreement cannot be settled by mechanism (both accept whatever mechanisms are discovered), by parsimony (both involve trade-offs), or by declaring one side “unscientific” (both accept empirical method).

What can be done is to name the question clearly: **What kind of brute fact is more fundamental?**

This essay does not answer that question. It clarifies what the question is. Once clearly stated, productive engagement becomes possible.

Appendix A: Ontological Frameworks and Their Brute Facts

Different ontological frameworks locate their explanatory stopping points differently:

Framework	Where Explanation Stops
Physicalism (Emergentist)	Laws of physics permit organization
Panpsychism	Fundamental entities possess experiential aspects
Neutral Monism	A neutral substrate underlies both mind and matter
Dual-Aspect Theory	A single underlying reality has inseparable physical and experiential aspects
Analytic Idealism	Mind-like organization is ontologically primitive

Each framework accepts the same scientific mechanisms. They differ on what those mechanisms ultimately rest upon—on what kind of primitive reality makes mechanism possible.

Appendix B: How Analytic Idealism Addresses the Public World Constraint

Idealism must explain why mind presents with stable, lawlike, intersubjective structure—why the “outer” world appears with mathematical regularity, public accessibility, and resistance to individual will. This is sometimes called the **public world constraint**.

Contemporary analytic idealism—most notably Bernardo Kastrup’s framework—addresses this explicitly. Physical regularities are treated as stable invariants of mental processes; intersubjectivity arises via dissociation within a universal consciousness. This is not hand-waving; it is a worked-out structural account.

The brute fact becomes the **specific character of mentation**—why mind has the particular structure it does rather than some other. The burden is relocated, not eliminated.

Why some find this placement attractive. If consciousness is primitive, certain explanatory debts are collapsed rather than postponed. The hard problem, understood as a demand for a generative account of experience, does not arise. The quantum measurement puzzle can likewise be reframed as constraints on what can be known from within experience rather than as a mysterious physical “collapse” event. These are not decisive results, but they help explain why idealism’s brute-fact placement can seem comparatively parsimonious.

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Related Essays in This Project

Available at: <https://brunoton.github.io/return-to-consciousness/>

[Return to Consciousness \(rtc\)](#) — The core framework

[Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality \(mmn\)](#) — Why neutrality is impossible

[Asymmetric Methodological Restraint \(amr\)](#) — Exposing selective skepticism

[Biological Competency \(bio\)](#) — Constraint analysis that surfaces this issue in biology

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