

The Dualistic Nature of Reality

“Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?” asked Stephen Hawking, in *A Brief History of Time*. A question for all ages, yet there may be an obvious answer already. Why does the universe exist? This question assumes that we know that the universe exists, or that we are at least highly suspicious that it exists. How can we be so confident? Because we are *aware* of the universe. We perceive it. How can anyone say that the universe *doesn't exist*, when it is constantly existing right there in front of us? I don't aim to answer Hawking's question, but it points to a fundamental part of our lives: our consciousness. In this essay, I will argue that the universe is made of one stuff that has two aspects: physicality and consciousness. This view can be described as dual-aspect monism.

There are two main reasons that I believe in dual-aspect monism. The first reason is that, based on the evidence from direct conscious experience, it is the most hopeful theory because it accepts the reality and power of both the physical and the mental. The second reason was alluded to by Hawking when he wrote, “Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?” Put more concretely, my second reason is that physics—our attempt to study the universe *in its entirety*—seems to only scratch the surface of reality. There are counterarguments to my two reasons that I will respond to when they come.

The first reason is simply explained with a thought experiment, or rather a consciousness experiment. Do you know that you are conscious? It may be difficult to explain how or why, but I assume that you do know that you are conscious (unless you are a p-zombie). What is consciousness? This question is much harder to answer. Maybe you have an answer, and maybe you don't. If you do, your answer exists as a thought in your mind. If you don't, your mind may be relatively empty at the moment. Either way, you know that within your own experience, there is this intrinsic property of consciousness.

Now that your attention is on your own consciousness, I ask you to look for something other than your own consciousness. This may seem simple, but what is really going on? Say you see a chair, which is clearly not a part of your mind. But the perception of the chair exists within your mind. Can you *really* know the chair as the chair? Or can

you only see the shape and color of the chair, touch the chair's surface, and feel the chair's weight? Surely the experience of the chair is not the chair. This points to the obvious distinction between physical reality and mental reality. There are several possibilities from here:

1. Our experience may be entirely mental, with no influences from physical objects (which we can't prove the existence of anyway).
2. Our experience may be an illusion arising out of purely physical factors (physicalism), in which case doubt is cast over everything.
3. Our experience may be a mental phenomenon that interacts with or is influenced by physical phenomena.

Option (1) is noncommittal at best. It leads to a dead end where there is no use or point to perceiving the seemingly physical world around us, because it doesn't interact with us at all. Option (2) is similarly unsatisfying. In this case, our experience is an illusion, and, again, becomes devoid of a deeper meaning. There may be some physical meaning, such as the biological meaning of survival and reproduction, but our perception of reality is meaningless. There is no point in experiencing reality if everything is just a game of physical forms that cannot be influenced by experience itself. Option (3) is slightly more hopeful, but it presupposes that the physical and the mental can *interact* somehow with each other, that there can be a relationship between the two. I ask, how can two separate planes of existence interact?

The option I didn't list is the answer. The physical and mental are not truly interacting but coexisting as the same thing. This option is dual-aspect monism, and it gives meaning to our experience, because it suggests that our phenomenal experience is real (not an illusion), and that it has a place in the physical world *and* the mental world. In other words, dual-aspect monism is hopeful because it accepts the reality of both the physical and the mental, rather than denying one or the other, or assuming some inconceivable relationship between the two. It is important to note that I am not proposing that the physical and mental relate to each other. They are the same thing. The fundamental makeup of reality is a thing that is equally conscious and physical.

The natural criticism of this idea is that rocks are not conscious like we are. It doesn't seem like *everything* is conscious. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove that a

rock is or is not conscious, just as there is no way to know for certain that anybody other than yourself has a mind. The only consciousness we can observe is our own. This is why we have words to describe human consciousness, but not rock consciousness. A conscious rock doesn't have the senses that human bodies have, so its qualia would be of a different order entirely. For this reason, it is possible for anything physical to also be conscious, even if we are not able to imagine it.

The second reason I believe in dual-aspect monism is that it fills the intrinsic hole in physics. Physics studies the reality *from the outside*. It relies on measurements of quantitative data, which is all relational. Everything described by physics exists in a system with other things. In other words, physics is a relational discipline that depicts the structure of reality. All relations need relata, however, and this is the unknown problem at the bottom of physics that Stephen Hawking was questioning in his writing. If physics were "solved," we would be able to mathematically understand the interactions between all physical things. But we would have learned nothing about the things themselves. There is this mystery of what things *intrinsically are*. This is where dual-aspect monism comes in. Why come up with some new theory to explain the mystery, when we already know what *we intrinsically are*? We are conscious bodies. Why not apply this explanation to all constituents of reality? This would solve the intrinsic mystery of physics without needing to generate any unfounded principles.

One counterargument to this is that we should not assume the same explanation of our own intrinsic reality to apply to every other physical body and particle in the universe. This is a valid argument, and there is no easy answer. The mystery of physics remains to be solved. However, physics appears unable to solve its own problem in this case, because the problem deals with something outside of physics' reach. For this reason, we should find an answer outside of physics. This is why consciousness is so applicable here. What else do we know of, outside of the realm of physics, that can explain the intrinsic reality of *things*? We can turn to science, but most (if not all) modern science is influenced by physics. We can turn to reasoning, but what can we reason upon if not science? We can reason upon our direct experience, which heavily involves consciousness. In the end, there is not anything we know of that can explain the intrinsic

reality of things outside of consciousness, so why not assume this to be the answer? Our only other option is to use something unknown as the explanation.

In conclusion, I have argued for dual-aspect monism because it accepts both physical and mental reality as equally real and that it solves the intrinsic question of physics. This is not a complete defense by any means, but a suggestion for the avid thinker unsure of where to stand in the philosophy of mind. Dual-aspect monism is a flexible and justifiable world view.

Bibliography

Hawking, Stephen. 1988. *A Brief History of Time*. Bantam.