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The Mind does not (Affect) Matter

The view that humans or conscious beings have both a mental and physical facet often referred to as dualism has many variations, differing on what that facet entails. However, as I argue in this paper, all these variations must prove bidirectional causal action, from mental facet to physical facet and vice versa. I will first explore the problem of mental causation using substance dualism, then two possible solutions, ultimately arguing that it is unreasonable to assume the existence of a mental facet.

§1: Substance Dualism

It is first necessary to understand the dualism and dualism's primary formulation, substance dualism. Substance dualism posits that the mental and physical facets are distinct substances, mind and body respectively. The mind is immaterial, non-physical, and responsible for thought and will, while the body is material, physical, and responsible for moving.

To reach this conclusion, the substance dualist begins a method of systematic doubt, carefully inspecting every belief for any possibility of falsity, discarding it if it did. Specifically, if it had the ability to be false while remaining entirely non-contradictory – if it could not be proven *a priori* – it was forfeited. For example, say I believed that strawberries are red. When we inspect what a strawberry is, the question is, is there anything incomprehensible about a non-red strawberry? Obviously no, a blue strawberry is possible. Therefore, even though there aren't blue strawberries, the belief strawberries are red ought to be forfeited; to know something, it must have to be that way. If it could be different, we do not know it.

Using systematic doubt reveals the instability of most of our beliefs. Crucially, examine the belief in the external world. Imagine if the world we see is nothing more than a mirage implanted in our minds. If then we do not know the world is not a mirage, it is impossible to have knowledge of the external world. Such a radical skepticism is shocking and consequently begs the question of whether it is possible to know anything at all.

The dualist finds their answer in the proposition, “I exist”. Such a proposition is incontrovertible; to hold this position, the position must be true. Even if we are being deceived, we must exist to be deceived. How this proposition is reached, just explained, influences its properties: The “I” the dualist asserts must be immaterial, non-physical, and non-spatial, as the external world follows from the proof of the mind. Additionally, the method of doubt defines the primary characteristic of the mind, thought; thought cannot be removed from the mind, regardless of trickery. From the proof of the mind, the dualist provides proof of the external world. The specifics are not important to this paper, and as such I will take it for granted that it exists independent of the mind.

However, it is not clear that the mind and body must be distinct. To remedy this the substance dualism first notes the mind and body can be conceived as distinct substances; there is nothing inherently contradictory about a separate mind and body. Second, it must be possible if it is conceivable. Third, because if it is possible to distinguish and separate two things, they must be different: distinct. Therefore, the mind and body must be distinct substances. Similarly, if the books on a bookshelf were not distinct, I could not divide them into individual books, but because I can, I recognize them as distinct. Mind and body now proven by systematic doubt, described by their origin, and recognized separate; we may now move forward with an understanding of dualism.

§2: The Problem of Mental Causation

Dualism faces a problem that cannot be ignored; the problem of mental causation that simply states the disbelief that causal an immaterial and non-physical thing can move a material and physical thing. This is because all physical movement stems from either a push or a pull. To incur either of these requires physical contact and extension. Neither of which an immaterial thing has, therefore making this casual relationship dubious at best.

This critique challenges substance dualism because it explicitly states a casual relationship from the mind to the body: The mind, the locus of free will and conscious experience, must communicate its will and experience back to the body to be transferred into spatial motion. But, as discussed, the mind lacking in physicality and extension can have no power of push or pull on the body. Without mental causation, mind cannot affect matter, and substance dualism is inconceivable and impossible.

§3: Property Dualism

Property dualism rose in prominence in response to the critique of mental causation. To properly address how it attempts to (unsuccessfully) address the critique we must first understand it. Being that property dualism spawned out of substance dualism while trying to mend it, it still retains much of substance dualism's original qualities. However, it lacks grounding against the doubt of the external world. In substance dualism, the mental substance held a "primary" role from which the physical substance was derived, but the formulation of property dualism places primacy in a physical substance. The proof of the physical world will be taken for granted as my focus remains elsewhere.

From the physical basis, property dualism defines its formulation. The non-mechanistic nature of the world and the physical brain leads the property dualist to conclude that the goings-on of the brain can explain how and why we act. When I stub my toe, an electrical signal shoots up my nervous system into my brain, alerting it of the event. My brain then causes me to jump back and groan in response. All this, neuroscientist *and* the property dualist think, is explainable mechanistically, without the need for a mental substance to process the pain and to alert the body to respond. Thereby sidestepping the problem of mental causation.

Despite the grand explanatory powers, the physical properties and substance contain, it is unable, in the dualist view, to account for conscious experience. Imagine how it feels to stub a toe, to look at the blueness of a clear sky, and the oppressive weight of stress; these cannot be explained in purely mechanistic terms. The dualist solves this by introducing mental properties. Immaterial, non-physical, non-spatial, the mental properties are purely effects of the physical substance. The mental properties are then the “subjective quality of experience,” or “qualia.” Merely attached to the physical substance, qualia mirror the physical substance; when the brain process “stubbed toe” occurs physically, I feel pain mentally. In this way the relationship from the physical properties to the substance (bidirectional) is different from the mental to substance (monodirectional). This is the formulation for property dualism; two distinct properties attached to a physical substance.

§4: Solutions; Property Dualism

Property dualism, as aforementioned, attempts to sidestep the problem of mental causation. This is done by placing the physical substance as primary and the mental property as solely secondary; by making the mental property unable to cause entirely. As the physical substance changes, the mental property, conscious experience, reflects those changes. When I

stub my toe, a brain process “stubbed toe” fires, causing me to groan, recoil, and crucially create the conscious experience of a stubbed toe, pain. That pain, however, does not have any legitimate reciprocal effect on the body. The groan and recoil happen entirely mechanistically. By making the mental property causally inert, the property dualist avoids the problem of mental causation entirely as it does not need to influence our actions.

The property dualist thinks themselves safe from mental causation, but in making the mental property entirely inert, they have made property dualism unprovable (and unfalsifiable). In their proof, the property dualist relies on conscious experience – e.g., pain – to prove the existence of mental properties. However, a question arises, how, if the mental properties are inert and the physical substance responsible for thinking, do we think we have mental properties? The physical brain could never cognize a conscious experience to use it in a proof without the mental property causing a shift in the brain. Thus, property dualism fails to evade the problem of mental causation. I will admit though, it is entirely possible and conceivable that such mental properties do exist, but if they do, we could never be aware of their existence. Mental properties become nothing more than extraneous possibilities, easily rid by Occam’s Razor.

§5: Solutions; Refutation

The more salient, but ultimately unconvincing, argument is to flat out accept mental causation as possible. By arguing that the laws of physics aren’t in fact laws themselves, rather correlations and useful explanations, and that we seem to have conscious experience, there must be a mental facet. The laws of physics of the mechanist worldview are supported by the necessary conjunction of one action to another: I let go of a pen, it falls. I let go again, it falls. The skeptic asks, “what reason do I have to believe that it will fall again, surely it would not be against the definition of the pen to rise?” and “what reason do I have to believe that because you

let go, the pen fell?” The common response is induction, which in itself is rather unreasonable¹. Therefore, maybe it was because of invisible mental forces.

Removing induction theoretically removes the problem of mental causation; we no longer have good reason to believe movement must be caused by physical things. However, we also have no reason to believe movement is caused by immaterial things. Physical and mental facets are then both unconnectable from cause to effect, denying any substantive arguments for dualism and monism. To further discussion, I will assume that mental and physical facets *can* cause. This shifts the question slightly, from asking “*how* can the mental facet cause” to “*does* the mental facet cause.”

§6: Consciousness Without Consciousness

The dualist will claim the mental facet does, appealing to conscious experience. But, I argue that conscious experience is entirely accountable in a mechanistic worldview, removing the need for extra mental premises. First, the operation of thought, action, reaction, etc. is established to be mechanistically accountable. Substance dualism’s account is then largely superfluous and property dualism outright forfeits thought and will to the physical realm, leaving only the object of feeling to prove dualism. The object itself is apart from our thinking processes. Therefore, we must inspect its possible effects. Solely, I find the effect to be the great conviction of conscious experience.

I argue that the existence of the great conviction of conscious experience, the belief that there is something inherently unique to experiencing something, undiscoverable in imagination, memory, or description, is explainable mechanistically. Specifically, by the process of

¹ For a detailed deconstruction of induction see *David Hume’s “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding”*

experiencing. When you see an object, the processes used for seeing, the eye, is activated, the brain records the object as seen, and experience-temporal actions, i.e., reactions, fire. In contrast when you remember a thing, the eye, and eye controlling processes are left dormant, the brain reads, not writes, the memory, and experience-temporal actions do not occur. Our brains notice a difference between action and memory, but the processual difference is not readily apparent. We are inclined to review the quality, not the processes of thought. This is evident in the phrases “I feel...” or “I thought...”, we imply a psychic process associated with a fuzzy sense of “I”. This thus creates a notion of “conscious experience” without correctly regarding the true causes.

Finally, the merits of conscious experience itself are thin, when asked, “what does it feel like to stub a toe” people inevitably resort to physical descriptions, “like punching a wall, but with your toe.” With such thin, vague, descriptions and no unique effects, the conscious experience can safely be discarded.

§7: Conclusion

Because (1) all dualism is contingent on mental causation and conscious experience, (2) the great conviction of conscious experience is explainable mechanistically, and (3) no effective account of conscious experience has been given, the mental facet likely does not cause change in the physical facet and is most reasonably nonexistent.