Two Forms of Dualism

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ABSTRACT: I distinguish two sorts of motivation for dualism. One motivation is driven by the distinctive character of conscious phenomenology. The other is driven by the special character of normativity: Is rationality an even "harder" problem than consciousness? There is no dramatic climax in which I show that these two dualist currents have a common source; in fact, I think they are relatively independent.

RÉSUMÉ: Je distingue deux sortes de motivations pour le dualisme. La première de ces motivations est entraînée par le caractère distinctif de la phénoménologie consciente. La seconde est entraînée par le caractère particulier de la normativité : le problème de la rationalité serait-il un problème "plus difficile" que celui de la conscience? Il n'y a pas de point culminant où je montre qu'il existe une source commune à ces deux courants dualistes; en fait, je pense qu'ils sont relativement indépendants.

There are two forms of dualism. The difference between these forms responds to two sorts of motivation. One motivation is driven by the distinctive character of conscious phenomenology, by what it's like to undergo conscious experience. The other motivation is driven by the special normative character of cognition, by the essential susceptibility to rational evaluation of our intentional attitudes.

I promise no dramatic climax in which I show that these two dualist currents have a common source; in fact, I think they are relatively independent. In one respect, however, the two motivations show an interesting reversal of prioritizations, with respect to an independent expectation, and I will try to bring that out too.

So one sort of motivation is relatively familiar, I think. Let's call it the "what it's like" source of dualism. This source is well captured by Thomas Nagel's classic piece:[1] consciousness is a subjective phenomenon, essentially encapsulating a perspective, a first-person point of view. And consciousness is

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constituted by a characteristic phenomenology, incorporating such experiences as pain, the aroma of madeleines in a bakery, the taste of a ripe strawberry, and so on. Any naturalistic explanation of these phenomena will necessarily leave something out. That's because any naturalistic explanation will of necessity "objectify"—or at least de-subjectify—the phenomena; will characterize them from a third-person point of view, in a way that's equally well available to anyone.

In fact, I see

(i) Nagel's points about what it's like to be a bat,
(ii) Kripke's point about the absence of an appearance/reality distinction for conscious states such as pain,[2]
(iii) Jackson's Mary argument,[3]
(iv) the problem of the explanatory gap,[4] and
(v) the conceivability of zombies,[5] and arguably
(vi) Searle's Chinese Room argument[6]

as all various expressions of the same fundamental insight: There is an essential aspect of consciousness that is apparently impossible to capture in naturalistic terms. This is obviously not, here, a defense of any of these specific lines of argument. I just think it's valuable to see how these different examples and considerations that have been offered as motivating dualism are all ways of dramatizing the difference between the subjective character of experience and the objective nature of physical properties.

A standard response to this set of considerations is to distinguish between *concepts* and *properties* and to insist that the fact that we apply different sorts of concept to experience, on one hand, and to the physical world, on the other, does not show that the properties in question are distinct. It is a familiar phenomenon that we should have different concepts for the same thing. Properties need not be an exception.

This is a strong and important response. Indeed it may be *too* strong. It is hard to know when and when not to apply it. One can imagine an argument that *up* is really the same property as *down*, that *here* is *there*, *now* is *then*—it's just that we have multiple *concepts* for each of these properties. How to distinguish the absurd application of the strategy from its allegedly more apt deployment against dualism? Again I don't propose to *evaluate* the sorts of manoeuvres being reviewed. I do think "what it's like" considerations constitute a familiar and influential motivation.

In fact I think that even among physicalists, the consideration has some effect: it is likely viewed as *the* main threat to physicalism. In *Mind in a Physical World*,[7] for example, Jaegwon Kim says, "[T]he real bad news is that some mental properties, notably phenomenal properties of conscious experiences, seem to resist functionalization, and this means that there is no way to account for their causal efficacy within a physicalist scheme." And David Chalmers

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says that while intentionality is a problem, consciousness, with its phenomenological character, is a *mystery*.[8]

But I want now to distinguish an entirely *different* sort of motivation, a motivation that's more aptly associated with Donald Davidson than with Nagel. Let's call this the "rational normativity" source of dualism.[9] The thought here is that part of what it is to be a mind is to be subject to a distinctive sort of normative evaluation. Minds are such as to be *irrational* or *incoherent* and that marks them out as ontologically distinctive. No physical object is in virtue of specifically its physical properties susceptible to that sort of evaluation.

Though he himself of course claimed to be a monist, Davidson's anomalism represents a sort of irreducibility of mental phenomena to the physical, and he very nicely put the motivating consideration in terms of the role of principles of rationality and charity, and considerations of overall consistency and coherence, in the attribution of beliefs and other cognitive states. The physical, according to Davidson, owes allegiance to no such principle. The obtaining of physical properties is determined in independence of their satisfaction of principles of rationality, in terms of causal relations and physical theory.

Put perhaps a bit more generally, physical systems—*as* such—are not apt subjects for rational normativity. There's a distinctive sort of normative status that we subjects, with minds, are apt to exhibit. But we cannot understand how that could be so if we conceive the mind as fundamentally a physical object. Our rational evaluability derives from our mentality; but it could not derive from our being the *physical* types we are. If the mental were asymmetrically reduced to the physical, then that rational evaluability would have to be at least implicit in the physical supervenience base.

Another good source for this second dualist current (though again, he would reject the moniker) is McDowell.[10] McDowell is impressed by the differences between the space of reasons and the space of nature. Indeed, he thinks that, thanks to a kind of anxiety to which we've been susceptible since Descartes, we are philosophically troubled by how phenomena characteristic of the space of nature could have a normative effect on the space of reasons. There are ways of conceiving perception, for example, that will make it hard to understand how it can normatively constrain or justify belief. McDowell's solution is first, to invest perception with conceptual content and then second—in light of the persistence of an analogous problem—to conceive the world as itself conceptually articulated.

What's important for present purposes is that McDowell expresses very well our sense that a "disenchanted" nature is an inadequate ground on which to explain the normativity of cognitive activity.

Though I claim no expertise in these figures, other historical sources for this sentiment likely include Adorno, Habermas, Horkheimer, and Weber. The underlying thought, it seems, has been that because reason plays an essential role in the individuation of cognitive states, whereas there is nothing to physical states beyond the network of causal relations into which they fit—because reason

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is, and causation is not, an essentially normative notion—therefore the mental can in no adequate sense be reduced to the physical.

It is important, at the same time, to remember that there is a *kind* of "argument from normativity" that could be mounted in favour of dualism, even from the relatively minimal basis of the earlier "what it's like" motivation. If subjects are distinctive in their ability to undergo phenomenal presentations such as pain, then, because of the intrinsic nature of that presentation, subjects are distinctive in their demanding the observation of certain normative constraints. For example, because of the nature of pain, subjects should not, all else being equal, be made to feel that state. Even if a bit of matter is somehow importantly related to a conscious mind, it is not fundamentally in virtue of how it is with that bit of matter that subjects should not be made to feel pain: the normative account gives a basic role to mental properties that cannot be played by any physical property.

To put the point in Kantian terms, from the "what it's like" motivation for dualism we can derive another dualist argument, to the effect that physicalism cannot account for our "fancy price." But the "rational normativity" source I've tried to separate emphasizes instead physicalism's inability to account for our *dignity*.[11]

Another observation, in passing: *intentionality* has, since Brentano, been seen as a distinctive mark of the mental. And the prospects for a reduction of intentionality have long occupied us. Fodor, in *Psychosemantics*, said, "I suppose that sooner or later the physicists will complete the catalogue they've been compiling of the ultimate and irreducible properties of things. When they do, the likes of spin, charm, and charge will perhaps appear upon their list. But aboutness surely won't; intentionality simply doesn't go that deep."[12] I will not here say anything substantive on the score. But I will say, just briefly, that the irreducibility of intentionality, such as it is, is derivative from the irreducibility of the normative. In fact, I think there is *a variety of* intentionality that *is* in fact reducible—that's adequately conceived as serving as a signal, as a matter of modal co-variation, of carrying information, and that Dennis Stampe,[13] Fred Dretske,[14] and Jerry Fodor,[15] for examples, and more recently Bryan Skyrms,[16] have done so much to help elucidate.

But there can be a residual sense that something deserving the name *intentionality* has still been left out of account in such a reduction, a sense that sometimes leads to resistance to what is otherwise an adequate story as far as it goes. That sense of dissatisfaction is best positioned, I think, rather as the demand for an account of a different *sort* of intentionality.

This other sort of intentionality is that of the content of a state against the obtaining of which there's a distinctive requirement produced by the obtaining of a state with a *contradictory* content. It appears that our minds are in fact characterized by that sort of intentionality, so that if the sort of intentionality that is susceptible to reduction does not accommodate it, we face a gap in our understanding. And the attribution of physical states is *not* constrained, except at most derivatively, by whether another physical state obtains that realizes a cognitive content with a contradictory content.

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While each of the two broad sorts of motivation has its defenders, they both have been resisted by physicalists. What less often has been done is to distinguish them as two categories of dualism, into which very many more specific philosophical arguments can be fit. And in light of the taxonomy, an interesting consideration now emerges: the two motivations represent a kind of inversion with respect to a common structure. The sort of dualism that's responsive specifically to the "what it's like" source will find an important joint in reality in the transition from matter to consciousness, beginning already with *sentience* and sensation—so that non-rational animals that can sense and feel, for example, constitute as good a challenge to materialism as any human could do. The sort of dualism that's responsive in particular to the "rational normativity" source, on the other hand, finds the crucial joint in reality in the transition rather from perception to cognition—to *sapience*, so that while the reducibility of *consciousness* as such is *not* in principle ruled out, the reducibility of a mind endowed with *reason* is rejected.

While I myself am sympathetic to *both* dualist tendencies—dualism is overdetermined!—I do think it's *a bit* odd to favour the "what it's like" motivation *over* the "rational normativity" motivation. If we begin with a sort of inarticulate thought that non-human animals are somehow more "brutal" than we are, so that if a reason for dualism is to be found anywhere it will be found *first* in our distinctive nature as rational animals—since we humans are somehow even *further away* from dumb matter than are animals—that thought will tend to encourage the "rational normativity" motivation, perhaps in combination with the "what it's like" motivation. The "what it's like" motivation, alone, would find reason for dualism in features that we share with the brutes, and our distinctive nature as rational subjects would serve no special role as a ground. If there's a variety of mentality that *might* be reducible, I'd say it's of the sort that we share with conscious but arational animals: they're more like machines than we are.

Accordingly, the *really*, really hard problem of consciousness is not to explain experience, but to explain the rational character of some cognitive states.

So that's a philosophical taxonomy that I find useful and that I put on the table. I want to note, in a metaphilosophical, epistemic vein, that both dualist tendencies would proceed, if they were to do so, by a movement away from what cannot be conceived. Such a movement is not characterized by taking as a *premise* that "if it cannot be conceived, it is not so." As a general principal, that conditional of course seems dubious. It's quite plausible that there are many truths that are beyond our ken and indeed that our ability to conceive that *p* is at best a fallible guide to whether it is the case that *p*. We have to be alive to the possibility that our best efforts here, as elsewhere, are misleading us.

At the same time, it can hardly be found inappropriate that we should reject a view that we cannot comprehend. So if the phenomenal character of conscious states cannot be understood in terms of the satisfaction of any conditions that are offered up specifically as elements from a naturalistic theory, a theory we in turn cannot understand as demanding phenomenal aspects, then dualism is

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to that extent defended. Correspondingly for the "rational normativity" motivation: if it is inconceivable that matter should, in virtue of material properties alone, be apt for normative evaluation—if it is never fundamentally in virtue of occupying a position in the space of nature that anything can be characterized as, say, irrational—if nature is in that sense *alien*, then the motivation for dualism is easily comprehensible.

At this point I might take advantage of the opportunity to say several provocative and inflammatory things about materialism. But I'll limit myself to this: It seems somewhat strange to me that dualism is conceived as ontologically profligate and inflationary. Many philosophers are prepared to believe that there is a number between seven and nine. In fact most philosophers would believe that there are many, many numbers between seven and nine. Let's just think about the number eight. The number eight is not identical with any physical thing. And the numerical property of being divisible by two is not identical to any physical property. We're all dualists now! So dualism need not be particularly inflationary. We're already committed to the relevant sort of category. One doesn't get to be ontologically inflationary by thinking there are more items of a familiar type than we might otherwise have thought were of that type. Only an absolutely thoroughgoing nominalist can non-hypocritically wag the finger, I think; in the meantime, to the average materialist, I'll point it (or worse!).

Notes

1 Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–50.
2 Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), Lecture III.
3 Frank Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 127–35.
4 Joseph Levine, "Materialism and *Qualia*: The Explanatory Gap," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 354–61.
5 David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
6 John Searle, "Minds, Brains and Programs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417–57.
7 Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 118-9.
8 David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24–5. For a related distinction, see also Ned Block, "On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18 (1995): 227–87.
9 See Donald Davidson, "Mental Events," in *Experience and Theory*, ed. Lawrence Foster and J. W. Swanson (London: Duckworth, 1970).
10 See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
11 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42-3.
12 Jerry Fodor, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 97.

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13 Dennis Stampe, "Toward a Causal Theory of Linguistic Representation," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2 (1977): 42–63.
14 Fred Dretske, *Explaining Behavior* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
15 Jerry Fodor, "Semantics, Wisconsin Style," *Synthese* 59 (1984): 231–50.
16 Bryan Skyrms, *Signals: Evolution, Learning, and Information* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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