

Neutral Monism: A Saner Solution to the Mind/Body Problem

Sam Coleman seeks a balance between two extreme views of consciousness.

Philosophy Now, Aug/Sep 2017, Issue 121

https://philosophynow.org/issues/121/Neutral_Monism_A_Saner_Solution_to_the_Mind_Body_Problem

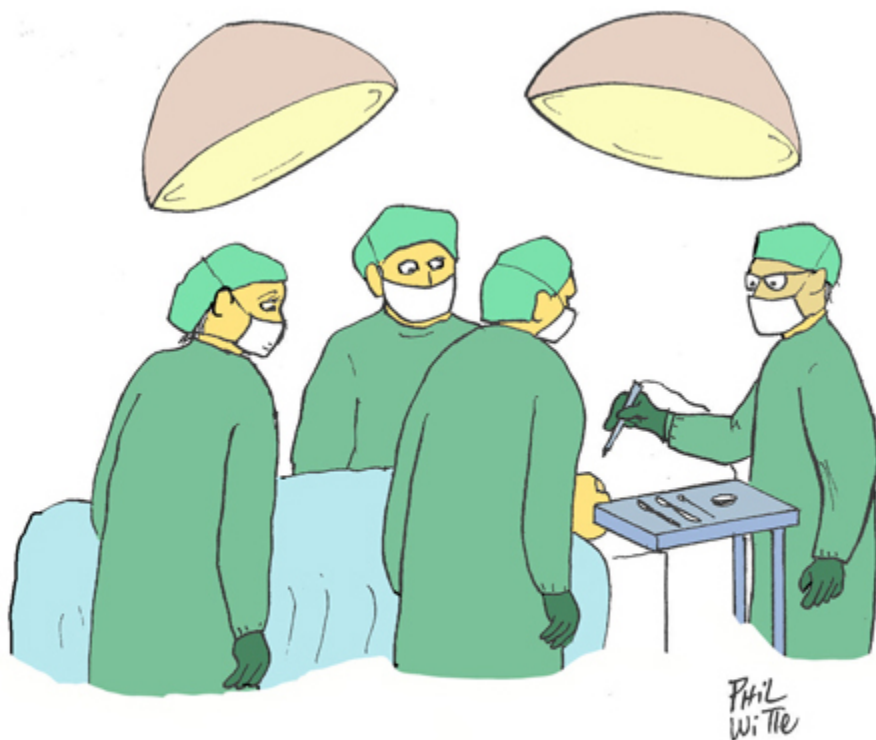
The mind-body problem is that it is difficult to see how the mental and the physical fit together within one world. Part of the difficulty is the unsatisfactoriness of trying to explain either side of the mental/physical duality in terms of the other. Purported physical explanations of consciousness inevitably fall short of their target. They seem about as suitable as a plan to build a skyscraper out of marshmallows, or an attempt to recreate the sensuous colour and curves of a Cezanne painting using only a pencil and set square – the materials are simply not up to the job. Physical objects and properties just do not seem the right kind of ingredients with which to create experiences. And although the failure of physical explanations might make *panpsychism* seem an appealing option (see [Philip Goff's seductive article](#)), seeking to capture the physical in terms of the mental is equally inappropriate, albeit for the opposite reason: this manoeuvre is so overblown, it's metaphysical overkill. The panpsychist claim that everything physical has a degree of consciousness seems an almost wholly gratuitous addition to the properties physics assigns electrons and their microphysical kin. And if there's one thing that perturbs physicists and metaphysicists in equal measure, it's gratuitous additions. Although we certainly need more than the mere *tendencies* or *behaviour* physics ascribes – as Goff says, we require an account of what matter, for example, an electron, is *in itself*, not just of what it *does* – to plug this gap with prefab minds is too much. True, nothing physics says positively *rules out* that electrons behave as they do because they literally have minds and feelings – Schrödinger's equation works even if electrons repel one another due to mutual resentment. But nature favours economy, and economy counts against spreading consciousness all over nature. That would be decadent.

Wanted: A New Middle Way

Physicalism and panpsychism sit either end of a metaphysical seesaw, and when one is in the ascendancy it is only by bringing the other unduly low. The austerity of the physical account should not be privileged at the cost of mentality's richness; but neither ought the otherwise elegant and parsimonious microphysical world to be stuffed to the gills with consciousness. A saner view would achieve a balance between the two poles of the mental-physical duality. Perhaps the lesson to draw from the failure of both of those unilateral solutions, which attempt to frame the mind/body conundrum in terms of only one side of the equation, is that we are in need of something new: a third, middle way.

What then if the mental and the physical, quite irreconcilable when taken as independent natures, are really the common offspring of another sort of nature, something *in-between* the two? This something would be an essence neither mental nor physical in itself,

but which possesses properties capable of generating both the mental and physical. Theories that propose this are called 'neutral monist': 'monist' because, unlike dualism, they envisage only one fundamental kind of stuff in the world; 'neutral' because this unifying nature is hypothesised to lie betwixt mentality and physicality, equidistant from each, distinct from either, and ultimately responsible for both.



“Stimulating this area of the brain will enable the patient to think of all the clever things he wished he had said.”

Cartoon © Phil Witte 2017

The Nature of the Neutral

What special sort of nature might this neutral basis be? We already have a conception of it, in terms of the role neutral properties are to play in our worldview. Neither mental nor physical, they must be capable of producing mental and physical properties through their interactions – perhaps analogously to how subatomic particles produce atoms of all sorts with radically different properties, merely by combining in various ways. Some neutral monists stop there, from a belief that a more fleshed-out description of the neutral nature is beyond us. But this is not a comfortable resting place. This skeletal specification of the nature of the neutral amounts only to a job description. We might dearly wish there to exist properties that could play this dual and in-between role: that would solve the whole mind-body problem! But the job description, for all we know, may be a description of the impossible. To make sure that this isn't the case – that we aren't investing our hopes in a metaphysical chimera – we need to offer a more positive conception of the neutral

properties. The closer to home the suggested candidate properties are – the more familiar, and the less abstrusely theoretical – the better, for we desire a conception that matches panpsychism and physicalism in their clarity and concreteness. We feel we know what their proponents mean when they say, respectively, that the physical is fundamentally conscious or that the mental is nothing but machinations of the physical. We must aim to make the neutral monist proposal, unfamiliar as it is, equally intelligible.

Two Conceptions of Colours

Are there any familiar properties that might offer a suitable analogy? *Colours* might be the very sort of ambivalent properties we seek. That is because although two opposing conceptions of colour exist, colours seem to elude being completely characterised by either, just as our neutral properties are hypothesised to evade the categories of the physical and the mental.

On a commonsense conception, colours are resolutely non-mental properties that reside on the surfaces and also permeate the hidden insides of physical objects – like red apples with white interiors. Although the colours of objects are perceivable by minds, common sense does not make it a condition of an object's being coloured that someone be currently experiencing it, nor that anyone ever will. Colours, on this view, do not depend on conscious awareness, or mentality of any sort. Quite the contrary: if we inquire further into the nature of colours under the commonsense conception, we are most likely to equate them with objectively measurable physical properties – wavelengths, for example. Conceived of in this way, colours exist whether anyone is looking or not. Your favourite shirt is no less loud for being in the wardrobe.

On a second conception, which we might call more philosophically informed (or misinformed, depending on your perspective – for there are philosophers who vigorously defend the commonsense conception), colours are paradigmatically *mental* properties. After all, we dream, and can hallucinate, colours just like those we see. People with Charles Bonnet Syndrome experience especially vivid colour hallucinations. For homemade colour hallucinations rub your eyelids for ten seconds, or stare at a bright light for half a minute and look around. When dreaming of an apple, no light rays are hitting your retinas, nor are you in sight of a real apple. So whatever is red and white about a dream apple is only within your mind. Colours under this second conception *do* require the touch of consciousness. This would mean that there can be no such thing as an unexperienced colour; colours exist only when some mind's eye sees them. And what goes for the colours of sleep is also true of the colours we experience when awake: right now the colours you are seeing are *in your mind* (so waves of light are not intrinsically coloured, since light waves evidently exist when no-one sees them). We could label this the 'Cartesian' conception of colours, since René Descartes is usually blamed for this line of thought, although (like every other Western philosopher) he's only following Plato, who forcefully chipped away at the objectivity of colours.

The debate rages on, among philosophers anyway, as to which of these contrasting conceptions of colours is correct. It is even possible to combine the two: while dreamt or hallucinated colours may be the mind's products (perhaps they are stored 'templates' of waking colour), the seen colours of daily life could still belong to external physical things, such as light waves or objects. The combined view would then be that colours are sometimes internal/mental, and sometimes external/physical.

Colours as a Pointer to the Neutral Properties

This controversy just goes to show how perfectly colours might fit the neutral monist's bill. Any properties that can be construed so easily now as physical, now as mental, would seem to have precisely what it takes to be judged as being ultimately – that is, in themselves – of neither category. Colours might well show up in the world doing *here* a mental job, *there* a physical job, but like a construction worker who moonlights as a cabaret star, be intrinsically defined by neither of these very different occupations.

The conspicuous and persistent ambiguity in our conception of colours provides serious evidence that in their own nature they elude classification as either mental *or* physical. We might choose to follow Bertrand Russell (himself following William James and Ernst Mach) in counting a colour as 'mental' when it is something in or to a mind, but as 'physical' when it belongs to an external physical thing. That is, colours are mental when they play mind-related roles, like being in present sensation, being remembered, or being dreamt, and physical when they play physical roles – like obeying the equations of physics. But these are *just* roles, and colours, as neutral properties, are no more defined by them than an actress is defined by the roles she takes on. It's a hard thought to get one's teeth into, but perhaps colours are just... colours.

So whereas the panpsychist fills quarks and electrons with conscious minds, the neutral monist constructs the universe from neither-mental-nor-physical qualities, of which colours might be said to provide the exemplar. Far from panpsychism, this is a 'panqualityism' (that sleek name is thanks to S.C. Pepper, via Herbert Feigl). It should be noted however that colours ultimately offer us only a conception of the *kind* of properties we seek. The panqualityist neutral monist is committed to them as a placeholder for the neutral properties, nothing more. That is, colours demonstrate that there *could be* such natures. Still, the neutral natures that actually underlie the world may be quite alien to us. But then again, perhaps not: it might even be that those colourful plastic models of atoms, familiar from school, are remarkably close to the deep truth about matter: it is nothing more nor less than 'colour-stuff' (think of squeezing out a tube of red paint into a heap).



Are colours in the world or in the mind?

Food for Thought © Vadim Dozmorov 2017. Contact him at dozmorovadim@gmail.com

The Payoff

Our brains consist of matter, of course. So panpsychism builds the conscious cortex out of tiny conscious minds, giving nary a thought to how this crowd of trillions combines into *you*: do you feel a vast population teeming in your head? The neutral monist, by contrast, makes brains from neutral qualities. Such qualities are physical when they play physical/chemical/biological roles in the brain, and mental when they provide the content that appears in consciousness. But *in themselves* the qualities are neither mental nor physical. So when you are conscious of a colour that is also playing a physical role (as, say, a constituent of a physical object), the colour counts as simultaneously physical *and* mental. In this way, the whole difficulty of the mind/body problem – a blockage in the metaphysical pipeworks caused by the congealing of the centuries-old opposition of mental and physical – is simply flushed away.

Whence Consciousness?

But, take an assortment of these colours, or other kinds of sense-related qualities, or indeed any properties of this broad 'qualitative' sort, however exotic, and let them be oh-so-cleverly arranged in a brain: since these qualities themselves avowedly lack consciousness, how can they give rise to a genuine *sensation*, a feeling? Would not the panqualityist world, including panqualityist brains, be one of *dead* colours, in fact seen and experienced by nobody? It would be celluloid film without the projector's beam. How, in a word, does neutral monism actually propose to give us *consciousness*?

Those who make this objection place consciousness upon too lofty a pedestal. It stands to reason that any genuine explanation of how consciousness arises must be in *non-*

conscious terms, because you cannot explain something in terms of itself. So the objector's real protest appears to be that *experience cannot be explained at all*, which seems a protest too far. A panpsychist of course feels that consciousness cannot be *manufactured*: rather, consciousness must be taken for granted in the world. Consciousness! Taken for granted! (Exclamation is warranted here.) Physicalism is, as noted, too impoverished to explain experience. What puts panqualityist neutral monism a rung higher on the ladder of explanations than physicalism is the metaphysical boost provided by qualitative properties such as colours. In fact, when a normal person (hence a non-philosopher) reports on her conscious experience, all she ever mentions are the qualities of which she is aware and the things to which they seem to belong: like *pains* in toes, or *red* buses. She never mentions her *consciousness* of these properties in addition. Search for it: consciousness itself seems rather a flimsy thing, hard – possibly impossible – to glimpse, as G.E. Moore noted a century ago. Perhaps the most we can say about it is that qualities, such as colours, are *apparent* to us. And when we aren't conscious of them, well, they aren't apparent. But if consciousness is no more than a quality's being apparent, or appearing, to one, then consciousness might be considerably more mundane a property than our objector reckons. Perhaps then a metaphysical system built of nothing but qualities could capture consciousness, after all. Consciousness would be a certain special kind of connection holding between a quality and a person's brain. Special, yes; but it would be nothing like the magical glow that has blinded philosophers for so long.

© Dr Sam Coleman 2017

Sam Coleman is a Reader in Philosophy at the University of Hertfordshire. His email is s.coleman@herts.ac.uk