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The Primacy of the Mental

From Russellian Monism to Substance Dualism

Brandon Rickabaugh
Department of Philosophy
Baylor University
Waco, Texas
brandon_rickabaugh@baylor.edu

We are, if anything, subjects of consciousness. This fact is given to us in our phenomenology, in our experience of, or reflection on, our conscious experience. It is because of this that I favor a consciousness-first approach to the philosophy of mind. It both seems obvious to me that I am conscious and that we should start our inquiry into the nature of consciousness from here.[1] But, what explains the fact that we are conscious? One way to get at this question is to consider what is primary regarding consciousness. Is the mental (consciousness itself) or the physical primary?

The recent history of philosophy of mind can be told as a persistent replacement of attempts to explain consciousness with the physical as primary, that is, in physicalist terms. Behaviorism gave way to type and token physicalism. These views have largely been superseded by versions of functionalism and emergentism. More recently, the shift toward nonreductive physicalism has motivated many toward panpsychism, panprotopsychism, and Russellian monist views.

In this paper I argue for the primacy of the mental over the physical from the recent physicalist embrace of views such as panpsychism, panprotopsychism, and Russellian monism. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer only to Russellian monism, although I consider my argument applicable to all three views. More specifically, I argue that the conjunction of phenomenal

Abstract: I argue for the primacy of the mental from recent physicalists' endorsements of phenomenal transparency and the nontransparency of the physical. I argue that the conjunction of these views shows that (1) arguments for dualism from introspection are difficult to resist; and (2) a kind of Hempel's dilemma removes constraints that block substance dualism. This shows that (1) raises the probability of the primacy of the mental, while (2) lowers the probability of the primacy of the physical. Lastly, I argue that the conjunction of (1) and (2) raises the probability of substance dualism.

1. See, e.g., Adam Pautz, "Does Phenomenology Ground Mental Content?," in *Phenomenal Intentionality: New Essays*, ed. U. Kriegel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 194–234.

transparency and the nontransparency of the physical that motivates these physicalist views incurs two problems:

(1) Introspective Dualism: arguments for dualism from introspection become more difficult to resist.
(2) Hempel's Dilemma: a kind of Hempel's dilemma that removes constraints that block substance dualism.

What this shows, or so I argue, is that (1) raises the probability of the primacy of the mental, while (2) lowers the probability of the primacy of the physical. Lastly, I argue that the conjunction of (1) and (2) raises the probability of substance dualism.

1. Laying the Groundwork

1.1. What Is the Primacy of the Mental?

Primacy is often understood in terms of grounding or metaphysical explanations, which reveal an ontological dependence relation between the grounded entity and the grounding entity(s).[2] Accordingly,

> Primacy: *y* is primary over $x =_{\text{def.}}$ *x* is grounded in *y*; *y* metaphysically explains *x*.

Primacy can be rendered more precise by delimiting its *scope* and *kind*. The scope of primacy might refer to the cosmos, biological organisms, subjects of consciousness, features of subjects of consciousness, or the nature of consciousness. Applied to our topic:

> Primacy of the Mental: the fundamental facts about consciousness and our being subjects of consciousness are grounded in facts about the mental.

This is the thesis I will defend.

It is worth recognizing that Christianity is committed to the ultimate ontological primacy of the mental in so far as God is the only necessary being. Consequently, Alvin Plantinga urges Christian philosophers to begin work on the ontology of human persons by first considering what it is that makes God a person. Such an analysis will not yield to the primacy of the physical, but give primacy to consciousness.[3] As Charles Taliaferro argues, the immaterial nature of God gives us reason to reject eliminativism, identity

2. E.g., see Kit Fine, "Guide to Grounding," in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, ed. F. Correia and B. Schnieder (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37–80; and Shamik Dasgupta, "On the Plurality of Grounds," *Philosophers' Imprint* 14 (2014): 1–28.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 264–5.

theory, and functionalism.[4] While the implications of theism for the philosophy of mind are debatable, what cannot be contested is that the probability of the primacy of the mental over the physical increases on Christian theism as the Person in whom all persons count as persons—God—is not physical, but mental.

1.2. Substance Dualism and Russellian Monism

The logical space of substance dualism (hereafter, dualism) is far more expansive than is usually recognized. The following definition accommodates the logical space:

> Substance Dualism (dualism): for every person who thinks or has experiences, there is an immaterial substantial soul which is (i) essential to the person, (ii) responsible for the person's mental life, and (iii) lacks many or most of the physical properties characteristic of nonthinking material objects.[5]

Accordingly, consciousness is a fundamental, irreducible feature of reality, as are subjects of consciousness. Consequently, the primacy of the mental holds for both consciousness and human persons in that at least some fundamental facts about persons and consciousness are grounded in the mental.

Russellian monism comes in various forms as well. I will use the following definition:

> Russellian Monism: matter has intrinsic properties that both constitute consciousness and serve as categorical bases for the dispositional properties described in physics.[6]

Accordingly, facts about fundamental physical entities with certain intrinsic properties are what ground facts about everything else, including consciousness. Moreover, the fundamental constituents of reality are physical. Hence,

> Primacy of the Physical: the fundamental facts about consciousness are grounded in facts about fundamental physical entities.

According to Russellian monism, physical terms/concepts and phenomenal terms/concepts, which characterize consciousness, corefer to matter, to the physical.

4. Charles Taliaferro, "Philosophy of Mind and the Christian," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. M. Beaty (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 231–53.

5. This is a modification of Dean Zimmerman's definition of substance dualism in Dean Zimmerman, "From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism," *Aristotelian Society Supplement* 84 (2010): 119–20.

6. For a helpful introduction to Russellian monism, see, Torin Alter and Yujin Nagasawa, "Editors' Introduction," and "What Is Russellian Monism?," in *Consciousness in the Physical World: Perspectives on Russellian Monism*, ed. T. Alter and Y. Nagasawa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–17 and 422–51.

The move from standard physicalism to Russellian monism or panpsychism should be seen as a move in the right direction and as a move closer to dualism. Taliaferro, for example, observes that both dualists and panpsychists (i) recognize the reality of consciousness; (ii) resist reductive accounts that result in eliminativism; and (iii) tend to reject accounts which take consciousness as both irreducible and emergent from nonconscious mental elements.[7] In fact, one might wonder just how Russellian monism is a form of orthodox physicalism.

Presumably fidelity to causal closure or the completeness of physics keeps the Russellian monist a faithful physicalist. The thesis of causal closure, explains David Papineau, is the view that "all physical effects are fully caused by purely *physical* prior histories."[8] Accordingly, unlike dualism, Russellian monism needn't require one to locate mental causation outside of the physical realm. However, fidelity to causal closure makes Russellian monism susceptible to standard problems for physicalism. For example, if we needn't go outside the physical realm to find causes for why one reasons to the conclusion of arguments, then we have good reason to think that the causal powers of mental states are drained away. It is, therefore, no longer the agent that reasons, but subpersonal, fundamental physical states that drain reason away as epiphenomenal.[9]

1.3. Russellian Monism and the Transparency Theses

My argument relies on a main reason for thinking Russellian monism is true. It seems obvious to many that one has knowledge of one's mental life through first-person introspection. While some physicalists deny such knowledge, other physicalists, especially Russellian monists, embrace the following thesis:

> Phenomenal Transparency: phenomenal concepts reveal the nature of the conscious states to which they refer.

The nature of phenomenal states, like experiences of pain or seeing red, are known through first-person introspection or what Philip Goff calls *direct phenomenal transparency*.[10] I know what pain is simply by consider-

7. Charles Taliaferro, "Dualism and Panpsychism," in *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. G. Brüntrup and L. Jaskolla (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 383–4.

8. David Papineau, *Thinking about Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

9. For a recent defense of this argument, see Brandon Rickabaugh and Todd Buras, "The Argument from Reason, and Mental Causal Drainage: A Reply to van Inwagen," *Philosophia Christi* 19 (2017): 381–99.

10. See Philip Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14–17, and chap. 5.

ing my experience of pain, attending to my acquaintance with pain. I know what thinking is simply by attending to my acquaintance with experiences of thinking.

Additionally, Russellian monists hold the following thesis:

> Nontransparency of the Physical: while we have knowledge of the dispositional properties of the physical we lack knowledge of its intrinsic properties.

Interestingly, this is in tension with the line of argument we usually hear from physicalists. The usual claim is that our understanding of the physical, especially understanding provided by neuroscience, evidences physicalism over dualism. Now the argument is that we do not know as much as we thought we knew about the physical. It seems that the Russellian monist is substantially revising the thesis of physicalism, and in so doing has rejected a leading argument for physicalism. This alone changes the evidence against physicalism and for dualism. Likewise, there is a tension with the nontransparency of the physical and David Papineau's physiological argument for causal closure, which is central to a very popular argument for physicalism.

Furthermore, notice that the conjunction of phenomenal transparency and the nontransparency of the physical entails a specific kind of primacy of the mental:

> Epistemological Primacy of the Mental: *S*'s evidence with respect to her mental states is greater than her evidence with respect to the nature of her physical states.

For example, some dualists hold that the belief that I am conscious is indubitable for the referent "I" whereas the belief that I am a biological entity might not be indubitable. Of course, the epistemological primacy of the mental does not entail the ontological primacy of the mental. To that argument I now turn.

2. The Ontological Primacy of Consciousness

2.1. An Argument for the Primacy of the Mental from Phenomenal Transparency

Here is the specific kind of primacy of the mental that is at the heart of the debate between dualists and physicalists:

> Ontological Primacy of the Mental: y is ontologically primary over $x =_{\text{def.}}$ facts about the ontological nature or structure of x are grounded in facts about the nature of y.

For example, one might think that consciousness, or the mental, is ontologically primary, such that facts about phenomenal consciousness are neither

found in any physical entity nor are they emergent from any physical entity. Here is one way we might defend this thesis from premises that are accepted by the Russellian monist.

Phenomenal transparency makes possible various arguments from conceivability and introspection for both property and substance dualism.[11] This follows from the fact that phenomenal transparency endorses the epistemological primacy of the mental. Dualists have similarly argued that mental states are the sorts of things that can be introspectively known, and, thus, they stand in a direct access relation to the subject.[12] I contend that metaphysical formulations of arguments from introspection can demonstrate that we can know by introspection, given what introspection is, that mental states are not identical to physical states.[13]

Plausibly, introspection reveals that consciousness or mental states in general stand to subjects of consciousness, from the first-person, as:

(*a*) inner (not spatially inside, but properties of mine),
(*b*) private (known by me in a way not available to anyone else),
(*c*) directly given to me and not by means of anything else (self-presenting),
(*d*) intentional, and
(*e*) present themselves as necessarily states of the mine.

For simplicity, let's refer to a set, the *M-set*, which has as its members features (*a*) through (*e*), such that, *M-set* = {*a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*}. This allows us to state the argument succinctly as follows:

(1) Some mental states have the ontological features of the *M-set*.
(2) No physical state has the ontological features of the *M-set*.
(3) Therefore, some mental states are not identical to physical states.

This is similar to the understanding of arguments from introspection that John Searle favors. He explains, "The logical form of the argument is this: I stand in a relation to certain entities, my experience of colors. And the bat stands in a relation to certain entities, its experiences of what it feels like to be a bat. A complete third-person description of the world leaves out these entities, therefore the description is incomplete."[14] Likewise, Richard Fum-

11. See, e.g., Richard Fumerton, *Knowledge, Thought and the Case for Dualism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Howard Robinson, *From the Knowledge Argument to Mental Substance: Resurrecting the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

12. See, e.g., J. P. Moreland, "The Knowledge Argument Revisited," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2003): 219–38.

13. For a defense of this argument against criticisms from Jaegwon Kim and Paul Churchland, see, J. P. Moreland and Brandon Rickabaugh, "The Plausibility of Property Dualism and the Intelligibility of a Spiritual Substance: A Reply to Churchland," in *Christianity and Science in Dialogue*, ed. Natalia Pecherskaya (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

14. John Searle, *Mind: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68.

erton's understanding of the knowledge argument accords well with stating arguments from introspection in the metaphysical mode.[15]

Phenomenal transparency, so argues the dualist, reveals features of mental states that are not features of physical states. Mental states are the sorts of things that can be introspectively known and, thus, they stand in a direct access relation to the subject. Mental states are inner—exemplified within the subject—and as so known, are necessarily states of the subject. They are modes of me. Mental states are intentional; they are about something other than themselves. Brain states, however, lack these features.

To be clear, my point is not to defend the premises of the metaphysical argument from introspection to dualism. Rather, I am arguing that given phenomenal transparency, a commitment of Russellian monism, the assertoric force of introspection makes arguments for dualism from introspection more difficult for the Russellian monist to avoid than for the traditional physicalist. This is the case because the strongest objection to arguments from introspection is to reject introspection as a legitimate source of justification. This is how physicalists often avoid such dualist arguments.[16] However, the Russellian monist's adoption of phenomenal transparency entails the acceptance of introspection as a legitimate source of evidence. Hence, the probability of the evidence of introspection for the *M-set* dramatically increases on Russellian monism.

The Russellian monist might employ another objection. Some physicalists have argued that the conclusion of introspective arguments for dualism cannot follow from its premises because such arguments move from epistemological premises to a metaphysical conclusion.[17] They correctly point out that such a move is suspect. That one knows x in some way, say from introspection, does not necessarily tell us anything about the ontology of x. However, once we consider both the ontology of introspection and the details of the argument this objection is easily eliminated.

Dualist arguments from introspection do vary. For example, Howard Robinson advances a linguistic version, concluding that, "The phenomenal nature of sound cannot in principle be expressed in the vocabulary of physical science."[18] However, the version I have stated above clearly moves from metaphysical premises to a metaphysical conclusion. Consider the following figure.

15. Fumerton, *Knowledge, Thought and the Case for Dualism*, chap. 3.

16. See, e.g., Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 24–5.

17. E.g., both Jaegwon Kim and Paul Churchland mistakenly state dualist arguments from introspection in this way. See Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2011), 153–61; and Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, 49–53.

18. Howard Robinson, "The Anti-Materialist Strategy and the 'Knowledge Argument,'" in *Objections to Physicalism*, ed. H. Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 163.

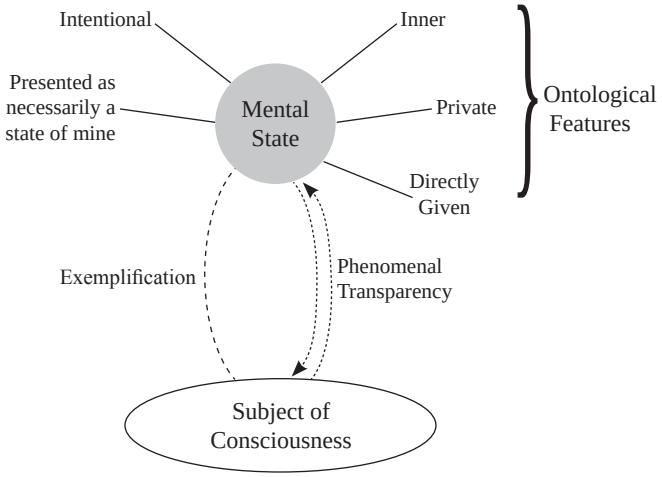

FIGURE 1. The Ontological Structure of Introspection

First, it must be understood that this is an illustration. Mental states, at least on many dualist views, are internal to the subject of consciousness. The figure does not depict this. What it does depict are two relations between the subject of consciousness and the subject's conscious mental states. The relation is metaphysical, just as other forms of perception are. The mental state is an intentional object of the subject of consciousness. It is in virtue of this relation that the subject of consciousness comes to observe or discern certain ontological features of mental states. Likewise, phenomenal transparency requires a direct introspective relation to one's mental states.

I understand the ontology of introspection as a form of knowledge by acquaintance:

> Knowledge by Acquaintance: *S* knows *x* = $_{\text{broadly means:}}$ (i) *S* is directly acquainted with *x*, where *x* is a real-world object or agent; and (ii) *x* provides a prominent evidential role in the noninferential, immediate justification with respect to *S*'s knowledge of *x*.[19]

This is in the direct self-awareness tradition of Franz Brentano and Roderick Chisholm.[20] It is in virtue of this metaphysical relation of acquaintance that phenomenal transparency provides introspective knowledge—a form of

19. For a detailed account of the ontology of knowledge by acquaintance, see Brandon Rickabaugh, "Eternal Life as Knowledge of God: An Epistemology of Knowledge by Acquaintance and Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6 (2013): 204–28.

20. Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study* (Chicago: Open Court, 1976), 22–37.

knowledge by acquaintance—about these central features of the metaphysical nature of consciousness. Hence, the argument from introspection is not an epistemological argument, but a metaphysical one.

So, what is to stop the Russellian monist from sliding into dualism? Presumably, it is for this that the nontransparency of the physical is intended. The physicalist could argue that although phenomenal transparency reveals qualities had by mental states, the nontransparency of the physical makes it impossible to know that these mental qualities are not possessed by fundamental physical entities. Hence, the slide into dualism is avoided.

I have two things to say about this. First, it is clear that phenomenal transparency raises the probability of dualism insofar as Russellian monists cannot deny the data of introspection. They cannot dismiss the evidence gained through introspection, as other physicalists have. Second, I think we have a very good reason to think that the Russellian monist faces a type of Hempel's dilemma that undermines the ability of the nontransparency of the physical to stop the slide into dualism. To that argument I now turn.

2.2. Russellian Monism and Hempel's Dilemma

Our understanding of the physical makes or breaks physicalism. The less we know about the nature of physicality the less meaningful the term "physicalism" becomes. Oddly enough, the physicalist who embraces Russellian monism is committed to the view that our knowledge of the physical is significantly incomplete. It is so incomplete that we have failed to realize that mentality is an aspect of the physical. This ignorance of the physical is amplified due to a familiar problem referred to as Hempel's dilemma.

Hempel's dilemma raises a problem for how the physicalist can define to what the term "physical" refers.[21] There are two options. First, the physicalist could attempt to define the physical by reference to our current physics. However, our current physics is incomplete. Hence, we cannot accurately define the physical in terms of current physics. Alternatively, the physicalist might define the nature of physicality with reference to whatever physics tells us in the future, once it has become as complete as possible. In reply some argue that appeals to future physics leave physicalism so indeterminate as to be uninformative.[22]

Others argue that, on the physicalist assumption that physics will deliver the true theory of everything, physicalism amounts to the thesis that the world contains only what is true, which renders physicalism trivially true.

21. See Carl Hempel, "Comments on Goodman's Ways of Worldmaking," *Synthese* 45 (1980): 193–200.

22. See, e.g., Seth Crook and Carl Gillett, "Why Physics Alone Cannot Define the 'Physical': Materialism, Metaphysics, and the Formulation of Physicalism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2001): 333–60.

Similarly, others argue that one cannot even formulate a univocal notion of the physical.[23] Here is a second problem with the future physics reply. It is entirely possible that future physics will give us an understanding of the physical that is significantly unlike what current physicalism presumes. In fact, future physics might reveal that the nature of the physical supports dualism.[24] Perhaps certain potential causal powers of the physical are actualized only by the causal powers of the mental. The physical and the mental remain distinct; however, the causal interaction of the two entities creates the situation we are now in, where the Russellian monist is attributing the powers of the mental to the physical. This is entirely possible.

What this leaves us with is a serious problem of understanding to what the term "physical" refers. This problem is more difficult for Russellian monism than standard physicalism, given that Russellian monists must hold that we know enough about the physical to motivate physicalism but have enough ignorance to suppose that matter can in some sense ground consciousness. Taken together, the nontransparency of the physical and Hempel's dilemma give us significant reason to think that our understanding of the nature of the physical is inadequate to motivate physicalism.

Furthermore, it seems that in revising the ontology of what counts as physical the Russellian monist is left without a means of blocking the move to dualism.

2.3. From Consciousness to Subjects of Consciousness

So far, I have argued that the Russellian monist's phenomenal transparency thesis raises the probability of the primacy of the mental and that the nontransparency of the physical lowers the probability of the primacy of the physical. I then briefly explained how this raises the probability of dualism. This conclusion raises the probability of dualism in another way. Consider arguments from self-awareness to dualism.

There is substantial evidence from cognitive science that the vast majority of individuals naturally believe that dualism is true.[25] One explanation of this is that most individuals form their belief in dualism in virtue of their self-awareness. J. P. Moreland has defended such an inference from self-

23. See, e.g., Bas van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 49–61; and Michel Bitbol, "Materialism, Stances, and Open-Mindedness," in *Images of Empiricism: Essays on Science and Stances, with a Reply from Bas C. van Fraassen*, ed. B. Monton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 229–70.

24. For a similar argument, see Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor, "There Is No Question of Physicalism," *Mind* 99 (1990): 185–206.

25. See, e.g., Justin L. Barrett, *Cognitive Science, Religion, and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2011); Paul Bloom, *Descartes's Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

awareness.[26] According to Moreland, direct awareness of the self as identical, not to their body, but to an immaterial substance, provides justification for dualism. The previously explained notion of direct awareness or knowledge by acquaintance is at work in this argument as well. For *S* to be directly acquainted with *x* just means that *S*'s acquaintance with *x* is not mediated through or inferred from anything. When I am directly aware of myself as *p*, then I am presented to myself as *p*, and *p* implies that I have *p*. Consequently, when I introspect I am presented to myself as an immaterial substantial soul, not identical with my body. Hence, in virtue of the metaphysical relation of acquaintance I have knowledge by acquaintance with myself which provides me with evidence for dualism.

As before, I am not defending these dualist arguments. Rather, I am arguing that the Russellian monist's phenomenal transparency thesis raises the probability of introspective evidence for dualism. Here the issue is the awareness of one's self as an immaterial substance distinct from one's body. That is, the Russellian monist's phenomenal transparency thesis makes arguments, such as Moreland's, far more difficult to resist. The Russellian monist must furnish an account that blocks the introspective evidence for dualism, although not the evidence for Russellian monism. As I have argued, appeals to the nontransparency of the physical will not do, as they make Russellian monism more susceptible to Hempel's dilemma.

3. Conclusion

As I've explained, the physicalist's move to views like panpsychism and Russellian monism can be seen as a move in the right direction: away from reductive physicalism and closer to dualism. Once the physicalist develops an account of phenomenal consciousness, intentionality, and subjects of consciousness, the entire project become less and less probable. In the case of Russellian monism, this includes developing a revisionary account of the physical. This confirms a suspicion I have that views like animalism are attractive in large part because they more often than not avoid addressing the most difficult problems for physicalism. These problems remain for Russellian monism. As I've argued, there is a plausible argument from the Russellian monist's phenomenal transparency thesis to the primacy of the mental regarding consciousness in general and dualism in particular. Consequently, a good case for the primacy of the mental, at least regarding consciousness and subjects of consciousness, has been made.[27]

26. J. P. Moreland, "Substance Dualism and the Argument from Self-Awareness," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2001): 21–34.

27. I'd like to thank Kevin Corcoran who was an inspiring philosophical interlocutor with a unique blend of philosophical rigor, intellectual honesty, and academic hospitality. I'd also like to thank Angus Menuge and Jonathan Loose for helpful comments on the first draft of this paper.