

# Is property dualism better off than substance dualism?

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**Abstract** It is widely thought that mind–body substance dualism is implausible at best, though mere “property” dualism is defensible and even flourishing. This paper argues that substance dualism is no less plausible than property dualism and even has two advantages over it.

**Keywords** Mind–body problem · Cartesian dualism · Substance dualism · Property dualism

During the last quarter-century, mind–body dualism has been doing surprisingly well: Campbell (1984); Swinburne (1986); Madell (1988); Robinson (1988, 2004); Hart (1988); Foster (1991); Seager (1991); Forrest (1993); Strawson (1994); Chalmers (1996); Taliaferro (1996); Bealer (1994, 1997, 2010); Stubenberg (1998); Griffin (1998); Siewert (1998); Hasker (1999); Rosenberg (2004); Zimmerman (2010) and others. (And see especially Koons and Bealer (2010).) But, with the notable exceptions of Swinburne, Hart and Foster,<sup>1</sup> these dualists are not Cartesian or otherwise substance dualists. Most are merely property dualists, holding that some of our mental states have immaterial properties, but not that we ourselves are immaterial souls entirely distinct from our bodies.<sup>2</sup> The prevalent idea is that property dualism (PD) is tenable (or even demonstrated), but we are not crazy.

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<sup>1</sup> Kripke (1972) gives an argument which, if sound, would establish Cartesian dualism, but he stops short of accepting its conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> A few seem to be “emergentist” rather than mere Cartesian substance dualists: Hasker, Zimmerman, and possibly Taliaferro. More on this below.

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I reject this disparity. I think that most of the standard objections to substance dualism (SD) count as effectively against PD, and that PD is hardly more plausible, or less implausible, than SD.<sup>3</sup> Granted, assuming that a Cartesian ego would *eo ipso* have some immaterial mental properties, SD is logically stronger than PD; so one would need a reason for accepting SD over and above PD, and there must be at least one objection that applies to SD but not to PD. However, as we shall see, nonsubstance (PD &  $\sim$ SD) faces at least two objections that SD does not.<sup>4</sup>

## 1

Let us consider seriatim what I take to be the nine main general problems for SD, starting with the four that I agree do *not* afflict PD quite as severely if at all. In each of those first four cases I shall argue that the difference is small, if only because the original objection to SD was overblown to begin with.

### 1.1 Excrescencehood

It is complained that Cartesian egos are excrescences, queer and obscure, and they are not needed for the explanation of any publicly known fact.

What would nonphysical properties explain that an ego would not? (My opponent holds that mere PD is more plausible than SD. So, *if* we look at the issue from just the explanatory point of view, the PDist must think that PD explains more or better or both than does SD; hence my rhetorical question.) Well, we do seem to be aware of properties that are problematic for materialism: intentional properties, qualia, “what it’s like” and such. And if Hume is right, we are not aware of our selves, and certainly not of their being immaterial substances.

But the objection had little bite to begin with. The point is that we do *seem to be aware of* the properties, from within, from the first-person perspective. Dualists do not think of either Cartesian egos or immaterial properties as explanatory posits. I know of no dualist who grants the “‘theory’ theory”, that the main (much less the only) purpose of mental ascriptions is third-person explanatory and that we know our own minds only by way of the general “mind” theory. Nor do I know of any

<sup>3</sup> I say “substance dualism” rather than “Cartesian dualism”, because as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, it is unclear how specifically a dualist view must match Descartes’ own in order to count as “Cartesian”. For convenience, however, I shall continue to talk of “Cartesian egos” and the like, because “substance ego” or “substantial ego” would be an unfamiliar and confusing term.

<sup>4</sup> Francescotti (2001) suggests that actually PD necessitates SD. Having considered a number of possible ways of defining “physical particular”, he concludes that “on any plausible definition of a physical particular, it is unclear how one can consistently endorse property dualism...while rejecting substance dualism” (p. 114). If PD does secretly entail SD, then of course my comparative view is true quite regardless of my arguments for it. Another defense of the entailment claim is given by Sharpe (2011). Zimmerman (2010) argues that if one holds PD but not SD, one probably must also be an adverbialist regarding sensory qualities, and that given adverbialism, a weak form of substance dualism is more plausible than any strict materialism.

who holds either SD or PD on explanatory grounds; dualist arguments are generally deductive.<sup>5</sup>

(But what about those deductive arguments—Leibniz’-Law objections, the Knowledge Argument, conceivability arguments, et al.? Some of those have been thought by some to be sound, and would establish PD but not SD. Moreover, that is one obvious reason why their proponents hold PD but not SD.)

Right, if any such argument is sound, then PD is true, period. Yet, n.b., any such would need to be checked, to make sure that a parallel argument would *not* establish SD. But if there is no sound argument for SD, the received view is correct and we should accept PD but not SD. I am assuming at least for the sake of discussion that no argument for PD is deductively sound; for my question is that of whether, *considered as theories only*, SD is less plausible than mere PD.)

There is one explanatory role that SD might play *if* PD is assumed, for a “how-possibly” question would arise: why or how on earth would a merely physical object, even one as complex as a brain, give rise to immaterial properties? We do not see how it could. If persons have immaterial mental properties, then most likely the persons themselves are or incorporate immaterial things. The idea would be that while there is nothing puzzling about an immaterial substance’s having immaterial properties, it is extremely strange to think that an otherwise purely physical object might have them. (Of course, we may wonder where the immaterial substance came from in the first place, especially if it is to emerge when a functioning brain does. But that is a different issue; on emergence, see Sect. 3 below.)

Still, it is theoretically possible that immaterial properties might play an explanatory role even though Cartesian egos play none<sup>6</sup>; so the objection may give PD a slight edge over SD.

## 1.2 Neural dependence

Paul Churchland (1984) argues:

If there really is a distinct entity in which reasoning, emotion, and consciousness take place, and if that entity is dependent on the brain for nothing more than sensory experiences as input and volitional executions as output, *then one would expect reason, emotion, and consciousness to be relatively invulnerable to direct control or pathology by manipulation or damage to the brain*. But in fact the exact opposite is true.... (p. 20, italics original)

Churchland says this “comes close to being an outright refutation of (substance) dualism”, but adds, “PD, note, is not threatened by this argument, since, like materialism, PD reckons the brain as the seat of all mental activity” (ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> In teaching the mind–body problem, we tend to treat Cartesian dualism as a *theory*, competing with Behaviorism, the Identity Theory et al. But remember that for Descartes it was not a theory, but the conclusion of each of several deductive arguments that he thought were sound. He did not *like* the view; he agreed with Elisabeth that it was extremely problematic.

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous reviewer has shrewdly suggested that PD can explain psychological continuity, by appeal to continuing dependence of mental states on one and the same physical brain, while SD can only refer tautologically to continuing dependence on one and the same immaterial ego.

But why does Churchland think the substance dualist cannot accommodate detailed dependence of mind on neural activity, and why does he suppose that a Cartesian mind must depend on the brain for nothing more than sensory experiences as input and volitional executions as output? Descartes himself knew very well that the mental depended in a detailed way upon the brain.<sup>7</sup> Finely tuned brain processing may be constantly and absolutely necessary for activity in a Cartesian mind, e.g., to solve a massive transduction problem (Lycan 2009). And there is no reason to suppose that the mind can do complicated reasoning without the aid of a physical calculator; in the real world, most people cannot do complicated reasoning without the aid of a physical calculator.

There is a more abstract ontological issue that does give PD a further slight advantage over SD:<sup>8</sup> that of disembodied existence. PD is not per se committed to the possibility of such, but, arguably, SD is. Being attributes of or inhering in brain states, PD's immaterial properties must vanish when the brain ceases to function, but an entirely immaterial Cartesian ego might persist. Churchland and others may see this as a large difference in plausibility.

But, first, remember that the *conceptual* possibility of disembodied existence is granted by nearly everyone, the only exceptions being Analytical Behaviorists and (if any) Analytical Eliminativists.<sup>9</sup> The Identity Theorists and the Functionalists have both vigorously insisted on it. And so should the PDist; the dependence of her/his immaterial mental properties on brains is hardly a conceptual truth.

The PDist is free to maintain, and almost surely will maintain, that the immaterial properties are metaphysically dependent on brains or brain-analogues. But is not SD committed to the metaphysical independence of Cartesian egos from brains and from all else that is physical? Now the question is that of metaphysical possibility, and PDist again sees a difference.

But it is not obvious that SD is committed to the metaphysical possibility of disembodied existence. I contend that there is no entailment (in the strict sense of logical or even conceptual entailment); at least one additional premise would be needed—perhaps a Descartes–Hume principle regarding distinct existences, or the doctrine(s) involved in an attempt to show that in some suitably constrained cases, metaphysical possibility can be inferred from conceptual possibility.<sup>10</sup> No such thesis is analytic or even uncontroversial, even if it is in fact a metaphysical truth.

So the relevant difference between PD and SD is that from SD but not from PD, *it is possible to argue* that minds (metaphysically) might exist quite independently of brains. Perhaps an advantage for PD, but I do not see it as large.

<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer has reminded me that Descartes himself made an exception to allow for free will, and that in the *Discourse* he explicitly distinguished us from machines. But those dualist concessions allow for a great deal of detailed dependence on brains; more importantly, one can accept SD without making them.

<sup>8</sup> Called to my attention by the same reviewer.

<sup>9</sup> Armstrong (1968) uses this as one of his basic desiderata for theories of the mind, and uses it to rule out Analytical Behaviorism in short order.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Chalmers (2002).

### 1.3 Causal pairing (Foster (1991); Kim (2005))

Why does one immaterial ego rather than another count as causally interacting with a given body? It seems there could be two Cartesian minds running exactly in parallel, one interacting with body A while the other interacts with body B. In virtue of what, metaphysically speaking, are they thus, respectively, paired?

Yet it is hardly obvious that such differences in causal relations need explaining; Robb and Heil (2003) argue that causal relations may be brute. Further, as Bennett (2007) points out, there are comparable differences in purely physical scenarios, so the dualist is not distinctively afflicted.<sup>11</sup> Finally, we shall see in the next section that the problem can be solved in a more direct way.

### 1.4 Evolution

Evolutionary theory embarrasses dualism generally, since we have no idea how natural selection could have produced either Cartesian egos or immaterial properties; nothing immaterial could possibly be adaptive. But it does seem easier at least to imagine weird properties' emerging from brain complexity than whole individual substances' doing so.<sup>12</sup>

Yet why could not Cartesian egos be adaptive, *if* as according to SD they causally interact with the physical? We shall address the interaction problem after just one more sentence.

So, now, on to the other five objections.

## 2

### 2.1 Interaction

The problem is widely thought to be fatal to SD. But there is no obvious difference in the case of PD. How could a nonphysical *property* causally affect physical ones, any more than could a nonphysical substance? (Epiphenomenalists of course deny that the immaterial properties do affect physical things, but the shortcomings of epiphenomenalism are familiar.<sup>13</sup>) Perhaps by way of a brute or primitive psychophysical law (Chalmers (1996)); but equally such laws could hold between immaterial properties of Cartesian egos and physical properties.

### 2.2 Nonspatiality

That is perhaps the nastiest characteristic of a Cartesian ego, and not just because it is what makes the interaction problem so bad.

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<sup>11</sup> Foster offers his own ingenious solution to the problem, but it is too complicated to expound here.

<sup>12</sup> As was observed to me by Bryce Huebner. (But see again the "emergentist" substance dualists (fn 2 above).)

<sup>13</sup> However, for doughty defense of epiphenomenalism, see Robinson (2003).

Is it worse for an ego-substance to be nonspatial than for a property to be? Perhaps a bit, since we do not much think of properties as being spatially located in the first place, while we do usually think of *things* as located.

It could be argued that properties are located in space: The color of a rubber ball is on the ball's surface; the ball's temperature is not uniform throughout, but every different degree of temperature it has qualifies a very particular spatial location; the ball's weight is located exactly where the ball is. But a true realist about universals (as opposed to a trope theorist or the like) would resist that, insisting that it is only the property *instances* that are spatially located.

We could just agree to locate immaterial properties in brains. But an even less ad hoc and more attractive parallel move is available to the SDist: Several problems, as well as the present difference between SD and PD, would diminish, if we were to spatialize the egos themselves, as was recommended by Sir Isaac Newton. I see no good reason not to suppose that immaterial selves are located roughly where central nervous systems are. (But wherein are minds *immaterial*, if they are spatially located? First, they do not have other physical properties such as mass or charge. Second, unlike brain matter, they are not made of atoms or subatomic particles. Notice further that ghosts and disembodied spirits supposedly move about in space, and that does not cause readers/audiences any conceptual dissonance.<sup>14</sup>) Incidentally, the locating of Cartesian minds in real space would also take some of the punch out of the interaction objection,<sup>15</sup> and it would entirely obviate the causal pairing problem.

Thus, were we to locate immaterial properties in brains, we could and should also agree to locate immaterial egos in heads.<sup>16</sup> There is no advantage for PD.

### 2.3 Laws of physics

SD is supposed to be incompatible with the conservation laws,<sup>17</sup> and just plain is incompatible with modern physics' conception of spacetime; Cartesian mental events supposedly occur in real time but not in physical space.

<sup>14</sup> Meehl and Sellars (1956) distinguished two senses of "physical", one of which was just defined as, spatial. It was the other that mattered to Sellars (1971), roughly, "figures in the explanation and description of ordinary matter", which presumably does not apply to Cartesian egos.

But how does a spatialized SD differ from emergentist SD (fn 2 above)? The emergentists too locate soul-substances in space and make them causally dependent on brains. I think the chief difference is in the nature or at least the degree of causal dependence. Emergence is an intimate relation; an emergent entity depends on its base or substrate for its very existence and for at least some of its nature. Spatialized SD makes no such assumption; even spatialized Cartesian souls may have been (e.g.) created independently by God, and *may* be able to float free of brains and bodies.

<sup>15</sup> In saying this I assume that nonspatiality is a large, perhaps the largest, element of the interaction problem. Its closest competitor would probably be the causal closure of physics, another large element. But the causal closure principle is an empirical thesis, and a recent one (Papineau (2009), Sect. 2.2), while nonspatiality raises a prior "how-possibly" question; it seems nearly inconceivable that a substance entirely lacking in spatial properties could cause physical motion.

<sup>16</sup> Choice: would an ego be merely a spatial point(-*nom*mass), or would it have extension within the brain? I am thinking of it in the latter way, since at least my own mind seems fairly large and intersects with various sense modalities, but Chisholm (1976) seems to go for the point view.

<sup>17</sup> But this is reasonably debated: Averill and Keating (1981).

As with interaction, the nonphysical properties are supposed to have causal powers. Whatever problems SD has with the conservation laws or with general relativity, PD should have too (bar those which may arise *solely* from traditional Cartesian egos' being nonspatial).

## 2.4 Epistemology

Ryle argued that Descartes got the epistemology radically wrong. If SD were true, we could not possibly ever know what was going on in someone else's mind; yet we have such knowledge very easily. (Often we just see what mental state another person is in.<sup>18</sup>)

SD's ontology, especially nonspatially interpreted, makes the epistemological problem at first look more grotesque than for PD. But if the interaction problem were solved, that appearance would cease: If minds and bodies causally interact (especially in a detailed way), there is some basis for knowledge of other minds, whatever particular epistemology one might urge. I would conclude that Ryle's objection merely collapses into the interaction problem. Since PD has the interaction problem too, the epistemological objection is in fact no worse for SD.

## 2.5 Unity and individuation

In virtue of what are the contents of a Cartesian mind contents of that mind rather than another one with (however unlikely) an exactly similar history of content? (We might answer that by reference to the uniquely associated body, but then what accounts for the unique relation between the mind and that body?) Here PD may be thought to have an advantage: Since the property dualist regards the immaterial properties as properties either of the brain or more broadly of the human animal who has them, s/he need not worry about what identifies or unifies or individuates Cartesian egos, or about the vexed relation between an ego and a human body.

But here too, if the interaction problem were solved, so too would be the individuation problem: A Cartesian ego is the one it is in virtue of the particular animal body it interacts with. (Also, if we do follow Newton's recommendation and spatialize the egos, there is simply no problem in the first place.)

# 3

Precisely for the reason Churchland gives, that PD "reckons the brain as the seat of all mental activity", nonCartesian PD incurs at least two objections that SD does not.

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<sup>18</sup> In making this observation, Ryle meant to be calling attention to a familiar phenomenon, not offering a solution to the philosophical problem of other minds (though of course he did go on to furnish a roughly behaviorist solution to that problem). The point here is, rather, that *if* traditional SD were correct, the familiar phenomenon would be a *complete* mystery and not just the source of a standard philosophical problem.

First, strong emergence.<sup>19</sup> If a brain state or event *itself* has immaterial properties, i.e., that are not properties of an immaterial thing, the properties are emergent in an objectionably strong sense: Viz., for the state/event to have the property is not just constituted by the subject's entirely material parts' being arranged in a particular way. (Either that, or as Sellars (1962, 1965) and Galen Strawson (2006) have reminded us, the brain state or event itself has some immaterial component.<sup>20</sup>) N.b., the sense of emergence here is a matter of wholes and their component individual parts, as discussed in Meehl and Sellars (1956); that is why the objection does not apply to immaterial properties of immaterial substances.<sup>21</sup> Sense may be made of such emergence, but it is considered a serious liability of a view, on whatever topic, that entails it.

(Churchland (1984) notes that the property dualist can get around the emergence objection by claiming that the immaterial properties are fundamental, on the model of electromagnetic properties:

Such a view may be called *elemental property dualism*.... Unfortunately, the parallel with electromagnetic phenomena has one very obvious failure. Unlike electromagnetic properties, which are displayed at all levels of reality from the subatomic level on up, mental properties are displayed only in large physical systems that have evolved a very complex internal organization. ... They do not appear to be basic or elemental at all. (pp. 12–13)

Churchland is assuming, reasonably, that any fundamental property will be found throughout the universe, and in particular existed long before the descent of living creatures.)

But an important distinction must be made.<sup>22</sup> I have been speaking of “Cartesian minds”, but they are not the only sorts of individual substances that could free dualism from the emergence problem. First, an immaterial substance need not be a continuant mind; it could be a momentary mind. But more interestingly and pertinently, it could be a noncontinuant immaterial individual that is not a mind at all: say, a sense-datum. The sense-datum theorist too avoids the emergence problem. Of course, there is little point in appealing to sense-data unless there is a mind that is acquainted with them; and the point remains that Cartesian minds do afford SD the present advantage over PD.

<sup>19</sup> Dave Chalmers has made this point in conversation.

<sup>20</sup> And that way panpsychism lies, as Strawson happily points out; for discussion, see Lycan (2006, 2011). I shall not here try to make the case that SD is less implausible than panpsychism.

<sup>21</sup> Presumably it does not apply to “emergentist” substance dualism either, though the existence of an immaterial substance within the physical universe would itself remain extremely problematic. SD does not imply the strong emergence of properties. As in the discussion of excrescencehood in Sect. 1 above, we may wonder where an immaterial ego might come from, and/or why the development of a brain might be accompanied by an ego's coming into being, but these questions do not elicit the immediate intuition of impossibility that attends strong emergence of properties. Moreover, SD per se is not committed to any emergence doctrine.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.



### 3.1 Second objection

If a sentient subject is not a Cartesian substance but an animal with a brain, and what are immaterial about that brain are only properties of otherwise physical states and events off/in it, how does the subject obtain knowledge of those of her own mental states that have the immaterial properties?<sup>23</sup> A Cartesian mind knows its own immaterial properties either because they are merely modifications of it or because they are directly presented to it in acquaintance, but a brute physical brain seems the wrong sort of thing to be acquainted with immaterial properties, even if the property-instances have spatial location.

I suppose the best way of answering this would be (i) to maintain that PD is not true of beliefs and other cognitive states, so that they can be identified with brain states, (ii) adopt a pleasingly etymological higher-order-perception view of introspective knowledge, and then (iii) argue as I did versus Ryle that if the interaction problem has been solved for properties, the epistemological problem is not additional. (Good; we can always use another reason to accept a HOP theory. But (i) and (ii), at least, will be contested by many dualists.)

## 4

### 4.1 Scorecard

(1) Each of the first four objections has a little differential force. But I have argued that they have little if any more than that, though the first three do not even arise for PD. (2) I do not think the remaining five have any differential force at all. And (3) nonCartesian PD faces two objections that SD does not, of which the first, at least, is serious. I myself think (3) outweighs (1). But I shall be magnanimous. Verdict: PD is perhaps a little better off than SD. But not so much better off that property dualists should go on boasting that they are not so crazy as to be Cartesians.

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<sup>23</sup> Amber Ross has raised this question to me.

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