

# Consciousness, Physicalism, and Panpsychism

ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

*Consciousness and the Prospects of Physicalism*<sup>1</sup> is an excellent book. A fair assessment of the “prospects” for success or failure of a major and very influential but also highly controversial view such as physicalism requires a wide knowledge of the subject and its literature, and a deep and sympathetic understanding of competing views. This Pereboom provides, combined with rigorous examination of many lines of argument. I find my views revised and enlarged in various ways in pondering his discussion of the issues, though I remain less enthusiastic than he is about the prospects for physicalism. I comment with some trepidation, as I am certainly less steeped than he is in the relevant debates in the philosophy of mind. My comments are those of a philosopher who finds finds broadly idealist or panpsychist views of the subject the most plausible, and I will indulge in some panpsychist speculation. But I will try to focus, as Pereboom does, on giving both the physical and the phenomenal their due, and on developing what he calls “open possibilities,” rather than advocating adoption of a particular view.

## 1. The Qualitative Inaccuracy Hypothesis

Pereboom sees “the greatest obstacle” to a vindication of phenomenalism as deriving from phenomenal consciousness, and articulated in arguments about knowledge and about conceivability. I don’t have space to discuss the conceivability argument, but I will have something to say, in due course, about the knowledge argument. Pereboom sees both of these arguments as crucially presupposing:

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<sup>1</sup> Derk Pereboom, *Consciousness and the Prospects of Physicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). I refer to it as CPP.

[IR] “that we introspectively represent phenomenal properties as having qualitative natures that are distinct from any features that physical theories represent them as having” (CPP 3).

Pereboom thinks [IR] should be endorsed as a claim about how we introspectively represent phenomenal properties, but proposes to defang the anti-physicalist arguments by invoking what he calls “*the qualitative inaccuracy hypothesis*,”

[QI] “that introspection represents phenomenal properties as having certain characteristic qualitative natures, and it may be that these properties actually lack such features” (CPP 3).

This is the first of two main physicalist responses to the problem of phenomenal consciousness that he develops in *Consciousness and the Prospects of Physicalism*.

Pereboom grants that [QI] goes against a widely shared intuition of the qualitative accuracy of phenomenal consciousness, but he urges that theoretical considerations might justify overriding the intuition. He also suggests that there are (rare) cases of actually “becoming aware of a discrepancy between the real qualitative nature of a phenomenal property and how it is introspectively represented,” and offers two examples in which he thinks such a discrepancy may be empirically knowable. In the first case, a student “being initiated into a fraternity ... is shown a razor, and is then blindfolded and told that the razor will be drawn across his throat.” In fact, an icicle is drawn across his throat. When he feels it, “he believes for a split second that he is in pain,” though even before they show him the icicle, reflection on what he felt has led him to the conclusion that it was a sensation of cold rather than pain.<sup>2</sup> In a similar example a dentist treating a child (Pereboom’s daughter) gets her to interpret the presumably painful sensation of a Novocain injection as a sensation of cold by hiding the needle from her and telling her “that he would be dropping bits of cold water into her mouth.” Afterwards “she said that she didn’t like the drops of water very much, but they didn’t hurt” (CPP 23).

I have not been able to persuade myself that the possibility invoked in [QI] really is an epistemic possibility, relative to my phenomenal consciousness. I remain convinced of the qualitative accuracy of phenomenal consciousness in the crucial respects. And I am not convinced by the examples just described. The difference between the misinterpretation and the correct interpretation in them is far less profound than [QI] requires if it is to rescue physicalism. And it is not clear that the error in these cases was really a misperception of a

<sup>2</sup> CPP 22, quoted from Christopher Hill’s account of a case presented orally by Rogers Albritton.

phenomenal quality rather than a misidentification of its cause, combined with a heightened or diminished aversive reaction. I am also reluctant to make metaphysical judgments on the basis of cases that clearly manifest the well documented tendency of human beings to adjust their perceptual judgments to conform with what they take to be the views of people around them.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, reflection on Pereboom's discussions has left me doubting that the anti-physicalist arguments from knowledge and conceivability prove as much as has been claimed for them. One reason for this is that I am not inclined to endorse [IR]. In my view, the aspect of consciousness of phenomenal properties that I cannot bring myself to regard as erroneous does not represent them as non-physical, because it does not *represent* them at all. It is them, and at the same time is consciousness of them. This is a form of what Pereboom calls "a *self-presentation* view," ascribing it to Franz Brentano. According to it, "a token sensation of green [for example] is on the one hand a sensation of green, while that very sensation is also an experience of itself." Pereboom allows that this "is also an open possibility" (CPP 19–20).

He also holds that a self-presentation view does not obviously preclude a physicalist conclusion, because it does not preclude the possibility of every sort of error about the self-presenting quality. I agree, though I do not conceive the possibility of error in the same way as Pereboom does. Here I will develop my own conception, starting with a more or less Kantian contrast between concepts and judgments, on the one hand, conceived in functional terms and manifested in mental activity, and on the other hand phenomenal givens on which concepts and judgments operate but which they do not create. In humans old enough to achieve linguistic competence, phenomenal givens normally occur only in conscious states that are laced through (I will not say saturated) with concepts and judgments that do represent things and which can and often do *misrepresent* things. In the cases discussed above, for example, in which a sensation of cold was misinterpreted as a sensation of pain, or vice versa, I take the misinterpretation to have been a mistake in conceptual classification or judgment.

On this view, it takes concepts and judgments to represent anything as having a nature, or as distinct from some other sort of thing, or as being represented or not represented by a physical theory. No such representation is contained in what is phenomenally given or self-presenting. I believe that phenomenal qualities I experience are as they present themselves, and I base some confident judgments on my consciousness of them. But those judgments are not *given* as phenomenally qualitative aspects of my experience are, and the givenness of the qualitatively phenomenal does not guarantee the accuracy of any of my judgments about it. Similarly, when I speak of

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Boston, Massachusetts: McGraw-Hill, 1991), pp.28–35.

the given consciousness of the phenomenal quality as *knowledge* of the quality, I do *not* mean *propositional* knowledge. Rather I mean a knowledge that consists in experiencing a phenomenal quality or reliving (or being able to relive) such an experience to some extent in memory, but it is a different sort of knowledge.

The knowledge argument against physicalism may be viewed against this background. The basic idea of the knowledge argument is that experiencing a phenomenal property gives us knowledge of the property that the study of physics as such cannot give us, and the conclusion of the argument is that the property thus known in experience must therefore not be a physical property. Pereboom discusses the argument, as many do, with reference to Frank Jackson's well known fictitious example of Mary, who has acquired remarkable knowledge of physics despite an extraordinary history of sensory deprivation (CPP 10). I prefer examples that seem to me closer to real life.

Suppose Tiffany is an internationally recognized authority on human physiology; in particular, she knows everything of general importance that physics can teach about pain. Although there is nothing abnormal about her own sensory capacities, or the environment in which she has lived, by good luck she has never yet been in intense pain. If tomorrow her luck fails her and she experiences intense pain for the first time, surely she will learn something that she does not know now about what it is like to be in intense pain. It will be something that I cannot imagine learning simply by studying physics as physicists study physics. Similarly, I ask, don't we go to concerts and art museums to experience and know something we could not imagine learning simply by studying physics?

But I think that is not the crucial question here, for the prospects of physicalism. Rather, I ask, if I am right in those judgments about what we learn in having phenomenal qualities in our consciousness, does it follow that in having the relevant experiences, we acquire knowledge of properties that are distinct from any that physical theories represent things as having? Or does the experience give us an insight into properties that physics does indeed represent, but that are not completely known by physics without the aid of such experience? These questions connect with the second of the two principal lines of response that Pereboom suggests to the physicalist's problem of phenomenal consciousness.

## 2. Russellian Monism and the Intrinsicness Principle

The physicalist proposal Pereboom presents that "allows that introspection accurately represents the qualitative nature of phenomenal properties" is classified as a form of "Russellian monism" on the basis of similarity to a view advanced by Bertrand Russell in his *Analysis of Matter* (1927); the name is due to David Chalmers (CPP 86, 91). The proposal presupposes an incom-

pleteness in our physical knowledge. Specifically, it presupposes that “we are currently significantly ignorant of the absolutely intrinsic properties—those that don’t reduce to purely extrinsic properties—that underlie the physical properties our best science reveals” (CPP 171). Pereboom thinks this plausible (CPP 89–101), and so do I. “Perhaps,” he suggests, “such properties not only serve as the categorical bases of physical properties but also explain phenomenal properties as they are introspectively represented, without being phenomenal themselves” (CPP 171). The proviso that the hypothesized absolutely intrinsic properties important for physics would not be phenomenal themselves seems to me inadequately motivated. I will therefore present my own development of the proposal without including the proviso, but will eventually address the question whether it should be included.

My version of the proposal, like Pereboom’s, relies on what he calls the Intrinsicness Principle (which I will abbreviate to IP). His final version of it is:

[IP] “Any mind-independently real substantival entity must have at least one substantival absolutely intrinsic property” (CPP 101).

‘Intrinsic’ is understood in contrast with ‘extrinsic’. Relations that  $x$  has to things distinct from  $x$  are extrinsic properties of  $x$ . I also count dispositional properties of  $x$  as extrinsic properties of  $x$ , inasmuch as they are largely constituted by causal relations to possible states that are not actually present in  $x$  at the time that  $x$  has the disposition.<sup>4</sup> Intrinsic properties are properties that are not extrinsic, or that at least have aspects that are not extrinsic. Following Pereboom, I will say that “a *purely extrinsic property*” is one that “has no intrinsic aspects,” and that

“P is an *absolutely intrinsic* property of X just in case P is an intrinsic property of X, and X’s having P does not reduce to parts of X having purely extrinsic properties” (CPP 93).

Pereboom says, and I heartily agree, “The intuition that the Intrinsicness Principle is true is strong, and the prospect of rejecting it cannot be taken lightly” (CPP 109). It is not uncontroversial, but it certainly seems to me there is something implausible about supposing that a thing in itself has nothing to it over and above its relations with other things, or that its present actual state has nothing to it over and above its causal relation to other possible states.

A further presupposition of my proposal (and of Pereboom’s corresponding proposal) is that physical science does not explain to us the nature of any absolutely intrinsic properties of physical things. As Pereboom docu-

<sup>4</sup> I am not sure that Pereboom agrees with me about this, though it seems to me suggested by some things that he says in chapters 5 and 6.

ments, this has been, and is, believed by many philosophers (CPP 85–109). I am inclined to think it a fact that is rooted in the relational nature of geometric and kinetic properties, and the epistemology of physical science, which yields inter-subjective third-person knowledge of physical objects and states, exclusively in terms of spatio-temporal and causal relations that the objects have to each other and to the experiences on the basis of which alone we know anything about them.

Do we know of any properties that are absolutely intrinsic? After surveying the candidates, as Pereboom suggests, we may find that “what remains are the mental candidates and possible candidates that we have not conceived” (CPP 110). He notes that David Chalmers and Galen Strawson have suggested more or less panpsychist views that would assign to some mental properties the role of absolutely intrinsic properties in all or some micro-physical objects (CPP 110).

The view I propose here is similar to that. It seems to me intuitively plausible, in particular, to classify as absolutely intrinsic properties of a conscious state the phenomenal qualities that present themselves (as I see it) in my consciousness. Could those mental qualities also be absolutely intrinsic properties of *physical* states or *physical* objects? For instance, could they be intrinsic properties, or intrinsic aspects, of electrical charge or electrical discharge? (The hypothesis thus suggested is, of course, *not* to be understood as implying that physical micro-states or micro-objects in general have *intentional* states or acts such as humans are believed to have.)

My ninth grade science teacher, Miss Quinn, told us, “We don’t know what electricity is, but we know what it does.” In other words (less vivid, but perhaps more precise), our electrical concepts are functional concepts, involving other theoretical concepts, such as that of an electron, which are also functional concepts. Scientists and others may believe, however, that over and above the functional properties that science can verify and measure, the nature of electricity includes some absolutely intrinsic property whose existence we can hypothesize even if we cannot explain its intrinsic character. Could that property be a phenomenal quality, or perhaps a family of phenomenal qualities? Who knows whether that is true in fact about electricity? But why couldn’t it be?

It should not be a fatal objection to this hypothesis that the phenomenal character does not self-present as having the dispositional and causal relational properties discovered by physical research about electricity. That just follows from the divergent epistemological limitations of self-consciousness and physical research as sources of human knowledge. A more pertinent objection might be that it is scientifically important that electrical charges and discharges have quantity that can be measured, but that does not seem to be true about phenomenal qualities. I agree that phenomenal qualities do not generally have quantities that we are able in introspection to measure

either precisely or reliably. But that might be no more than an epistemological difference between a more direct but less precise knowledge of a property in introspection and a less direct but more precise knowledge in scientific methods. However, phenomenal qualities certainly do often differ in apparent *intensity*. Might it not be right in some cases to follow Kant in taking different intensities in sensations as “intensive magnitudes” that correspond to different physical magnitudes (of mass, for example, or electrical charge) in a physical object?<sup>5</sup>

Another objection we may anticipate is that such a panpsychist proposal not only embraces a metaphysical dualism of the mental and the physical, but hugely and implausibly enlarges its scope. To this I reply that any dualism here is very different from the much decried Cartesian dualism between two types of substance, interacting, but constituted by two different attributes (extension and thought) conceived as utterly heterogeneous with each other. My proposal begins with a duality that is epistemological rather than metaphysical, between properties as they can be apprehended in introspection and properties as they can be apprehended more externally. There is also, to be sure, a metaphysical duality between absolutely intrinsic properties and relationally extrinsic properties. But that is not a duality that starkly opposes the mental to the physical; for mental entities too can have relationally extrinsic properties. And this is not an *implausible*, and certainly not an *arbitrary* metaphysical duality. For our account provides roles that these types of property may plausibly be supposed to have, and for which they might be needed, as properties of a single integrated substance or state.

### 3. Physicalism and the Physical

On the version of Russellian monism that I have been putting forward, should I say that phenomenal properties that play the role of absolutely intrinsic properties in objects or states that are explained in extrinsic terms by physical science *are physical properties* as well as mental properties? That seems to be in line with be on line with Russell’s argument that “there is ... no ground for supposing that percepts cannot be physical events,” because they “are not known to have any intrinsic character which physical events cannot have, since we do not know of any intrinsic character which could be incompatible with the logical properties that physics assigns to physical events.”<sup>6</sup> But perhaps we should consider a little more closely what is meant by ‘physical property’.

Pereboom says he is “at least somewhat partial to” a view that identifies physical entities as entities of the sorts “we find in present physics (or [as]

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A165–76/B207–18.

<sup>6</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Matter* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 384; quoted in CPP 91.



wholly constituted or realized by them)—or entities sufficiently similar to them that will be found in future physics. He also speaks of approvingly of Jessica Wilson’s formulation, that “an entity is physical just in case it is (approximately accurately) treated by current or future (at the end of inquiry, ideal) physics, and is not fundamentally mental.”<sup>7</sup> He specifically approves “the consequences that it’s a priori that there are no fundamental physical entities that are mental,” on the ground that “if a theory in future physics were to posit fundamental entities that are mental, then physicalism would be false on that theory” (CPP 6). Perhaps, as Pereboom suggests, defining *physicalism* as entailing that there are no fundamental mental entities is helpful in tracking an important divide in philosophy of mind (CPP 6n6). But I don’t see the point of defining the more general term *physical* in such a way as to make it impossible, by definition, for future physics to falsify physicalism on this point. That seems out of harmony with Pereboom’s general approach of treating a variety of metaphysical views as “open” theoretical possibilities until decisively refuted.

I note also that in both Pereboom’s and Wilson’s formulations, the criteria for being a physical property are not stated in purely metaphysical terms, but in terms of treatment in present and future physics. That might suggest that the physical is not a purely metaphysical kind, but an at least partly epistemological or even cultural kind, inasmuch as physics is certainly a human cultural phenomenon. And to the extent that the physical is not a purely metaphysical kind, metaphysicians ought perhaps to be less seriously worried about a physical/mental duality.

So let’s suppose that the concept of electrical charge, as it occurs in current physics, is a functional concept, intended to signify a property that plays a certain complex causal role. Suppose it is widely assumed that this property has an absolutely intrinsic character, but that physics provides no informative explanation of what that character is or may be. Suppose finally that it is in fact, unknown to us, a law of nature that a certain type of microparticle plays the functional role associated by physics with having a certain electrical charge if and only if it is in a quasi-conscious state in which a certain phenomenal quality presents itself. In that case would that phenomenal quality, or the conscious state containing it, be the property to which physicists have been *referring* as that electrical charge? And would that make it a *physical* property? Or should we say it is a physical property only if physics actually explains not only its function but also its intrinsic nature? So far as I can see these are questions about how to speak, not questions of metaphysical fact. These reflections leave me in doubt as to how important metaphysically the question is, whether this or that property is physical or mental or both.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Wilson, “Supervenience-Based Formulations of Physicalism,” *Noûs*, 39 (2005): 428; quoted in CPP 6.