



Philosophy of Mind

**Getting Rid of the Mind Body Problem:  
Ontological Relativism and the  
Pragmatic Notion of Metaphysical Truth**

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**I. Introduction**

The mind body problem resembles a black hole in the universe of philosophy: It takes a lot of energy which could be spent otherwise. Therefore, it would be liberating to show that it is not a problem at all. That is exactly what I shall do in this paper. Roughly, I shall argue as follows:

First, I will show that the traditional mind body problem as a logical conflict will not occur if one is more decided in dualism.

Then, I shall argue that dualism does not need to be an absurd position. It is absurd only when taken metaphysically, but it is plausible when taken pragmatically. I shall reject the metaphysical presumptions shared by metaphysical dualism and the materialist identity theory in order to develop a metaphysical position compatible with pragmatic dualism. Thus, I shall get rid of the mind body problem, the absurdities associated with dualism and the unintelligibility of the identity theory — all at once.

**II. Exchanging Logical Conflicts for Metaphysical Questions**

The traditional logical way of putting the mind body problem is this:

- (1) Physical events are caused only by other physical events.
- (2) Mental phenomena play causal roles such that they do cause not only other mental phenomena but also physical events, namely actions and movements.
- (3) Mental phenomena are not physical.

These statements contradict each other, but only for the reason that (3) defends a mental-physical dualism, whereas (2) supposes identity between actions (or behavior) and physical events. Thus, the logical conflict is constituted by nothing but indecision in dualism. I call it indecision, because the relevant reasons which lead to dualism with regard to mental and physical phenomena do equally well support dualism as to actions (or behavior) and

physical events. Both variants of ontological dualism are built upon semantic dualism which is both conceptual and explanatory dualism.

As to conceptual dualism, it should be conceded that mental phenomena, behavior, and actions as such can be individuated only as sensed, had, made, and done by someone. This existential dependency on a subject cannot be analysed naturalistically, because it is neither an empirical intrinsic property, nor any kind of empirical relation. It is what the contents of the concepts "sensing", "feeling", "deciding", "believing", and "acting" have in common, concepts, which do not refer to intrinsic properties or relations at all. Thus, the individuation of mental phenomena and actions as such differs essentially from the individuation of physical phenomena and events.

This conceptual dualism may not be enough for excluding the possibility of ontological reduction. Two theories may be conceptually irreducible to each other, but may somehow mirror each other as explanatory systems, thus allowing for ontological reduction.

My thesis is that our psychological language-cum-theory and our naturalistic one differ strongly enough in their explanatory standards to make ontological reduction impossible. They are incompatible with regard to the reconstruction of causation. The difference is this: As to physical causation, the individuation of events as links within a causal chain does not depend on any semantic properties ascribed to these events. As to the causation of actions, the very opposite is the case. If for example I decide to dance in the street, the whole sequence of my movements instantiating dancing is singled out as the immediate effect of my decision only because of its having some unified content which is exactly the one of my decision. If, by contrast, we ignore this semantic relation between the decision and the action, regarding the one as an event in the brain and the other as a sequence of physical events in the outer world, only some events concerning my nerves and my muscles could be the immediate effect of my decision, whereas the long sequence of my movements instantiating dancing would not be singled out as one unified event at all.

This explanatory incompatibility supports ontological dualism. Thus, I do solve the traditional version of the mind body problem with the help of the wider version of ontological dualism, exchanging the logical conflict for what I call the *seeming metaphysical problem of dualism*:

- (1) Physical events are caused only by other physical events.
- (2) Mental phenomena have causal effects: They cause other psychological phenomena such as actions and behavior.
- (3) Mental phenomena are caused equally by other mental phenomena, by actions, and by physical events such as neural stimuli.
- (4) Mental phenomena, actions, and behavior are neither physical states nor physical events.

If considered as giving a world view, these statements represent a version of metaphysical dualism and should be rejected. It is absurd to believe that there is a crack through the world, bridged only by the physical causation of mental phenomena. But there are two ways of rejecting metaphysical dualism. One may either retain its metaphysical presumptions while replacing dualism by its best accepted alternative, namely the token-identity theory. Or one may stick to dualism while changing the metaphysical presumptions. In order to see the difference, I have to make clear what the possible metaphysical presumptions are.

### III. Discussing Almost All Philosophical Basic Concepts at Once

I shall, in good Kantian tradition, differentiate between two epistemological concepts of the world. The world as it is from our epistemic perspective shall be called the *relative world*, and the world as it is in itself shall be called the *absolute world*. Both concepts refer to one and the same world which is only considered under two different metaphysical aspects.

If we do talk about the relative world only, we talk about how we are bound to see the world. If in this case our talk is ontological, we suppose our ontologies to be relative to the special conditions of our epistemic life. Our ontologies are then sets of posits to which our languages-cum-theories do commit us, but to which no "things in themselves" need to correspond. In this case, we may not suppose it to be a matter of fact out of which single entities the world is made up; and ontological statements do therefore have no epistemic status; they must not be supposed to be true or false. This is the rough characterization of the kind of ontological relativism which concerns me in this paper.

Ontological relativism commits to a pragmatic notion of identity. If, namely, it is not supposed to be a matter of fact which single entities make up the world, then any ascription of the property of being one single entity cannot be supposed to be true or false either, and identity must be considered pragmatically.

Under the presumption of ontological relativism, ontological dualism is not at all absurd, simply for the reason that it has no metaphysical dimension. It does only mean that our psychological language-cum-theory and our naturalistic one are incompatible to such a degree that it would be nonsense to identify across their ontologies. Ontological dualism, understood this way, is pragmatic dualism. It gives no world view at all.

If, however, we stop limiting our philosophical interest to the relative world and start talking about the absolute world also, our talk is metaphysical and gives a world view in the strong sense of the word. If our metaphysical talk is ontological, we have to take our ontologies to be true or false qua correspondence to the absolute world. This is the rough characterization of ontological absolutism.

Ontological absolutism commits to an epistemological notion of identity: It claims that it is a matter of fact out of which different single entities the world is built up, given some level of ontological fine-grainedness. Thus, the ascription of the property of being one single entity is true or false qua correspondence to the absolute world. Under the presumption of ontological absolutism, ontological dualism thus gains a metaphysical dimension and becomes an absurd position indeed. Metaphysical dualism claims that Mister God has built up the whole world according to our semantic oddities. Unfortunately, the only alternative within ontological absolutism is claiming that Mister God has built up the whole world oddly disaccording with our semantic conditions of reasoning about how he did.

### IV. No Point for the Identity Theory

Under the presumption of ontological absolutism, either dualism or the identity theory is true about the absolute world. Metaphysical dualism is absurd, but the identity theory is it equally, because where we are confronted with conceptual and explanatory dualism, ontological reduction is the strangest thing to do. The only defence of the identity theory which does not (falsly) claim its being the only means of avoiding metaphysical dualism is an analogy, namely the reference to statements like "water = H<sub>2</sub>O", identifications which are well accepted in spite of some semantic dualism. But the analogy does not work:

(1) Though the concepts "water" and "H<sub>2</sub>O" have different contents, it is possible to conceive of water as H<sub>2</sub>O with the help of *analogical understanding*. We can imagine that water as such may consist of very small particulars the movements of which are invisible to us. Thus, it seems intelligible to us that one may apply the molecular theory to water. By contrast, there is no possibility of imagining any mental phenomenon as such being something analogical to a brain state.

(2) There is *no relevant explanatory dualism* between talk about water and talk about H<sub>2</sub>O, simply for the reason that the one is on a very low level of theorizing whereas the other one is highly theoretical. This may be similar as to sensations and brain states. But as to actions and mental phenomena other than sensations, the very opposite is the case. Opinions, feelings, decisions, and actions, for example, are conceived of on a high level of psychological theorizing. There may be no everyday observation as theory-laden as is the psychological everyday observation of ourselves and other conscious beings. And surely, the means and ends of everyday psychological explanation differ from those of the naturalistic one.

Because both criteria, analogical understanding and the lack of explanatory dualism, must be fulfilled if empirical identifications are intelligible, I see no way for the materialist identity thesis to succeed. The only way I see is to reject the bad choice between metaphysical dualism and metaphysical materialism by rejecting ontological absolutism. But this should not mean rejecting metaphysics. We cannot do entirely without metaphysics, if we do not want to put the most interesting topics aside. Therefore, I shall now reconcile ontological relativism and pragmatic dualism with the core of metaphysics, the notion of metaphysical truth.

## **V. Discussing the One Philosophical Basic Concept which is Still Missing**

One of the ideas intimately connected with the notion of truth is that true statements or theories must be true of the absolute world. Ontological absolutism accords with this idea: It claims that our theories are true of the absolute world only if their ontologies are, that is only if our ontologies correspond to really real things. Ontological relativism, by contrast, makes it impossible to apply the correspondence theory of truth to the absolute world. I could now claim that therefore, we should adopt relativism as to truth also. That is not the conclusion I want to draw. In the contrary, my concept of metaphysical truth is this:

Theories are metaphysically true iff (a) they are empirically adequate, that is if the observation categoricals implied by them cannot be falsified by any possible observation of rational human beings, and (b) they have sufficient explanatory power, measured against their own explanatory ends. In short, theories are true iff according to our claims they do cope well with the uncontrollable dynamics of the world. This pragmatic sense of truth is at the same time its metaphysical sense, for it is the absolute world's being such and such which makes our theories being true pragmatically.

As to our ontologies, they are not true or false, but justified by underlying metaphysically true theories.

The advantages of this pragmatic notion of metaphysical truth, compared with the correspondence theory, are these:

(1) Though doing metaphysics, we are not as usual forced into the inconsistency of making any assumption about how the absolute world, the

world seen through nobody's eyes, is constructed. The only metaphysical assumption I make is about how the two metaphysical *aspects* of the world, its being a relative world and an absolute one, may be interconnected.

(2) The pragmatic concept of metaphysical truth is a strong anti-sceptical concept. First, it allows for the case that two ontologically incompatible theories are both metaphysically true. Because contradictions between theories can be turned into ontological incompatibility, it follows that no contradiction between equally well accepted theories provides a basis for the sceptic any more. Second, metaphysical truth in the pragmatic sense is relative to our explanatory ends and standards. If we change these and give up a theory which was well accepted as true before, we are not forced to claim that we have been mistaken all the time (and that we could equally be mistaken now), but we have then to say that the old theory is metaphysically true relative to our old explanatory ends and standards and metaphysically false relative to our new ones. Thus, no change of our explanatory ends and standards can be of any support for sceptical arguments.

These advantages of the pragmatic concept of metaphysical truth make pragmatic dualism superior both to metaphysical dualism and the identity theory. Pragmatic dualism, based on ontological relativism and combined with the pragmatic notion of metaphysical truth, does not only help us to get rid of the mind body problem, but it is also a thoroughly coherent, conceptually unproblematic and metaphysically interesting position.