

“The Mind-Body Problem”

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## The Mind-Body Problem

The mind-body problem is perhaps the oldest, most persistent philosophical problem in the history of Western philosophy. It is considered the primary philosophical issue concerning the study of metaphysics and philosophy of mind. The term refers to the philosophical problem that arises from the relation between the mental and the physical. The mind-body problem has created “the single most important gap in our understanding of the natural world” (Ludwig 1). The mysterious nature of the problem has prompted philosophers to develop a variety of theories and variations of classic positions on the subject. Several thousand years have passed, and the mind-body problem continues to endure, without a satisfactory solution or a plausible explanation.

Historically, the mind-body problem of Western thought, dates back to ancient Greece and the classic Greek philosophers; Plato, and his pupil, Aristotle. Plato divided the universe into two independent realms of existence, one physical and the other nonphysical (Soccio 126-7). Plato’s idea described the soul as temporarily “imprisoned by the body” but capable of an independent eternal existence (Robinson; Eliasmith). Aristotle rejected platonic dualism and believed that the soul and the body are just different forms of the same substance that inhabit the same world (Eliasmith). Aristotle identified the “mystical union” between the soul and the body as a philosophical problem (Robinson). Aristotle identified the mind-body problem of Western thought (Robinson).

Traditionally, the “phenomenal” or subjective reality was held to be supreme to the perceived, objective reality (Soccio 319). Today, modern society has become much more dependent on science for epistemology, transitioning from metaphysics to physics. The mind-

body problem is typically aimed at the assumed causal relationship between nonphysical mental thought and a physical reaction, also known as mental causation. The supposed connection is commonly thought of as bidirectional; a conscious thought directs the physical to act, and motion involving the physical body creates sensations in the mind. Thoughts that direct mental processes, like planning and problem solving are also considered mental causation (Yoo). A personal account from memory, of one's behavior also seems to give meaning to the interaction.

While the idea seems simple enough to understand, explaining how the interaction is possible is far more complex (Yoo). Natural laws and physics rigidly maintain that any physical event must have a sufficient physical cause (Fodor). Based on experience it is reasonable to conclude that what is required for something to cause another thing to move involves contact or a transfer of energy between things with common physical properties (Skirry). This leads us to conclude one of three things; either thought does influence physical behavior, or mental thoughts have physical properties, or everything outside of the mind is an illusion. The options are reasonable to accept independently, but jointly inconsistent (Ludwig 12).

Philosophy of mind has traditionally been divided into three broad theories of existence; materialism, dualism and idealism (Young). In general, materialism reduces mental phenomenon to physical properties, dualist theories establish an irreducible distinction between mental and physical, and idealism reduces everything physical to mental (Fodor; Young). Materialism usually escapes the mind-body scrutiny, where dualism seems particularly vulnerable (Yoo). The substance dualism proposed by Rene Descartes is the clearest example of "the full-blown paradox of the mind-body dichotomy" (Young).

The term mind-body problem, as we know it today, originated from the critical response to the writings of Descartes (Eliasmith). The seventeenth century philosopher formulated a

dualist theory, known as Cartesian dualism, which divides reality into two distinctly unique and fundamentally different substances, typically thought of as body and mind or body and soul (Soccio 266). The theory provides that a nonphysical soul existing beyond the scope of physics and a physical body made up of completely different materials are supposed to interact to guide human activity (Yoo). The distinction made between the mind and body, and the immaterial nature of the soul makes the idea of a meaningful interaction difficult to comprehend.

Despite the significant progress in science, the mind-body problem remains an unsolved mystery that may never be understood entirely. As Nicholas Maxwell writes, “the resistance of the mental to physical explanation is due, not to some built-in unintelligibility of the mental, but to built-in limitations of physical explanation” (49-50). The advances in neuroscience have led to fascinating discoveries of the function and physical qualities of the mind. Through neuroimaging scientists have traced chemical and electrical pathways in the brain that relate to conscious decisions, emotions, and thoughts. Many philosophers and cognitive scientists are optimistic about eventually finding answers to the hard problems of consciousness and mind-body interaction (Kerr-Lawson).

Whole brain functional connectivity MRI “appears to offer an unprecedented window into the mind” by enabling scientists to identify the connection between conscious thoughts and areas stimulated in the brain (Brooks). This appears to support the idea of interaction between mental thought and physical activity, but the necessary connection between them “cannot be accomplished by applying physical analogies from within the physical sciences” or reducing mental states to something familiar (Nagel). “The better the scientific explanation, the more inexplicable our inner experiences seem to become” and the more impenetrable the mind becomes (Maxwell). Every attempt to solve the mind-body problem either falls short or creates

another problem. Transcendental naturalism (TN) has been proposed as a logical solution to the mind-body problem.

The TN theory is based on the philosophy of Colin McGinn, author of *Problems of Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry*. TN, also known as anti-constructive naturalism, or New Mysterianism is a modern philosophical position that rejects dualism in strong favor of realism with respect to naturalism. The theory promotes cognitive closure, which is the idea that there are problems that cannot be solved given our current stage of evolutionary development (Kerr-Lawson). TN acknowledges the mind-body problem and the existence of consciousness, but remains skeptical about the mind's ability to understand them.

Transcendental naturalism is often criticized for supposing that a question is unsolvable. In defense, the group maintains that the conclusion was reached through logical reasoning not supposition (Kerr-Lawson). They do so by examining the intellectual debate surrounding the issue. The clearest indication that "the object of puzzlement" is outside of human cognition is the philosophical reaction to it and the nature of the theories that emerge in the debate (McGinn). Unsolvable problems or "mysteries" have common characteristics such as; lacking physical properties, a high degree of complexity, resistance to scientific methods, and generating fallacious philosophical theories to explain them (McGinn). The philosophical reaction to a problem does appear to be a good indication of solvability.

TN does address the mind-body problem with cognitive closure, declaring it unsolvable. Importantly, this does not end the problem or restrict future discovery, but rather suspends the current debate by acknowledging the problem is unsolvable, and allows that the time and energy committed to the issue be redirected elsewhere. Given the opportunity cost of pursuing an unsolvable puzzle, this is a fitting solution.

There are some limitations to the theory and its potential as a solution. First, the theory does not support popular Christian theology concerning the existence of a soul outside of the body and excludes the possibility of an afterlife. This limits mainstream acceptance of TN and its popularity as a remedy. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, TN dismisses the concept of free will as an illusion. Rejecting free will effectively dismisses moral responsibility, intention, and choice. Excluding free will threatens ideas about freedom and justice. Third, the proposed solution seems a bit oversimplified. It seems counterintuitive to declare a problem unsolvable just because it hasn't been solved. To place limits on our understanding could be detrimental to our progression as a species and a society. As Douglas Soccio comments, "any difficulties in explaining mind-body interaction pale beside the consequences of rejecting dualism" (268). The solution provided by the theory does make sense, but falls short of ideal.

The mind is a mysterious concept, it is the source of perception, explanation and observation, yet it escapes its own understanding. The mind-body problem is a side effect of human curiosity and inquiry. Understanding the relation between the mental and physical phenomenon remains an unsolved mystery. The TN position does remedy the issue, but it leaves us wanting an explanation, not an excuse for not understanding the question. It looks like New Mysterianism turns out to be more like a placebo than the next trendy cure.

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