

Research Essay

Reconciling Consciousness with Physicalism

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Abstract

Concerning the face-off between idealism and physicalism, both schools of thought have strengths and weaknesses. In proposing a novel approach to the question of consciousness, this article capitalizes on the strengths and rejects the weaknesses. The result is a reconciliation between the materialistic ontology of physicalism and the unitary cosmic ultimate of idealism. The “Bottom-Up/Top-Down” theory, presented here, combines two physical operations. The first is “access,” how the nervous system receives and processes external stimuli, up to and including the stage of “binding.” The second physical operation involves encoded signals bound together in the brain, as interpreted by a Universal Mind. How that can work as a material process is largely explained through the agency of embodied cognition.

Keywords: Ontology, metaphysics, physicalism, idealism, cosmopsychism, consciousness, embodied cognition.

1. Idealism and physicalism

In the study of consciousness, three schools of thought have emerged. These include dualism, physicalism, and idealism. Currently, dualism has largely been abandoned, leaving only two competing approaches. The idealist ontology holds that materialism is an illusion, with the only reality being consciousness, *per se* (Kozlowski, 2020, p. 387). In effect, to idealists, we live in a world of dreams. The physicalist ontology, on the other hand, maintains that consciousness is largely an illusion, a “ghost in the machine,” with the only reality being material (Dennett, 1991).

Idealists, like Bernardo Kastrup (2018a, 2018b) and Itay Shani (2015), argue, in the first place, that consciousness is the only reality we know. Kastrup gives the example of an argument between Samuel Johnson and Bishop Berkeley. The Bishop, an idealist, challenges Johnson to show why he believes the physical world is real. Dr. Johnson responds by kicking a stone, and responding, “I know it thus!” He means the solidness of the rock proves it’s real (Kastrup, 2018b, p. 15). Ironically, what he’s actually admitting is he knows the rock exists only because he *feels* it.

The other idealist argument has to do with the “combination problem.” It comes in two versions. First, how is it possible, idealists ask, for purely physical things to be conscious, since none of their components are conscious. For example, not quarks, electrons, atoms, molecules, or neurons possess anything like conscious thought. It makes no sense, therefore, to build consciousness out of mindless physical components.

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As biologist Thomas Huxley queries, “How is it possible that anything as remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue?” (1866).

The “subject” combination problem is a dispute between two branches of idealism. Panpsychists contend that the solution to physicalism would be if every physical particle - down to the atomic and subatomic levels - possessed its own degree of consciousness. That way, these particles could combine to form higher levels of awareness. Cosmopsychists, however, respond that individual minds cannot “combine” because consciousness, by definition, is a subjective and individual property. Feelings do not aggregate.

So, building consciousness from the ground-up is problematic. Whether you build it up from inert matter, or from semi-conscious particles, either way it may not work.

Instead, cosmopsychists argue, build consciousness from the top down. If we posit a consciousness ontology, and that the “whole universe” itself is a “unitary conscious entity” (Kastrup, 2018a, p. 134), then we humans, and other sentient beings, derive our conscious abilities from above.

Physicalists, on the other hand, argue from common sense. How can 8 billion people be wrong? We are, most of us, under the impression that the material world we occupy is solid and real.

The main argument for physicalism comes from science. We know how DNA works, and how we physically evolved as a species. We know the human nervous system, and how it operates. Moreover, we observe, from implanted electrodes or fMRIs, how every part of the brain impacts a corresponding part of the body. Sentient responses, such as seeing, hearing, or feeling, can all be activated or suppressed by stimulating parts of the brain. It’s only a matter of time, the physicalists say, until we learn exactly what parts of the brain produce sensation.

“It is now a canon of neuroscience that any mental experience can be associated with some specific pattern of neural firings” (Chorost, 2011, p. 33).

2. A composite theory

This essay will attempt to reconcile the best parts of both schools of thought with a composite theory that has yet to be advanced. Let’s start with an analogy. We all have a multitude of household appliances. Like our brains, some of these appliances contain a bewildering nest of wiring. Yet none of them actually work until they are plugged into an outlet. Until then, they are just inert pieces of furniture. Once connected to the electric grid, however, they come alive.

That analogy illustrates what I call the “Bottom-Up/Top-Down” theory of consciousness. The bottom up part consists of what Stephen Pinker (1997) calls “access.” For example, sight begins with light waves from external objects hitting our retinas, stimulating neural pathways inside our heads, and separately being processed by specialized functional areas inside our cortices. Ultimately, all sense impressions, including sight, sound, smell, etc., are tied together through a process called “binding.” Every 1/40th of a second an electric wave passes over our brains and binds together all our sensory signals into a unitary frame (Blakeslee, 1998).

That part is strictly physical. One might even imagine building an android or a computer with the exact same functions. But “access” isn’t enough. What we have at the binding stage is electrically encoded information. We don’t have consciousness.

The top-down part consists of what I call the “Universal Mind” (UM). Once all of our stimuli are processed and encoded, the Universal Mind interprets those signals as sentient experience. The Universal Mind corresponds, in part, to what Kastrup and Shani call the irreducible cosmic ultimate. That’s what we plug into.

How does it work?

- 1) It works physically. Contrary to the idealists, the Universe, I believe, is entirely material. Our only ontology is physical. There is no need to ditch our common sense notion that everything around us consists of solid stuff.
- 2) It works because we are part of the Universe. It’s not just that the Universe is inside of us. We are inside of it.
- 3) It works through “embodied cognition.” The Universe physically embodies not just us, but everything within it. For that reason, it contains not just all things, but also knowledge of all things. That knowledge is not just abstract, but also visceral. That knowledge is *existential*.
- 4) It works because the Universe contains embodied knowledge that the rest of do not have, and cannot have. None of us embodies the world around us. But the Universe does. For example, consider the apple. The Universe contains knowledge of its components and how they fit together. But it also contains knowledge of its existential properties, including how it looks, tastes, and smells.
- 5) It works because, as philosopher John Searle has observed, the properties of objects are inherent in those objects. What is it, he asks, about the raw perceptual experience that causes us to see red? His answer is, “It’s part of what it means for something to be red that it’s capable of causing experiences like this” (2013).

The look, smell and taste of an apple aren’t figments of our imagination or constructions of our brain. They are intrinsic aspects of the thing we call an apple. Only two entities contains those aspects: the apple itself, and the Universe which embodies it.

So, like the appliance plugged into an outlet, the encoded signals in our brains are activated by the Universal Mind. That’s how the existential impact of the apple is conveyed to us.

3. Objections

- a) If we receive the truth of things from the UM, then why don’t we all see things the same way?

Answer: the top-down part may be the same for everyone, but the bottom-up part differs. We all have different physical capabilities when it comes to the mechanical processing of external stimuli. For example, it is said that a frog “will starve to death, surrounded by food, if it is not moving” (Lettvin, et al, 1959, p. 234). A frog’s visual apparatus only allows it to see animation.

b) Am I saying that the Universe, *per se*, has a “Mind;” that, in effect, the Universe is God?

Answer: Yes.

c) Where’s the proof?

Answer: Proof for the existence of a Universal Mind is the topic for a separate discussion (Levi, 2019, 2020). Of course, if there is no such thing, then the present argument fails. However, the focus for this discussion is how a “Bottom-Up/Top-Down” consciousness can work.

In terms of proof, however, consciousness is like love. It’s real. You know it’s real, even though to outside observers, you just may be a zombie. What, then, is the best evidence for its reality? As is the case with love, the best evidence for consciousness is personal, subjective experience. The same goes for evidence of top-down consciousness. If one or two people claim it, then the evidence is merely anecdotal. But if very many people claim it, then, it becomes science (Levi, 2020).

d) Is it plausible?

Answer: Having a top-down component to consciousness is not a new idea. It’s not just the idealists who espouse it. For over a billion Hindus and Buddhists throughout the world, the highest plain of existence is thought to be the Brahman, the great spirit, which dwells in each individual in the form of the Atman, the personal soul (Srinivasan, 2018, p. 402).

And, of course, “May the Force be with you” is a popular - and widely accepted - element of popular culture.

What’s new here is the concept of the Universal Mind as a physical force; as a stage of human consciousness, dovetailing with our physical nervous system, and conveying existential realism.

e) How exactly can the Universe be completely physical, like us, but yet be capable of sentience, unlike us?

Answer: Embodied cognition. If, for example, I say, “I feel your pain,” I don’t really mean it. What I actually mean is I imagine what your pain must be like. But the Universe does, indeed, feel your pain, because the Universe is you.

f) How exactly does bottom-up “plug into” top-down?

Answer: I’m not sure. Here’s what we know. Binding is the final stage in the nervous system. We have no reason to believe that what is bound together in that stage is anything but encoded signals. So, how are those signals converted into sense experiences? If it can’t be explained by the physical apparatus of our brains, then, it must be something besides our brains. And that something, I hypothesize, is the Universal Mind. For one thing, we are already a part of the Universe. It doesn’t have to come to us. We’re already in it. For another thing, besides the object itself, only the Universe contains both objective and visceral knowledge of everything we experience.

4. Conclusion

How is this Bottom-Up/Top-Down theory different from any of the others? Answer: it explains top-down consciousness within the context of a physicalist ontology.

Unlike idealism, it doesn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Just because we cannot currently explain - or even logically rationalize - how subjective consciousness could arise from inert matter, that doesn't have to mean the material world is fake.

Unlike physicalism, just because we cannot objectively measure or observe conscious thought, doesn't mean we are all just glorified robots.

Stephen Hawking has argued that throughout history, people have invoked the "gods" to explain things they couldn't understand. That includes earthquakes, eclipses, personal suffering, and the like. As soon as science provides a demonstrable explanation, he observes, we dispense with the gods.

As once was true of eclipses and human heartbreak, consciousness is something we cannot presently explain. Does Hawking's critique apply to this essay, as well? We will need more research to find out.

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