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Reconsidering the Mind/Body Distinction: Towards a Continuist Ontology of Consciousness

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“Nature stretches *without a break* from lifeless objects to animals through things that are animated but not animals, so that there seems to be very little difference between one thing and the next, they are so close together.”

Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium* ¹

In his paper, “*The State and Fate of Contemporary Philosophy of Mind*,” John Haldane likens the present condition of Philosophy of Mind to that of the philosophically stultifying period of late scholasticism, where naming took the place of explaining, and philosophy was reduced to taxonomy.² Haldane argues that our current physicalistic lexicon has made it virtually “impossible to accommodate the basic features of mindedness revealed in reflection and direct experience.”³ For Philosophy of Mind to progress, Haldane argues, we must “make space” for alternative modes of knowing that exist beyond the bounds of our current, overly physicalistic terminology.

Similar to Haldane, but offering a much bleaker picture of contemporary Philosophy of Mind, is Colin McGinn. In his essay, “Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?” McGinn advances what he refers to as his *Mysterian* view of consciousness, the view that human cognition is, by design, simply incapable of generating the concept(s) necessary for adequately explaining psycho-physical interaction. Just as a dog’s mind is cognitively closed to the concepts of Einsteinian Physics, so too, McGinn argues, is the human mind cognitively closed to the property that links mind and body. McGinn therefore concludes that the mind-body problem is fundamentally insoluble.⁴

Surveying the landscape of contemporary Philosophy of Mind from two rather different vantage points, Haldane and McGinn nonetheless arrive at very similar conclusions. Whereas both agree that contemporary Philosophy of Mind has reached an impasse, and that the language we currently use when speaking about consciousness is fundamentally inadequate, Haldane argues that what is necessary for Philosophy of Mind to advance is the generation of new language, and McGinn concludes that such language is nowhere to be found.

In this paper I argue that the impasse suggested by Haldane and McGinn directly stems from the presupposed notion of a sharp, binary distinction between mind and body. Hardly ever stated outright, this presupposition

is instead expressed tacitly through their presentation of the hard problem—that the physical as we define it cannot in any meaningful causal way bring about the mental, for the two are divided by a seemingly unbridgeable gap. What is therefore necessary, I argue, is a new way of looking at the mind-body problem that gets us away from seeing and speaking of reality strictly in terms of a discrete subject/object divide. In this paper I propose that the sharp distinction between mind and body, often assumed by many philosophers to be metaphysically foundational, is in fact false, and rather, that mind and body coexist upon an unbroken, graded continuum. If we thereby grant ontological primacy to a *continuum* of mind and body, we are now presented with a possible alternative explanation of consciousness that avoids to a large extent, the glaring inconsistencies of substantial Dualism as well as the woeful incompleteness of classic Physicalism.⁵ Furthermore, this new ontology provides a possible new starting point for both Haldane and McGinn; one that might provide Haldane the new language he is searching for, and likewise, one that might serve to rescue McGinn from the conceptual dead-end created by our present language. Accordingly, for the functional purposes of this paper I will here on out refer to this alternative viewpoint as a *Continuist* explanation of consciousness.

In this paper I will attempt to further develop this Continuist conception of mind and body. I will do so in two parts. The first part of this paper will be devoted to the task of finding an adequate metaphysics in which to ground our theory. Borrowing from Stephen R.L. Clark's, "Deconstructing the Laws of Logic", I will attempt to show how the epistemological problems raised by Clark suggest a metaphysical reality that is fundamentally continuous rather than discrete or atomistic. Once this grounding is firmly established, I will move on to the second part of this paper where I will attempt to extend this concept of continuity specifically to the mind-body problem, building upon the conceptual scaffolding laid forth in the Synechism of C.S. Pierce. Using Pierce, I will attempt to advance this Continuist position in strong hopes that it will allow us to view consciousness and the mind-body problem through fresh eyes.

Blurring the Line

Before we set about the task of further developing this Continuist position, we must first provide it with an adequate metaphysical foundation on which to stand. As briefly stated before, one incipient solution fit for the task can be found in Stephen R.L. Clark's, "Deconstructing the Laws of Logic". In his essay, Clark challenges the ontological status of some of the bedrock foundations of formal Logic. Clark argues that our lived reality is that of an unbroken, continuous spectrum of experience, absent of the clean, crisp, and discrete distinctions

found in the world of bivalent logic and language. Given this incongruity between abstract logic and the experienced world, Clark concludes that these so-called "laws" are either false, or alternatively, that they "identify a reality *distinct* from the ordinary world of experience, and also from the ultimate source of reality."⁶ Clark's argument thereby suggests that without clear-cut, distinct boundaries differentiating between one atomic simple or "thing" and another (as the laws of logic would lead us to believe), reality is therefore not at all discrete but instead, an unbroken, contiguous spectrum. As Clark puts it, "our reality is *ineradicably continuous*, and there are therefore no abrupt changes of the kind that logic and language might lead us to suppose."⁷

In his essay, Clark exposes some of the paradoxes and inconsistencies latent within formal logic by pitting the law of Non-Contradiction against the law of Excluded Middle. He does so in the following manner. Clark first reminds us of the two laws of logic in question;

- 1.) The Law of Excluded Middle (EM): either p or \neg p
- 2.) The Law of Non-Contradiction (NC): not both p and \neg p.

He then asks us to imagine a given segment, spatial or temporal, extending from L1, through L2, to L3. That is, L1 – L2 – L3 could represent one thing next to another (in space) or one thing leading to another (in time). Next, Clark asks us to imagine an x, such that, from L1 to L2, x is A, and from L2 to L3, x is \neg A (as depicted below).

$x = A$	$x = \neg A$
L1 =====	L2===== L3

With this scenario firmly in place, Clark asks; if x is A *prior* to L2, and x is \neg A *after* L2, then what is x immediately *at* L2? Here is where the problem begins to rear its head. If we conclude that x is *both* A and \neg A then the Law of Non Contradiction fails. Conversely, if we say that x is *neither* A or \neg A then the Law of Excluded Middle fails.⁸ A potential solution that appears to get us around this problem, while preserving the integrity of both laws, is to assert that, "the laws of logic only apply within a discontinuous world, where there are no points *between* adjacent points, so that the object is A from L1 to L2, and not A from L2* to L3, but through L2 and L2* are different, there are *no points* at all between them."⁹ But even this move leads us to an equally undesirable conclusion.

If we are to assert that there are in fact *no points* through L2 and L2*, then what we are left with, it would seem, is a peculiar type of 'nothing'; a concept very similar, Clark argues, to that of Epicurus' "void". To assert this void, Clark argues, still does

us no good, for it would seem that there must be a place where point and void touch, and in so doing, leaving that place of contact subject to the same argument as before. Furthermore, the ontological consequence of asserting a void go far beyond the localized case of L2 and L2*; its ramifications extending throughout the entire segment of L1 to L3. If we assert that it is neither true nor false that x is A (or $\neg A$) *at the specific point* of L2, then the implication is that we cannot say that x is A at *any point* between L1 and L3. As Clark puts it, “While it may seem that, if there are truths, they must be true at any point in the period during which they are true, we might conclude instead *that periods are not made up of points*. That is; our reality is *ineradically continuous*.”¹⁰ (My italics.)

What then must we conclude from the problems raised by Clark’s argument? If Clark is correct, then it seems we are unable to definitively pin down the truth status of a single, atomistic point. This conclusion forces us to ask the following question; what must reality *fundamentally be like* to allow for such consequences? One possible metaphysical solution, not too far reaching, is to conclude that reality is not at all discrete or atomistic, but rather, that it is fundamentally continuous. If reality is continuous in the way that Clark suggests, then may it also not be continuous in regard to Mind-Body, where the two are not sharp metaphysical categories but, rather, poles on a continuous line? By following this line of thought, we can begin to solve the hard problem.

Towards Continuism

How then does this Continuist ontology specifically apply to the mind-body problem? One immediately recognizable advantage to positing a continuum of mind and body is that it promises to eliminate the problem of having to bridge the so-called “explanatory gap” between the world of the mental and the world of the physical. For on the Continuist view, there is no gap. Since Descartes, the Achilles’ Heel of substantial Dualism has been that of trying to explain psycho-physical interaction without reliance upon some sort of “bridge entity” to fill this gap.¹¹ For Descartes this bridge entity took the form of the pineal gland. Descartes posited that the pineal gland contained additional bridge entities, *both* will (mind) and spirit (body), and thus could function as the interface point where the worlds of mental and physical came into contact with one another. This move however failed to resolve the issue, as all it did was compress the problem of mind-body interaction into the localized microcosm of the pineal gland, leaving us with the same inherent dualism as before. That is, as long as we are dealing in terms of mental and physical, then the bridge spanning the chasm between mind and body must therefore *be made of* either the mental or the physical. If it is physical then

it fails to connect to the mental. If it is mental then it fails to connect to the physical. Thus, the positing of a bridge entity does us no good in crossing the mind-body divide.

Mind-Body Continuism, however, provides us with a potential way around this problem. By putting mind and body on a continuum, we are no longer faced with the intractable problem of having to reconcile two radically dichotomous worlds. Rather, the world of the mental and world of the physical would now inhabit *one shared world* along the continuum, with aspects of both mind and body extending into and interpenetrating one another in myriad forms and fashions.¹² In short, mind and body would now differ only *in degree* but no longer *in kind*. Thus, the problem of bridging the explanatory gap between mind and body would be effectively eliminated, for the gap would no longer be there.

As a further remark, and one pointing to the profound advantage of Continuism, consider the issue of causation and the hard problem. Under the common formulations of causation, a given object or event, existing in prior space-time, is often said to be the cause of another object or event existing in later space-time, if it meets certain criteria. However, under a Continuist ontology, this formulation of causality fails, for it depends on there being these independent, discrete identities of the objects of cause and effect. However, since Continuism does away with all sharp, discrete edges, the integrity of the atomic identities of cause and effect dissolve. Thus, it would make little sense to speak of A causing B, for in a sense, at the point of contact A *is* B, or, in the spirit of Aristotle’s *De Partibus Animalium*, “there seems to be very little difference between one thing and the next, they are so close together.”¹³

As Clark demonstrates, just as there is ambiguity regarding truth status of a given point (in time or space), so too is there ambiguity regarding the *point of causal contact* between cause and effect. With no clear distinction as to where cause ends and effect begins, discussion of *mind-body interaction* becomes increasingly difficult on the standard dualist line. But this is precisely the strength of Continuism, since it offers a way out of the hard problem by denying that there is a sharp distinction between mind and body in the first place. Hence, the possibility is now created for formulations of mind-body interaction without reliance upon *dualistic* bridge entities or dualistic language that take the standard form of *either* “mind” *or* “body” and thus result in contradiction. Instead, under this new Continuist ontology, we can now make formulations of mind-body interaction using *Continuist* entities that take the form of *neither* “mind” *nor* “body,” *or both* “mind” *and* “body.” Whatever language we come up with to “bridge the gap,” so to speak, it will have to be of a Continuist order, according to

Continuism, and thus, following Clark, will present us with entities that are neither/nor or both/and “mind” and “body.”

A final advantage of Continuism is that it preserves, equally, aspects of *both* mind and body without seeking to reduce one to the other. Unlike an Idealism that attempts to explain matter in terms of mind, or a Physicalism that attempts to explain mind in terms of matter, Continuism provides a metaphysics that puts mind and body on equal ontological footing. Another position that likewise attempts to end the tug of war between Idealism and Physicalism by granting equal ontological status to mind and body is Russell’s Neutral Monism. However, unlike Neutral Monism, Continuism does not run into the problem of introducing a third metaphysical category, “the neutral”, and then having to explain how it is that this third category interacts with or brings about the categories of mind and body. Rather than introducing an additional metaphysical category, Continuism, in fact, does the complete opposite by attempting to dissolve the absolute division of the metaphysical categories of mind and body altogether into a continuist relation.

More so than Russell’s Neutral Monism, Mind-Body Continuism most closely resembles the doctrine of Synechism advocated by C.S. Pierce. Pierce defines Synechism as “the tendency to regard *continuity* as an idea of prime importance in Philosophy.”¹⁴ This theme of continuity echoes throughout all of Pierce’s works to include his writings regarding mind and body. Under a Piercean ontology, mind is seen as extending continuously throughout all of nature by different degrees and in different concentrations. Thus, what we commonly call matter is, according to Pierce, really mind but in a “degraded or undeveloped” form.¹⁵ Likewise, Pierce regards the mechanical laws of nature as being, “acquired habits, like all the regularities of mind.”¹⁶ Pierce therefore concludes that “[t]he idealist has no reason to dread a mechanistic theory of life.”¹⁷ Although Pierce advocates more of an Idealist position than a truly Continuist position his writings nonetheless present a conception of mind that attempts to avoid the sharp mind/body distinction.

Conclusion

It has been said that if you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten. Such is the case with contemporary Philosophy of Mind. New versions of old Dualist and Physicalist solutions, no matter how dressed up in the latest in vogue technical language, still carry with them the same old problems. Hemmed in by classic dualistic/ binary blinders, our conceptual and linguistic framework has simply been too narrow for the task at hand. The resulting tunnel vision has kept us locked into standard inadequate formulations of the question with equally inadequate formulations of solutions.

What is necessary for contemporary Philosophy of Mind to progress is the reformulation of both solution *and* question in a way that allows us to speak of things *in any other way* than in terms of a strict mind/body dichotomy. The Continuist viewpoint that I have advanced in this paper, though far from perfect, *at the very least* makes an honest attempt to break out from the standard mold and to try something new, for the old certainly isn’t working. From Maxwell’s merging of electricity and magnetism, to Einstein’s unification of matter and energy, to the formulation of a “space-time continuum”, and even to the fall of the Berlin Wall; *progress*, as it were, in virtually every area of human endeavor, has come in the form of the dissolution of presumed boundaries and the unification of seemingly irreconcilable parts. Is it really then so hard to imagine that one day we might come to discover that the impenetrable wall separating mind and body, subject and object, seer and the thing seen, might turn out to be equally permeable and not so solid after all?

Endnotes

1. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” *Philosophy* 83 (2008) 25-53; p.29.
2. John Haldane, “The State and Fate of Philosophy of Mind,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 37:3 (July, 2000) 301-310; p. 301.
3. For instance, Merleau Ponty’s notions of being-the-world or “inhabiting one’s body” have, as a result, been excluded from virtually all contemporary discussions regarding mind. See John Haldane, “The State and Fate of Philosophy of Mind,” pp. 303-304.
4. Colin McGinn, “Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem,” *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* Ed. David Chalmers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 394-405; p.395.
5. Furthermore, this viewpoint likewise circumnavigates the solipsistic dead end often suggested by classic Idealist explanations of consciousness.
6. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 25.
7. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 27
8. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 26
9. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 26
10. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 27
11. J. Passmore, *Philosophical Reasoning* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961) p.140.
12. Edward James, “Mind-Body Continuism: Dualities Without Dualism,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 5:4(1991) 233-55; p. 235. The term and ontology of “Continuism” builds upon this original work.
13. Stephen R.L. Clark, “Deconstructing the Laws of Logic,” p. 29

14. Charles Sanders Pierce, "The Law of Mind," *The Philosophers of Process* Ed. Douglas Browning. New York: Random House, 1965. 88-105; p.89.
15. Charles Sanders Pierce, "Man's Glassy Essence," *The Essential Pierce* Eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992. 334-351; p.334.
16. Charles Sanders Pierce, "Man's Glassy Essence," p.334.
17. Charles Sanders Pierce, "Man's Glassy Essence," p.334.