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# The Quest to Solve Problems That Don't Exist: Thought Artifacts in Contemporary Ontology

*Bernardo Kastrup*

Veldhoven,
The Netherlands

*e-mail:* bernardo@bernardokastrup.com

*Abstract:*
Questions about the nature of reality and consciousness remain unresolved in philosophy today, but not for lack of hypotheses. Ontologies as varied as physicalism, microexperientialism and cosmopsychism enrich the philosophical menu. Each of these ontologies faces a seemingly fundamental problem: under physicalism, for instance, we have the 'hard problem of consciousness,' whereas under microexperientialism we have the 'subject combination problem.' I argue that these problems are thought artifacts, having no grounding in empirical reality. In a manner akin to semantic paradoxes, they exist only in the internal logico-conceptual structure of their respective ontologies.
*Keywords:* physicalism, panpsychism, cosmopsychism, idealism, hard problem of consciousness, subject combination problem.

## 1. Introduction

While advances in technology – enabled by the predictive models of science – have influenced early 21st century culture more than anything else, questions of ontology loom large in the contemporary psyche: What is the nature of reality? What is the essence of phenomenal consciousness and how does it relate to matter? Our tentative answers to these questions color – if not outright determine – our view of life's meaning, thereby underlying every aspect of our existence.

Philosophy has not been idle in face of the demand for a menu of hypotheses in this regard. The mainstream physicalist ontology, for instance, posits that reality is constituted by irreducible physical entities – which Strawson has called 'ultimates' [21, p. 9] – outside and independent of phenomenality. According to physicalism, these ultimates, in and of themselves, do not instantiate phenomenal properties. In other words, there is nothing it is like to be an ultimate, phenomenality somehow emerging only at the level of complex arrangements of ultimates. As such, under physicalism phenomenality is not fundamental, but instead reducible to physical parameters of arrangements of ultimates.

What I shall call 'microexperientialism,' in turn, posits that there is already something it is like to be at least some ultimates, combinations of these experiencing ultimates somehow leading to more complex experience [21, pp. 24 – 29]. As such, under microexperientialism phenomenality is seen as an irreducible aspect of at least some ultimates. The ontology of panexperientialism [8, pp. 77 – 116], [16, pp. 91 – 103], [20, pp. 21 – 22] is analogous to microexperientialism, except in that the former entails the stronger claim that all ultimates instantiate phenomenal properties.

Micropsychism [21, pp. 24 – 29] and panpsychism [20, pp. 15 – 22] are analogous – maybe even identical – to microexperientialism and panexperientialism, respectively, except perhaps in that some formulations of the former admit cognition – a more complex form of phenomenality – already at the level of ultimates, as an irreducible aspect of these ultimates.

Among microexperientialism, panexperientialism, micropsychism and panpsychism, microexperientialism makes the narrowest claim and, therefore, is the most generic. In a strong sense, panexperientialism, micropsychism and panpsychism are variations or extensions of microexperientialism, the latter being the canonical basis of all four ontologies. Therefore, I shall henceforth speak only of microexperientialism.

Whereas microexperientialism entails that bottom-up combinations of simple subjects give rise to more complex ones, such as human beings, cosmopsychism [15], [18] takes the opposite route: according to it, the cosmos as a whole is conscious, individual psyches arising from top-down discontinuity in the integration of the contents of cosmic consciousness. Cosmopsychism can also be interpreted so as to include the further claim that, in addition to being conscious, the cosmos has a facet irreducible to phenomenal properties: the physical universe we can measure. This implies a form of dual-aspect monism, *a la* Spinoza [20, p. 88], so I shall call this interpretation 'dual-aspect cosmopsychism.' Under dual-aspect cosmopsychism, the cosmos as a whole *bears* phenomenality, but is not *constituted by* phenomenality. In other words, the cosmos is supposedly *conscious,* but not *in consciousness*.

My goal with this brief essay is to show that the thought processes underlying many of these ontologies are flawed, for being based on unexamined assumptions and unwarranted logical bridges. Once this is lucidly understood, some of the most important open questions associated with these ontologies – which contemporary philosophers see as their job to answer – are exposed as artifacts. Indeed, it is my contention that some of the key problems of ontology that contemporary philosophers have been grappling with do not actually exist. The next sections will elaborate upon this claim.

Anticipating a point that is bound to be raised, I acknowledge that offering a coherent alternative to the ontologies I am about to criticize is important for the completeness of my argument. And as attentive readers will notice, only idealist ontologies – those entailing that all existence is essentially phenomenal – are left unscathed by the criticisms in this paper. For this reason, I have extensively elaborated on a formulation of idealism elsewhere [10] and also rebutted many objections to it [11]. Here, however, I shall limit myself to deconstructing the rationale behind the mainstream physicalist ontology and two of its more recent alternatives. Readers interested in my formulation of idealism are referred to the works cited above.

## 2. Thought Artifacts in Physicalism

As discussed in the previous section, physicalism entails the existence of a world outside and independent of consciousness, which I shall henceforth refer to as the 'objective physical world.' This postulate seems to be self-evident from the perspective of modern and post-modern culture, yet it is merely a theoretical *inference* arising from interpretation of sense perceptions. After all, what we call the world is available to us solely as 'images' – defined here broadly, so to include any sensory modality – on the screen of perception, which is itself in consciousness. (To avoid possible misinterpretations, notice that my point here is agnostic of whether these perceptual images are a

valid given – in the sense of being both epistemically independent and efficacious [17] – or not. My point is that, in either case, *the objective physical world is surely not a given.*)

Stanford physicist Prof. Andrei Lindeperhaps explained best the inferential nature of the objective physical world:

> Let us remember that our knowledge of the world begins not with matter but with perceptions. I know for sure that my pain exists, my "green" exists, and my "sweet" exists. I do not need any proof of their existence, because these events are a part of me; everything else is a theory. Later we find out that our perceptions obey some laws, which can be most conveniently formulated if we assume that there is some underlying reality beyond our perceptions. This model of material world obeying laws of physics is so successful that soon we forget about our starting point and say that matter is the only reality, and perceptions are only helpful for its description. This assumption is almost as natural (and maybe as false) as our previous assumption that space is only a mathematical tool for the description of matter. But in fact we are substituting reality of our feelings by a successfully working theory of an independently existing material world. And the theory is so successful that we almost never think about its limitations until we must address some really deep issues, which do not fit into our model of reality [14, p. 12].

Now, we know that consciousness is perfectly capable to autonomously generate the imagery we associate with physicality: dreams and hallucinations, for instance, are often qualitatively indistinguishable from the 'real world.' Therefore, the motivation for positing the existence of an objective physical world must go beyond the mere existence of this imagery. And indeed, what physicalism attempts to make sense of are certain basic facts observable *in* the imagery, such as:

1. The correlations between observed brain activity and reported inner life [cf. 12];
2. The fact that we all seem to inhabit the same world; and
3. The fact that the dynamics of this world unfold independently of personal volition.

After all, if consciousness isn't a product of objective arrangements of physical elements, how can there be such tight correlations between brain activity and experience? If the world isn't made of physical elements outside our individual psyches, how can we all inhabit the same world beyond ourselves? If the world isn't independent of consciousness, why can't we change the laws of nature simply by imagining them to be different? Clearly, thus, the objective physical world posited by physicalism is an attempt to make sense of these three basic facts. As such, it is an *explanatory model*, not itself an observation. We *imagine* that there is an abstract physical world underlying our perceptions – and in some sense isomorphic to these perceptions – because doing so helps explain the basic facts.

Conjuring up an objective physical world to make sense of observations would – at least in principle – be legitimate if it didn't create an insoluble problem known as the 'hard problem of consciousness' [3], [13]. Indeed, one of physicalism's key tenets is that consciousness itself must be reducible to arrangements of objective physical elements. The problem, of course, is that it is impossible to conceive of how or why any particular structural or functional arrangement of physical elements would constitute or generate experience [16, pp. 13 – 30], [21, pp. 2 – 30]. The qualities of experience are irreducible to the observable parameters of physical arrangements – whatever the arrangement is – in the sense that it is impossible to deduce those qualities – even *in principle* – from these parameters [3]. There is nothing about the momentum, mass, charge or spin of physical particles, or their relative positions and interactions with one another, in terms of which we could deduce the greenness of grass, the sweetness of honey, the warmth of love, or the bitterness of disappointment. As long as they fit with the observed correlations between neural activity and reported experience, mappings between these two domains are entirely arbitrary: in principle, it is as (in)valid to state that spin up generates the feeling of coldness and spin down that of warmth as it is to say the exact opposite. There is nothing intrinsic about spin – or about any

other parameter of physical elements or arrangements thereof – that would allow us to make the distinction.

For this reason, neuroscience finds itself positing a slew of conflicting speculative theories about the neural constitutors or generators of experience, varying from information integration across vast networks of neurons [23] to microscopic intra-neural dynamics [9]. Indeed, as skeptic Michael Shermer wrote, "the neuroscience surrounding consciousness" is "nonfalsifiable" [19]. Such nonfalsifiability derives from the fact that the logical bridge between the felt qualities of experience and the configurations of an abstract world beyond experience is arbitrary.

Let us take a step back and unpack the thought process that brought us to this dilemma: first, the consciousness of a physicalist wove the conceptual notion that some patterns of its own dynamics – namely, those of sense perception – must somehow exist outside itself; then, the consciousness of the physicalist tried to project its own essence onto these patterns. The glaring artifact of thought here becomes apparent with an analogy: imagine a painter who, having painted a self-portrait, points at it and declares himself to *be* the portrait. This, in essence, is what physicalism does. The consciousness of the physicalist conceptualizes self-portraits within itself. Sometimes these self-portraits take the form of electrical impulses and neurotransmitter releases in the brain [12]. Other times, they take the shape of quantum transitions or potentials [22]. Whatever the case, the physicalist's consciousness always points to a conceptual entity it creates within itself and then declares itself to *be* this entity. It dismisses its own primary, first-person point of view in favor of an abstract third-person perspective. Consider Daniel Dennett's words: "The way to answer these 'first-person point of view' stumpers is *to ignore the first-person point of view* and examine what can be learned from the third-person point of view" [6, p. 336, emphasis added]. The contempt for direct experience, primary datum of existence, is palpable here.

This arbitrary dislocation of epistemic primacy from direct experience to explanatory abstraction is what conjures up the 'hard problem.' If we didn't insist that direct experience must somehow be constituted or generated by 'something beyond' direct experience, there would be no problem. And since this 'something beyond' is a conceptual invention derived from an explanatory model, the 'hard problem' itself is a conceptual invention.

The issue here is that the invention forces the physicalist into the impossible position of *having to reduce consciousness to consciousness's own abstractions*. This is as absurd as trying to reduce a painter to his paintings; cause to its effects. As such, the 'hard problem' is akin to a semantic paradox: the difficulty behind it is grounded not in empirical reality, but in its internal logico-conceptual structure.

For as long as they fail to remain alert to the fact that an objective physical world outside consciousness is a conceptual creation of consciousness itself, physicalists will continue to struggle with an insoluble problem. Indeed, the fundamental insolubility of the problem is itself a glaring hint that something has gone wrong in the underlying thought processes that led to it in the first place.

## 3. Thought Artifacts in Microexperientialism

As we have seen, microexperientialism posits that entities as small as subatomic particles are experiencing subjects in their own merit. Microexperientialists imagine that the unitary subjectivity of more complex experiencing subjects, such as human beings, arises from *bottom-up combination* of countless simpler subjects. This circumvents the 'hard problem' by positing that consciousness is a fundamental, irreducible property of ultimates and, as such, does not need to be explained in terms of anything else.

However, another problem immediately arises: the combination of subjects is an unexplainable process, perhaps incoherent [5]. It is just as hard as the 'hard problem' itself [7]. We cannot coherently explain how or why any physical action – such as bringing two subatomic particles close together or having them interact in some way – would cause the unification of their

subjective points of view, as required by microexperientialism. This is known in contemporary philosophy as the 'subject combination problem' [4]. And, just like the 'hard problem,' it is an artifact of thought.

Indeed, the motivation for microexperientialism is that subatomic particles are the discernible 'pixels' of the empirical world we perceive around ourselves. But to imagine, for this reason, that the subjectivity of living beings is composed of myriad subatomic-level subjects makes a rather simple mistake: it attributes to *that which experiences* a structure discernible only *in the experience itself*.

Let us unpack this. The notion of fundamental subatomic particles – ultimates – arises from experiments whose outcomes are accessible to us only in the form of perception (even when delicate instrumentation is used, the output of this instrumentation is only available to us as perception). Such experiments show that the images we experience on the screen of perception can be divided up into ever-smaller elements, until we reach a limit. At this limit, we find the smallest discernible components of the images, which are thus akin to pixels. As such, ultimates are the 'pixels' of *experience*, not necessarily of the experienc*er*. The latter does not follow from the former.

Even the fact that human bodies are made of subatomic particles says nothing about the structure of the experienc*er*: what we call a human body is itself an image on the screen of perception, and so will necessarily be 'pixelated' insofar as it is perceived. Such pixilation reflects the idiosyncrasies *of the screen of perception*, not necessarily the structure of the human subject itself. As an analogy, the pixelated image of a person on a television screen reflects the idiosyncrasies *of the television screen*; it doesn't mean that the person itself is made up of pixels.

To conclude that a living subject – that is, the consciousness of a living being – is made up of a combination of lower-level inanimate subjects requires an extra logical step for which, unless we beg the question of ontology, there is no justification. It is analogous to saying, for instance, that water is made of ripples simply because one can discern individual ripples in water. Obviously, individual ripples make up the structure of the *movements* of water, not of water itself. Analogously, subatomic particles are the 'pixels' of the observable 'movements' of consciousness, not necessarily the building blocks of consciousness itself. We have just as much reason to conclude that our subjectivity is composed of myriad subatomic-level subjects as to conclude that water is made of ripples.

Clearly, thus, the 'combination problem' of microexperientialism is an artifact of a fallacious logical bridge. Just like the 'hard problem' faced by physicalism, it is not grounded in empirical reality, but in the internal logico-conceptual structure of microexperientialism itself.

## 4. Thought Artifacts in Dual-Aspect Cosmopsychism

Dual-aspect cosmopsychism is the least problematic ontology among the three criticized in this brief essay. By positing that the cosmos as a whole is conscious, the associated cosmic consciousness being an irreducible aspect of reality, it circumvents both the 'hard problem' and the 'combination problem.' One might then be tempted to conclude that a third, equivalent problem must be incurred, which we might call the 'decomposition problem': How does one cosmic consciousness apparently break up into myriad individual psyches, such as yours and mine? This, however, is actually not a fundamental problem, for "a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness" [2, p. 191] that can account for the *appearance* of decomposition is well known and understood today, under the label of "dissociation" [1].

So what is the thought artifact behind dual-aspect cosmopsychism then? It is the redundant and inflationary postulate that the cosmos as a whole is a "*bearer* of consciousness" [18, p. 408, emphasis added], as opposed to being *constituted by* consciousness. For the cosmos to *bear* consciousness there must be something to it – some aspect of it – beyond consciousness itself, which can in turn carry consciousness. Otherwise, what sense is there in saying that consciousness

bears consciousness? This postulate of dual-aspect cosmopsychism may be an unexamined concession to the reigning physicalist view that there exists something beyond phenomenality. By accommodating this view, dual-aspect cosmopsychism certainly becomes more digestible under the contemporary zeitgeist. However, the key challenge incumbent upon cosmopsychism is to explain how a unitary cosmic consciousness can give rise to apparently distinct individual psyches. The idea of a physically objective facet of the cosmos is not necessary or helpful for tackling and overcoming such a challenge [cf. 15], [18]. Therefore, by accommodating the physicalist view that there exists something beyond phenomenality, dual-aspect cosmopsychism also ends up incorporating a redundant and inflationary postulate.

If the notion of an objective physical world is left out of cosmopsychism, the latter boils down to idealism: the view that the cosmos as a whole is *in consciousness* – as opposed to being *conscious* – and that individual psyches arise from a process of top-down dissociation in cosmic consciousness [10]. Although idealism faces challenges regarding its explanatory power – that is, its ability to make sense of the facts that we all seem to share the same world outside the control of our volition, that physical interference with the brain clearly affects inner experience, etc. – it does not fall victim to any of the artifacts of thought discussed in this essay.

## 5. Conclusions

The key philosophical problems faced by today's most popular ontologies – such as the 'hard problem of consciousness' faced by physicalism and the 'subject combination problem' faced by microexperientialism – are artifacts of unexamined assumptions and fallacious logical bridges inherent to their respective ontologies, having no grounding in empirical reality. In a manner akin to semantic paradoxes, they exist only in the internal logico-conceptual structure of these ontologies. The sooner philosophers become lucid of this fact, the sooner philosophical thought can move towards more constructive avenues of inquiry.

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