

## A Simple Proof of Mind-Body Dualism

G.E. Moore once suggested that to be a natural property is to be describable.<sup>1</sup> If he were right, then there would be a simple, powerful proof of mind-body dualism, namely:

- i. To be a natural (i.e. physical) property is to be describable.
- ii. Some qualitative features of consciousness are not (fully) describable.
- iii. Thus, some qualitative features of consciousness are not natural (i.e. physical) properties.

I say this would be a powerful proof because (ii) is clearly true. Just sit in front of a stoplight and try to convince yourself, to your own satisfaction, that the way red and green look (respectively) is fully describable. You will fail. The qualitative aspects of color experience outstrip all possible description. We have all known this since childhood, when we wondered “whether my red is your green” (and how we could ever know the answer). One can of course describe *some* properties of color-experience. One can describe red looking “alarming,” “hot,” “darker than yellow,” etc. Yet any such description ultimately fails to fully describe what red looks like. If you have any doubt about this, consider an alien being with twice as many color photoreceptors as we humans have. Suppose this alien being announced, when looking at a color wheel, that the areas we call “green” are in fact several distinct colors. Then suppose the alien being tried to describe what those colors look like. Could we have any real idea what they look

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<sup>1</sup> Moore (1942): 591.

like? Surely not. If it is hard to know what it is like to be a bat<sup>2</sup>, it is even harder to know what alien colors look like. Description would never suffice.

Alas, Moore's definition of natural properties is arguably false, so the above "proof" won't do. Numerical properties, conceptual properties, and moral properties are all describable (e.g., the number one is half the number two; morality is [perhaps] a matter of maximizing the good or [perhaps] treating persons as ends in themselves), and yet none of them are the sort of thing we want to call "natural properties."<sup>3</sup> Moore's basic idea, however, is almost certainly right. Let me explain. Consider any property known to humankind besides properties of conscious experience – for example, the property of being an electron, or a car, or a number, or a moral truth. Although due to conceptual vagueness it is often hard to describe these properties exactly, it is not hard to describe their general nature. Let me explain. The property of being an electron, for example, is clearly just the complex property of *behaving in such-and-such ways vis-à-vis other elementary particles*, etc. (I leave this to the particle physicist). Similarly, the property of being a car is just the complex property of *being something with three or four wheels and an engine that a human being can drive around in*.<sup>4</sup> The property of being the number one is the (infinite) property of *being half the number two, one-fourth the number four*, etc.

Now, one of the striking things about all these properties – that is, about *all* the properties known to humankind (besides those of conscious experience) – is that it is clear right on the face

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<sup>2</sup> See Nagel (1974). For my part, I have never seen why it is thought to be difficult to know what it is like to be a bat. If bat-brains use echolocation to map the surface properties of objects, and our brains use visible light spectra to map the surface properties of objects, then human vision and bat *do* roughly the same thing: they *present* the surface properties of the world to the observer. What it is like to be a bat, and what it is like to be a human, then, are in one very definite way *alike*. The bat *sees* the tree (by echolocation). *I* see the tree (by visible light). The primary difference in experience is presumably one of topographical (or image) resolution. Because sound waves are cruder information-carriers than light waves, bats presumably see trees "all blurry," much like a human being whose eyes are out of focus.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the natural/non-natural property distinction, see e.g., the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry, "Ethical Non-naturalism."

<sup>4</sup> By "car" here, I of course mean ordinary human cars, not toy cars, alien cars, etc.

of it that they are all *fundamentally relational properties*. Indeed, as Kant pointed out long ago, this actually seems obviously true.<sup>5</sup> What makes something an electron (as opposed to a proton, positron, etc.) is simply how it relates to other things (electrons “orbit” the nucleus of an atom; protons don’t; and cars certainly don’t). Similarly, what makes something a car (as opposed to a motorcycle or electron) is how it relates to other things (cars relate to things very differently than electrons do, than motorcycles do, and so on; cars have three or four tires which allow them to drive around roads, for example – electrons do not). What makes something a moral truth is its specific relations to human beings and human action (moral truths relate to us as requirements about what to do; cars relate to us in very different ways). And so on. Every property we know of (setting aside properties of conscious experience) is ultimately fully definable in terms of its various relations to other things.

Now, do not mistake me here. I do not mean to say that there are no “intrinsic” properties. When considered “all by myself,” I am five-feet-ten-inches tall. In this regard, my height is an “intrinsic” property of me. All the same, even such “intrinsic” properties are *ultimately* relational properties. For example, the property of being five-feet-ten-inches tall is

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<sup>5</sup> See Kant (1781): Book II, ch. III. Here is my gloss: *truly* intrinsic properties – those that are not definable in terms of relations to other things or properties – must in principle be (in every case but one – see below) beyond all possible experience or cognition. This is, first, because our experience of the world is itself relational: we only see/hear/feel things in relation to ourselves. But of course, second, we also see/hear/feel things only in relation to each other (even an apple, considered all by itself, is extended in space, all of its parts being given to us in spatial and temporal relations to one another. Third, because cognition is manipulation of concepts, and all concepts are derived either from experience or abstraction, all cognition is in turn fundamentally relational as well. Thus, all objects of experience and cognition must ultimately be relational properties. (This is Kant’s point, not mine). There is, however, one possible exception: *experience itself*. Our experiences are not objects we grasp *via* some relation. We *are* our experiences (identity is, of course, often said to be a “relation” itself – but it is peculiar relation for sure; objects do not “relate” to themselves so much as they *are* themselves). In any case, because we are *comprised* by conscious experiences, experiences may prove to be properties we *grasp entirely without relation* (because, again, we *are* them). This, indeed, is what this paper aims to prove: *we are Kantian noumena*. Qualitative properties of consciousness are *truly intrinsic properties* that are unlike all other properties we know and which know non-rationally (as things-in-themselves) simply because we *are* them. (This is, I realize, a rather big thing to prove – and yet I think I do prove it).

clearly a relational property (it is the property of being taller than five-feet-nine-inches tall, being shorter than five-feet-eleven-inches tall, etc.). Accordingly, I submit:

- (1) All properties known to humankind (setting aside qualitative properties of conscious experience) are fundamentally relational properties.

But now what is it to be a relational property, exactly? Answer: to be a relational property is to be describable in principle: all one needs to do in order to describe any relational property is describe its relata and how they relate to one another (I do not beg the question here; I demonstrate a fact). Thus,

- (2) To be a relational property is to be describable in principle.

Thus (from 1 & 2),

- (3) All properties known to humankind (setting aside qualitative properties of conscious experience) are describable in principle.

As an aside, notice that (3) seems to be behind the famous “knowledge argument” for mind-body dualism. That argument holds that a super-intelligent, super-educated person in a black-and-white room could know every physical fact (and it deduces from this and the further claim that such a person might not know every mental fact the conclusion that some facts are non-physical). There are several ways to resist this argument, however, and of course physicalists have done so with fervor.<sup>6</sup> My argument tightens the slack. The knowledge argument never says exactly why a person in a black-and-white room could know “every physical fact” but not “every mental fact,” and indeed, it never even says what facts amount to. It just asserts the intuition that a person could know everything physical but not know everything mental. My argument fills these matters in: a person in a black-and-white room could know every physical fact because *to be* a physical property – indeed, to be *any* property we know of (aside from properties of

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the knowledge argument, the Stanford Encyclopedia entry by that name.

consciousness) – just is to be the sort of thing that can be fully described in a book.<sup>7</sup> But, again, as we have all known since we were children, the way the colors red and green look is *not* fully describable (in a book). Again, go to a stoplight and try to convince yourself that colors are fully describable. You will fail. The way red looks does not orbit around the nucleus of an atom (as electrons do); it does not drive on roads (like cars do); it is not half of the number two (as the number one is); it is simply, indescribably *red*. Thus,

(4) Some qualitative properties of conscious experience cannot in principle be described.

Thus (from 1-4),

(5) Some qualitative properties of conscious experience are properties of a fundamentally different kind than all other properties known to humankind: they are genuinely *non-relational properties* (i.e. things-in-themselves).

QED.

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<sup>7</sup> This is true even of indexical and demonstrative properties such as “that.” If “that” refers to a (particular) car, then the property of being *that* is the property of having all of the properties of the car in question.

## References

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