

Psychological Aether Theory: How to Pass Between the Horns of the Mind-Body Quadrilemma

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The Quadrad

Jerry Fodor, in his review of a book on Galen Strawson's work, implicitly presents the mind-body problem as a quadrilemma. I will begin by making his quadrilemma explicit, though I don't claim that Fodor would agree with the details of my formulation. The quadrilemma is this. It seems that no matter which position one takes on the mind-body problem, one will be forced to reject at least one of four highly plausible claims. Let's call these four claims "the Quadrad":

- (1) Robust consciousness exists -- that is, qualia-laden, inherently subjective consciousness exists (i.e., deflationism is false).
- (2) All of the fundamental lower-level stuff of which human beings are composed is, ultimately, the same sort of stuff as the fundamental lower-level stuff of which ordinary material objects like tables, mountains, and stars are composed. (i.e., dualism is false).
- (3) The fundamental lower-level stuff of which ordinary material objects are composed is not robustly conscious (i.e., panpsychism is false).
- (4) Robust consciousness does not result from combining lower-level entities that are not themselves robustly conscious (i.e., emergentism is false).

It is important for what follows that I am stipulatively defining "deflationism," "dualism," "panpsychism," and "emergentism" as the denials of (1), (2), (3), and (4), respectively. I recognize that people use these terms in other ways. This is especially so in the case of panpsychism, which, as often understood, entails at least that all of the fundamental lower-level stuff of which ordinary material objects are composed is robustly conscious. (Here I ignore emergentist forms of panpsychism that claim that fundamental stuff is merely "proto-conscious," whatever that means.) (3), however, should be interpreted in such a way that it denies more than this. It denies, not just the panpsychist thesis that *all* of that stuff is robustly conscious; it denies that *any* of that stuff is robustly conscious. In other words, it asserts, not just that not all of the stuff in question is robustly conscious, it asserts that none of it is. This makes no difference, of course, if it is assumed, as it usually is, that if any fundamental lower-level stuff is robustly conscious, then all of it is.

Pick Your Poison

The point of the quadrilemma is that, when it comes to the mind-body problem, there is nothing even close to a free lunch. If the only items on the menu are deflationism, dualism, panpsychism, and emergentism, then you will have to pay a steep price to dine no matter what you order. You can reject any three of those four unattractive views, but according to Fodor, you're stuck with one of them. So, to shift metaphors, pick your poison. Strawson says that most philosophers choose deflationism. He calls this the Great Silliness. But people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Strawson chooses panpsychism, which I admit isn't silliness as he defines "silliness", but it moves the needle on the foolishness detectors of many philosophers. In reality, it is arguable that neither view is foolish because all of the available alternatives are no less foolish. If your only options all involve being punched by a professional boxer, it isn't foolish to choose the boxer that looks a little less lethal than the others. But what about the other two options? Why not reject the second or fourth members of the quadrad in order to avoid both deflationism and panpsychism?

Picking dualism as your poison is fine if, like Descartes, you don't mind *deus ex machina* solutions to philosophical problems. But for many philosophers, including many philosophers who believe in God, the idea that God regularly intervenes in nature to pair immaterial minds with material bodies is hardly plausible. That's just not how our world works, not to mention that it fits poorly (even if it is compatible with) what neuroscience and evolutionary biology tell us about the mind. Of course, an atheist could be a dualist too, but if God does not supply these "souls", then where do they come from? And why does each soul interact with the specific body it does and no others? And why do souls interact with certain sorts of bodies and not others? Dualism appears to be less of a solution than just a quagmire of intractable problems.

The fourth poisonous option is emergentism. David Chalmers, when he's not tempted by panpsychism, is a good example of an emergentist. He believes, like I do, that crazy ideas are needed to solve the so-called hard problem of consciousness ("crazy", by the way, is his word, not mine), and he practices what he preaches by suggesting the crazy idea that consciousness is the one phenomenon in all of nature where a higher-level material entity has a characteristic that cannot be accounted for in terms of the characteristics and arrangement and laws governing lower-level material entities. He calls this sort of emergence "strong emergence". Strong emergence is required here because *robust* consciousness cannot weakly emerge. Problem solved? Hardly. As Fodor points out, this seems more like an admission that the problem cannot be solved. How does the brain produce the mind, you ask? The emergentist says, "it just does, in a way that is unlike anything else in nature". That sounds less like a solution and more like giving up.

A Fifth Way?

Faced with a choice between four very unattractive positions, what's a philosopher to do? We've seen that philosophers like Strawson choose one and argue for it by deriving it from the falsity of the other three. But any of the four positions can plausibly be defended in the exact same way, apparently leaving none worthy of belief.

I will take a different approach, one that exploits the invalidity of the four derivations just mentioned. This fifth way relies on the fact that Fodor's quadrilemma is in reality a false tetrachotomy. It is possible to pass between all four horns of the quadrilemma because the four statements that make up the quadrad are not actually inconsistent. They could all be true, which is to say that deflationism, dualism, panpsychism, and emergentism could all be false.

This is not to deny that some price will be paid for accepting all four members of the quadrad, but I submit that it is far from obvious that this price is greater than the price of rejecting one of those members. My goal, then, is not to *defend* a new position on the mind-body problem, but just to add a new position to the menu. To be honest, when it comes to the mind-body problem, I'm not ready to order, but I do want to have a look at the whole menu.

Aetherism

So how can we pass between the four horns of Fodor's quadrilemma? William James points us in the right direction in his Ingersoll lecture on immortality. His main goal in that lecture was to defend the view that there is life after death against the objection that, since the brain produces the mind, the inevitable permanent destruction of the brain guarantees the permanent destruction of the mind. He attempts to rebut this objection by questioning the objector's assumption that the brain produces the mind. He doesn't deny that thought is a function of the brain, he just denies that the function in question is one of production. In other words, he suggests a corrective answer to the hard problem of consciousness instead of a direct answer. How does the brain produce the mind? It doesn't. Instead, mentality exists quite independently of the brain.

Consider an analogy. Like other living things, our bodies make use of sunlight. Indeed, they have evolved to make use of it in very complicated ways. Sunlight is a sort of electromagnetic radiation. Human bodies are immersed in it, but are not composed of it. Similarly, perhaps the brain makes use of a consciousness that already exists independently of the existence of brains or nervous systems. On this view, human organisms are immersed in a sort of conscious aether that they have evolved to use in very complicated ways, but they are not composed of that aether.

Let's call this view the *psychological aether theory* or just *aetherism* for short. For reasons that will soon be clear, we might also call it *demergentism*. On this view, while all concrete stuff is physical in the sense that it is either space or located in space (so a sort of monism is true), not all of it is material: it is not all composed of or identical to fundamental particles like quarks and electrons. In addition to those entities, there is an omnipresent mind, a world soul or mental aether if you will, that can interact with the material world and in particular with the nervous systems of human beings and some other animals.

If such a fundamental immaterial entity exists, then it is also plausible to suppose that, while fundamental material reality has a bottom-up structure, fundamental mental reality has a top-down structure. In other words, in the case of material reality the properties of the parts explain the properties of the whole, while in the case of mental reality the properties of the whole explain the properties of the parts. To put the point another way, the mental properties of human beings and other conscious animals, instead of being emergent, are actually "demergent" -- they result from participation in a mental whole that is, metaphysically speaking, more fundamental than its mental parts. Hence my suggestion that this view could also be called "demergentism."

Is this really a fifth way? Let's check the quadrad to make sure. On aetherism, the first member of the triad is obviously true. Consciousness exists and is robust. The third member is also true. The mental aether is fundamental, but ordinary material objects are not composed of it even if they are immersed in it, so panpsychism is false on this view. In addition, precisely because the mental aether is fundamental, consciousness is not emergent and thus the fourth member of the quadrad is true. This leaves the second member. Is aetherism a form of dualism? Not if dualism is defined as the denial of the second member of the quadrad. For according to aetherism, human organisms make use of a consciousness that is not a part of them -- that, in fact, existed long before human beings existed. The nervous systems that successfully interact with this consciousness have evolved over time to make increasingly more complicated use of it. But such evolution involves just physical changes to our brains. It does not involve changing the world soul itself, which is not one of the entities of which any biological organism, including humans, are composed.

Notice too that, while aetherism might have some of the disadvantages of dualism (namely, an interaction problem), it doesn't have others and for that reason seems less poisonous. For example, no God is required to create the mental aether -- it is a purely natural entity. Indeed, it is located in space and so is compatible with one sort of monism, namely, the view that all stuff is physical stuff in the sense of being located in space. Also, worries about how individual souls get paired with individual bodies do not arise if there is only a single omnipresent world soul. In short, aetherism really is a fifth way. The quadrilemma really is a false tetrachotomy.

A Quintilemma?

This is not to say that aetherism is a free lunch. In one sense, what I have done is to turn a quadrilemma into a quintilemma. But that is hardly an insignificant accomplishment. At this point in philosophical inquiry about the mind-body problem and the hard problem of consciousness, the most we can hope to achieve is to provide a complete map of the terrain. Those (and there are many) who are already willing to stake out claims for specific parcels of land are woefully lacking in Socratic wisdom: they lack knowledge of their own ignorance. Unfortunately, philosophers, who should know better, are often just as foolish in the Socratic sense as non-philosophers.

Still, considered by itself, psychological aether theory does appear rather implausible. After all, it appears to add a fifth fundamental interaction to gravitation, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak interactions. This is indeed costly -- again, there are no free lunches here. But is that any more absurd than denying that robust consciousness exists or asserting that quarks are robustly conscious, or claiming that a new sort of stuff emerges from nothing when matter is organized in a certain way? It seems not.

Further, there is, I think, some empirical (though not scientific) evidence for the psychological aether theory, namely, that some people seem to perceive that their own minds are part of a much larger mental reality. Mystics from a variety of religious traditions claim to experience being absorbed into God (like individual drops of water that fall into the ocean) or even being identical to God (e.g. "I am the Truth [i.e. God]" as the Sufi mystic Mansur al-Hallaj said). Could it be that when they meditate and successfully extinguish or repress all or almost all of the many states of consciousness that ordinarily clutter our mental landscape, they manage to get a glimpse of a larger mental horizon that is normally hidden from view? Keep in mind that many of these mystics have very strong reasons not to blur the distinction between themselves and God because to do so is heretical in the religious traditions to which they belong. This makes it more likely that how they describe their experiences is accurate.

Perhaps, then, we should take seriously one of the central doctrines of the Vedanta school of Hindu thought, namely, the doctrine that atman is Brahman -- the individual soul is the world soul. As a philosopher of religion, I'm even tempted to rename aetherism "panpsychentheism" -- "all-minds-in-God-ism", which adds a fourth option to the usual tripartite menu of classical theism, pantheism, and panentheism. Finally, perhaps William James was right to challenge the confidence that most philosophers and scientists have that there is no life after death. For if we don't know that aetherism is false, then we don't actually know that the subject of our psychological properties does not continue to exist after our bodies are destroyed.

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