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978-1-107-08726-2 - From the Knowledge Argument to Mental Substance: Resurrecting the Mind

Howard Robinson

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From the Knowledge Argument to Mental Substance

This book presents a strong case for substance dualism and offers a comprehensive defence of the knowledge argument, showing that materialism cannot accommodate or explain the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness. Bringing together the discussion of reductionism and semantic vagueness in an original and illuminating way, Howard Robinson argues that non-fundamental levels of ontology are best treated by a conceptualist account, rather than a realist one. In addition to discussing the standard versions of physicalism, he examines physicalist theories such as those of McDowell and Price, and accounts of neutral monism and panpsychism from Strawson, McGinn and Stoljar. He also explores previously unnoticed historical parallels between Frege and Aristotle and between Hume and Plotinus. His book will be a valuable resource for scholars and advanced students of philosophy of mind, in particular those looking at consciousness, dualism and the mind–body problem.

Howard Robinson is University Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Central European University, Budapest; Senior Fellow at Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion, New Brunswick; and a Visiting Scholar at Fordham University, New York. He is the author of *Matter and Sense: A Critique of Contemporary Materialism* (Cambridge, 1982) and *Perception* (1994).

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Preface

This book is largely, but not wholly, based on work in the philosophy of mind that I have published in the last twenty-five years. Much has happened since Cambridge University Press published my *Matter and Sense* in 1982, and many sophisticated physicalist and semi-physicalist theories have been developed. It is one of the arguments of this book that this sophistication only disguises the fact that no serious progress has been made: the lucid but inadequate theories of J. J. C. Smart and D. M. Armstrong still remain the best that standard physicalism can achieve.

This book divides into three parts. In Part I, I argue against all the main attacks that have been made on the knowledge argument, but, beyond that, I argue that the knowledge argument does not merely resist all attempts to refute it, but that it has much more powerful consequences than is usually allowed for by either side in the discussion. What it shows is that the qualitative dimension of reality, without which the world can be nothing more than a bare formal system, is something that standard physicalism cannot accommodate. If the knowledge argument were not correct, there could be no manifest image of the world at all, and without the manifest image, there could be no scientific image either. I also try to prove the inadequacy of various non-reductive naturalist strategies, such as neutral monism and those that derive from the work of Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson.

In Part II, I challenge one of the main motivations of physicalism. The physicalist believes in the closure of the physical world. It is a consequence of this that if the mental is not physical, it must be epiphenomenal. I try to show that if the world is closed under *physics* – that is the physical world's most fundamental and microscopic level – then all higher levels, which must include the brain/mind if physicalism is true, will be epiphenomenal: I defend, that is, a version of what Kim calls the *exclusion principle*, and I do this via an investigation of reductionism and semantic vagueness. I carry the conclusion further and argue that there are no strict physical individuals at all: at most there are quality placings in space-time, presumably as the features of events.

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In Part III, I try to prove that we must be simple immaterial selves, and as such, minds are the only true individuals in the natural world. In the final chapter I tie this thought up to themes in the history of philosophy. I argue that a doctrine universally ignored by analytical philosophers, namely Plotinus's doctrine of the One, can be used to throw welcome light on the notion of an individual and on modern debates concerning the unity of substances. In fact, the notion of individuality that we project on the world has its source in our own identity as individuals. In this way, Plotinus's metaphysics and Humean conventionalism are both true. In the process, I draw attention to a striking – and, as far as I know, unnoticed – parallel between Frege's treatment of concepts and Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of forms, and how this supports a form of neo-Platonism.

If some of my conclusions run against current fashion in a way that provokes resistance, I believe that my arguments on particular issues follow all the normal canons of analytic carefulness and fall well within the framework of contemporary debates. I therefore ask the reader who finds parts of the final outcome rebarbative to try to take seriously the contributions to individual discussions that happen on the way.

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Acknowledgements

My plan in writing this book was to bring together the work that I had done on the mind–body problem since *Matter and Sense* was published in 1982. This work therefore draws on much previously published material, which is listed in the Bibliography. Some chapters are only slightly modified from their previously published versions. This includes, for example, Chapters 4, 8, 9 and 10. Others, such as Chapters 5, 6, 7, 13 and 15, draw heavily on published papers. But there is much new material and re-designing throughout, and everything has, I hope, been re-considered in the light of its place in this monograph.

I would like to thank Oxford University Press for permission to print from ‘Dennett and the knowledge argument’, *Analysis*, 53, 1993, 174–7.

‘Substance dualism and its rationale’, in *Free Will and Modern Science*, ed. Richard Swinburne, the British Academy and OUP, 2012, 158–77.

‘Phenomenal qualities: what they must be and what they cannot be’, in *Phenomenal Qualities: Sense, Perception and Consciousness*, eds Paul Coates and Sam. Coleman, OUP, 2015, 103–120.

Routledge for permission to use ‘Naturalism and the unavailability of the Cartesian perspective’, in *Contemporary Dualism*, eds Lavazza and Robinson, Routledge, 2014, 154–170.

‘Reductionism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*, eds P. Simons and P. LePoidevin, Routledge, 2009, 527–36.

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The Aristotelian Society for use of ‘Vagueness, Realism, Language and Thought’, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. CIX, 2008–9, 83–101.

When a book is based on material that has been generated over such a long period, it is hard to list the people who have contributed to its final form. I have been a member of a discussion group meeting in the summers in Oxford since well before the appearance of *Matter and Sense* in 1982 and almost everything I have written has passed through that forum. Ralph Walker, Lesley Brown and Julie Jack have been members of that group through the whole period. The late John Foster and the late Michael Woods were regulars for many years. Stephen Blamey, Adrian Moore, Anita Avromides, Penelope Mackie, Bob Frazier and Alex Orenstein are also long-standing members. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my former colleagues in Liverpool and to my present colleagues at Central European University (CEU), particularly Barry Dainton and Kati Farkas. Much of the material in the following pages was presented in Philosophy of Mind courses at CEU and I am grateful to the many students who helped me sharpen my arguments. My time at CEU since 2000 has been a pure delight. My wife, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, to whom this book is dedicated, is a professor of English at Fordham University and this has led me to be recurrently a visiting scholar at Fordham in the Bronx. The Walsh Library there is a most congenial place in which to sit and work: much of the final writing of this book was done there. Material was also presented – and thoroughly criticised – in a course I taught at Rutgers. I am grateful, too, to Barry Loewer and Kati Balog of Rutgers for many discussions on issues that recur in this book. Also to Ned Block and David Chalmers for inviting me to their NYU mind discussions, and to David Rosenthal for his CUNY cognitive science sessions.

I dedicated *Matter and Sense* to Manchester Grammar School (MGS). The Berkeley Society at the school, between 1961 and 1964, was where it became clear to me that I had to become a philosopher, and the discussions there chaired by John Armstrong continue to be an inspiration. The year 2015 is the five-hundredth anniversary of MGS and though I do not dedicate the book again to the school, neither can I fail to repeat mention, in its quinquennial year, of the debt that I owe it. This is more so as the school’s founder, Hugh Oldham, was also a partner in the founding of my college, Corpus, in Oxford, also due for a quinquennial in 2017. My principal tutor there was Christopher Taylor. A better philosophical education than that provided by these institutions is hardly imaginable.