

Selves, Solipsism and Living in a Simulated Reality

Philosophy 540, Spring 2020
Wednesdays, Marx 201, 1 pm—3.50 pm.

Instructors: Grace Helton and Mark Johnston

Graduate students who regularly attend may receive a unit by satisfactory performance on the take-home exam offered at the end of the course.

Readings will be found on Blackboard.

Brief Overview

The first half of the course (led by MJ) will begin with an opinionated introduction to the vast literature in Anglophone philosophy on the mind-body problem. This is intended to serve as an accelerated way for graduate students to get up to speed on the extant issues in an important part of the philosophy of mind, including action theory. There will be an emphasis on the question: what has happened to the agential self—the active subject of experience—in all this extensive literature? The (opinionated) answer is that it has disappeared, with disastrous consequences for action theory, philosophy of mind, and ethical theory. These consequences will be set out in some detail, and the urgent question will be how we must think of the self if ethical life is to be workable. A new view of the mind-body relation will emerge.

In the second half (led by GH) the questions under consideration will include: How do we know that others have minds and how (if at all) does our best theory of what a mind is constrain possible answers to this question? (The solipsistic worry may appear intensified on the view of the human person defended by MJ in the first part of the course.) Are there successful perceptual or abductive routes to knowledge that others have minds? Would knowledge of other minds tell against the hypothesis that all of reality is simulated? What, if anything, distinguishes the objects of dreams and fantasies from other parts of reality? Does the presence of oneself or of other sentient creatures explain or constrain which elements of the world can count as real?

Week by Week

Week 1: The Absent Self: Do we appear in the contemporary discussion of mind and body?

The *apparent mindlessness*—or is it the utterly *unapparent mindedness*— of the brain: information processing versus intentional content. Zuboff's argument revamped. (Arnold Zuboff "The Story of a Brain?" in *The Mind's Eye*) Why Ned Block's appeal to intuition in the nation of China case is misplaced. The apparent

subjectlessness of the brain. Peter Unger's cross-wiring argument: can we make four subjects from two brains? The new discovery that dolphins never sleep *and always sleep!* Each dolphin is fully bicameral! Does each dolphin subject then dream while it is awake? There seems to be a question here, but what is the neuro-psychological route to its answer? All we have are causal connections among neural nets. What would make it the case that we have one or two or four selves in such cases?

After that motivating introduction we will turn to a brief recap of Behaviorism, Analytical and non-Analytical Functionalism and the significance, if any, of multiple realization. (David Lewis: "Mad Pain and Martian Pain" and "Reduction of Mind")

We will then investigate how the "property confusion"—the widespread, implicit and mistaken assumption that all predicables are properties of some stable or variable adicity or other—affects the mind-body literature. Types are not properties, nor property-instantiations. (The Tiger, a type of animal, is not an instantiation of the property Tigricity, or of the property of being a tiger. Unlike properties, the Tiger is not anything *had* or *born*.) Types are identical only if they have just the same ultimate tokens. The ultimate tokens in the mind-body case are events or states (slow events). They are not property instantiations, nor states of affairs.

In this vein, partly influenced by Donald Davidson (1970), Cynthia MacDonald (2011) suggests that dual-aspect event identity is the proper response to the disparate character of neural processes and intentional states. Though interesting, this still leaves us with just a network of psychophysical events. We active subjects—you and I—do not appear in this network, unless we are just extended psychophysical processes or weak continuants whose continued existence is wholly grounded in the holding of psychological and/or bodily continuity over time. In either case we are ontological trash, with disastrous ethical consequences.

We should also keep in mind the important work of Jennifer Hornsby and of Helen Steward. They argue that reflection on the nature of belief and desire suggests that they are not things of the right ontological sort to fit into a network of events and states (with states understood as slow events.)

What was psycho-physical reduction anyway? The paradox of ontological reduction suggests it was a two-step process of elimination and then identification of what was left with brain processes. Hence, reduction as "nothing but"-ery—as in Australian Materialism. Other models: (i) reduction as the "nearest thing" to identity, (ii) reduction as realization, where the realizer is "*almost* nothing over and above" the realizing. (iii) Reduction for "groundhogs".

Reduction versus emergence. It is reduction if the essence of each psychological state of a subject is simply consequential on the essences of the subject's physical states. It is strong emergence in the sense of David Chalmers (2019) if you the mental comes from the physical only by way of substantial psychophysical laws. Is it

odd that the realm of law includes such “nomological danglers”? J.J.C. Smart (2008). Mentality is at best a momentary blip in the material universe, how is it then that the realm of law gives such a special place to mentality? Can such laws govern intentional mental states? Can Davidson’s argument against physical/intentional laws be made to work?

Could *separate selves* lawfully emerge from a whorl of neurochemistry, as per Zimmerman, O’Connor, and William Haskar’s *The Emergent Self*? Either a brain is capable of being inhabited by many emergent selves, or the “physico-ego” laws would have to be weird, precisely in allowing for non-local suppression of the emergence of more than one self per brain.

Can *I* be reduced, in any of the senses canvassed, to something wholly physical? What would it be to reduce *me*? Am I exhausted by my functional/causal role? What would that be? How does an individual have a functional role?

Am I instead my brain? Or, my neural thinking part? Identity versus constitution. (Readings: Derek Parfit 2016 “Why I am Not a Human Being”. Christopher Peacocke *The Mirror of the World* 2015 on the executive unit.)

The Dion/Theon paradox and the growing argument, as applied to neural networks. Is self-consciousness, e.g. being the subject of a *de se* thought, an extrinsic matter? Do I have *a* thinking part? If so, isn’t it massively coincident with many other thinking parts? Thinking parts as one sort of ontological trash.

Week 2: Am I my body/this human organism/this animal?

Why does philosophy need to recognize a persisting agential selves not wholly grounded in or reducible to the events that take place within its spatio-temporal footprint? Three considerations, the third being the most compelling.

(A) Normative Phenomenology?

- Normative phenomenology of meaning? (Kripkenstein 1980)
- Normative Phenomenology of inference, judgment and bodily action?
- Normative Phenomenology of the prudential ought?
- Normative Phenomenology of the moral ought? (Kant)

Can the phenomenology of being an active persisting subject who is under a demand be treated as misleading? Sure, but then “strong evaluation” in the sense of Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor looks like a busted ideal.

(B) Another thought: We can’t solve the ubiquitous wayward causation problem for the standard theory of action without appeal to *an agent’s appreciating the force of a consideration and then acting on it*. (A suggestion arising from Michael Smith’s “Four Problems With the Standard View of Action” 2012) It depends.

(C) If there is no persisting agential self then we are just (i) extended psychophysical processes or (ii) weak continuants whose persistence conditions are wholly grounded in psychophysical processes, as per David Lewis, Robert Nozick and Derek Parfit. Either way, we are ontological trash. That, as we shall see, is a very troubling consequence.

Neo-Aristotelianism as a response to (C): Animals are self-maintaining substances, not mere biological processes. We are active animals, who naturally have the (seldom used) capacity to act reasonably. (Johnston 1984, Chapter 5). Notice that Peter van Inwagen's later variant on animalism uses a trashy relational property—being taken up in a life—to generate non-atomic wholes, and so is not itself a way of avoiding the conclusion that we are ontological trash.

Eric Olson's (2010) argument for animalism. The bad "chair" argument which confuses predication and identity conditions. The important—but ultimately unconvincing—"it solves the many thinker's problem" argument. The status of Harold Noonan's "First-Personal Pronoun Revisionism". Bad reflective equilibrium concerning "I"-thought in the context of reductionism.

Some background on constitution/phase sortals/identity/essence. The remnant persons objection to animalism. See Johnston 2016 "Animalism Undone".

The deep worry about animalism. Aristotle was an "An idol with feet of qua (*qwey*)"—Sarah Broadie, who in turn attributes it to Vlastos. Why Aristotle would have given up his view that animals are substances had he known modern biology.

Week 3: Embodiment: What then is my relation to my body?

This session will present crucial results from cognitive science and psychology on bodily ownership. The guest speaker will be Frederique de Vignemont from CNRS (Paris), who recently published an important book on bodily sensation and bodily ownership—*Mind the Body: An Exploration of Bodily Self-Awareness* (OUP 2016).

Readings: Jose Luis Bermudez "Bodily ownership, bodily awareness and knowledge without observation" M.G.F. Martin "Bodily Awareness: A Sense of Ownership" ^[1]_[SEP] Frederique de Vignemont "What Phenomenal Contrast for Bodily Ownership?"

Week 4: Given that we are not essentially bodies or animals, how do we discover our essential natures?

Why is essence of any importance? The connection with continuing to exist. A conviction about our essence may be a structuring hint constraining the rest of ontology. And it may ground a very different picture of ethical life.

Contra Descartes, we have no direct insight into our essence. Contra the analytic method of cases, which attempts to synthesize our intuitions driven by our a priori or “conceptual” knowledge, that knowledge is fragmentary, generic and at best reflects our arbitrarily evolved and historically conditioned ways of thinking. (See Sarah-Jane Leslie 2019 “Cognitive Science and the Metaphysics of Concepts”.) Contra scientific essentialism, the science of primates has no implications as to what is essential to us, and what is accidental. Science is concerned with the explanation of the local in terms of the more *general*. The essential versus accidental status of the general is not a first-order scientific concern.

There is a practical route to a conviction about our essential natures, a route in some way reminiscent of Kant: If we are ontological trash then ethical life is unworkable. How then could we turn out to be anything other than ontological trash?

Is this method an illegitimate “pragmatic encroachment”? Can we instead just assume that ethical life is workable? Is that a priori? No. What then would make it probable that ethical life is workable?

Week 5: Ontological Trash and Ethical Life

Six ways of being ontological trash.

If reductive naturalism is true then we are exhausted by (wholly grounded in) the psychological and physical events which make up our spatio-temporal footprints. Then we are either extended processes or weak continuants. Processes and weak continuants are ontological trash. (The basic and unnoticed problem with all continuity theories of identity over time.)

If we are ontological trash then ethical singularity (ES) massively fails.

(ES) The only being with a moral status found within the spatio-temporal footprint of a person is that person.

If (ES) massively fails then ethical life is unworkable.

The arguments discussed in this class could be taken as an argument that pure hedonistic utilitarianism is the only practically viable conception of ethical life. But then human evolution is a deeply regrettable development. Thanks to our evolved cognitive endowment, we are only fair at pain avoidance, and we are not good at pleasure.

Johnston MS: “Did Ethics End in 1984?”, “Does the Stage View Save Ethical Life?”

Week 6: How We Might Not Be Ontological Trash

We will investigate a new view of the mind-body relation on which we are not ontological trash, and hence not wholly grounded in those events which take place within our spatio-temporal footprint. This will be a form of dualism, but one which does not deny the causal closure of the physical. It endorses no downward interventions in neural processes, and no upward creation of mental events. The neural (i) subserves non-voluntary mental processes without reducing them. The neural (ii) gives expression to the freely developing quality of an agent's will by way an isomorphism of functional role. It allows for libertarian freedom, if...

Does this view intensify the solipsistic problem?

Wittgenstein "I am not of the *opinion* that he has a mind!" Criteria, and having the right to be sure? But would we still have the right to be sure in a scenario in which half of all humanish beings were but perfect simulacra of persons?

A pragmatic argument for not abandoning the collective I-Thou stance, the very collective stance within which we as very young children *discovered* that we were active subjects. Is the pragmatic argument an illegitimate pragmatic encroachment? After all, the pragmatic argument does not point to *evidence*. A Pascalian reply: within the stance you will find evidence. Cf. L. Paul on transformative experience. Is that good enough?

Midterm Break

Week 7: What Is The Problem of Other Minds? (& Why Does It Matter?)

Gomes, "Is There a Problem of Other Minds?"

Avramides, selections

De Vignemont & Jacob, "What Is It Like to Feel Another's Pain?"

Optional: Helton, "Epistemological Solipsism as a Route to External World Skepticism" (unpublished manuscript)

Optional: De Vignemont, "The Co-Consciousness Hypothesis"

Optional: Sober, "Why not Solipsism?"

Week 8: Perceptual Solutions to Solipsism

Overgaard, "Other People

Gallagher, "Direct Perception in the Intersubjective Context"

McDowell, excerpts

Gomes, "McDowell's Disjunctivism and Other Minds"

Optional: Gallagher & Anika, "Being Pluralist About Understanding Others: Contexts & Communicative Practices"

Pickard, "Emotions & The Problem of Other Minds"

Gomes, "Perception, Evidence, & Our Expressive Knowledge of Other Minds"

Week 9: Abductive & Analogical Solutions to Solipsism

Melnyck, "Inference to the Best Explanation & Other Minds"
Hyslop & Jackson, "The Analogical Inference to Other Minds"
Optional: Pargetter, "The Scientific Inference to Other Minds"

Week 10: The Simulation Hypothesis & Solipsism

Bostrom, "The Simulation Hypothesis" [something on problem of AI, the singularity & harms to humans][something on debate about harming others by creating them, E.g., David Benatar]

Week 11: Virtual Reality and Simulated Minds

Chalmers, "The Virtual & The Real"
Helton, "Vivid Dreams & Simulated Worlds: What Makes Something Real?" MS

Week 12: Vantage Point & Embodiment in the Experience of Film

(co-lecturer: Sara Aronowitz) Readings TBD