To jettison the mind: consciousness, conceivability, and the mind–body problem

Reid Donson

Abstract

Ever since Descartes first introduced it, the mind–body problem has been the subject of much philosophical debate. I believe, however, that the key concept upon which these arguments hinge, the mind, is a nonsensical term. In this paper, I argue that the mind cannot be conceived of understandably, and that when we speak of the mind, we do not in fact know of what we speak. I begin with a brief description of the origin of the mind in Cartesian dualism, as well as an explanation of the two main opposing sides of the mind–body debate: physicalism and dualism. Thereafter, I explain my argument (inspired by AJ Ayer) as the Inconceivability Argument, which states that the mind is not conceivable in a way that makes an understandable difference in the world, and that we thus do not truly understand the mind. After addressing several potential objections, I explain the consequences that the Inconceivability Argument hold for dualism and physicalism. I conclude that dualism no longer has a place in debates about consciousness and that physicalism must narrow its definition so that it only includes measurable cognitive processes, but not subjective experience. If we wish to understand what we speak, write, and argue about, then it is necessary to jettison the concept of the mind.

About the author

Reid Donson (he/him) is currently completing his Honour's degree in Philosophy at Stellenbosch University. His Honours research can be described as an existentialist approach to psychiatry, in which he attempts to develop an ontological theory of the human self that centres anxiety and depression (as opposed to reason). Next year, he plans on making a switch to journalism, through which he hopes to use his passion for writing to truly make an impact in the world. Personally, he is obsessed with animals and his life revolves around his cat and dog, Pharaoh and Rocket.

1. Introduction

The mind–body problem has long baffled philosophers. Scholars continue to argue over how best to reconcile a seemingly immaterial mind with a material brain. However, it seems to me that the issue does not lie in the capacity of philosophers and scientists to solve the problem, but rather with the 'problem' itself. In this paper I will argue that the mind–body problem is a false problem, and that when we speak of the 'mind', we do not in fact know (or understand) what we are talking about. For this reason, we should forego the concept of the mind entirely. I will begin with a brief discussion of the origin of the mind–body problem in Cartesian methodological scepticism, and thereafter provide a brief overview of the two major opposing views in philosophy of mind: physicalism and dualism. I will then briefly discuss A. J. Ayer and how my argument draws its inspiration from his critique of metaphysics, but that my method will be different from his, arguing for *understandability* rather than *verifiability*. My discussion will then focus solely on explaining and proving my argument, showing how it hinges on the inconceivability of a mindless world, and revealing the core reason for the incomprehensibility of the mind to be what I will call hard consciousness (a shorthand for the idea posited by David Chalmers (1995)). Finally, I will use my argument to refute dualism and limit the definition of physicalism, concluding with a narrower physicalist account of consciousness which excludes the mind.

2. Descartes and the origin of the mind–body problem

The mind–body problem finds its origins in Cartesian dualism. Considered by many the catalyst of modern western philosophical thought, René Descartes developed what is known as "*The Cartesian Method*", an attempt at finding indubitable knowledge (Cottingham, 1986:22, italics in original). This method involved him temporarily doubting *everything* in order to determine, step by step, what he can be certain of (ibid.:29). The first thing Descartes finds he can know with certainty is that he is thinking (as by the sheer act of doubting, he is thinking), and he then infers from thought to existence in his famous phrase "I think, therefore I am" (quoted in Trifu & Trifu, 2024:2).[1] This existing "I" was not for Descartes a physical, material "I", but rather his "soul" (or, for our purposes, his mind) (Cottingham, 1986:112). This is because Descartes believed that he could not doubt his own existence, but that he could doubt that he had a body, and as such, that which is indubitably existing is not his body (ibid.). Descartes thus believed that there was a distinction (and separation) between the "*res extensa*, literally 'extended thing'", and the "*res cogitans* ('thinking thing')" (ibid.:84, italics in original). In simple terms, the "extended thing" is the body and the "thinking thing" is the mind (ibid.). This describes "Cartesian dualism" and is the origin of the mind–body problem: the difficulty with reconciling how the mind (an immaterial substance) can affect and cause action in the body (a material substance) (ibid.:19). Descartes believed that the mind and body were able to interact due to the pineal gland: a small gland in the brain which "the mind prevails upon… to change the course of the animal [and human] spirits so as to bring about bodily movements" (McLaughlin, 1993:166). In other words, the mind influences the body through this gland. However, modern medicine proves that Descartes was mistaken about the function of the pineal gland, and even if this were not the case, there would still be the question of

[1] Such a leap is considered by many to be unwarranted, since he is assuming that thought necessitates there be an "I" to do said thinking (Lawhead, 2018:35). As it was Descartes' mission to move from doubt to certainty without making such assumptions, it seems he falters here in his own method.

how the immaterial mind interacts with a material pineal gland (Peres *et al.*, 2019:1700).[2] Descartes thus never established a convincing link between the mind and body, and for this reason few philosophers remain Cartesian dualists, with many subscribing to physicalism instead.

3. Physicalism and functionalism

Physicalism is the view, most popular in the natural/physical sciences today, that the mind and body are not separate but that the mind in fact *is* the body (or specifically, the brain) (Maung, 2019:61). Broadly speaking, there are two different categories that physicalists fall into: "non-reductive physicalists and reductive physicalists" (Kim, 2011:14). For the latter, the mind is identical (or "reducible") to the brain, such that when we speak of the mind we are necessarily also speaking of the brain, or at least part of the brain (ibid.). Such physicalists believe that supposedly mental properties are in fact only "physical properties" (ibid.). Non-reductive physicalists, on the other hand, are not doubtful of the existence of mental properties, and challenge the idea that they are simply identical to the physical (i.e., the brain) (ibid.:11). Jaegwon Kim explains that an important aspect of non-reductive physicalism is what he calls "*Mind-Body Supervenience*", which is the idea that mental properties exist but are inextricably linked to (or supervene on) the physical (2011:9, italics in original). According to this theory, certain mental properties necessarily arise from certain physical properties to the extent that if two beings are identical in brain structure, they are necessarily also identical in the structure of their minds; they would be, for all intents and purposes, exact replicas of each other on both a physical and a mental level (ibid.:10).[3] This view is of course not without its critics.

I cannot (and need not) address all the objections to physicalism here, but I would like to mention the one most pertinent to my description of physicalism. Critics have attempted to refute physicalism by arguing that if mental properties are (under the reductionist view) reducible to or (under the non-reductionist view) inextricably linked to "particular brain states", then that would mean creatures with a different biological makeup to humans could not present with the same mental properties (Schwitzgebel, 2014:670). Kim provides an example, saying that according to such physicalist views, an octopus would not be able to experience pain in the same way a human does because it is not neurologically identical to the human brain (2011:130). This seems obviously incorrect as harmed octopuses exhibit behaviour which clearly indicate they are in a state of pain. In response to this objection, the theory of "functionalism" was developed (ibid.:129). Functionalism is the idea that certain brain states function in ways that give rise to certain mental states, and that said mental states are not unique to one specific brain state (ibid.:130-131).[4] As such, an octopus' brain state and a human's brain state could both give rise to the same mental state (e.g., pain) (ibid.:131). This seemingly solves the problem of wildly different creatures with similar mental states. However, despite the popularity of this theory and physicalism in general, there are still those who advocate for a new kind of dualism instead.

4. Contemporary dualism and the theory of qualia

Whereas Cartesian dualism does not have many serious advocates in academic circles today, there is a contemporary version of mind–body dualism that remains popular. According to this view,

[2] It was found that the primary function of the pineal gland is the secretion of melatonin, a hormone which has been used to treat headaches (Peres *et al.*, 2019:1700).

[3] By "identical" I am referring to qualitative identity, rather than numerical identity.

[4] Hilary Putnam called this phenomenon "the multiple realizability of the mental" (Salazar, 2019:16).

there is an important part of human consciousness that physicalism does not account for: the uniqueness and inherent subjectivity of human experience (Jackson, 1982:131). This problem can be best described using a thought experiment developed by philosopher Frank Jackson. Imagine, says Jackson (1982:130), that there is a scientist named Mary who lives inside a room in which everything is black-and-white. Despite having never seen colour before, she is a master in colour-vision and knows everything there is to know about what happens inside a human when they see colour. Now imagine Mary leaves her room and sees a red apple for the first time: does she learn anything new from the experience of seeing colour that she did not already know from her knowledge of the physical processes of colour-vision? For dualists, it seems intuitively clear that Mary *would* learn something new. This experiential quality to consciousness is known as "qualia" (Jackson, 1982:130). Dualists argue that the existence of qualia proves that there is an element to consciousness that cannot be explained through neural processes, and that the mind is thus (at least to some extent) separate from the brain (Robinson, 2023). Naturally, there are those who take issue with this theory.

The biggest problem with a qualia-centred dualism is the difficulty in actually explaining qualia itself. Dualists like to explain qualia in terms of what they are *not* (i.e., neural processes), but struggle to define qualia in terms of what they *are*, beyond describing them as 'experience' or what "it is like to *be*" someone or something (Nagel, 1974:436, italics in original). Thus, Shevlin describes qualia as "*ineffable*; that is, they cannot neatly be put into words" (2019:37, italics in original). Robinson calls this ineffability (or dare I say, inexplicability) "the *queerness* of the mental", and explains that if the mind and qualia are defined as immaterial, then we need a proper account of their relation to the physical world (2023, italics in original). One should recall that this is the same problem faced by Cartesian dualism (Cottingham, 1986:119). It appears that any dualistic account of the mind and body will need to be able to explain what exactly the mind and qualia are and how they function in an otherwise material world for it to be an acceptable theory.[5] It is not enough to simply argue for an experiential gap in the physicalist account; that gap itself needs to be properly explained and defined. Having now discussed both physicalism and dualism, it is clear that there is no consensus on which conception of the mind best solves the mind–body problem. This leads me into my primary discussion for this paper: the problem with the 'mind' itself as a concept.

5. Ayer and the problem with the mind

Despite the continuous discussion surrounding the mind and how it links to the brain, it is my argument that we do not in fact know of what we speak when we speak of the 'mind', and that the term's usage causes more confusion than anything else. I am here drawing inspiration from the argument made by A. J. Ayer (1934:339) that metaphysical claims are "nonsensical" and "meaningless" due to their inability to be observed and verified. For Ayer, since metaphysics does not deal with reality, but rather with that which (apparently) lies below or beyond reality, it is not possible to confirm whether metaphysical statements are true or false. They are thus neither true nor false: they simply do not assert or mean anything. It is the equivalent of saying "Garbage handbag kill": it would make no sense to say of such a statement that it is true or that it is false; it is simply nonsensical and thus asserts nothing to which we can attribute truth or falsity (ibid.:345).

[5] Jackson refers to qualia as "epiphenomenal", meaning that they are "causally inefficacious" and have no impact on the (physical) world (1982:133). However, this is exactly the issue: if qualia make no perceivable difference to the world, then how can we know that they exist? How can we even know what they are?

I would like to apply this line of thinking specifically to statements concerning the mind. When we make statements such as "the mind arises from the brain" or "the mind is independent of the brain", we enter into metaphysical territory (often without even meaning to). While I draw inspiration from Ayer, my argument will not hinge on verifiability.

I have limited the scope of my argument not to what is verifiable, but to what is *conceivable*. My reasoning for this decision is twofold. Firstly, I believe conceivability is the primary issue in discussions of the mind. This should become clear in the process of my argument. Secondly, Ayer's Verification Principle is highly disputed. Many have argued that he falters in his own logic: his argument hinges on the premise that a statement is meaningful if and only if it can be in principle empirically verified, but this statement itself is not empirically verifiable (Ogan & Ariche, 2018:34). How then do we know that it is meaningful? Whether or not this rebuttal seems convincing, I would rather not base my argument on such a controversial theory. Thus, rather than arguing that statements about the mind are unverifiable and thus meaningless, I am arguing that due to the metaphysical nature of the mind (which, I will argue, is evident even in physicalist accounts), we are unsure of what we speak when we make statements about the mind. I am thus not arguing that such statements are meaningless, but rather that we simply do not know whether they are meaningful or not.[6] For this reason, I will not be using the Verification Principle to prove my point but will rather be making use of an adapted version of Brian Cutter's "*Inconceivability Argument*" (2023:330, italics in original).

6. The argument from inconceivability

My argument against the use of the term 'mind' hinges on the idea of inconceivability. In his argument against physicalism, Cutter explains that it is inconceivable that "phenomenal" experiences (of the mind) should arise plainly from the physical properties of the brain (2023:330). Since for Cutter inconceivability is an indicator of factual impossibility, he is of the opinion that the physicalist belief in physical properties underlying all aspects of the mind is unfounded (ibid.). It is not of importance to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Cutter's argument in this paper. I rather wish to draw inspiration from his argument's logical form. My argument is stated as follows:

> (P1) If we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an *understandable* difference, then we do not truly understand what we mean by the 'mind'.[7]
>
> (P2) We cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an understandable difference.[8]

[6] This also means that I am not making the radical claim that the mind does not exist. There could very well be something like a mind, and we are simply "cognitively closed" off from ever understanding it, as argued by Colin McGinn (1989:350). Whether something akin to the mind does or does not exist, however, is irrelevant to this paper. As will be clarified below, I am rather arguing that we do not understand what we mean by the mind, and as such should cease all uses of and references to the term.

[7] It is important to note that I use the word *understandable* rather than *verifiable* or *observable*, so as not to appeal to the Verification Principle. It also seems to me that for the mind to be verifiable, it needs to be, first and foremost, understandable, otherwise we would have no way of knowing or interpreting what exactly it is that needs verifying. As such, if the mind is not understandable, we need not worry about its verifiability.

[8] As I will be using the term *understand* often in this paper, and as it is the crux of my argument, I think it best to briefly define exactly what I mean by the term. One can be said to understand something when they are able to comprehend, formulate, and express what makes that thing what it is (i.e., what it consists of and/or how it functions). Thus, when I argue that the mind does not make an *understandable difference* in the world, I am arguing that we are unable to

(C) Therefore, we do not truly understand what we mean by the 'mind'.[9]

Whereas premise 2 will need much arguing and elaboration, premise 1 seems self-evidently true. If we cannot understand the difference something's presence in the world makes, then how can we say we actually understand that thing? If I were to say that I understand oxygen but could not explain the difference between a world with oxygen and a world without oxygen, I would be hard-pressed to find someone who actually believed I truly understood oxygen. As such, I take premise 1 to be self-evident.[10] I will thus be dedicating the majority of my efforts to proving the second premise, that a world in which the mind is absent in a way that is understandably different from a world in which the mind is present, is inconceivable. In order to do this, I will need to bring the concept of consciousness into the discussion and differentiate between what Chalmers calls the "'hard' and 'easy' problems" of consciousness (1995:200).

6.1. Easy and hard consciousness

My argument aligns somewhat with an argument from Chalmers that it is "the hard problem of consciousness" which causes our confusion about the 'mind' (1995:201). To attempt to define consciousness is to face many (if not all) the same challenges one faces in trying to define the mind. For some, consciousness is just another, more contemporary, term for the mind (Prabhu & Bhat, 2013:182). Others consider consciousness only one aspect of the mind (Earl, 2019:84). Either way, most understand consciousness as encompassing "many different phenomena" (e.g., qualitative experience, cognition, awareness, rationality, etc.) (Chalmers, 1995:200). Chalmers divides consciousness into those aspects which are easier to understand, verify, and explain, and those aspects which seem to resist explanation (1995:200). The former aspects, which we can call easy consciousness, are those parts of consciousness which can be analysed via scientific investigation, such as the ability to relay experiential information or "react to environmental stimuli" (ibid.). The inexplicable aspects, which we can call hard consciousness, refer to the "subjective" nature of human existence, or "one's ongoing experience" (Chalmers, 1995:200; Earl, 2019:84). It is hard consciousness to which dualists refer when they speak of "qualia" (Chalmers, 1995:201). Whether consciousness is another word for the mind or only a part of the mind, it would seem that the confusion surrounding the mind is caused by hard consciousness (ibid.). As such, it is this aspect, "the subjective aspect of experience", which my argument specifically challenges, and this will become evident as we discuss premise 2 (ibid.).

6.2. Proving the second premise: why we cannot conceive of a mindless world

In order to prove the validity of premise 2, I will make use of a simple thought experiment. Imagine that there are two people named Sarah and Lana who live on two different versions of Earth. Sarah lives on Earth-1 in which everyone, including herself, have minds. Lana lives on Earth-2 in which everyone, including herself, *do not* have

comprehend, formulate, and express how a world-with-mind is different to a world-without-mind.

[9] I have used (P1) to indicate 'Premise 1' and (P2) to indicate 'Premise 2'. (C) refers to the argument's conclusion.

[10] One may very well point out logic or mathematics as examples of things we are able to understand without needing to understand the difference they make in the world. For example, we can understand that 1 + 1 = 2 without any real-world reference; we need not think 1 *cow* + 1 *cow* = 2 *cows* for it to make sense. However, I would argue that logic and math differ from the mind in that they are thought structures or tools which we use to think, and as such they do not *exist* in a strict sense of the word. The mind, on the other hand, while not considered tangible by dualists, is at the very least believed to exist and is able to actively influence the world. It is thus necessary to understand this effect on the world, to understand what it means to say the mind exists, if we are to say that we understand the mind itself.

minds. In every other way, Earth-1 and Earth-2 are identical. Now I ask the reader: are you able to describe the difference between Sarah and Lana? Is there a conceivable difference between them given that everything about them (including the fact that they have brains that function correctly) is identical, except that one has a mind, and the other does not?

Chalmers would argue that there *is* a conceivable difference between Sarah and Lana, according to his "Conceivability Argument" (2002:249). Chalmers says that it is possible to conceive of "a *zombie*: a system that is physically identical to a conscious being but that lacks consciousness entirely" (ibid., italics in original). In terms of our thought experiment, Lana would be Chalmers' zombie: she would be in all observable ways identical to Sarah, but she would have no depth to her (i.e., no subjectivity). However, the idea that this is conceivable is not convincing to me. Daniel Dennett agrees, arguing that if a zombie truly is physically identical to a human, then it would be behaviourally identical too, even down to the behaviour of its smallest atoms, since Chalmers describes them as being "molecule-for-molecule identical" with humans (Chalmers, 2002:249; Dennett, 1995:322). Since this is the case, Dennett argues that to say we can conceive of a zombie in a way that understandably differentiates between it and a human is to overestimate our conceptive abilities (ibid.:325). In other words, it makes no sense to say that Lana is identical to Sarah in every way but that there is still something missing (i.e., the mind). This will make more sense after dealing with the first and most obvious objection to this argument.

One may well object that I am overemphasising the metaphysical (even ethereal) quality of the mind and neglecting those aspects of the mind which are more easily explainable (Chalmers, 1995:200). Such an objector may rightfully call upon those aspects of the mind that we earlier grouped under the category of "easy consciousness". I concede that it *may* be possible to conceive of a difference between Sarah and Lana in terms of easy consciousness; the former exhibiting such consciousness and the latter not. For example, we can imagine that if Sarah stubs her toe, she would be able to report that the event caused her pain (due to her brain's ability to connect a particular sensation with its most likely cause) (ibid.:201). It is also possible for us to imagine that if Lana stubs her toe, she would be unable to report that it was the action of stubbing her toe that resulted in the ensuing pain, since she does not have access to easy consciousness (we can imagine that there is a disconnect somewhere in her neural pathways that prevents her from being able to connect an effect with its most plausible cause) (ibid.).[11] While such a case is clearly conceivable, I hesitate to accept that it is conceivable in a way that makes an *understandable* difference. While we may be able to claim that we can conceive of some kind of disconnect in Lana's brain, pinpointing exactly where and what that disconnect is seems more difficult. Chalmers himself acknowledges this when he says that "we do not yet have anything close to a complete explanation of these phenomena" (i.e., phenomena related to easy consciousness) (1995:201). However, it is possible that we simply do not fully understand easy consciousness *now*, but that in the future, with enough developments in science, we will. Therefore, let us assume that the "easy consciousness" objection holds. I would like to show that the biggest proof of premise 2 would nevertheless still apply, as it appeals to *hard* consciousness.

[11] Such an example assumes that the mind at the very least arises from the brain and would thus fit into a physicalist's account of the mind. As such, a strict dualist would not be able to make such an objection appealing to easy consciousness (as they believe that the mind is separate from the brain).

The core reason that Lana and her fellow mindless humans on Earth-2 cannot be conceived of has to do with the nature of hard consciousness. If Lana is without a mind, she is without hard consciousness, or "subjective…experience" (Chalmers, 1995:201). For Sarah, when she stubs her toe, she not only enters the brain state that correlates with the mental state of pain, but she also *experiences* pain (ibid.). This is the "what it is like" aspect of the mind (Nagel, 1974:438). To quote Thomas Nagel, "there is something it is like to *be*": something it is like to be you, something it is like to be me, and something it is like to be Sarah (ibid.:436, italics in original). However, this is not the case for Lana. There is nothing it is like to *be* Lana because Lana has no hard consciousness. When Lana stubs her toe, although her neurons fire in the exact same ways as Sarah's does, and although she enters the brain state that would normally correlate with pain, she experiences no pain. This is the biggest issue with the mind and why I believe premise 2 succeeds: Lana does not seem conceivable. If, as Nagel argues, we cannot even conceive of what it would be like to be a different organism, how can we conceive of what it would be like to have nothing in life be like anything at all (or, put simply, to live as if we were experiencing life but to never actually experience anything) (ibid.:442)? This does not seem plausible. To demonstrate this further, I will deal with one final objection before moving on.

One may object that Lana is clearly conceivable because otherwise I would not have been able to describe her the way I have. They might say that in trying to prove the inconceivability of Lana, I have in fact conceived of her myself. To such an objector I posit the following rebuttal. It is possible to conceive of a man who sticks his hand into a fire and, upon removing it from the flame, finds that his hand has been *frozen* by the heat of the fire. Such a scenario is entirely conceivable. However, it is not conceivable in an understandable way. While I can imagine the scenario from the perspective of a spectator watching it unfold, I cannot imagine it from inside the event. In other words, I cannot conceive of what it would take for a fire to have a freezing effect on a hand. The inner workings of such a scenario escape me. Importantly, in such a scenario I need not understand the "inside" of the event for me to adequately understand fire (at least from a basic, observer's perspective), since the main difference between a world in which fire burns and a world in which fire freezes would be the "outside" effect, the observable burning or freezing; however, this does not work the same for the Lana scenario. Since the mind by definition has to do with the inner workings of someone's experience, to adequately understand the difference between Sarah and Lana, one would need to understand the difference "from the inside", i.e., from each of their perspectives. The basis of this idea is by no means new. Collingwood posited a similar idea in discussing the difference between the objects of study in science and history. As explained by Van Niekerk,

> natural events can be explained only 'from the outside', and this involves the kind of procedures set forth in positivist theory. Historical actions (i.e. the achievements of human culture), however, are not 'mere events'; they have an 'inside' or a 'thought-side'. Their 'explanation' requires the discovery of the thought of the agent which the action as a whole expresses (Van Niekerk, 1990:5-6).

While I am not discussing history, the basic idea remains the same: to understand the mind (or even the products of the mind), one must understand its "inside" or "thought-side" (Van Niekerk, 1990:5). Thus, what I have described about Lana shows that I have conceived of her from the 'outside', but not from the "inside", and as such I do not adequately understand the difference between her and Sarah.

6.3. Taking stock

I have now shown, to the best of my ability, that the second premise is true. Premise 1 states that if we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an understandable difference, then we do not truly understand what we mean by the 'mind'. I argued that such a premise is intuitively true. Premise 2 states that we cannot conceive of a world in which the non-existence (or non-presence) of the mind makes an understandable difference. I have provided evidence in this regard. Therefore, given that premise 1 and premise 2 are true, it necessarily follows that we do not truly understand what we mean by the 'mind'. I think it necessary to briefly touch on what this means for dualism and physicalism.

7. The fate of dualism

Dualism naturally falls away as a result of the Inconceivability Argument. As we have discussed, a mind–body dualist believes that there is a distinct difference between the brain and the mind, and qualia (i.e., hard consciousness) is often called upon as evidence of this difference (Jackson, 1982:130). However, we have established that it is in fact hard consciousness which makes the mind incomprehensible and, as such, any theory that speaks of hard consciousness or the mind creates more confusion than clarity. There may of course still be dualists who disagree with my conclusion.

I predict that objectors would most likely draw on findings in contemporary cognitive science to dispute my point. For example, they may call upon Benjamin Libet, a cognitive scientist who claimed to have proven the distinction between the mind and the brain by showing that there is a delay between "brain processes" and their corresponding "mental events" (Vacariu, 2011:31). In other words, Libet supposedly showed that there is a short period of time between the brain's decision to perform an action and the individual themselves (i.e., the "mind") becoming aware of said decision (ibid.). A dualist may thus argue that we *can* conceive of a world in which the absence of the mind makes an understandable difference, namely a world in which there is no such delay between the brain's decision and the subject's awareness of that decision. Such an argument would supposedly refute the first premise of my argument and thus refute its conclusion that the mind is not understandable. While I do not deny the conceivability of the world they are proposing, I am not convinced that this refutes my argument.

There are two reasons I believe an argument drawing on Libet's delay (and those like it) fail to refute my Inconceivability Argument. Firstly, there have been doubts cast on Libet's findings which, if correct, neutralises the strength of the dualist's objection (as there would be no proof of Libet's delay in this world and thus conceiving of a world without such a delay would not necessarily be conceiving of a world different from our own) (Lacalli, 2023).[12] Secondly, and more importantly, even if Libet's delay exists, it only accounts for easy consciousness, as it is only such consciousness which can be measured and analysed scientifically (Chalmers, 1995:200). This means that even in the conceived world without Libet's delay, hard consciousness (or the lack thereof) can still not be accounted for in a way that makes an understandable difference. Since I have explained that hard consciousness is the real problem in our understanding of the mind, my argument remains unrefuted by those objectors who attempt to use cognitive science as a rebuttal (since, like Libet's delay, cognitive science only applies to easy consciousness). Having dealt with

[12] As I am no scientist, I am in no position to discuss the plausibility of the doubts cast on Libet's findings. If the reader would like to know more, see Neafsey (2021). Most importantly, as I explain after this, the validity of my argument does not rest on the failing of Libet's delay.

dualism, we now move on to the consequences of the Inconceivability Argument for physicalism.

8. The fate of physicalism

Now it may be that a reader finds it difficult to distinguish between my view and physicalism.[13] A reductive physicalist may argue that I am simply repeating what they have been saying: that the mind is simply the brain, and that when we speak of the mind we are actually only speaking of the brain. However, this would be an incorrect interpretation of my argument. The difference is that physicalists are attempting to reconcile the mind and the body/brain by explaining that the former is simply the latter, whereas I would like to jettison the concept of the 'mind' entirely (Kim, 2011:14). Even physicalists acknowledge that there are different meanings associated with 'mind' and 'brain', otherwise they would not need to write papers arguing that the one is the other; it would be obvious. As such, even if a physicalist claiming that "the mind *is* the brain" *thinks* that they are making an identity claim the likes of "a bachelor *is* an unmarried man" (where both the former and the latter have the same denotation), all they are really doing is attempting to reconcile the meanings associated with the mind and those associated with the brain. The problem is that the concept of the mind and the meaning we associate with it will always be linked to its metaphysical roots (i.e., Descartes' conception of the mind) no matter how much we try to explain it in terms of the brain. As such, the mind will remain incomprehensible. Considering all this, do we now need to forego physicalism as well?

My answer is no. Rather than completely abandoning physicalism, I argue that what is necessary is a redefining of the theory. In light of what has been discussed, it seems that the only acceptable physicalist position is one which does not argue over issues of hard consciousness at all, but that only applies the term 'consciousness' to Chalmers' easy problems (1995:200). I have shown above why hard consciousness is the core reason that the mind is incomprehensible. It thus follows that if we must talk of consciousness, we can only understandably apply it to easy consciousness, as this would allow for an understanding of consciousness as a measurable functioning of the brain.[14] This is the only application of consciousness that avoids the inconceivability problem.[15] However, as we have established that the concept of the mind is inextricably linked to the idea of hard consciousness, we must leave the mind behind.[16]

9. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the problem with the 'mind' as a concept, arguing that it leads to false problems, such as the infamous mind–body problem, and that the term should thus be jettisoned. I traced the mind–body problem from

[13] I will be focusing solely on reductive physicalism, as non-reductive physicalism hinges on the idea that the mind is a different substance to the body, which arises from the brain (Kim, 2011:10). Thus, such a position is naturally ruled out by my argument as not understandable as a result of the incomprehensibility of the mind.

[14] This of course seems to imply that we leave all talk of consciousness to science, which would understandably leave a bad taste in the mouths of many philosophers. I do believe that there is a space in philosophy for talk of *human experience* (i.e., what it is like to exist and be a human being). We see many such writings in the works of existentialist philosophers. However, we have seen that such 'what is it like' talk only serves to create confusion in discussions attempting to explain what consciousness is.

[15] Such an understanding of consciousness presupposes that easy consciousness is understandable, which is debatable. See the third paragraph of section 6.2. However, I am conceding that easy consciousness *may* be understandable in the absence of a convincing opposing argument and given "Libet's 'delay' problem" (which I discussed in section 7) (Vacariu, 2011:31). It is, of course, up to the reader to decide whether they accept an easy consciousness physicalism or would rather forego physicalism entirely.

[16] It is important to note that I am not concluding that the mind does not exist. Rather, I am simply saying that we do not understand what we mean by the 'mind' and are thus not even capable of understandably arguing that the mind does or does not exist.

its origins in Cartesian dualism to contemporary attempts at solving it, namely physicalism and modern dualism. Laying out my argument, I set out to prove its two premises, the first of which I found self-evidently true, and the second of which I argued for using the idea that a mindless world is inconceivable. Dealing with multiple possible objections to my argument, I finally addressed what it means for dualism and physicalism, concluding that the former should be dismissed, and the latter should be narrowed, excluding all talk of subjective experience. As I recognise the radicalness of disowning the 'mind', I invite the reader to develop their own objections to my argument. However, they would need to be able to show how a mindless world is conceivable in a way that makes an understandable difference.

References

Ayer, A.J. 1934. Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics. *Mind*, 43(171):335-345.

Chalmers, D.J. 1995. Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3):200-219.

Chalmers, D.J. 2002. Consciousness and Its Place in Nature, in S. Stitch & T. Warfield (eds.). *Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Mind*. Malden: Blackwell. 247-271.

Cottingham, J. 1986. *Descartes*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Cutter, B. 2023. The Inconceivability Argument. *Ergo*, 9(12):329-356.

Dennett, D. 1995. The Unimagined Preposterousness of Zombies. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(4):322-326.

Earl, B. 2019. The Structure of Mind and the Role of Consciousness. *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Science*, 7(2):84-101.

Jackson, F. 1982. Epiphenomenal Qualia. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32(127):127-136.

Kim, J. 2011. *Philosophy of Mind*. Third edition. New York: Routledge.

Lacalli, T. 2023. Consciousness and its hard problems: separating the ontological from the evolutionary. *Frontier Psychology* [Electronic], 14. Available: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1196576 [2024, September 6].

Lawhead, W.F. 2018. *Philosophy 214: Subdisciplines in Philosophy 1*. Fourth custom edition. Hampshire: Cengage Learning EMEA.

Maung, H.H. 2019. Dualism and its place in a philosophical structure for psychiatry. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 22(1):59-69.

McGinn, C. 1989. Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem? *Mind*, 98(391):349-366.

McLaughlin, P. 1993. Descartes on Mind-Body Interaction and the Conservation of Motion. *The Philosophical Review*, 102(2):155-182.

Nagel, T. 1974. What Is It Like to Be a Bat? *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4):435-450.

Neafsey, E.J. 2021. Conscious intention and human action: Review of the rise and fall of the readiness potential and Libet's clock. *Consciousness and Cognition* [Electronic], 94. Available: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34325185/ [2023, September 7].

Ogan, T.V. & Ariche, C.K. 2018. A Critical Evaluation of Ayer's Verification Principle. *Journal of Good Governance and Sustainable Development in Africa*, 4(1):23-36.

Peres, M.F.P., Valença, M.M., Amaral, F.G. & Cipolla-Neto, J. 2019. Current understanding of pineal gland structure and function in headache. *Cephalalgia*, 39(13):1700-1709.

Prabhu, H.R.A. & Bhat, P.S. 2013. Mind and consciousness in yoga – Vedanta: A comparative analysis with western psychological concepts. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(2):182-186.

Robinson, H. 2023. Dualism, in E.N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (eds.). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition) [Electronic]. Available: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/dualism/ [2023, September 11].

Salazar, H. 2019. Materialism and Behaviorism, in H. Salazar & C. Hendricks (eds.). *Introduction to Philosophy: Philosophy of Mind*. Montreal: Rebus Foundation. 13-21.

Schwitzgebel, E. 2014. The Crazyist Metaphysics of Mind. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 92(4):665-682.

Shevlin, H. 2019. Qualia and Raw Feels, in H. Salazar & C. Hendricks (eds.). *Introduction to Philosophy: Philosophy of Mind*. Montreal: Rebus Foundation. 37-43.

Trifu, S. & Trifu, A.D. 2024. The Mind Body Problem Descartes: Dualism and Skepticism. *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 14(1):1-4.

Vacariu, G. 2011. The Mind-Body Problem Today. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 1(1):26-34.

Van Niekerk, A.A. 1990. Textuality and the Human Sciences: An appraisal of Paul Ricoeur. *Scriptura*, (5):1-27.