Property Dualism (not?) for Property Nominalists
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Abstract: Property dualists believe in only one kind of substance (physical) but two fundamentally different kinds of properties: physical and mental. In this paper we argue that nominalism about properties is at odds with property dualism. Our argument relies on a principle we call Harmony, which we propose as a minimal constraint on the mental status of properties (nominalistically construed) and substances. We consider a variety of nominalisms and argue that none sits well with property dualism. We start with class nominalism and then generalize to resemblance, “ostrich”, predicate and concept nominalism. We then give a modified argument against combining property dualism with mereological nominalism. Since the properties of property dualism have not previously been thought of as having to be universals or tropes, but rather as ‘properties’ in a sense neutral to the general metaphysics of properties, our conclusion is significant (and bad) news for nominalistically inclined property dualists.

1. Introduction

Substance dualists hold that there are two fundamentally different kinds of substances: physical and mental. According to a standard version of this view, your body is a physical substance, whereas your soul is a mental substance.¹ Property dualism, by contrast, is the view that there is only one kind of substance (physical), but two fundamentally different kinds of properties: physical and mental.²

Property dualism has been criticized as either collapsing into substance dualism or at least enjoying no distinctive advantage over it.³ In this paper we will wield a similar criticism, but our argument will have a unique spin: we will scrutinize what it could mean for a property to count as mental given different conceptions of the relation between the ontological categories of substance and property. We will restrict our attention to nominalist positions, i.e. views according to which the ultimate building blocks of reality are non-predicable particulars. We will

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¹ Substance dualism has recently gained some traction, although it remains fairly unpopular. Contemporary defenders include Kripke (1980), Swinburne (1984), Zimmerman (2003), and Barnett (2010).

² Some form of property dualism has been defended by Jackson (1982), Chalmers (1996), and Kim (2005), among others. Our definition is somewhat stipulative, since property dualism is usually understood simply as the thesis that there are two fundamentally different kinds of properties, mental and physical, without the additional thesis of substance monism built in. This is just a matter of bookkeeping; for ease of presentation, we found it convenient to build substance monism into the definition of property dualism.

³ See, e.g., Zimmerman 2010 and Lycan 2013.
argue that no nominalist account of properties leaves room for any salient version of property dualism.\(^4\)

2. Preliminaries

We will use the words ‘substance’ and ‘property’ in the sense in which we take them to be typically used to formulate these positions. By ‘substance’ we mean any particular that can bear properties but isn’t itself the sort of thing that can be “had” in the way properties are.\(^5\) By ‘property’ we mean non-linguistic predicables that characterize subjects of predication. As we understand ‘property’, there trivially are properties; the question is whether they are among the basic constituents of reality or are reducible to other types of things.

By ‘mental substance’, we mean a substance that is irreducibly mental. It will be helpful to distinguish two ways in which something might be reducible to something else. The first kind of reduction involves facts about an entity from arbitrary ontological category \(C\) reducing to facts involving entities from distinct ontological category \(C^*\). The second kind involves facts about an entity from \(C\) reducing to facts only about other entities from \(C\). Call the first ‘extra-categorial’ and the second ‘intra-categorial’ reduction. Our usage of ‘mental’ deploys the intra-categorial notion of reduction. Thus on our usage, a mental substance’s status as mental doesn’t reduce to facts only about other substances.

Importantly, a substance doesn’t qualify as mental in our sense just because it has observable states indicative of a functioning psychology or even because there is something it is like to be it. Otherwise, the thesis that there are mental substances would be uncontroversial. Rather, a substance qualifies as mental in our sense only if it’s not physical.\(^6\) This follows from the standard interpretation of substance dualism as the thesis that there are two fundamentally different kinds of substances, physical and mental. So the God of the Abrahamic religions and immaterial souls, if such there be, are mental substances, while chairs and mushrooms aren’t.\(^7\)

More controversially, we intend to use ‘mental property’ analogously: a mental property’s status as mental is intra-categorially irreducible. We realize that this doesn’t fit standard usage.

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\(^4\) Two important predecessors of our paper are Francescotti 2001 and Schneider 2012, but our discussion importantly differs from theirs. Francescotti considers definitions of physical propertyhood in terms of the physical status of substances, with no special attention to the relation between categories of property and substance, whereas we will consider definitions of mental propertyhood in terms of the mental status of substances, with nominalist background assumptions. Schneider’s main focus is on realist views about properties (understood broadly to include trope theory), and the assumptions she makes about the relation between the mental status of substances and that of properties are considerably stronger than the ones we make (on which see more in the next section.)

\(^5\) Contrary to much of the specialized literature on substance and ontological dependence, we don’t assume that ontological independence is either necessary or sufficient for substancehood. See Correia 2008, Koslicki 2013 and Tahko and Lowe 2015 for helpful surveys on ontological dependence and Robinson 2018 on substance.

\(^6\) Thus substances as conceived of by “neutral monist” views are neither mental nor physical substances in our sense.

\(^7\) Thus our preferred way of cutting up logical space classifies some self-titled substance dualists as substance monists. For example, Lowe (1996) defends a view he calls “substantial dualism” (34), according to which both persons and bodies are material substances, but they are distinct since they have different persistence conditions. In a different fashion, Engelhardt (2015) defends what he calls “property reductive emergent dualism”, which combines property monism with the claim that persons aren’t identical to or reducible to lower-level physical entities. In our book, neither Lowe’s nor Engelhardt’s view qualify as versions of substance dualism.
Surely, one might complain, physicalists don’t deny that there are mental properties; they just identify them with or explain them in terms of physical properties. However, since we are interested in the relation between substance and property dualism, we prefer to have a unified terminology that treats ‘mental’ the same way, whether applied to substances or to properties; and it’s widely agreed that a substance counts as mental only if it’s intra-categorically irreducibly mental. If you object to this use, just mentally prefix every occurrence of ‘mental property’ below with ‘intra-categorically irreducibly’.

It will prove useful to introduce a further distinction between two ways of exemplifying a property: inherently or classificationally. Entity x inherently has property F iff x’s intrinsic qualitative nature appropriately resembles the intrinsic qualitative natures of entities that are intra-categorically irreducibly F; x is classificationally F if (though perhaps not only if) x’s being F is extra-categorically reducible to facts about entities that are inherently F. For example, suppose Platonism about universals is true and consider the property of being an isthmus. That property isn’t inherently geographic, since Platonic universals lack the appropriate intrinsic qualitative resemblance to irreducibly geographic substances. However, it’s classificationally geographic, since its being geographic plausibly reduces to facts about certain substances, namely isthmuses.

Finally, we want to make explicit a substantive assumption we will rely on throughout the rest of the paper:

\[(\text{Harmony}): \text{For any entity } x \text{ of arbitrary ontological category } C, \text{ if entities belonging to category } C \text{ are constructions out of entities } y_1 \ldots y_n \text{ belonging to another category, } C^* \text{ (i.e., if category } C \text{ extra-categorially reduces to category } C^*), \text{ then the mental status of } x \text{ is a function of the mental status of } y_1 \ldots y_n \text{ at least in the sense that it cannot be the case that } x \text{ is mental (whether inherently or classificationally) but none of } y_1 \ldots y_n \text{ is inherently mental.}\]

Harmony says that if an ontological category reduces to another ontological category, the mental status of things in the first category cannot entirely come apart from the mental status of things in the second category. Note that the principle doesn’t legislate on the mental status of constructions that involve both inherently mental and non-mental constituents.

Why believe Harmony? The way we use the word ‘mental,’ the mental/physical distinction divides entities to which those notions apply into two fundamentally different classes. Suppose substances are constructions out of properties. What would it even mean, then, to suggest that a substance is mental (/physical), even though all of the properties it’s made up of are inherently physical (/mental)? Or suppose that properties are classes of their instances. What would it even mean to suggest, then, that a property is mental (/physical), even though none of the instances it

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9 We characterize the condition of being classificationally F as merely sufficient because we see no harm in allowing inherently F entities to count as also classificationally F, in which case being inherently F would be a second way of being classificationally F.
is a class of are inherently mental (/physical)? We struggle even to make sense of such hypotheses.

Note the emphasis on the special status of the mental/physical distinction. We aren’t claiming that for every property \( \psi \), no substance can be \( \psi \) if none of its bundled properties are \( \psi \), or that no property is \( \psi \) if none of its instances are \( \psi \). These principles are obviously false: Donald Trump is a president although none of his properties is a president, and green is a color yet no green thing is a color. Instead, we contend that the property being mental is special in this regard. We don’t understand what could make a substance mental if none of its properties is mental. Suppose that substances are bundles of properties. Your toothbrush has no mental properties. What prevents it from nonetheless being a mental substance? It’s hard to say without accepting Harmony. Or suppose you are a class nominalist. Surely the table’s having a mass of 15 pounds isn’t a mental property. But why not? Again, it’s hard to give an answer that makes no reference to the things that have this property, i.e. the elements of the class of things with a mass of 15 pounds.

In the next section, we will argue that, given Harmony, what we call ‘strict nominalism’ about properties is at odds with property dualism.

3. Property dualism and strict nominalism

We use the expression ‘strict nominalism’ to pick out a subset of these views that dispenses not only with universals but also with tropes or “abstract particulars”. We will start with a run-of-the-mill strict nominalist view, class nominalism, and argue that it leaves no room for property dualism (3.1). Next, we will extend the argument to other nominalist views, i.e. predicate, concept and ostrich nominalism (3.2). Finally, we will present a slightly different argument showing that mereological nominalism, too, rules out property dualism (3.3).

3.1. Class nominalism

Class nominalists identify properties with the classes of their instances. In light of the problem of co-extension, namely that different properties can have the same actual instances, we will work with a modalized version that identifies properties with classes of their possible instances.\(^{10}\) Harmony doesn’t yet tell us when a property is classificationally mental. One option is

\(^{10}\)Lewis 1986. We will ignore the interesting question of how class nominalism interacts with the metaphysics of possible worlds and the idea that there are mere possibilia.
(Weak Class Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Weak Class*): a property is classificationally mental iff at least one of its possible instances is an inherently mental substance.\(^\text{11}\)

Weak Class strikes us as unpromising. The ‘only if’ part implies that if there are mental properties then substance dualism is at least possibly true. Surely this is a surprising result from the perspective of property dualism. If property dualists bore such a commitment, their view would lose an important advantage that is widely attributed to it. Property dualists believe that “zombie worlds” (worlds physically indistinguishable from ours but lacking phenomenal consciousness) are possible, whereas substance dualists believe that disembodied existence is possible. While both possibilities are controversial, the latter is typically considered more problematic. It thus is unclear why, if property dualism requires the possibility of inherently mental substances, one should be merely a property dualist, rather than a substance dualist, in the first place.\(^\text{12}\) The ‘if’ direction is even more problematic, for it wildly overgenerates classificationally mental properties. Take the property of being simple (indivisible). Plausibly, if inherently mental substances are possible then they are simple. But then, if such substances are possible, being simple is classificationally mental. So, electrons, quarks, or whichever physical entities are simple, have mental properties – a bad result.

One could attempt to restrict the properties eligible for analysis by Weak Class, but we are skeptical that this will rule out all miscategorizations. For example, one might try to restrict Weak Class to non-negative qualitative properties. But possible mental substances aren’t only simple; they are also concrete. So are lots of things in the actual world, like chairs and chewing gum, but it shouldn’t follow that they have mental properties. Generally, any non-arbitrary

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\(^\text{11}\) In fact, this is an oversimplification. For plausibly, some mental properties are second-order in the sense that every instance of them is a property. For example, we find it intuitive that being a phenomenal property is itself a mental property, albeit one no instance of which is a substance. We ignore this complication in Weak Class and subsequent definitions, since our main concern has to do only with first-order properties. I.e. the property dualism we are interested in is the view that every substance is physical but some substances have irreducible first-order mental properties.

\(^\text{12}\) One possible objection is that substance dualism proper require not only the *de dicto* possibility of disembodied mental substances but the *de re* possibility that some actually existing substance exist disembodied. This point is correct so far as it goes, but given class nominalism, there are plausible ways to bridge the gap between the *de dicto* and the *de re* claim. Here’s one. Given Weak Class, for any mental property you have, there is a possible disembodied mental substance that has that property (i.e. belongs to the class that property is identical to). Given plausible recombination principles, there is also a disembodied mental substance that has *all and only* your mental properties, that is, a disembodied mental substance that exactly shares your mental profile (right now, it appears to her as if she’s sitting in your chair and contemplates this argument). Moreover, given property dualism it’s also plausible that there are possible substances that are your mental duplicates but lack some, but not all, of your physical parts. Now take a series of substances, \(S_1\ldots S_n\), such that \(S_1\) is you, \(S_2\) is a mental duplicate of you that lacks one particle you have, \(S_3\) is a mental duplicate of you that lacks two of your particles (\(\ldots\)), and \(S_n\) is a mental duplicate of yours that is a disembodied soul. Intuitively, \(S_2\) is a way \(S_1\) (you) could have been, \(S_3\) is a way \(S_2\) could have been (\(\ldots\)), and \(S_n\) is a way \(S_{n-1}\) could have been. Assuming that the accessibility relation between possible worlds is transitive, it follows that you could have been \(S_n\) that is, that *you* could have been a disembodied soul.
restriction will likely imply that if mental substances are possible then there are property-classes that (i) include such substances and some actual-world entities but (ii) intuitively aren’t mental.

Let us consider, then, another option:

(Strong Class Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Strong Class*): a property is classificationally mental iff every possible instance of it is inherently mental

The chief problem for Strong Class concerns its ‘only if’ direction, which implies that if you have mental properties, you are a mental substance. This result is bad enough in our view to be prohibitive. If mental properties require mental substances to instantiate them, the whole point of distinguishing property dualism from substance dualism is undermined, as the former collapses into the latter.

One candidate fix for Strong Class is to broaden its modal scope so that having mental properties only makes one possibly a mental substance:

(Modal Strong Class Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Modal Strong Class*): a property is classificationally mental iff every possible instance $x$ of it is such that, possibly, $x$ is inherently mental

Modal Strong Class has the advantage over Strong Class of not requiring all bearers of mental properties to be mental substances. It also has the advantage over Weak Class of not overgenerating mental properties. For there is little reason to think that chairs and chewing gum are possibly inherently mental. However, like Weak Class, Modal Strong Class commits the property dualist to the possibility of mental substances. While this is a serious drawback for reasons we outline above, it’s less clearly a prohibitive problem than the respective problems of Weak Class and Strong Class that Modal Strong Class avoids. We tentatively suggest, then, that Modal Strong Class is the best characterization of ‘mental property’ available to the property dualist class nominalist. Unfortunately, it still leaves unclear why one should prefer property dualism to substance dualism.

3.2. *Resemblance, ostrich, predicate and concept nominalism*

Above we argued that class nominalists about properties would have a difficult time being property dualists. But as we will quickly show here, other forms of nominalism inherit essentially the same problems. The key point to recognizing this is that throughout the previous section, all our arguments and counterexamples relied merely on a necessary and sufficient criterion of having a property: that for any $x$ and any property $\psi$, $x$ has $\psi$ iff $x$ is a member of the
class of all possible \( \psi \)s. Crucially, most non-class-nominalists accept this; they just think that the criterion is insufficiently informative or that it cannot serve as a guide to the true ontology of properties.

Take, for instance, resemblance nominalism (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002). Resemblance nominalists differ from class nominalists in that they give a further definition of membership in a class in terms of resemblance (the details of which need not concern us here) and don’t necessarily identify properties with classes. But none of this makes any difference to the argument of 3.1, which didn’t rely on the assumption that properties were identical to classes; all it assumed was that having any property, \( \psi \), is necessarily co-extensional with membership in the class of all possible \( \psi \)s. Since the resemblance nominalist accepts this much, everything we said above about class nominalism carries over mutatis mutandis to resemblance nominalism.

The same points apply to more exotic forms of nominalism, for example ostrich nominalism 13 (which refuses to acknowledge any philosophical problem to which more substantive forms of nominalism or realism about universals could serve as a solution) or predicate and concept nominalism (which attempt to reduce the metaphysical problem of universals to a problem about predicates or concepts, respectively)14. While these views don’t identify properties with the classes of their instances, they agree that \( x \) has the property of being \( \psi \) iff it belongs to the class of all possible \( \psi \)s. If class nominalism is in tension with property dualism, then so are resemblance, ostrich, concept and predicate nominalism.

4.3. Mereological nominalism

Above we have argued that when combined with property dualism, most forms of nominalism are subject to the same difficulties as class nominalism. A less well-known form of nominalism, mereological nominalism, requires different treatment.

Mereological nominalism is the view that properties are mereological fusions of their instances (Effingham forthcoming). Class nominalists standardly respond to the familiar coextension problem by going modal: properties are classes of all their instances, whether in the actual or other possible worlds. The analogous mereological nominalist solution would be to insist that properties are cross-modal fusions of their instances, but this isn’t Effingham’s preferred response. Instead, he identifies properties with actual-world fusions of their instances but amends the view with a plenitude ontology of material objects: for any matter-filled spatiotemporal region and any consistent modal profile, there is a mereological fusion that occupies that region and has that modal profile. So there will be lots of spatiotemporally overlapping fusions with different modal profiles.

13 The locus classicus is Devitt 1980; see also Van Cleve 1994.
14 These views don’t enjoy much contemporary support or even serious discussion but may have been endorsed by historical thinkers; see Armstrong 1978: Chs. 1–2 for discussion.
What would a criterion of the mental status of a property in terms of that of its instances look like? As far as we can see, the options are analogous to those we considered in 4.1 in the case of class nominalism. First, we have the mereological analogue of Weak Class,

(Weak Mereological Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Weak Mer*): a property-fusion is classificationally mental iff at least one of its proper parts is inherently mental

Similarly to Weak Class, the ‘if’ part of this definition implies that if there mental substances, then any property that they have (and which they are therefore proper parts of) is thereby mental. But as we earlier argued, not even a substance dualist should accept that being mereologically simple or being concrete are mental properties. Perhaps this cost isn’t so serious, since these counterexamples require the actual existence of mental substances, which property dualists will presumably reject. We are more worried about the ‘only if’ clause. Since according to mereological nominalism all properties ultimately decompose into concrete particulars, this part of the definition implies that at least one proper part of any mental property needs to be mental. That is, for there to be mental properties there has to be at least one mental substance. But then, we cannot accept property dualism without accepting substance dualism. We take this result to be unacceptable.

The mereological analogue of Strong Class yields similarly bad results. Consider

(Strong Mereological Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Strong Mer*): a property-fusion is classificationally mental iff every proper part of it is inherently mental

This time, the ‘if’ part lacks the crazy consequences of Weak Mer: it no longer follows that being simple or being concrete are mental properties, since these are fusions that have lots of non-mental substances as proper parts. But the ‘only if’ side makes the definition even more intolerable than Strong Mer. For now we get that *only* mental substances can have mental properties. Any property with a single non-mental substance part would falsify the ‘only if’ side of the biconditional and thereby fail to qualify as mental. We take it that no property dualist is willing to live with this result, which would undermine the very point of being merely a property dualist. Finally, consider the mereological analogue of Modal Strong Class:

(Modal Strong Mereological Nominalist Criterion of Mental Propertyhood, *Modal Strong Mer*): a property-fusion is classificationally mental iff every possible proper part of it *x* is such that, possibly, *x* is inherently mental
In addition to facing the problem of harboring possible mental substances that also plagues Weak Class and Modal Strong Class, Modal Strong Mer requires an extreme form of panpsychism. Property dualist proponents of Modal Strong Mer presumably allow that some material fusions are classificationally mental—fusions of certain neural entities, say. But then, assuming that fundamental physical particles are proper parts of neural entities, Modal Strong Mer requires that those particles be inherently mental. Requiring property dualism to take on this panpsychist flavor is clearly prohibitive.

4. Conclusion

Barring better suggestions for how to characterize classificational mentality from a strict nominalist perspective than those that we have anticipated here, we conclude that strict nominalism and property dualism are deeply at odds with each another. Determining which view this news is worse for—property dualism or strict nominalism—is a task for another occasion.
References

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