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EMERGENT DUALISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF VAGUENESS

Igor Gasparov

In two recent papers, Dean Zimmerman has argued that the vagueness of ordinary physical objects poses a challenge for “garden variety” materialism (roughly, the view that the subject of conscious experiences is identical with the brain or the whole human organism), and that emergent substance dualism can deal more successfully with the problem of vagueness. In this paper I try to show that emergent dualism is vulnerable to the challenge of vagueness to the same extent as is “garden variety” materialism.

1. Introduction

Dean Zimmerman has recently argued against “garden variety” materialism and in support of emergent substance dualism.¹ Whereas garden variety materialism claims that I am identical either to the whole human organism that is my body or to one of the natural physical parts of my body, such as the brain or nervous system, emergent substance dualism identifies me, as a subject of conscious experiences, with an immaterial soul caused by complex interactions among the physical parts of my brain.² According to Zimmerman, if you believe in the existence of phenomenal properties, it is difficult to embrace garden variety materialism. Among entities suggested by garden variety materialism, no appropriate candidates for being the subject of my conscious experiences “present themselves,”³ because all “natural” material parts of my organism are vague. As Zimmerman argues, a materialist intent on preserving belief in *qualia* must resort to highly speculative forms of materialism. This fact in turn opens the door for emergent dualism, because the speculations of the emergent dualist are no more counter-intuitive than those of the speculative materialist. In what follows I argue that Zimmerman’s emergent dualism is vulnerable

¹Dean W. Zimmerman, “From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 84 (2010), 119–150; “From Experience to Experienter,” in *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations in the Existence of the Soul*, ed. M. Baker and S. Goetz (New York: Continuum, 2011), 168–201.

²The most elaborate account of emergent substance dualism is provided by William Hasker in his *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

³Zimmerman, “From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism,” 145.



to the very problem of vagueness that makes trouble for garden variety materialism.⁴

2. Emergent Dualism and the Problem of Vagueness

To begin, consider the well-known example of a cloud.⁵ Imagine that you observe a single cloud floating in a bright blue sky. As seen from the earth, the cloud appears to be *at most one*. Upon a closer investigation, however, it becomes apparent that some water droplets at the edges of the cloud are neither clearly part of the cloud nor clearly not part of the cloud. Indeed, there are many, largely overlapping, but nevertheless distinct aggregates of water molecules each of which is an equally good candidate for being the cloud you see in the sky. Given this, it's natural to revise one's belief that there is a single cloud in the sky, and instead believe either that there are no clouds in the sky (but only water molecules), or that there are many distinct cloud-like objects in the sky. This may do for clouds, but what about for ourselves? Clouds indeed are vague, but what about the person who sees a cloud? If you believe yourself to be identical with *at most one* person having now a conscious experience of a cloud, could you turn out also to be just as vague as the cloud?

If you hold the view Dean Zimmerman has dubbed "garden variety materialism," your answer should be "yes." On this view, each human person is identical with an ordinary physical object, such as a human body or brain. The difficulty, however, is that human bodies and brains are just as vague as clouds and mountains. Suppose you are identical with your brain. There is no one single thing that is *your* brain. Instead, where your brain is supposed to be, there are many, largely overlapping brain-like objects each of which is an equally good candidate for being *your* brain. Which of them is you? It seems that there is no reason to prefer one of the candidates over any of the others.

There are surely many ways of dealing with the problem of vagueness. But for the sake of argument I accept here that Zimmerman is correct in his reflections on the way vagueness raises a challenge for garden variety materialism.⁶ If he is right, then this kind of materialism turns out indeed to be a rather implausible account of human persons.

To get a clearer sense of the problem, assume there is a chair in your vicinity. Chairs are admittedly vague, but that fact does not matter for their ability to fulfill a precise function, namely to provide a place to sit.

⁴It might be argued that even if emergent dualism is vulnerable to the vagueness problem to the same extent as is garden variety materialism, emergent dualism would still be no worse off than garden variety materialism. But, as far as I can see, Zimmerman's point is rather that emergent dualism should be back on the table precisely *because* garden variety materialism suffers from a vagueness problem while emergent dualism does not. If it turns out that emergent dualism suffers from problems of vagueness too, the motivation for emergent dualism which Zimmerman provides is undercut.

⁵David Lewis, "Many, but Almost One," in David Lewis, *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 164.

⁶Zimmerman, "From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism," 139–140.

Even after you have realized that there are many distinct chair-like objects in front of you, you do not have to choose which of them to sit down on. All of them are in nearly the same place, and are alike in all respects relevant for sitting down and, hence, are equally good for serving the role of a chair to sit on. In contrast, assume now that the brain is the ultimate subject of your conscious experience. Thus, it possesses the first-person perspective which is exclusively yours. Notice further that there are many distinct brain-like things in the vicinity of your skull, each of which is an equally good candidate for being a brain. If a brain is the subject of conscious experience and, hence, the bearer of a first-person perspective, then each equally good candidate for being a brain should possess its own first-person perspective. Then, however, the question naturally arises, which of them is you? In other words, the difficulty is that each candidate for being my brain will be a thinker on her own.⁷ Therefore, there are too many thinkers where we would have expected just a single one, and there is no way to decide which of them is identical with you. This is a problem for those who would like to identify a conscious person with the brain or with the whole human organism.

Zimmerman contends that one can avoid this problem by adopting a form of emergent substance dualism. Instead of identifying you with a vague garden variety physical thing, emergent dualists hold that complex interactions among physical particles in your brain bring about the existence of a new emergent individual that is the true subject of your experience, i.e., is *you*. This new emergent individual cannot be identified with any material object whatsoever, but is an immaterial counterpart to your body, a soul.

Unfortunately, emergent dualists have to face the same problem as do garden variety materialists.⁸ This seems to be so for the following reason. Suppose there is a set, *S*, of physical particles interacting with each other so as to jointly generate in a lawful manner an emergent soul, *a*. Further, suppose that there is another set, *S'*, of physical particles most but not all of which are members of *S*. *S* and *S'* are largely over-lapping, equally good candidates for being a brain, and so if *S* generates a soul, then *S'* should too—call that soul *b*. Would *a* be identical to *b*? *Prima facie* there is no reason why they should be identical. Distinct causes typically produce distinct effects. Since a brain is vague, where we would normally think

⁷In her critical evaluation of Zimmerman's paper, Penelope Mackie also reaches the conclusion that Zimmerman's account of vague "garden variety" objects entails the existence of a multiplicity of thinkers: "[A] vague GVO [GVO is Mackie's abbreviation for "garden variety object"] can be a thinker only in virtue of the existence of a multiplicity of precise candidates for being the GVO, all of which (or whom?) are thinkers." (Penelope Mackie, "Property Dualism and Substance Dualism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 111 [2011], 190n8.)

⁸For the sake of simplicity I speak here only of emergent substance dualism. I think, however, that a similar criticism would apply to the non-dualist account of emergent individuals provided by Timothy O'Connor and Jonathan D. Jacobs, "Emergent Individuals," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2003), 540–555.

there is “the” brain, there are in fact many different (though largely overlapping) sets of particles each of which seems to be appropriate to generate an emergent soul. Then, however, each such set would correspond to a distinct emergent soul, since, according to the emergent dualist, emergent souls are generated in a lawful manner, so that nothing could prevent such a soul from arising if its natural cause is present. Thus, it appears that there will be a great number of emergent souls associated with “your brain.” Which one of them is yours? All are equally eligible for being you. Emergent substance dualism seems to suffer from the vagueness problem just as much as does garden variety materialism. I think that *both* garden variety materialism and emergent dualism are in trouble here given the strength of the intuition that one is the unique bearer of one’s own first-person perspective and conscious experience.⁹

3. *The Overdetermination Hypothesis*

In two recent papers,¹⁰ Dean Zimmerman has proposed a way for the emergent dualist to avoid the problem of vagueness, suggesting that, in a situation of causal overdetermination, many overlapping sets of neural events generate only one single soul:

I suppose that the following hypothesis is more likely: that many overlapping sets of events occur in the brain, none of which is the minimal cause of the soul’s ongoing existence, nor the single cause of its overall phenomenal state. With many overlapping patterns of neural firing, each lawfully sufficient for the existence of a soul with the same phenomenal states, there could still be just one soul, its existence and phenomenal state simply overdetermined. There need be no vagueness about which activities in the brain generate the subject of consciousness—in fact, on this supposition, many precise (and largely overlapping) events are equally responsible—nor about how many subjects there are.¹¹

Zimmerman’s Overdetermination Hypothesis includes three main claims. First, it denies that there is just one single cause for the existence of a soul. Second, it supposes the existence of several distinct sets of largely overlapping neural events each of which is sufficient to produce an emergent

⁹It might be objected that neither garden variety materialism nor emergent dualism are substantially called into question by problems of vagueness. We continue to believe in change despite the apparently strong arguments mounted by Zeno. Why then cannot we still believe either garden variety materialism or emergent dualism even if there is an apparently strong argument against them? I think this analogy cannot be applied here since the trouble with garden variety materialism and emergent dualism is that both, if the argument presented above is correct, undermine our basic conviction that we are the unique and genuine subjects of our experience. Yes, we could be justified in holding some of our deep and important beliefs despite there being some arguments against them. But I think that the same is not true of our theories if they claim to account for one of our most basic intuitions (such as the uniqueness of the subject of conscious experience) on the one hand, and yet on the other entail a consequence which is incompatible with the very same basic intuition (as the existence of many thinkers instead of just a single one seems to be).

¹⁰See footnote 1.

¹¹Zimmerman, “From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism,” 146–147.

soul in a lawful manner. And, third, it claims that the existence of just one single emergent soul with its overall phenomenal state is overdetermined by the totality of all these neural events. Vagueness is removed because each neural event is precise and there is no question which set of such events is the cause of the emergent soul. Since all neural events occurring in a brain cause a single soul, there is no question about whose soul it is. Thus, it appears that the Overdetermination Hypothesis would save emergent dualism from the problem of vagueness. But let us examine the issue more closely.

4. *Some Troubles for the Overdetermination Hypothesis*

Although the Overdetermination Hypothesis has its merits, it is also afflicted with some serious problems. There are at least two aspects that are questionable. The first is that *either* Zimmerman's appeal to overdetermination is ad hoc *or* a garden variety materialist could invoke it as well. Indeed why should we suppose that many distinct and precise causes yield just one precise effect, rather than many? Is there any reason that convincingly speaks in favor of this supposition, beyond the need for a single subject of conscious experience?

Consider the case when two or more bullets simultaneously do cause just one single hole in a wall. At first glance, it appears in this case that many distinct precise events jointly cause just a single event. The problem, however, is that each of the distinct bullets would cause its own part of the destruction in the wall. The talk of many bullets causing one hole is imprecise. At the fundamental level each precise cause is related to its own precise outcome. Applying this claim to a hypothetical process of soul generation, it seems to follow that whenever there is a distinct precise physical cause sufficient for the production of a soul, that cause should yield its own precise outcome. Thus, many distinct precise brain processes each lawfully sufficient for the generation of an emergent soul should and presumably would produce many distinct souls rather than just one.¹²

Still, if one is willing to accept the Overdetermination Hypothesis, why not say that many precise neural events overdetermine just one single physical entity,—the brain*,—that is the unique bearer of the precise phenomenal properties? I don't believe that this is a good idea in itself, but if the overdetermination of the soul should be allowed, why shouldn't the overdetermination of its physical counterpart? It may be well asked: what kind of entity is the brain* supposed to be? The materialist could reply that even if nobody knows the precise way in which this new material thing comes into existence, it is a causal effect of many overlapping

¹²The point here is not so much to deny the possibility of overdetermination as such. It might possibly be the case that a set of physical particles shaped as a bust of Aristotle and the bust itself, although they are two distinct entities, cause just one single effect. What I claim here is that two different and not coinciding entities such as two different sets of neurons could not cause just one single effect, if the effect in question is supposed to be non-vague. I take it to be a conceptual matter, rather than a matter of probability.

neural events which produce it by overdetermination. For this reason a proponent of garden variety materialism could claim that the brain* is neither vague nor identical to any of equally eligible candidates for being the brain. Rather, it is a new, emergent entity, to be compared with the (alleged) emergent soul in respect of its origin but purely physical. (Could this count as a form of speculative materialism of which Zimmerman speaks? I think not. As far as I understood Zimmerman, he claims that speculative materialism should identify me with a precise part of a brain which is to be discovered by scientific speculation.¹³ In contrast the account of the brain* is merely supposed to be a philosophical account of what the brain (of ordinary discourse) in fact is.) So, I think, a proponent of the Overdetermination Hypothesis is confronted with a dilemma: Either she has to acknowledge that the overdetermination solution is *ad hoc* or concede that a garden variety materialist may invoke it as well to bolster her position.

Second, there seems to be another, more serious problem for the Overdetermination Hypothesis, one that concerns the precise temporal beginning of an emergent soul. According to the Overdetermination Hypothesis, many overlapping patterns of neural firing causally overdetermine the existence of my soul. But patterns of neural firing can overlap in time as well as in terms of the physical particles which they involve. Because these patterns of neural firing contain so many constituent sub-events (at the atomic or sub-atomic level), and because these processes are unlikely to have clear-cut temporal beginnings or endings (times at which we could say, the relevant process starts exactly now, and ends exactly now), it is very likely that for any pattern of neural firing which is a good candidate for being a pattern sufficient for the generation of a soul, there will also be many other equally good candidates that begin or end slightly earlier or slightly later.

But it appears that any emergent soul must necessarily have a beginning in time, because it is the result of natural causal processes occurring over time. Moreover, an emergent soul, in order to be a non-vague entity, should have a precise time of temporal beginning.¹⁴ Let *t* be the precise time at which my emergent soul *s* began to exist. From this it would follow that no neural activities sufficient to produce *s* occurred before *t*. But this should strike us as very unlikely, for the reason given in the previous paragraph. Any pattern of neural firing which is a good candidate for being "the first neural process to generate my soul" will likely be just one among very many processes which have slightly different times of initiation or

¹³Zimmerman, "From Property Dualism to Substance Dualism," 143.

¹⁴The material processes which (are supposed to) causally produce the soul are in time. If a natural cause is in time, its natural effect must be in time as well. If emergent dualism is true, then the soul must be produced in time as an effect of underlying physical processes. If the soul is produced in time, then either there is a first moment at which the soul comes into existence or the soul is temporally vague. Thus if the emergent soul has to be a non-vague entity, then it must have a first moment of its existence.

termination, but which are nonetheless equally good candidates for being a process sufficient for the generation of a soul. If it was a problem for the garden variety materialist that, at a single time, there are many equally good candidates for "the physical object which is my brain," then it should be just as much of a problem for the emergent dualist that, occurring at slightly different times, there are many equally good candidate processes for "the neural process which first generates my soul."

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize that Zimmerman's argument presents a strong case against garden variety materialism. Yet, the emergent substance dualism which Zimmerman proposes is itself subject to difficulties involving vagueness. In my view, the main reason for this is the lawful causal dependence of the emergent soul on the physical processes going on in the brain. This feature, which the emergent dualist believes to be an advantage of her account, enabling her to include the soul in the natural order, turns out instead to be a "Trojan horse" through which the problem of vagueness casts its shadow on the emergent soul, making it inappropriate for being the unique bearer of *my* conscious experience.¹⁵

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