

A Sellarsian Response to Aulisio

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In “Epiphenomenal Minds and Philosophers’ Zombies: Where Do Mental Properties Originate?”, Prof. Aulisio conducts an in-depth investigation on *property dualism*, one of the leading versions of physicalism in the contemporary philosophy of mind. According to property dualism, while everything that exists is physical, mental properties are “distinct from and irreducible to physical properties”.¹ After laying out a background for the relevant concepts, Aulisio examines whether proponents of property dualism can provide a satisfactory account of the origins of mental properties. As he describes, there are two options available to the property dualist on this issue: either (1) mental properties have a generative origin, or (2) mental properties are fundamental. Aulisio argues that neither of these options is tenable.

According to Aulisio, Option (1) does not work because, on the one hand, physical sciences have failed to explain the generation of mental properties. As he emphasizes, “if mental properties are irreducible, as most physicalists maintain, then they *cannot* be explained by reductive scientific

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¹ Lowe (2008: 1018).

methodologies.”² On the other hand, appealing to the concept of emergence only pushes physicalism into the predicament of making mental properties look mysterious. Option (2) essentially takes mental properties to be brute facts, period. According to Aulisio, this option does not fare any better because it provides “little help to the question of *who* or *what* possesses mental properties.”³

This paper is admirably clear and very well-written. I agree with many points that Aulisio makes in the paper. For example, I agree with the author that “the reason most physicalists hold mental properties to be irreducible is that reductive approaches have proved fruitless.”⁴ To put this in my own terms, I am convinced by this paper that the marriage between ontological physicalism and property dualism is not stable. Below, I raise two questions for the sake of further discussion. Both will draw on ideas from a famous essay by Wilfrid Sellars (1956/1997), “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” (hereafter, *EPM*).

First, the distinction between physical properties and mental properties is important not only for property dualism but also for Aulisio’s criticisms. The author characterizes the distinction between physical properties and mental properties as “categorically different”, according to which “Physical properties are quantitative, public, and causally efficacious; whereas, mental properties are qualitative, private, and causally inefficacious.”⁵ Does “categorically different” mean “ontologically different”? Here, my focus will be on the public/private distinction. Is it an ontological distinction such that

² Aulisio (2022: 285).

³ Aulisio (2022: 292).

⁴ Aulisio (2022: 285).

⁵ Aulisio (2022: 284).

what is private can never be public and vice versa? If one thinks that mental properties are fundamentally different from physical properties, then one would probably hold a positive answer to this question.

However, in *EPM* Sellars provides a different way to consider the nature of mental properties. As it is well known that *EPM* is a difficult text. To avoid unnecessary exegetical digression, in the following I will mainly reply on the interpretation of *EPM* by Michael Williams (2001). A similar interpretation of *EPM* can also be found in the *Study Guide* of *EPM* by Robert Brandom (1997). According to Williams,

Sellars suggests that we think of concepts relating to inner psychological states ... as theoretical concepts, relative to an observational vocabulary relating to behaviour. ... Now although theoretical entities are introduced as “unobservables”, they are not beyond the reach of observational evidence. On the contrary, because theories invoke them specifically to explain observable phenomena, it is built into such theories that certain observations are indicative of what the theoretical entities are up to. Theoretical discourse is always introduced with built-in links to observation. ... to speak of entities as “theoretical” is not to imply that they do not “really exist” ... the observational/theoretical distinction is methodological not ontological. ... If the theory works, this is reason to think that the world really does contain what the theory postulates (2001, 181-182).

As Williams presents in this passage, Sellars’ suggestion is that we can think of mental properties as some sort of theoretical entities. Once we make this

move, the relationship between mental properties that are usually characterized as private or inner, on the one hand, and public behaviors, on the other, can be regarded as the kind of relationship that holds between theoretical entities and observable phenomena. Since theoretical entities are posited only to explain observable phenomena, the former has “built-in links” with the latter. Likewise, since mental properties are posited solely to explain public behaviors, it is built into the nature of mental properties that they can be expressed by certain public behaviors. Thus, Sellars thinks that the public/private distinction is methodological rather than ontological. It is methodological in the sense that only I possess the first-personal access to my mental states. But such privileged access is not absolute, and it does not affect Sellars’ point that there is no ontological gap between public behaviors and mental properties. If so, not only the proponents of property dualism but also its opponents, including Aulisio, would probably have to reconsider how to formulate the thesis of property dualism. Then, I suspect, more work needs to be done to see whether Aulisio’s criticisms still hold.

Second, in the course of arguing against property dualism, Aulisio brings epiphenomenalism into discussion. He says that: “If we suppose that the causal exclusion argument is successful, as physicalists generally believe, it follows that we must find mental properties to be causally inefficacious.”⁶ Then he raises the following issue: “Given the reality of epiphenomenalism, how do I go about determining that others possess mental properties as well?”⁷

⁶ Aulisio (2022: 288).

⁷ Aulisio (2022: 288).

Aulisio argues that accepting epiphenomenalism forces the property-dualist to face the zombie problem:

If mental properties are causally inefficacious and irreducible, then the physicalist is equally unqualified to grant or deny the possession of mental properties to others. That is to say, if mental properties are causally inefficacious and the only evidence I have for them are the ones that exist in my phenomenal landscape, then why isn't it reasonable to postulate the existence of philosopher's zombies?" "In a world of philosopher's zombies, we would easily and regularly be tricked and unable to differentiate between humans and zombies."⁸

The idea is that if mental properties are causally inefficacious then one loses ground to attribute mental properties to others. One can only ascertain the existence of mental properties in one's own mind and be quarantined in the realm of solipsism. This seems to be a powerful criticism once property dualism admits accepting epiphenomenalism. Aulisio concludes that "Without efficacy and reducibility, then all the theories of the special sciences look the same whether you are in a universe of philosopher's zombies, epiphenomenal humans, or conscious plants."⁹

From my perspective, the criticism that Aulisio raises here is in effect a version of the other mind problem. That is, if mental properties are causally inefficacious, there is no way to find out whether others have mental properties at all. This seems to assume that the only kind of explanation that can establish

⁸ Aulisio (2022: 290).

⁹ Aulisio (2022: 295).

mental realism in the case of other mind is causal explanation. However, in *EPM* Sellars offers another way to consider the other mind problem in general, which is later known as “the Myth of Jones”. Again, I will use Williams’ interpretation here:

Sellars invites us to imagine a community—“our Rylean ancestors” ... they go in for a lot of reporting-out-loud, wanting-out-loud, hoping-out-loud, and so on. As a result, they get on fairly well, anticipating each other’s behaviour and coordinating their activities. However, an outstanding theoretical genius among them conceives the idea that they would get along even better if they saw each other as going in for more “speaking” than they give voice to. The model for such inaudible utterances—or, as they come to be called, “thoughts” —is of course speaking-out-loud. The model stresses that these covert episodes stand in the same logical relations to each other and to overt utterances and actions as do overt utterances. They also show the same variety, including seeings, wonderings, hopings, wishings, wantings, and so on. But the commentary stresses that they are inaudible, even to the person whose thoughts they are (2001, 182-183).

Consider thoughts as an example of mental states. The gist of this passage is that we can understand thoughts as a kind of theoretical entities. More specifically, Sellars suggests that we understand thoughts on the model of language. Just as the natural languages that we use in daily life consist of overt and public utterances, thoughts can be considered as some sort of covert and inaudible utterances. Once we make this move, Sellars’ point about the

“built-in links” between theoretical entities and observable phenomena mentioned above can apply here again. Williams continues,

This conception of thoughts solves the skeptical problem of other minds. The inner episodes we call thoughts are “hidden” only in the way that all theoretical entities are. They are not “logically private”, in the sense that no one has more than the shakiest of inductive grounds for attributing them to other people. On the contrary, criteria for their application are built into the theory ... And the theory works so well that we can be confident that inner episodes really exist (2001, 183).

On this view, the connections with public uses of language are built into the nature of thoughts. Suppose that positing thoughts in theory turns out to be successful in explaining public linguistic behaviors, this can serve as a reason to support mental realism in the case of other mind. Other people can be considered as having thoughts as long as they are competent language-users in a linguistic community.

To be sure, Sellars’ goal in *EPM* was not to defend epiphenomenalism. But he does provide a very different way to cope with the other mind problem with respect to Aulisio’s discussion. In this commentary, I am not arguing that Aulisio’s attack on property dualism has failed in this regard. But, just like the first question that I raised above, I do think that both the proponents and the opponents of property dualism have more work to do once Sellars’ view is taken into consideration.

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