

would be untouched, and I will take this idea further in chapter 4. But let me first return to the issue of asymmetry.

### 3.7 Asymmetry and Reduction

Suppose that serious materialists grant what they must: that the experiential is just physical and is as real as any other part of the physical. Does this leave them with no room for any sort of asymmetry claim? That would be surprising. The idea that materialism involves some sort of asymmetry claim is extremely influential. And one reason why it seems so attractive is this: we find it natural to suppose that wherever and whenever there is experiential reality there is nonexperiential reality, but that the converse of this is not true—there can, we think, be nonexperiential reality without experience.<sup>6</sup> And this immediately makes it seem that experiential reality must *depend* on nonexperiential reality in some way.

So the natural materialist position seems to involve an asymmetry claim, and to be as follows: Experiential physical reality exists, and it is, of course, as real as nonexperiential physical reality, for there are no degrees of reality (*pace* Descartes), and so there can be no asymmetry in the reality status of experiential reality and nonexperiential reality. And yet there is an asymmetrical relation of dependence of experiential reality on nonexperiential reality. Or rather—a more complicated statement of the point seems worthwhile—there is an asymmetrical relation of existential dependence of experiential features of physical reality on features of physical reality that are taken account of in a physics that, like our current physics, contains predicates only for nonexperiential features of physical reality.

According to this view, then, some things have experiential physical properties, all things that have experiential physical properties also have nonexperiential physical properties, and they have the particular experiential physical properties they have in virtue of having certain of the

6. Stones, water, air, etc. We also believe that there was once no experiential reality on earth but plenty of nonexperiential reality, and that experiential reality came to exist as life evolved.

nonexperiential physical properties they have—whatever exactly ‘in virtue of’ means.<sup>7</sup>

This is a version of the asymmetry thesis given on page 56, which may now be restated in terms of the distinction between the experiential and the nonexperiential rather than the distinction between the mental and the physical. It says [1] that the experiential is based in, or realized by, or otherwise dependent on, the nonexperiential, and that it is false to say either [2] that the nonexperiential is based in, or realized by, or otherwise dependent on, the experiential or [3] that they coexist in such a way that neither can be said to be based in, or realized by, or in any way asymmetrically dependent on, the other. (It is arguable that the use of the idiom ‘in virtue of’ makes this a relatively strong version of the general dependency thesis, which is not forced on one merely by acceptance of the view that wherever there is experiential reality, there is nonexperiential reality but not conversely. See the last paragraph of this section.)

The asymmetry thesis can sound very plausible. But it is important to be clear about what it amounts to, if one is both a materialist and a realist (as one must be) about experiential properties. I suggest, to return to the theme of section 3.5, that it must in the end amount to the claim that experiential physical properties, like the property of having color experience, resemble nonexperiential physical properties, like liquidity,

7. In fact, there is no need to say that a being *B*’s experiential properties depend only on its own nonexperiential properties and do not also depend on certain of the wider world’s nonexperiential properties. Nor is there any need to restrict attention to *B*’s nonrelational nonexperiential properties. I do these things here to bypass currently unimportant complications. It is natural to restrict attention to *B*’s own nonexperiential (and nonrelational) properties when one is considering *B*’s experiential properties only in respect of their narrow or purely experiential content, and I am at present concerned with the asymmetry thesis only as applied to phenomena discernible at the purely experiential level of description, the level at which I and my Twin Earth twin and var-twin can be said to have identical experience (see section 1.6). One reason why these phenomena are all that need concern us at present is that the mind-body problem already arises in all its glory for a being whose experiences have no content relating to an external world. It arises in all its fullness for a being that suddenly comes into existence by chance and lies in a sealed room with its sense organs inoperative, while having experiences just like yours or mine on account of the internal activity of its brain.

in one crucial respect, *however much they may also differ from them*: they resemble such properties in being physical properties possessed by things in virtue of their possession of other physical properties that we naturally think of as more fundamental physical properties. The reason why it seems that this is all the asymmetry claim can really amount to is that it seems that this is really the only relevant sort of asymmetrical dependency that one natural physical property can be said to have on another, within the materialist scheme of things.

This conclusion about what the asymmetry thesis amounts to appears to have a striking consequence. It appears to have the consequence—which some will think clearly false—that if one accepts the asymmetry thesis, one must reject the irreducibility thesis (p. 56). And vice versa: given the asymmetry thesis, and materialism, it seems that experiential physical properties must be reducible to nonexperiential physical properties in a way that is ultimately similar to the way in which the property of liquidity is held to be reducible to van de Waals molecular-interaction properties, however great the difference between the two cases may also be. (The case of liquidity is not chosen because it is comfortable or traceable as an analogy. It isn't. There is no comfortable analogy, and that is part of the point.)

This reduction is very hard—impossible—to imagine. If one thinks of reduction in a standard way as semantic or ontological reduction (see n. 4), then it looks as if it amounts to the claim that when you have said all there is to say about a segment of the world (say, a person) in non-experiential terms, there is a fundamental sense in which you have described everything there is to describe. So although there may perhaps be other natural, perspicuous, and theoretically interesting ways of putting things, they will not advert to facts, or aspects of facts, other than those already detailed in nonexperiential terms. But this claim cannot possibly be true, for in deploying only nonexperiential terms, you will not have described the person's experience considered just as such. The problem is not diminished if one thinks of reduction in the way proposed in section 3.5, and takes the fundamental entailment of 'x is reducible to y' to be 'x is (fully) theoretically explicable by reference to y'. For how can the nature and existence of an experiential property be thought to be (fully) explained by reference to essentially nonexperiential properties?

So it is easy to sympathize with nonreductive monists who think the irreducibility thesis is just obviously true. But it is arguable that they will have to abandon the standard asymmetry thesis. They will either have to abandon the asymmetry thesis or treat the irreducibility thesis as a rather banal thesis about the limitations on human understanding. That is, they will have to grant that there is no irreducible irreducibility, that experiential properties are reducible to nonexperiential properties in some possible optimal physics, and that the appearance of irreducibility is just an illusion generated by human ignorance. This seems profoundly implausible, given the nature of the case. (The attractions of neutral monism seem more apparent than ever.)

Some may talk of levels of description, and of how facts registered at one level of description (e.g., the sociological level) may depend on facts registered at another (e.g., the level of physics) while being clearly irreducible to them. But even if this case of irreducibility were granted, it would not provide a good analogy for the present case, because all sorts of convention-involving properties—properties that depend for their existence on human conventions—are ascribed at the sociological level, and there is no parallel for this alleged source of in-principle irreducibility in the case of basic, non-convention-involving, sensory-experiential properties like color experience or sound experience.

Once again, then, if experiential phenomena (like color experiences) really are somehow (wholly) dependent on nonexperiential phenomena, then naturalistic materialist realism about them necessarily implies that there is a correct way of describing things (a level of description) that allows one to relate color experience, considered just as such, to the nonexperiential phenomena on which it is supposed to depend in such a way that the dependence is as intelligible as the dependence of the liquidity of water on the interaction properties of individual molecules. The alternative, after all, is that this total dependence is not intelligible or explicable in any possible physics, not intelligible or explicable even to God, as it were (see McGinn 1989b).

It may be objected that I am simply assuming that if there is a single, unified, nonmiraculous physical reality, there must be some possible valid unified theoretical account of it. It may also be objected that this use of the notions of intelligibility and explicability is dubious. Both these objections deserve a response, which I will give in section 4.3.

For the moment, the question that must be faced by nonreductive monists who are unconvinced by the present discussion, but who are genuine realists about the experiential, is ‘How is it possible for there to be asymmetrical dependence without reducibility in some possible or optimal physics?’ I feel I will have got somewhere if I have managed to revive anyone’s sense that a positive answer to this question is very hard, if not impossible. There can’t be [1] wholly physical properties that are [2] wholly dependent on other physical properties and [3] wholly irreducible to them, or wholly inexplicable by reference to them, in any possible valid physics. As far as I can see, many nonreductive monists want to accept (2) and (3), in the case of experiential properties, although they are also committed to the view that experiential properties satisfy (1), if they are genuine materialists.

Two (connected) points in conclusion. First, I have concentrated on (occurrent) experience when discussing reduction, although many who call themselves nonreductive monists are convinced of the impossibility of reduction primarily by the case of dispositional mental phenomena like desires and beliefs. I have ignored such dispositional phenomena because I do not think they pose any difficulty when it comes to the mind-body problem, any more than the phenomenon of intentionality does. I will discuss this point briefly in section 4.4 and then at more length in section 6.6 and chapter 7. For the moment it can be put by saying that there is a crucial sense of ‘mental reality’ that allows one to say that such dispositional mental phenomena are not really part of mental reality; or it can be put by saying that insofar as they are part of mental reality, reduction is easy in their case.

Second, in talking of reduction, I have concentrated on basic sensory-experiential phenomena like color experience. According to the definition of ‘experience’ in section 1.2, however, conscious entertainings of thoughts are also counted as experiential phenomena, and it may be thought that the difficulty of making the existential dependency of experiential phenomena on nonexperiential phenomena intelligible will be far greater in the case of propositionally contentful thought experience than in the case of sensory experience. On this view, showing the occurrence of the experience of thinking ‘Every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers’ to be intelligibly related to the nonexperiential brain phenomena on which it supposedly depends will

be fundamentally more difficult than showing the result of looking unreflectively at an abstract expressionist painting to be so related. My conviction is that this is a mistake: if there is a difficulty, it is at most a difference of degree, not of kind. It is, certainly, true that one cannot have thoughts about prime numbers unless certain special complex structures exist in one’s brain that need not exist when one has color experience. The fact remains that both experiences, considered just as experiences, are ultimately just that—*experiences*—episodes whose whole nature, considered specifically in its experiential aspect (in the sense of section 3.1), consists in the fact that they have, for the experienter, a certain highly complex *qualitative* character or what-it’s-like-ness (which may be as much cognitive as sensory).

I think this point is of great importance. Attempts to give a naturalistic account of the mental are beguiled by the idea that mental states have propositional content in some way that transcends both their experiential content, on the one hand, and features of the brain as discerned by physics and neurophysiology, on the other hand. It seems to me that this idea is incorrect, and that it causes a great deal of unnecessary grief. I will return to it in section 6.6 and chapter 7. For the moment, if someone wishes to insist that the case of conscious thought is fundamentally different from the case of sensory experience insofar as it involves language, conventional properties, and so on, I am content to be skeptical, and to restrict my insistence on the incompatibility of asymmetry with irreducibility to the sensory case for present purposes.

It may finally be protested that I have failed to consider an “emergentist” suggestion about how to combine asymmetry and irreducibility within the materialist framework. Some may hold that the asymmetry thesis is compatible with the view that there is an essentially *indirect* dependency relation between the experiential and the nonexperiential. On this view, experiential physical properties simply cannot be instantiated, at a given time and place, unless nonexperiential physical properties are also instantiated, while the converse is not true. But this is not because the experiential physical properties depend on the nonexperiential physical properties in a way that implies that (statements about) the former are in principle reducible to (statements about) the latter in some possible, optimal physics. It is because although the former do not directly depend on the latter, they somehow just need the presence or

company of the latter. Some of those who talk of experiential properties as “emergent” nonexperiential properties may feel that this represents their position accurately, although it seems to turn the relation between the experiential and the nonexperiential into a guaranteed mystery, where before it was merely a mystery.

### 3.8 Equal-Status Monism

No doubt there are other ways of attempting to reconcile the asymmetry thesis and the irreducibility thesis. I will consider the question no further. Instead I will return to the fact that many are strongly attracted to the asymmetry thesis; they are (for example) strongly committed to the belief that wherever and whenever there is experiential reality there is nonexperiential reality, while the converse of this is not true.

This being so, it is worth completing a movement begun in section 3.4, by pointing out that we can indeed adopt a view that appears to fulfill the defining conditions of both equal-status M&P monism (section 3.2) and standard asymmetrical materialist monism. (There may seem to be something rather grim about all these metaphysical distinctions, but perhaps they are good exercise. Those who have had enough could skip to section 3.10.) According to this view, the experiential and the nonexperiential (the mental and the nonmental) are each as really real as each other (to this extent they have equal status), and yet it is still true to say that the former depends on the latter in some way (to this extent there is asymmetry).

This, I suppose, is a common materialist view. But M&P monism ought not to be so easily swallowed by asymmetrical materialist monism, given the idea that lies behind it. To prevent the swallowing, the equal-status aspect of its definition needs to be slightly augmented, and I will now do this.

First, though, its name needs changing, on account of the unsatisfactoriness of the mental/physical distinction (p. 58). It could be called ‘equal-status mental and nonmental monism’, or, better, ‘equal-status experiential and nonexperiential monism’, but I will just call it ‘positive equal-status monism’ for short, or ‘equal-status monism’ for shorter. (It is *positive* equal-status monism because it says that reality is both experiential and nonexperiential, as opposed to *negative* equal-status

monism or neutral monism, which says that reality is, ultimately, neither mental nor physical.)

Equal-status monism, then, like its predecessor, involves the following thesis:

**Thesis 1** Reality is irreducibly both experiential and nonexperiential (both mental and nonmental), while being substantially single in some way *W* that we do not fully understand, although we take it that *W* is a way of being substantially single that does not involve any sort of *asymmetry* between the status of claims that reality has nonexperiential (nonmental) aspects and claims that reality has experiential (mental) aspects.

But I have argued that there is a sense in which standard materialist monism can accept thesis 1. So what now distinguishes equal-status monism is that it also involves the following thesis:

**Thesis 2** It is not correct to say [1] that the experiential is based in or realized by or otherwise dependent on the nonexperiential, or [2] vice versa. The truth is rather [3] that the experiential and nonexperiential coexist in such a way that neither can be said to be based in or realized by or in any way asymmetrically dependent on the other; or if there is any sense in which one can reasonably be said to be dependent on the other, then this sense applies equally both ways.

Thesis 2 directly rejects the central claim of standard asymmetrical materialist monism. But it is still compatible with materialism as such. To get an explicitly materialist form of equal-status monism one simply has to add in the words ‘properties of the physical’ in thesis 2, part (3), to get ‘The truth is that the experiential and nonexperiential properties of the physical coexist in such a way that neither can be said to be based in, or realized by, or in any way asymmetrically dependent on the other, etc.’<sup>8</sup>

This is *equal-status* materialist monism. It is, perhaps, the view that many nonreductive monists should hold. It is the view they should

<sup>8</sup> Note that some substance dualists might feel they could endorse both theses simply by replacing ‘substantially single’ in thesis 1 with some such expression as ‘unified’ or ‘causally unified’.

hold if they believe in the in-principle irreducibility of the mental or experiential to the nonexperiential, and do not think that the appearance of irreducibility is at bottom just an effect of human limitation. I will restate the view although it is clear enough. [1] All reality is physical (the basic materialist premise). [2] There are experiential and nonexperiential phenomena (unavoidable realism about the experiential, *plus* the assumption [1] that there is more to physical reality than experiential reality). [3] Among physical phenomena, experiential physical phenomena do not depend on nonexperiential physical phenomena (recall again the definition of 'experiential phenomena' in section 3.1), or do not depend on them in any way in which nonexperiential phenomena do not also depend on experiential phenomena.

Standard *asymmetrical* materialist monism rejects (3). It positively asserts the dependency of the mental or experiential on the nonmental or nonexperiential, rather than positively denying it. It draws attention to things like the effects of damage to the brain, in support of its case. It points out that when a presumably nonexperiential phenomenon like the intrusion of a bullet affects part of X's brain and destroys certain of X's experiential capacities and properties, we take it that it does so *because* it has certain consequences for the nonexperiential properties of X's brain. When alcohol and cocaine do what they do, they do it because they have certain consequences for the nonexperiential properties of one's brain.

Overall, asymmetrical materialist monism may seem to be strongly supported. But the mind-body problem is too difficult for us to suppose that these standard arguments in its support are conclusive. This may seem like a weak response, but it is perhaps a measure of the difficulty of the mind-body problem that it appears appropriate. Both equal-status monism and asymmetrical monism come up against our deep ignorance of the nature of the relation between the experiential and the nonexperiential, and of what dependency relations might possibly be like, and although the difference between the two positions seems well enough defined, it is not clear that we really know what it amounts to. Insofar as we are committed to naturalistic no-miracles materialism, we seem

obliged to hold that the appearance of radical disconnection between experiential properties and nonexperiential properties is a kind of illusion, an accident of our sensory-intellectual constitution. But it won't go away, and it constitutes a vivid proof of the limitations on our understanding of reality.

The point can be put as follows. Experiential phenomena and nonexperiential phenomena constitute two realms of systematic difference that seem radically disparate in their intrinsic character, in spite of all the co-occurrence correlations that we may be able to establish between their respective elements. A rough analogy for this radical disparity is provided by the disparity of the realm of color differences and the realm of smell differences. If, however, we had been differently constructed, we might have been able to see how the two realms of difference relate; and in this second case an analogy is provided by the way we take our visual and tactile perceptions to interrelate as sources of information about shape. Considered merely in their qualitative character, and hence entirely independently of any construction we put on them, visual experiences are utterly unlike tactile experiences. And yet we soon come to think of them as two ways of experiencing the same thing: shape.

Combining the two analogies, we may say that the experiential and the nonexperiential appear as disparate as color and smell. And yet we can imagine that we might have found them as profoundly intelligibly related as visual shape perception and tactile shape perception. And we can suppose that there must be some possible perspective from which they appear so related (see section 4.3 below).

### 3.9 Panpsychism

It may be suggested that equal-status monism forces us into a form of *panpsychism*. Is this so? I think the matter is worth considering briefly, first, because the problem of the relation between the experiential and the nonexperiential is so difficult that panpsychism deserves to be taken seriously, and second, because whether or not panpsychism is a serious

candidate, it is instructive to see how the metaphysical possibilities proliferate. (This section is rather dense and can be omitted.)

Consider the version of panpsychism that holds that there is a material universe, and that a fundamental and universal (and not at all understood) property of all matter, from the smallest portion up, is that it is *experience-realizing* or *experience-involving*. Put into the more circumspect terms mentioned above, this becomes the thesis that there is such a thing as nonexperiential reality, and yet it is a fundamental feature of this reality that every portion of it is experience-realizing or experience-involving. Just for the purposes of exposition, I will endow these two terms with different implications, so that they give rise to two different versions of panpsychism.<sup>9</sup>

The panpsychist claim that all matter is *experience-realizing* preserves the asymmetry thesis. It preserves the idea that there is some fundamental asymmetry in the status of experiential reality and nonexperiential reality given which it is correct to say that experience is based in or realized by or otherwise dependent on nonexperiential reality, and incorrect to say either that nonexperiential reality is based in or realized by or otherwise dependent on experience, or that they coexist in such a way that neither can be said to be based in or realized by or otherwise dependent on the other. This version of panpsychism seems coherent enough, and can be classified with standard asymmetrical materialism. It differs from the ordinary view just in holding not only that some arrangements of nonexperiential reality realize experience but that all do. It lacks one motivation for an asymmetry of attitude noted above, but it is nonetheless an asymmetry theory.<sup>10</sup>

9. There are also idealist versions of panpsychism, but I will not consider them. It may also be said that panpsychism is, strictly speaking, the view that everything that exists is or has a soul. But I define it in terms of experience, as in the text.

10. It lacks the motivation that derives from the intuition that wherever there is experience or a capacity for experience, there is matter, while the converse is not true; for it asserts the converse as well. Note that it does not have to suppose that all matter is always actually experience-realizing at every moment. It may make the weaker claim that all matter is always *capable* of realizing experience (capable of realizing experience with its present arrangement, and not just because it could be rearranged into a brain). This panpsychism can allow that “matter thinks not always” (to adapt Hobbes’s objection to Descartes), and that if a human being can be in an experienceless sleep, so can a stone or an atom.

To claim that all matter is *experience-involving*, by contrast, is to reject the asymmetry thesis. I will take it that it is to adopt *equal status panpsychism*, according to which experiential reality and nonexperiential reality do precisely exist in such a way that neither can be said to be based in or realized by or in any way asymmetrically dependent on the other. This version of panpsychism is a version of equal-status monism and can also be counted as a form of materialism.

What about the other way round? Is equal-status monism, as defined in section 3.8, necessarily a form of panpsychism? This is the question I began with, and it seems that the answer is ‘No’. Equal-status monism need not be panpsychist, for it doesn’t have to hold that all nonexperiential reality is intrinsically experience-involving. Equal-status monism can hold that some parts of matter are experience-involving and others are not. This does not immediately commit them to any form of the asymmetry thesis. They could even suggest that many particles come in two types, hitherto indistinguishable by physics, some of which are experience-involving and some of which are not. This need not be thought to push them into a kind of dualism.

It is less clear that equal-status monists can claim that some *arrangements* of matter are experience-involving, while others are not. For this sort of claim makes an asymmetrical-dependency thesis look very plausible. “Dual-aspect” theorists may consider themselves to be equal-status monists, but it is not clear that they can plausibly claim that experiential properties are to be found only in some cases—e.g. only when nonexperiential properties of the sort instantiated by things like brains are also found—while denying any sort of dependency of the experiential on the nonexperiential. If they are really equal-status monists, there is pressure on them to be panpsychists (compare Nagel 1986, 49).

To summarize, [1] panpsychism can be a form of equal-status monism. To suggest that all reality is experience-involving is to suggest that being experience-involving is a fundamental property of existing things on a par with extension, rest mass, or electric charge. [2] Panpsychism is not necessarily a form of equal-status monism: it may also be a form of asymmetrical materialist monism. [3] Equal-status monism is not necessarily a form of panpsychism, although they can go naturally together. In sum, the two positions can be combined, but neither implies the other.

### 3.10 The Inescapability of Metaphysics

Where does this leave us? Alarmed, perhaps, by the uncontrollable fertility of metaphysics, but with two potentially useful things: an apparently surviving distinction between the asymmetrical and equal-status versions of monism and also, perhaps, a better feeling for our ignorance. The fertility of metaphysics may be fruitless, but it may be useful to have a reasonably well-developed sense of this fact, for one may be favoring a particular metaphysical option, implicitly or explicitly, without really possessing any good grounds for preferring it to the other possibilities with which it is in competition in the rich regions of metaphysical space. I think this is a danger for contemporary materialists.

That is to put it mildly. To put it less mildly: one cannot get out of metaphysics. As soon as one admits that something exists—and one must do that—one has to admit that it has some nature or other. For to be is to be somehow or other. And as soon as one admits that it has some nature or other, either one has to hold that one knows what its nature is—in which case one endorses a particular metaphysical claim about the nature of reality—or one has to admit that one might be wrong about its nature, at least in the sense that one might have an *incomplete* picture of its nature—in which case one admits that there are various metaphysical possibilities, even if one can never know for sure which is correct.

The great flight from metaphysics culminated in verificationist positivism. But verificationist positivists do not escape from metaphysics. For even they grant that there are sense data. And if they go on to say that sense data are all that exist, they adopt a patently metaphysical position—one of the most amazing on record. They may instead say that sense data are all that we can know to exist, and admit that it is, after all, not actually meaningless or incoherent to suppose that other things may exist, things of which we have no conception, things, perhaps, of which we can have no conception. But if they admit this, they must be prepared to grant that in the case of sense data too, there may possibly be more to them than we know, or can know. Either sense data are mere contents with no hidden nature—and this is a form of radical metaphysical

idealism<sup>11</sup>—or they are not mere contents with no hidden nature and there is something more to them, in which case some other unknown and perhaps unknowable metaphysical possibility is realized. Either way one is metaphysically committed. And yet the illusion persists—the illusion that one can be free of metaphysics. Today the most common form of the delusion is to think that one can be a tough metaphysics-eschewing positivist and also a hard-nosed materialist. Quine never made this mistake: he talked cheerfully of the “myth of physical objects, . . . posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer” (Quine 1951, 44).

11. On this view, we think of ourselves as, somehow, mere assemblages of sense data with no hidden nature—more wild metaphysics.