

Identity, identification, and discernibility

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Bernard Molyneux offers a more general, allegedly purely logical, rather than psychological, explanation of several philosophically interesting phenomena related to the issue of a potential mental-physical identification. He offers a very plausible logical, and, as far as I'm able to tell, exhaustive framework within which to analyze all sorts of property identifications.

Some such property identifications will be puzzling and more difficult in that they will involve *prima facie* discernibility of the identificanda. Inspired by the easier case of identification of particulars (e.g. Superman = Clark Kent), Molyneux argues that there is a number of conceptual tools that we use in order to explain away the appearance of such discernibility. Of course, in order to identify particulars or properties, we must not leave any apparent discernibility in the equation, as per Leibniz's principle of the indiscernibility of identicals.

Molyneux's point is that once we have such a general logical-conceptual framework we realize that the issues that seemed special about the case of mind-body identification are, in fact, a natural outcome of the more general obstacles to property identification, regardless of their domain.

More specifically, *prima facie* discriminability between properties in general gives rise to "how-possibly" questions: how could F possibly be (nothing more than) G? We, of course, have been most likely to raise this type of question in the context of mind-brain identifications: "How could the sensation of smelling a durian fruit possibly be (nothing more than) a neural population being active?"

According to this framework, when faced with identification of properties in the context of *prima facie* discernibility, there are three available operations to resolve the apparent tension into what Molyneux calls "a full solution": property addition, property subtraction, and facilitatory identification. When however, these operations are inapplicable, one might still offer a "semi-solution", that is, a solution according to which one of the higher-order properties of the property F we wanted to identify with G will be identical to some property or other, we don't specify which, of G.

When it comes to the mind-brain identification, Molyneux argues, we can at most arrive at semi-solutions. The hard problem of consciousness follows from the logic of property identification, namely, from the preservationist constraint (that we should preserve both third-person and first-person properties when trying to identify them) and the fact that we are bound to only have semi-solutions to the "how possibly" question raised by the mind-brain case.

This framework and the explanations it generates are certainly useful and coherent, but I am not entirely convinced that it captures all the important features of the issue of mind-

brain identification. More precisely, I think it fails to take seriously a point that is usually insisted on by the so-called “a posteriori physicalists”, namely, the distinction between ontology and epistemology and how that distinction, if taken seriously, makes room for a coherent and definite identity thesis (i.e. a full rather than a semi-solution).

The basic idea of a posteriori physicalism is that the apparent discernibility between physical and phenomenal properties is due to a difference in concepts. Take any phenomenal property, F. According to this approach, F is identical to a physical/neural property, G. Yet, they appear to be distinct. However, the distinctness is not grounded in ontology but in our concepts. If this theory is coherent, then the question of “how possibly” does not arise any more once we realize that this question is not genuinely about ontology. The physicalist answer to the “how possibly” question is to put forward a theory of phenomenal concepts.

Brought into the more general framework elaborated by Molyneux, this type of physicalism would have it that we should distinguish between *identity*, which is a relation that can hold or not at the level of ontology, and *identification*, which is epistemic notion having to do with our activity as cognizers. What the mind-body problem boils down to, then, is how to square the apparent discernibility of mental and neural properties (the identification problem) with their actual identity. The way to solve this problem is to elaborate a theory of phenomenal concepts.

This is relevant to Molyneux’s analysis of the mind-brain identification in that the physicalist will simply deny that the apparent discernibility has anything to do with “real” discernibility. In other words, when Molyneux postulates second-order properties whenever apparent discernibility between properties is present, the physicalist will merely postulate concepts. (Note: the distinction between an ontological and epistemological notion of discernibility was already put forward by Hector-Neri Catañeda in 1975, in his “Individuation and Non-identity: A New Look,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 12, pp. 131–140.)

I do not claim that this approach is in itself sound, but that to the extent that it is coherent—and unless further reasons are given to us for thinking that whenever we postulate a new, phenomenal concept, we also need to postulate a second-order property—it will constitute a full solution rather than a semi-solution to the mind-body identification problem.

This full solution consists in explaining away the apparent distinctness not by trying to identify the allegedly new property responsible for this apparent distinctness with some physical property or other, but by pointing out that the distinctness *really is apparent*.