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Claremont McKenna College

**The Identity of Properties: How Qualia Solve the Regress
Problem in Dispositional Monism**

Submitted to

Professor James Kreines

By Emma Kresch

Senior Thesis

Fall 2021

December 6, 2021

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Abstract

This paper argues for the existence of certain instances of categorical properties in non-physical qualia. There are two types of properties: dispositional properties and categorical properties. Dispositional properties are such that they derive their identity from their relationships to other dispositional properties. Conversely, categorical properties have an identity that exists outside of their relationship to other properties and do not depend on the existence of other properties to derive their identity. The dispositional monist theory claims that all properties are dispositional. In this paper, I present the dispositional monist theory by explaining an account given by Alexander Bird in his paper “The Regress of Pure Powers?”. Then, I present the primary problem with dispositional monism: that it would result in a regress and the identities of dispositional properties disappear and become purely structural. To solve this problem, I give an account using the work of Simon Blackburn from his paper “Filling in Space” and Frank Jackson from his paper “Epiphenomenal Qualia” to argue that qualia are an instance of categorical properties that put an end to the regress and allow all properties to have identity.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Kreines. Your guidance and support throughout this thesis and my college career at large has been invaluable. You helped me work through and understand seemingly unsolvable philosophical questions. Your passion and dedication have inspired me to always keep learning and asking the tough questions. I am so grateful to Claremont McKenna's general education requirements because without your Freshman Humanities Seminar, I would not have had this wonderful experience of majoring in Philosophy.

I would also like to thank the Philosophy department for all of the exciting and thought-provoking classes I have had the privilege to take throughout my college career. In particular, I would like to extend a special thank you to Professor Locke for your mentorship and support in making the most of my time at Claremont McKenna. Philosophy Unlocked taught me that no matter how daunting a task might seem, with persistence, teamwork, and a curious mindset, we can do anything!

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends. To my dad for always encouraging me to follow my dreams, whatever they may be, and supporting me in every challenge I face. To my younger brother for always showing genuine excitement when I talked about philosophy at the dinner table. To my older brother for your unconditional love and support in every endeavor. To my mom who inspires me to this day. I miss her dearly and am forever grateful to her for teaching me to find joy in all the little things. To Sophie Gitlin for going on this philosophical journey with me and being my best friend through it all. And to Ethan Tyng, for always being there and making me smile.

Introduction

There are properties. For example, gasoline has the property of being flammable. One theory is that all properties are purely structural.¹ This means that all properties are constructed in a way where their identities depend on their relationships to other properties, this theory is also called *dispositional monism*.² Thus, for the case of gasoline, its property of being flammable depends on the property that this thing called fire has, namely, the property of being fire, since to be flammable is to catch fire when exposed to fire. In this paper, I will argue that if properties are purely structural—or dispositional monism is true—this would eliminate the existence of their identities, because of a regress. I will claim that in order to solve the problem of the regress, we must prove the existence of a certain type of property that does not derive its identity from its relationships to other properties, or a categorical property. I will finally argue that qualia—things such as the itchiness of an itch, the smell of a rose, or the experience of seeing a color—are examples of such categorical properties and solve the problem of a regress.³

In my first chapter, I will first use the work of Alexander Bird to explain dispositional monism. While Bird offers his own response to the regress problem that he believes saves dispositional monism, I will instead present a view that allows for both dispositional and categorical properties. The second chapter will then reveal the problems of dispositional monism, namely that including that it would result in a regress and lead to no properties having any identity.⁴ In the third chapter, I will consider Simon Blackburn’s argument that science can only find dispositional properties all the way down, necessitating the introduction

¹ Alexander Bird, “The Regress of Pure Powers?,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 229 (October 2007): pp. 513-534, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2007.507.x>, 515.

² Bird, 517.

³ Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32, no. 127 (April 1982): pp. 127-136, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2960077>, 127.

⁴ Bird, 524.

of something called a categorical property.⁵ In the fourth chapter, I will draw from Frank Jackson's argument for the existence of non-physical qualia to argue that they are an example of a type of property that is non-dispositional. Finally, I will use this explanation of qualia being an instance of a type of categorical property to argue that they pose a solution to the regress problem posed in the second chapter, and show that dispositional monism cannot be true, and categorical properties do exist.

⁵ Simon Blackburn, "Filling in Space," *Analysis* 50, no. 2 (March 1990): pp. 62-65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/50.2.62>, 63.

Chapter 1: Dispositional Monism and Reasons to Favor It

This chapter will explain what *dispositional monism* is and explain some initial reasons that seem to support it. To do this, I will first define and explain dispositional monism. Then, I will present Alexander Bird's argument for why we should accept it, and a scientific argument for why we should accept it.

The central claim behind dispositional monism is that all properties have structural identities.⁶ In that sense, all properties *depend, for their identities, on other properties*. Therefore, all properties are structural—or relational.⁷ For example, say we are trying to understand what it is to be negatively charged.⁸ Well, part of what it is to be negatively charged is to attract positively charged object.⁹ But, then, we cannot understand what it is to be negatively charged without also understanding what it is to be positively charged.¹⁰ Now, strictly speaking, this is a way of putting the point in terms of how we *understand* things, but the real point here is that the property of being negatively charged *depends* on the property of being positively charged. This is an *epistemological* way to state the thesis of dispositional monism. In the future, I will sometimes make related points by referring to understanding—or using the epistemological formulation—but I will also bring the point back to the *metaphysical* formulation upon which this theory depends. Just because we understand something as being a certain way, does not mean it necessarily must be that way, but for the purposes of explaining this material, framing it through understanding will be helpful. Thus, we can see how dispositional monists understand properties as being structural or relational to one another.

⁶ Bird, 514.

⁷ Bird, 514.

⁸ Bird, 514.

⁹ Bird, 514.

¹⁰ Bird, 514.

In explaining dispositional monism, Bird takes his explanation a step further to claim that all properties are structural or relational in the sense that the structure of all of their identities is similar in that they are built of a stimulus and manifestation; in this respect, we can move from calling properties structural or relational to calling them dispositional.¹¹ Thus, properties that are structural or relational and their identities are structured such that they have a stimulus and manifestation are called dispositional properties.¹² A property that does not have a structural or relational and dispositional identity would consequently not fit into this framework. Such a property is considered a *categorical property*, and does not depend on other properties for its identity.¹³ The dispositional monist argues that there are no categorical properties, and all properties are dispositional.¹⁴

Let us now examine an example that illustrates dispositional properties. Once again, consider a particle that has the property of being negatively charged.¹⁵ The stimulus for the property of being negatively charged would be that there is a positively charged particle somewhere nearby. The manifestation for the property of being negatively charged would be the positively charged particle moving towards the negatively charged particle. Together, the stimulus and manifestation make up the *identity* of the property of being negatively charged, making it a dispositional property.¹⁶ According to dispositional monism, we could apply such a framework on all properties.¹⁷ Thus, dispositional monists claim that all properties are structural and relational—they all depend on other properties as demonstrated by the first example—and that they are dispositional in that their identity is structured in their having a stimulus and manifestation—as demonstrated by the second example.¹⁸

¹¹ Bird, 514.

¹² Bird, 514.

¹³ Bird, 514.

¹⁴ Bird, 515.

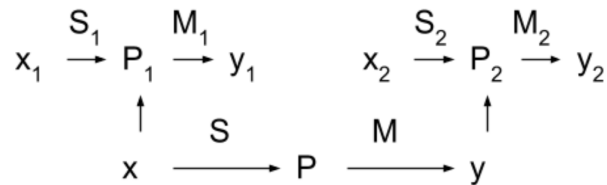
¹⁵ Bird, 514.

¹⁶ Bird, 514.

¹⁷ Bird, 515.

¹⁸ Bird, 514.

To better illustrate the identity of a property under a dispositional monist view, I will consider a property P and demonstrate its identity through a diagram. P 's identity is its relationship to other properties through its stimulus S and manifestation M .¹⁹ Consider the following diagram:



As seen above, x represents something that has a property P which is brought about by stimulus S , and results in some y through manifestation M . But x and y also have their own properties which respectively have their own stimuli and manifestations. Let us use this diagram to understand another example in order to better understand this concept. Suppose x is salt that has the property P of being water-soluble. For something to be water-soluble is for it to be such that, when in water, that thing dissolves. Thus, the identity of the property of being water-soluble is dependent on the property that a certain liquid has of *being* water. To further explain this concept, imagine there are two properties, P and Q . P is the property of water-solubility and Q is the property of acid-solubility. What makes P and Q different is that P depends on the liquid we are considering to have the property of being water, whereas Q depends on the liquid in question to have the property of being acid. Thus, one could not know what P is without knowing what water is, and likewise, one could not know what Q is without knowing what acid is. Since P and Q are different properties and depend on different things, the relationship that P has to the property water has of being water is essential to its identity. Therefore, we can establish that the property of being water-soluble is structural or relational, and we do this by claiming that the property P of being water-soluble is dependent

¹⁹ Bird, 514.

on water's property P_1 of being water. The stimulus for x 's property P of being water-soluble is putting x —salt—in water. The manifestation is then that for x to be P (water-soluble) is the salt dissolving in water. This results in y , dissolved salt. Then, once we see how salts property P of being water-soluble is dependent on the property some liquid has of being water, which we called P_1 , we can then build out the tree to understand P_1 's identity through its S_1 , and M_1 . This is the basic structure of dispositional monism.

In order to further give a case for why we might choose to favor dispositional monism before I reject it in later chapters, I will give another view explaining its appealing qualities. On a dispositional monist view, the structural or relational nature of properties offers some appealing explanation for why our world is the way it is. As we well know, our world functions the way that it does because of certain laws that govern the universe. For example, the law of gravity decrees that when we throw an object in the air, it will fall back down. Or, when you put liquid water in a temperature at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, it will freeze and turn solid. Therefore, in terms of properties, the law of gravity comes to be because of things having the property of falling when we throw them in the air because there is a gravitational force acting upon them.²⁰ Consider also the law that liquids take the shape of the container that they are poured into; this is a law of the universe. But we only consider this a law because it is the structural identity of the property of being liquid that allows it to behave in the same way every time. First, we can identify the structural or relational nature of the property; it depends on other things having the property of being solid. Then, we can further characterize the dispositional identity of the property of being liquid: the stimulus is pouring it into the solid container, and the manifestation is it taking the shape of the container it is poured into. One could argue that through the dispositional identities of properties, we can

²⁰ Bird, 515.

have a *causal* understanding of the world around us.²¹ We know every property to have a distinct cause (or stimulus) that leads to a certain result (or manifestation) that builds our understanding of what the identity of that property is.²² Let us return to consider a comparison to categorical properties; a categorical property might have a certain disposition in our world where we could see it having a stimulus and manifestation, but its disposition depends on the laws of nature, where in another world, those laws of nature might be different and cause the property to have a different stimulus and manifestation, effectively changing the causal relationship of the property to its identity.²³ For example, consider metal's property of being malleable. Its stimulus is hitting it with a hammer, and its manifestation is denting the metal. In the sense of malleability being a structural or relational property, its being property of being malleable depends on the hammer's property of being solid and harder than the metal. The relationships between these properties—which is the same things as the identities of the properties—is what makes our world do what it does. For, consider a world where the laws of nature dictate that the stimulus is hitting metal with a hammer, but the manifestation is the metal crumbling like a cookie once you hit it, then the identity of the property of being malleable would be changed because malleable would mean crumbling.²⁴ This seems impossible because it requires altering the causal nature of the property of being malleable, and the relationship between the property of being malleable and the property of the hammer being hard would also be affected.

If dispositional monism were not true, then we would need more than just properties to make our world do what it does. One alternative might be that there is a God. It is God who created the laws and the laws make our world do what it does. Without God and God's laws, nothing would do anything. For example, had God not created the law of gravity, if we threw

²¹ Bird, 515.

²² Bird, 514.

²³ Bird, 515.

²⁴ Bird, 515.

a ball in the air, it would float up endlessly. Another possibility might be the same as above, but there is no God. There are still these laws that govern the universe, but we just do not think of them as being made by God. But they still do the same thing as if they were created by God, they stand outside the rest of the world and make it do what it does. Why can we not assume that this is the case of how our world works? There is a clear drawback to this story which is the question of where these laws come from. They could depend on categorical grounds.²⁵ A property might have a dispositional identity, but only because it depends on some categorical grounds.²⁶ If this were the case, then we could see a possible world where when you hit a piece of sheet metal with a hammer, the metal crumbled like a cookie as opposed to denting.²⁷ But there is one overwhelming piece of the argument that dispositional monists might cling to in order to save their theory: it is the principle of Occam's Razor.²⁸ This theory essentially claims that the simplest theory is the best theory, and we should be inclined to accept it.²⁹ The simpler theory in this case definitely seems to be that all properties are structural and relational, and thus dispositional, and therefore their relationships to one another make our world do what it does. To add categorical grounds or the necessity of a God into the theory would only further complicate it, and take us farther from the better and simpler solution.

In the next section, I will consider the primary objection to the dispositional monism theory, namely, that it will result in a regress or a vicious circle, and lead properties to not having any identity at all.

²⁵ Bird, 514.

²⁶ Bird, 514.

²⁷ Bird, 514.

²⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Occam's Razor," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., July 20, 1998), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Occams-razor>.

²⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Chapter 2: Refining the Best Regress Argument Against Dispositional Monism

This chapter points out the primary concerns with the dispositional monism theory, namely, that it would result in a regress or a vicious circle. To explain this problem, I will show how a regress would result if all properties had a structure that gave them their identities. Then, I will show that a regress would mean that the relationships between all properties would be purely structural, and properties would not be able to have any determinate identities.³⁰

We know that dispositional monism claims that every property has a structure, and that the structure is how every property has its identity that consists of a stimulus and manifestation.³¹ But, based on what we know of dispositional monism, for every property to have a structure, it must depend on other properties and them all having a structure as well. For example, when we consider the property of salt being water-soluble, it depends on the property that a certain liquid has of being water. But, if all properties are structural and dependent on one another in this sense, there are two problematic consequences that can arise. These problems are called a regress and they take on two different forms: a circular regress and an infinite regress.³² A regress results when a series of events repeats itself or circles back on itself until it becomes useless.³³ In this case, the regress for structural properties occurs when properties all depend on each other to the point where no property can have any identity and they become purely structure.³⁴

I will begin by explaining how a circular regress is a problem for dispositional monism. Consider a case of the negatively charged ion, the ion has the property *P* of being

³⁰ Bird, 517.

³¹ Bird, 514.

³² Bird, 516.

³³ Bird, 523.

³⁴ Bird, 523.

negatively charged.³⁵ The property of being negatively charged has the stimulus of a positively charged ion approaching the negatively charged ion. The manifestation is then that the negatively charged ion repels from the positively charged ion. As I explained in the first chapter, the property of being negatively charged depends on the property of something else being positively charged, therefore the property is relational and structural, and its identity depends on another property.³⁶ Then the same structure can then be applied to the positively charged ion for its identity of being positively charged.³⁷ Clearly, one identity cannot exist without its relationship to the other, and neither has its own determinate identity when they must depend on one another.³⁸ Another way to understand this issue is to think about it in plain English. What does the term ‘negative charge’ mean? “It may be essential to the property of being negatively charged that any object that is negatively charged attracts objects that are positively charged.”³⁹ Further, what does the term ‘positive charge’ mean? It means that it is essential for something having the property of being positively charged to attract objects which are negatively charged.⁴⁰ This means that the property *P* of being negatively charged cannot be fixed or determinate in its identity because its identity only exists insofar as it relates to other properties and their identities.⁴¹

There is a clearer way to understand this concept through diagrams to show that identities of properties will disappear due to a circular regress under dispositional monism. I will use the model for diagrams that Graham Priest uses in his paper, “Net of Indra”, where he argues for the interconnectedness of all things. In this case, I will just use his structure to discuss properties.

³⁵ Bird, 514.

³⁶ Bird, 524.

³⁷ Bird, 524.

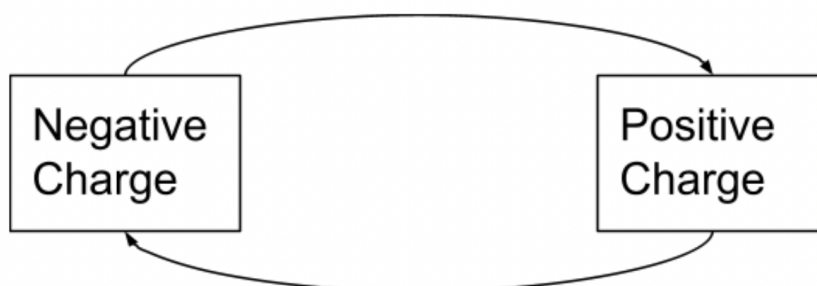
³⁸ Bird, 524.

³⁹ Bird 517.

⁴⁰ Bird, 517.

⁴¹ Bird, 524.

Consider this first case where we illustrate that the property of being negatively charged and the property of being positively charged depend on each other. We see that the property of being negatively charged gives meaning or identity to the property of being positively charged and vice versa.



Now, consider what would happen if we took the property of negative charged out of the picture, and replaced it with an empty circle to signify that it was nothing independently of its relation to the property of positive charge.⁴² We are still left with positive charged giving identity to the empty circle that was once the property of negative charge.⁴³

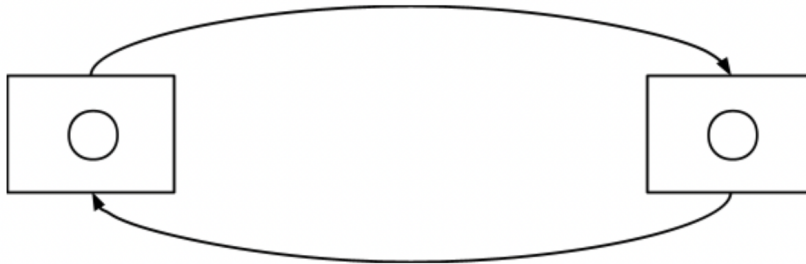


But we know that our diagram is not complete, as the same is true of positive charge; its identity depends on the property of negative charge. Therefore, we must draw another arrow

⁴² Graham Priest, "The Net of Indra," in *The Moon Points Back* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 113-127, 118.

⁴³ Priest, 118.

from the empty circle towards the property of positive charge to signify that the nothing gives identity to positive charge. But, once we draw this arrow, we end up in a situation where nothing is giving identity to the property, or the identity of positive charge is dependent on nothing, so we can complete our diagram below:⁴⁴



The consequence as illustrated above is that since nothing is giving identity to positive charge, the property of positive charge itself becomes nothing.⁴⁵ Thus, we find ourselves in a circular regress where properties have no identities and are purely structural, which is clearly problematic for dispositional monism, since it argues that all properties must have identities that must be structural and dispositional.⁴⁶

What results is a sort of circle where properties must depend on one another to derive their identity. But, if all properties must depend on one another to have identity, this results in a circular regress. And, by definition of a regress, the result is that no property can have any identity because the only determinate identity of a property would be its dependence on another property. Therefore, the properties of being positively and negatively charged have no identity and are purely structural in their relationship to one another.⁴⁷ Why would a vicious circle be a problem for dispositional monism? As we stated earlier, the fundamental

⁴⁴ Priest, 119.

⁴⁵ Priest, 119.

⁴⁶ Bird, 525.

⁴⁷ Bird, 525.

claim underlying dispositional monism is every property has a structure that has a relationship to other properties, and this leads to a case where every property has an identity that consists of a stimulus and manifestation.⁴⁸ The regress problem attacks this fundamental claim because if properties no longer have identities due to a regress, then they would be purely structural and have no identities. This then prompts the further question of why lack of identity is a problem for dispositional monism. Another claim that we discovered earlier is that, according to dispositional monism, it is the identities of properties that create the laws of nature that govern our world. But, even if properties do not have determine identities because of the regress problem, there are still clearly laws the govern our world. Thus, these laws must have a different sort of explanation: they must either *give* identity to properties or they must come from a different kind of property that *does* have a determinate identity but is not structural. I will argue for the latter claim in the following chapter. But we can still conclude that a vicious circle type of regress causes a significant problem for the existence of determinate identities of properties in dispositional monism.

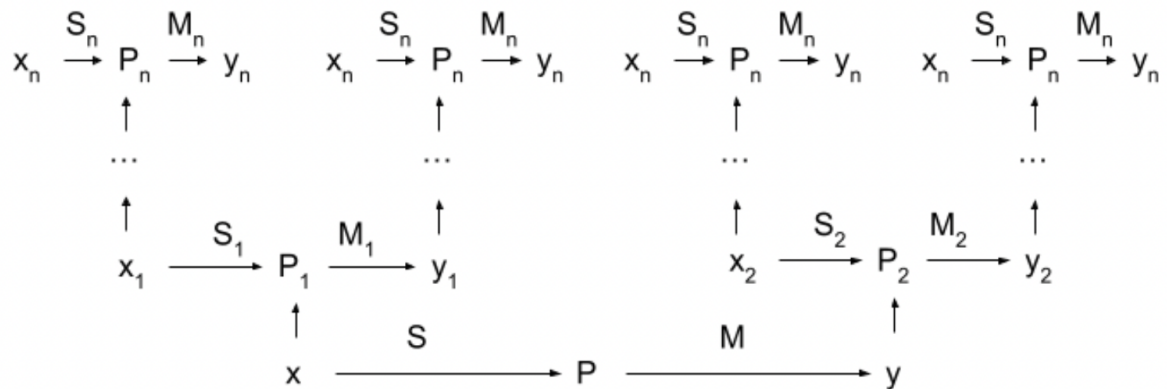
The other kind of regress that causes a problem for disposition monism is an infinite regress.⁴⁹ In the case of an infinite regress, we could imagine that from each branch of the tree illustrated in the previous chapter above, comes an infinite amount of identically structured branches. For the identity of a property *P* to exist, it must have an *S* and an *M*.⁵⁰ But we know that *S* and *M* result from an *x* and result in a *y*. Then, these *x*'s and *y*'s have their own properties which then have their own identities. If you were to take away a label as we did in the diagram above from any branch of the tree below, we could see continuing this pattern with infinite properties, until you reached a point where no property had any determinate

⁴⁸ Bird, 514.

⁴⁹ Bird, 525.

⁵⁰ Bird, 515.

identity because their relationships would be purely structural and dependent on the property that came before it in the tree.⁵¹ Consider the following diagram to illustrate this concept:



As we can see from the above diagram, if all properties have dispositional identities, we can find infinite properties stemming back from their relationships to one another.⁵² But, if we were to replace any one of those properties with an empty circle (or take away its label), then all of the properties that depended on it would lose their identities and we would be left with a tree of empty circles and only structures of properties with no identities.⁵³

Through these regress objections we can conclude that if dispositional monism is true, properties could not have any determinate identity because their identity will always point to another property with its own identity that points to another property and so on. What then occurs is a relationship between all properties that is purely structural. When all properties rely on one another, what we are left with is a system of properties connected to one another, but their identities have no meaning besides representing the relationship from one property to another.

⁵¹ Bird, 525.

⁵² Bird, 525.

⁵³ Priest, 119.

To reiterate the steps of the argument so far: for a dispositional property P , its structure comes from its relationship to other properties, from which it derives its identity which is made up of a stimulus and manifestation.⁵⁴ But, if all properties were dispositional, then we would end up with a regress because we would either constantly be going backwards to find stimuli and manifestations for properties and their properties, or end up in a vicious circle.⁵⁵ Since the identities of dispositional properties are relational, if we found ourselves in either an infinite regress or a vicious circle, then the identities of properties would not point to anything and the relationships between properties could be reduced to purely structure. But, as we established earlier, it is not the case that properties do not have identifiable identities. For example, we can identify salt's property of being water-soluble because when we drop salt in water, it dissolves, and we can identify its stimulus and manifestation. Therefore, if all properties being dispositional leads to a regress where the relationships between properties are purely structural, but we can identify the identity of at least some properties, then it cannot be the case that all properties are dispositional.

In the next chapter, I will argue, using the work of Simon Blackburn, that science only finds dispositional properties all the way down.⁵⁶ By arguing this, in the following chapter, I begin to build an argument for the existence of categorical properties which exist and are not found through science, and how they might resolve the problems presented by the regress that would result from dispositional monism.

⁵⁴ Bird, 514.

⁵⁵ Bird, 525.

⁵⁶ Blackburn, 63.

Chapter 3: Science and Dispositional Properties

After learning the problems with dispositional monism evidenced by the regress problem, our next task is to find a solution that makes the existence of the identities of properties salvageable. In order to do this, we must argue for the existence of a different sort of property that is not structural, also known as a categorical property. But even before we can argue for categorical properties, I must first establish that science can only find dispositional properties all the way down.⁵⁷ After establishing this, in a following chapter, I can argue that there is a type of property that is not found through science which makes is a categorical property. Therefore, in this chapter, I will give argument inspired by an account given by Simon Blackburn for why science finds dispositional properties all the way down.⁵⁸

We have established something that Blackburn also claims, which is that a dispositional property is a sort of property such that its identity depends on its relationship to some other property or properties.⁵⁹ This being said, a categorical property is the opposite: it is a property that can have an identity without needing a relationship to something else, or in other words, have a non-structural or non-relational identity.⁶⁰ Blackburn considers the argument that there might be categorical properties underlying dispositional properties that allows them to have identities and not just be purely structural and solves the regress problem.⁶¹

The central aspect of Blackburn's argument that I will consider is that through science, we find that such categorical grounds through the study of physics and just deeper and more refined scientific study, concluding that these are not are not, in fact, categorical at

⁵⁷ Blackburn, 63.

⁵⁸ Blackburn, 63.

⁵⁹ Blackburn, 62.

⁶⁰ Blackburn, 62.

⁶¹ Blackburn, 62.

all, but also dispositional.⁶² So, in the words of Blackburn, “science finds only dispositional properties, all the way down”.⁶³ Our primary way of learning anything about the world around us is through science. We learn about the world through a study of how external objects—which refer to anything around us including humans, animals, things like balls or cups, atoms, other planets, and essentially everything else in our world that has some kind of physical presence. Further, we can define physical as anything that is spatially existing. Therefore, something need not be observable for it to be physical, for, we cannot observe individual atoms, but we know that they have a physical presence. Presumably, everything physical in the world interacts with other things, and we understand those things based on how they interact with everything else. For example, I can know the physical properties of a ball because I can see how it interacts with other physical things around it. From this scientific and physical understanding of the world, we understand the properties of different objects.⁶⁴ Categorical properties, on the other hand, are not physical because their existence does not depend on the external objects whose interactions with one another give them identity. It is possible, and likely, that categorical properties have effects on physical external objects. But a facet that is essential to dispositional properties is that their identities come from their relationships to other properties, and these relationships only emerge in scientific study when we see physical objects that possess these properties interacting with one another. Categorical properties cannot be learned about or understood through scientific study because they do not have a physical presence, and science can only learn about those things which have a physical presence.⁶⁵

⁶² Blackburn, 63.

⁶³ Blackburn, 63.

⁶⁴ Jackson, 127.

⁶⁵ James Kreines, “Blackburn on Filling in Space,” Handout given in Modern Metaphysics class (Department of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, November 11 2020).

Therefore, we must not understand dispositional properties as needing to rely on categorical grounds, but instead, we should think about the existence of other categorical properties that might also have relationships with dispositional properties even though their existence is not dependent on their relationships to dispositional properties. For, it still seems plausible that if something has a certain dispositional property, we might ask *why* it has that property, and this question cannot be answered with another dispositional property. Thus, we need a categorical property to explain why that dispositional property is there. But, if science can only discover dispositional properties, then we need some other way to discover or prove the existence of categorical properties.⁶⁶ Blackburn also makes the argument that dispositional properties cannot have categorical grounds underlying them.⁶⁷ So, where do we find categorical properties that can solve our regress problem? We must find categorical properties that belong to those external objects that we know only to have dispositional properties. In other words, we need things that have phenomenal, or ‘what it’s like’ type properties called qualia.⁶⁸ I will explain such properties in the following chapter.

⁶⁶ Blackburn, 63.

⁶⁷ Blackburn, 63.

⁶⁸ Jackson, 127.

Chapter 4: A Case for Non-Physical Qualia

In this chapter, I will explain what qualia are, as they present a possible Blackburn-inspired solution to the regress problem with dispositional monism. In order to do this, I will use the work of Frank Jackson's essay "Epiphenomenal Qualia" to define and explain qualia, and then give an argument for why they are non-physical and cannot be discovered or understood as dispositional as we do through scientific study.⁶⁹ In the following chapter, I will explain how they are instances of categorical properties and reject dispositional monism.

In the previous chapter, I explained scientific study finds dispositional properties all the way down.⁷⁰ I also argued that all properties found through scientific study are physical, and thus all dispositional properties are physical.⁷¹ Further, one might make the claim that science is our only way of obtaining concrete, useful, or even any information about the world we live in. Thus, combined with the claims of dispositional monism that the only kind of properties that exist are dispositional properties, it leads to the conclusion that science only finds dispositional properties and all dispositional properties are physical.⁷² But I will argue that there is another way to know of properties that exist in our world that are non-physical and are not found through scientific study. Therefore, these properties are non-dispositional and must be categorical.

Consider the property someone has of being in pain. We can make a case that pain is a structural property and further that it also has a dispositional identity. What does it mean for someone to have the property of being in pain? It means that when we do something that causes us pain, we experience certain painful sensations. For example, when I touch a

⁶⁹ Jackson, 127.

⁷⁰ Blackburn, 63.

⁷¹ Kreines, handout.

⁷² Kreines, handout.

hot stove, it burns my hand and I feel a sensation of pain, leading me to quickly pull my hand away.⁷³ We might then say that that feeling of pain comes from the property that the stove has of being hot. Thus, the property that the experience of touching the stove causes us of being in pain depends on the property that the stove has of being hot. We can also identify the stimulus and manifestation of this property; the stimulus is touching the stove and the manifestation is pulling my hand away. This series of events seems like a purely physical series.⁷⁴ The feelings of pain I experience that lead me to pull my hand away from the stove come from the physical neurological events that occur in my brain including the firing of certain neurons that tell my muscles to contract and pull my hand away.⁷⁵ But, consider Tom. Tom was born with a shocking and rare condition where he has no feeling anywhere in his body, and does not know what it *feels like* to touch anything.⁷⁶ But, nonetheless, Tom still has access to all of his other senses. Tom is a brilliant scientist who studies pain.⁷⁷ He has access to all of the proper technology that allows him, in his condition, to learn all of the physical information there is to know about pain.⁷⁸ He knows the neurons that fire when someone touches a hot stove and consequently the chemical reactions that occur in someone's brain that cause them to pull their hand away or yelp in pain.⁷⁹ He even knows all of the physical information there is about different touch sensations and how they compare to the sensation of pain. Overall, Tom knows all of the physical information there is about pain.⁸⁰ Then, suppose that by some miracle, Tom is cured of his condition and regains all sensations of touch, including pain. Tom then accidentally touches a hot stove and feels a sensation of

⁷³ Sophie Gitlin, Emma Kresch, and Dustin Locke, "Retelling of Frank Jackson's 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' (1982)," paper written for Philosophy Unlocked research project (Gould Center for Humanistic Studies, Claremont McKenna College May 17 2021).

⁷⁴ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁷⁵ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁷⁶ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁷⁷ Jackson, 130.

⁷⁸ Jackson, 130.

⁷⁹ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁸⁰ Jackson, 130.

pain. Presumably, Tom has learned something new, namely, *what it's like* to feel pain.⁸¹ Tom already knew all of the physical information, so what is it that he learned?⁸² He learned about the **qualia** or singular **quale** of pain.⁸³ Qualia refer to these *what it's like* type of experiences or sensations like what it's like to smell a rose, or the itchiness of an itch, or the sourness of a lemon.⁸⁴ These experiences are non-physical since, like Tom, one could know all of the physical information there is about the sensation of pain, but still learn something new when experiencing it for oneself.⁸⁵

Thus, what effect does this example have on what we know of dispositional monism? We concluded that the property something has of being painful has a structural or dispositional side because its identity depends on its relationship to other properties, like the property of being hot, and it has stimulus and manifestation conditions.⁸⁶ We also know that science finds all dispositional properties all the way down, and we learn about dispositional properties through scientific study.⁸⁷ But we also found out that there is an aspect to the property of pain that we cannot find through science, namely, what it's like to feel pain, or the quale aspect of pain.⁸⁸ Further, we can argue that this aspect of pain is not structural. While the identity of the dispositional side of the property of pain depends on the stove being hot, what it's like to feel pain, or what I will begin to call the categorical aspect of what it's like to feel pain, does not depend on the hotness of the stove. For, our understanding of what it's like to feel pain is not dependent on the property a stove has of being hot. It is a different side to the property of pain that does not have a structural identity, since the structural aspect of pain has already been accounted for. There is no way that we can know what it's like to

⁸¹ Jackson, 130.

⁸² Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁸³ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

⁸⁴ Jackson, 127.

⁸⁵ Jackson, 130.

⁸⁶ Bird, 514.

⁸⁷ Blackburn, 63.

⁸⁸ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

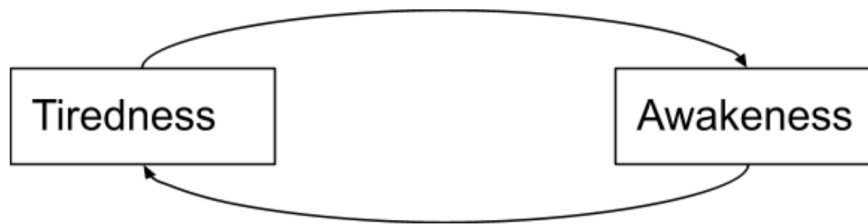
feel pain outside of actually feeling pain, we need no other properties to understand the identity of this side of the property of pain besides the property of pain itself.

Chapter 5: Qualia to the Rescue

In this chapter, I will offer a concluding argument as to how the categorical side of certain properties, namely qualia, offers a solution to the problems posed by the regress. Further, I conclude that the existence of such categorical properties disproves dispositional monism and gives evidence of properties that are categorical. What we are left with is a better alternative to dispositional monism without necessitating the existence of some God or larger categorical grounds that dictate the laws of our world.

The first question that I seek to answer is how does the existence of categorical properties solve the regress problem? To answer this, I would like to mirror a diagram that I presented in my second chapter that showed how a circular regress led to the loss of identities in purely structural dispositional properties.⁸⁹ Consider the property that someone might have due to lack of sleep of being tired. We can ask, what does it mean for someone to be tired? It means that person has the urge to go to sleep because they have been awake for so long. If someone were sleeping, they would not know what it is to be tired, therefore, the property of being tired depends on the property that person has of being awake. Further, we can identify stimulus and manifestation conditions for this property: the stimulus would be that person's lack of sleep, and the manifestation would be that person exhibiting tired behavior such as yawning or having bags under their eyes. Consider the following diagram to illustrate the structural identity of the property:

⁸⁹ Priest, 119.

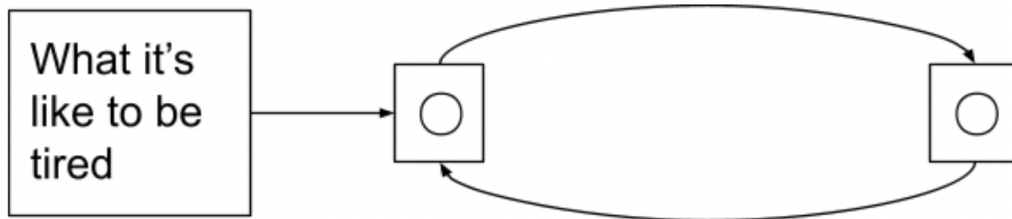


But based on what was argued before with Tom the pain scientist, we can argue for the existence of a non-physical aspect to the property of being tired, because if one knew all of the physical information about what it was to be tired having never felt tired in their lives, once someone was actually tired for the first time, they would learn something new: what it's like to be tired. Therefore, the property of tiredness has an additional, non-dispositional, but categorical aspect that gives it identity. The property of being tired that we have depends on the property of being awake, but the aspect of *what it's like* to be tired does not depend on our being awake, it is merely another aspect that answers the question of 'what does it mean to be tired?'. For, one could only know that they were experiencing tiredness if they knew what it was like to be tired. In this sense, the property of what it's like to be tired is an additional aspect of the identity of the property of being tired that was missing before, because there is more to tiredness than just its relationship to the property of being awake. Therefore, we can now introduce the qualia aspect into our diagram:



As demonstrated in the second chapter, if we remove the label from the property of being tired, then we are left in a position where the relationship between the properties is purely

structural and neither of them has an identity.⁹⁰ But, consider the categorical aspect to the property of tiredness, namely, *what it's like* to be tired, or the quale of the property of tiredness which is now giving identity to the property of tiredness.⁹¹ Our diagram after removing labels would look something like this:



We know a part of the identity of tiredness based on what it's like to be tired, and can go back and fill in the empty circles and restore identity to the properties in question, reverting to the diagram directly before this one. Therefore, we have solved the regress problem by demonstrating the existence of a categorical aspect of the property of tiredness.

What this conclusion now leaves us with is an understanding of properties as having both dispositional and categorical components to their identities. The dispositional component comes from the property's relationship to other properties and its stimulus and manifestation conditions. The categorical component comes from the qualia or *what it's like* aspect of a property that gives it an additional grounding for its identity. With the categorical aspect of a property, we can have a clear scientific understanding of the world around us, but also know that there are some non-physical factors that exist and give identities to properties.

This argument for the identity of properties only reinforces the fact that there is still much to discover about the world around us. We have learned so much through scientific study, but there is an aspect of our world that remains unknown, namely categorical

⁹⁰ Priest, 119.

⁹¹ Gitlin, Kresch, and Locke.

properties and what they might be. While qualia are only one instance of such categorical properties that give identity and meaning to dispositional physical properties of our world, it still remains to be seen whether there are other instances of such properties that exist and whether we can ever know them at all.

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