

Whither Neutral Monism?

1. Neutral monism is the monistic metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality according to which there is only one underlying commonality to both mind and matter, both of which can be reduced to and constructed from that underlying commonality.

Historically, various authors have defended various forms of monism: a physicalist monism, a mentalist or spiritualist monism, and neutral monism itself. Physicalist monism contends that the ultimate nature of reality can be accommodated within the confines of the science of physics—when theoretical physics will arrive at a “theory of everything”, mind itself will be accounted for by that theory, combining or overcoming insights from the theory of relativity, quantum physics, string theory, or any other theory of this kind. Mentalist or spiritualist monism contends that the ultimate nature of reality cannot be accommodated within the confines of any natural science, with the possible exception of a natural science of the mind—even the nature of physical entities is ultimately mental or spiritualist. Historically, idealism can be considered as a mentalist or spiritualist metaphysics, but other varieties of the latter can be constructed, including a variation of the thesis emphasizing the possible development of a natural science of the mind that can incorporate the science of physics as a particular instance of it. Neutral monism is different from either physicalist monism or mentalist/spiritualist monism. Its contention is that the ultimate nature of reality is neutral between the physical and the mental, thus solving debates between monists of one stripe or another on the one hand and between dualists and monists of any stripe on the other hand. Neutral monism can be considered as a noneliminativist reductionist thesis in so far as it reduces mind and matter to something more fundamental which is neither, while at the same time preserving mind and matter as self-standing ontological entities.

Neutral monism has been defended or adumbrated by thinkers such as William James, Bertrand Russell, Ernst Mach, and the contemporary Australian philosophers Daniel Stoljar and David Chalmers.

In this brief paper I am only interested in the large-scale structure and dynamics of neutral monism as a metaphysical thesis, as well as in its potential as a promising metaphysical thesis about the ultimate nature of reality. As such, I am not going to discuss the intricacies of the thesis at various authors. I am only going to refer to some authors when the pattern of argument will demand it.

The metaphysical picture put forward by neutral monism is the following: there exists a basis, composed of neutral entities, out of which mind and matter are constructed and to which mind and matter can be reduced.

2. The fundamental problems that neutral monism faces are two: (i) the problem of the nature of neutral entities (of the neutrality of the basis), and (ii) the problem of the relationship between the neutral entities, on the one hand, and mind and matter, on the other hand (the problem is a Janus-faced one, i.e., of the reductibility relation and of the constructibility relation). In this paper, I am using interchangeably the notions “the physical” and “matter”, as well as the notions “the mental” and “mind”—the former two refer to one category, the latter two refer to another category. Notoriously,

some thinkers have argued that either matter is inscrutable (e.g., Foster 1982) or that the notion itself is unclear and that we do not know precisely what it refers to (e.g., Chomsky 2000). The science of physics is also largely considered incomplete at the time of writing this paper. Nevertheless, I am presupposing here that the notions “the physical” and “matter” refer to that element of reality that is the focus of a “theory of everything” in theoretical physics and that is supposed to also account for and incorporate the mental.

Let us focus first on the (ii) problem and its two instances: reductibility and constructibility.

Reductibility can concern the reduction of matter to neutral entities, of mind to neutral entities, as well as the possible question of the status of the neutral entities themselves, whether they can be further reduced or not. Constructibility can concern not only the construction of matter from neutral entities and of mind from neutral entities, but also the hypothetical construction stage after the neutral entities, where there is a conceptual space for arguing that only one of mind and matter is constructed from neutral entities, while the other is constructed from its complementary category at that stage: thus, mind could be constructed from neutral entities, while matter could be constructed from mind (forms of idealism or panpsychism could be inserted here), or matter could be constructed from neutral entities, while mind could be constructed from matter. In this paper, I am going to leave open the completion of the metaphysics along the suggested options, only canvassing the options (or some of the options) at stake.

The central difficulty that neutral monism can encounter in the development of the reductibility and constructibility lines is that of *collapsing*: neutral monism must remain neutral until the end, thus avoiding possible collapses in committed monisms such as physicalist monism or mentalist/spiritualist monism, as well as in more nuanced metaphysics such as emergentism or the double-aspect theory. The central category on which it relies, that of *neutral entities*, must be specified to such an extent that it differentiates itself clearly enough from either physical entities or mental/spiritual entities, in order to preserve the neutrality of the (reductibility and constructibility) basis. The (i) problem thus becomes pivotal and encounters the (ii) problem at this juncture.

After sketching the large-scale structure and dynamics of neutral monism as a metaphysical thesis, I am going in the remainder of this paper to provide a) a suggestion about the nature of the neutral entities as amorphous-morphing entities, and b) a problem arising after the specification of the nature of the neutral entities as amorphous-morphing entities, raising questions about a possible supplementation of neutral monism with a *sui generis* ontological entity that might not abide by the reductibility and constructibility lines required by neutral monism. The picture that emerges is not a form of dualism, but a form of “superscripted” neutral monism.

3. The neutral entities are neutral by definition: they are neither mind, nor matter, but sufficiently powerful to allow reduction and construction of either mind or matter to and from them. A specification of neutral entities that would make them similar to either mind or matter will possibly bring the collapse of neutral monism into another form of monism. The idea of neutrality is essential and any form of neutral monism must steer a middle course through the space at stake, avoiding collapse.

The suggestion that I wish to explore is that neutral entities are amorphous, plastic entities that can *morph into* various mental or physical entities. The (ii) problem can thus be offered a solution, in both its constructibility and reductibility instances, via the introduction of the framework of *morphing*.

If we place ourselves in the perspective of a subject of experience on the background of the all-encompassing metaphysical picture of neutral monism, the first-personal or subjective perspective, everything that goes on is ultimately composed of, constructed from, reducible to the neutral entities. If there is an “I”, an experiencing subject, it is also composed of, constructed from, reducible to the neutral entities. Every single experience, such as my current experience of feeling the after-taste of the Mediterranean salad that I just ate, is composed of, constructed from, reducible to the neutral entities. Whether these experiences have a neural substrate or are identical to it is orthogonal. What matters is that every single thing is ultimately the domain of *morphing* neutral entities. But it looks to me at this stage that there still remains an important philosophical problem: that of the conscious access itself to the various metamorphoses of neutral entities, including neural morphings of the neutral entities. For it could have been the case that these neural morphings were not accompanied by any conscious access to them, but simply morphed in such a way that they wired neural systems to undergo and follow patterns of various system states when self-interacting, interacting with other similar systems, or the world at large. Neutral monism can be considered as a metaphysical thesis holding not only for our universe, but for all other universes as well (if the multiverse exists), not only for our actual world, but for all possible worlds as well (if possibilism is a viable thesis). Neutral monism is such an encompassing metaphysical thesis that it can still *go meta* irrespective of the best, most truthful theories in theoretical physics or philosophical logic (the pictures of ultimate reality provided by theoretical physics and philosophical logic should not be confused, they are different, but neutral monism is the highest in the *meta* scale). Nevertheless, it seems as if there can still be the case that in some parts of the multiverse or the string of possible worlds, there are subjects who do not have conscious access to the metamorphoses of neutral entities. That we have such access may be an accident or it may be not. Irrespectively, if we agree that there is still an important philosophical problem left, then it looks as if neutral monism needs to be supplemented with the *sui generis* conscious access itself, giving rise to a superscripted neutral monism.

I consider that the most promising development of the specification of neutral entities, beside the *morphing* relation, is that in terms of *information*. The latter line of argument has been developed in some detail by philosophers such as Kenneth Sayre and David Chalmers. According to them, *information* might be a primitive accounting for the nature of neutral entities. At this point, the collapsing issue re-enters the debate, for one can consider that neutral entities are thus reduced to something even more fundamental. The permissible geometry is only the one in which neutral entities are at the basis of everything: the introduction of a further element, *information*, with unclarified relations to mind and matter, risks to alter the permissible geometry and to introduce with it an underground that might well place mind and matter as more fundamental than the neutral entities themselves. Thus, what is needed for enhancing the specification of the neutral entities in terms of *information* is an *exclusion of any ties* of the latter with both mind and matter that might risk the collapsing of neutral monism in another form of monism or the distorting of the permissible geometry of construction and reductibility in connection to the neutrality base.

I have noted that I tend to lean towards a supplementation of neutral monism with the *sui generis* conscious access, leading to a superscripted neutral monism. It needs to be emphasized that this supplementation is to be located at the level of the neutrality of the basis itself. For *sui generis* conscious access contributes to the differentiated processing of information and, through its modification, raises the problem of its independence from consciousness and of its viability as a primitive in the analysis and specification of the neutral entities.

The picture of superscripted neutral monism that I have sketched brings with it interesting ways of conceiving of the nature of the phenomenologies that we experience as subjects.

4. The problem of the “what it is like (for a subject)” is well-known in the philosophy of mind and consciousness, raising puzzles that are seen as defying scientific explanation. If we bar subjectless experience or phenomenology, all phenomenologies will be the phenomenologies of a subject, whether they are consciously experienced or not (theoretically, we can argue that there can be unfelt phenomenology, phenomenologies attributed to a subject of experience, but unexperienced *tale quale* due to lack of conscious access). Superscripted neutral monism offers us an elegant framework to account for all this. Within superscripted neutral monism, the subject is not a bundle of mental states or phenomenologies, but more of a substratum or a substance, on the background of which phenomenologies occur as modifications of the substratum or second-degree *morphings* of the neutral entities to which we have conscious access. Please note that someone can agree with the substratum, the first-degree morphings of the neutral entities giving rise to it, and the second-degree morphings of the neutral entities as “waves” of the subject-stratum, but still argue that the reality in question is a zombie-reality, to which there is no conscious access: there are no subjectless phenomenologies, but there are unfelt, zombie phenomenologies (phenomenologies lacking conscious access to them). Superscripted neutral monism overcomes this issue.

The overall schemata of superscripted neutral monism can also be applied to debates between the proponents and opponents of the existence of a *sui generis* phenomenology of thought, not reducible to the associated phenomenologies of thought, the phenomenologies of the colourings of thought (inner speech, emotions, mental images, epistemic feelings such as a feeling of certainty or uncertainty). The overall schemata, *mutatis mutandis*, says that there might be something subjacent to both kinds of phenomenologies, which is neither and to and from which both can be reduced and constructed. This would amount to an amorphous phenomenology *morphing into* particular phenomenologies. The issues regarding the *sui generis* conscious access to information and of its differentiated processing in consciousness are still present at this level of the structure of phenomenology, now the second level of abstractization in our inquiry after the level of the large-scale metaphysics of consciousness. For both the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought and the phenomenologies of thought colourings need to also be consciously accessed. Are the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought and the *sui generis* conscious access related in any way? If we allow for the theoretical possibility of unfelt, zombie *sui generis* phenomenology of thought, they are not. But it might be the case that the *sui generis* conscious access makes the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought *sui generis* in the first place, placing it apart from the phenomenology of the thought colourings that are only *experientially enabled*, but *not individuated* by the *sui generis* conscious access.

5. I shall end this paper by summing up what has been achieved, if something.

Neutral monism is a promising all-encompassing metaphysical picture of the ultimate nature of all reality.

There are several problems to be solved to confer credibility to the theory, especially those having to do with: the nature of the neutral entities; the constructibility and reductibility relations between the neutrality base, on the one hand, and mind and matter, on the other hand; the specification and analysis of neutral entities in terms of information in order to avoid the collapsing of neutral monism into another form of monism.

It might be that the best account of the nature of the neutral entities and the constructibility and reductibility relations is in terms of amorphous, plastic neutral entities capable of *morphing into* various kinds of entities. The metamorphoses of neutral entities account for the nature of mind and matter.

Neutral monism thus conceived of still encounters a fundamental philosophical problem related to, but different from the hard problem of consciousness (Why is there phenomenology rather than not? Why do phenomenologies differ between themselves?): why is there conscious access to the various mental metamorphoses of neutral entities? It might be that neutral monism needs to be supplemented with an unreducible entity at the level of the neutrality of the base, *sui generis* conscious access, giving rise to superscripted neutral monism, a metaphysical view that distinguishes itself from dualism. *Sui generis* conscious access might influence and modify *information* (rather than the other way around) to such an extent that the viability of *information* as a primitive in the specification and analysis of the neutral entities is discarded.

The overall schemata of superscripted neutral monism can be applied not only to the large-scale structure of the metaphysics of consciousness, but also to the metaphysics of the structure of particular phenomenologies: for instance, the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought and the phenomenologies of thought colourings may both amount to (be reducible at a structural level to) an amorphous phenomenology *morphing into* particular phenomenologies.

Are the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought and *sui generis* conscious access connected somehow? I leave open the possibility of *sui generis* conscious access making the *sui generis* phenomenology of thought *sui generis* in the first place¹.

References:

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¹ My understanding of the structure and dynamics of neutral monism as a monistic metaphysic has been shaped by Leopold Stubenberg's excellent article "Neutral Monism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/neutral-monism/>.