

Reality Bubbles

Consciousness and the Problem of Matter

Christian de Quincey, Ph.D.

Abstract

From Plato's *eidos*, to Descartes' *cogito*, to Kant's *numenon*, our understanding of reality has faltered at a seemingly impossible, double-edged, impasse. First, an ontological "hard problem": If mind and matter are so radically different and separate, how do they ever interact? Second, a related epistemological conundrum: How is it possible for mind to ever know anything about matter—including *whether it even exists*? Then came Whitehead. By shifting the mind-matter relation from substances interacting in space to complementary phases in *process*, he offered a way through, or at least around, the Kantian impasse. His panpsychist ontology came hand-in-glove with an epistemology of intersubjectivity: *We can know the objective physical world because the actual world is not just physical, and because it necessarily and intimately informs and constitutes our subjective experience.* But is this panpsychism or idealism? And how does it avoid the interaction problem that bedevils dualism or the problem of emergence that embarrasses materialism?

"For thought and being are the same." — Parmenides

It begins with Plato and his division of reality into transcendental forms or ideas and immanent matter. This metaphysical split was further firmly established in Western philosophy by Descartes' mind-body dualism, bequeathing to the world a profoundly challenging puzzle: How, then, is it possible for "thinking stuff" to ever know anything about material "extended stuff"—the perennial, unsolvable problem of interaction? The Cartesian split was fundamentally ontological, but it sowed the seeds for an epistemological conundrum that came to be known as the "Kantian impasse": If all that we ever know are events or phenomena in consciousness, how, then, can we ever know *anything* about an assumed extra-mental world of matter—the *numenon*?

Following the line through Plato, Descartes, and Kant, our understanding of reality has been, and continues to be, dogged by this double-edged dualism. These days, the arch culprit is often identified as poor old René Descartes. He gets a lot of (mostly undeserved) bad press for his inconvenient dualism. How dare he split matter from mind, leaving the world disenchanting and desacralized! What was he thinking? Didn't he foresee that one day materialism would supplant dualism by lopping off half of reality—giving us another, equally hard, problem: explaining how mind could emerge from wholly mindless matter? No, he didn't. His thoughts were focused elsewhere.

"I think, therefore, I am." This superb insight is not, in itself, dualism or even an inevitable source of dualism; though it can lead there. In essence, it affirms the one undeniable certainty—*consciousness*. Descartes arrived at this statement by realizing that even doubting (or denying) consciousness thereby necessarily affirms and demonstrates it. *Consciousness obviously is*. Everything else is open to doubt. This "cogito" insight was a forerunner of Kant's transcendental (epistemological) idealism—the realization that *everything* we know necessarily is known *only in the mind*. We know nothing outside consciousness—and can't know anything other than consciousness and its contents. Even the idea of "matter" or "energy" is known only in the mind. We don't—and can't—know what it is in itself, or even if it exists as anything other than forms in consciousness.

This, by the way, is a truly embarrassing state of affairs for materialists—or, at least it should be. The fundamental metaphysical assumption of materialism—the guiding light for all modern science—is that the ultimate nature of reality is matter or physical energy. But, as Kant pointed out, *we can never know anything about the so-called physical world other than as forms or ideas in the mind*. What passes in science for knowledge of matter is always, and inevitably, only knowledge of mind, or, more accurately, mental contents. But that's another story (de Quincey, 2002).

Back to Descartes: For complicated reasons, including the dangerous looming presence of the Inquisition, he did not pursue the implications of epistemological idealism. Instead, he opted to focus on ontology and employed strained (and strangled) logic to affirm the existence of material substance independent of mind. Hence, his now-famous Cartesian dualism.

From Substance to Process

Not until Whitehead came along did Western philosophy have a way out of the Cartesian-Kantian impasse (of ever knowing the physical domain) and the insuperable problem of interaction that has immobilized metaphysical dualism. Instead of trying to understand how matter and mind (energy and consciousness) could be related in and interact through space, Whitehead shifted the entire debate and proposed a revolutionary, postmodern, solution: *Mind and matter are related as phases in process*. Time, not space, according to Whitehead, is our clue to the mysterious relationship between mind and matter.

His ontology was based on the foundational idea that reality consists of "actual occasions" and that these are "occasions of experience." Technically, Whitehead's "occasions of experience" are equivalent to Descartes' *cogito* insight. Both affirm *experience* as the primary ingredient of knowledge and existence. Descartes' metaphysics ran into a dead end because he had proposed that mind (experience) was a "substance" existing alongside matter, another—utterly different—kind of substance.

The term "substance," as originally used by medieval scholastics, meant a mode of existence that is "self-subsistent." A substance, therefore, is something that

exists or can exist entirely on its own. For Descartes, this meant that the substances of mind and matter could exist completely independent of each other. Further, it included the notion that a substance exists *fully as itself* at every instant. In other words, even if we could somehow stop time, substances would still exist undisturbed in space.

Whitehead showed that the Cartesian idea of substance (also assumed by Kant) is incoherent. In simple terms, he showed that a world could not be composed of substances existing as a string of durationless “instants.” If time really were composed of pure instants (without any duration), then there would be no way for any one instant to connect or communicate with any subsequent instant. There would and could be no *causal connection* between instants. Therefore nothing could hold any “substance” in existence from one instant to the next.

Time and Experience

Instead of substances existing from instant to instant, Whitehead revolutionized metaphysics by proposing that reality is composed of enduring *moments in process*. “Duration” means that something exists or endures from one moment to the next; that is, one moment *informs* the next moment. Eh voila! we have causality. We have a connection between successive moments. Not only that, to have any meaning whatsoever, duration implies a *distinction* between successive moments—that is, a distinction between moments that have happened (past), moments that are happening (now), and moments that have yet to happen (future). And any such distinction necessarily requires an *experiencing* being to detect or notice (or *feel*) the difference between the moment of “now” and past or future moments. (Whitehead’s technical term for “feeling” is “prehension”).

In substituting *process* for medieval “substance,” Whitehead not only gave us a way around the “mind-body” problem, he also gave us an exit strategy out of the Kantian impasse. In *Process and Reality*, he presented a detailed account of a thoroughly non-Cartesian understanding of the mind-matter relationship. Essentially, the process view unifies mind and matter without reducing one to the other, and this unification occurs in *time* rather than as substances in space.

Every actuality is an occasion or moment of experience. Every moment endures briefly as “now” before it completes itself and expires to become a past moment. It is then immediately succeeded by a new moment of “now.” Whitehead summed up this process in a memorable phrase: “Now subject, then object.” Every moment of experience is a *subject now*, which, as soon as it completes itself and expires, becomes a past *object* for the subject in the next moment of now. In *Radical Nature*, I referred to this process as “past matter, present mind.”

Whitehead’s solution to the mind-body problem, then, is to show us that what we know as the objective, material world exists as expired moments of experience and that these are known by the subject of experience existing in the present moment. In a word, Whitehead showed us that actuality, the actual world, exists as moments in a process, and that every moment in the process consists of two

poles—a physical pole (expired moments of experience) and a mental pole (the current subject of experience). In doing so, Whitehead made a categorical distinction between the objective, physical world and the experiential world of mental events. *Every actuality consists of both physical and mental poles.* Matter and mind always go together. Experience, consciousness, is always *now*; and matter is always “ago,” either just a moment in the past, or expired experiences accumulated over billions of years.

Beyond The Kantian Impasse

The Kantian impasse—we can know only what shows up in the mind, and we can never know any reality beyond the mind—is resolved by recognizing that *every* current moment of experience is necessarily and causally *informed* by the presence and pressure of the (objective) past.

For example, in the case of human consciousness, every mental event is informed and causally conditioned by the material events occurring in its associated brain (itself composed of expired experiences). In other words, we can know things in themselves (matter or the physical pole of a moment) because they inform and partly constitute every act of knowing. Knowing can happen only because the past streams into the present, forming it, shaping it, constituting it.

The role of the current subject existing *now* is to purposefully select (i.e., *choose*) which aspects of the (probably) infinite realm of the past it takes into its own being in the present. This is Whitehead’s *prehension*. Every actual occasion, then, is both constituted and determined by physical causes (from “ago”) and by the self-creative, self-renewable subject that chooses its own past (and is therefore responsible for its past) and also chooses among the potentials and possibilities available to it in every moment that will, in turn and in time, determine its future.

In short, we can know the objective, material world because it literally constitutes and informs us (our subjective experience) in the present moment. In this way, Whitehead overcomes the dualism and interaction problem of separate mind and matter, and the Kantian impasse of ever knowing the nature or existence of the material world beyond the mind. *There is no physical world beyond the mind* (just as idealism insists).

But this is not to say that the physical world is “only in the mind.” The physical world is objectively real, but this objective reality can exist only in concert with a *knowing subject of experience* in every present moment. The mind-body problem, thus, is solved by recognizing mind and matter as pulses or phases in a single experiential process. Mind and matter are inseparable, yet categorically distinct, just as present and past are inseparable and distinct—because every moment of now endures only for an ontological “blink,” before expiring and becoming an object in the past that informs the next experiential moment . . . and so on, and on, and on.

Reality Bubbles

Think of reality as made up of countless gazillions of “bubble moments,” where each bubble is both physical and mental—a bubble or quantum of *sentient energy*. However, try not to picture these bubbles as existing in or filling up space. Try, if you can, to imagine them as “bubbles of time”—bubbles of *process*, or quantum bubbles of action.

Each bubble exists for a moment, then *pops!* and the resulting “spray” is the objective “stuff” that composes the physical pole of the next momentary bubble. Each bubble exists *now*, and it *endures* for a split moment until it, too, *pops!* The quantum of time between the formation of each new bubble and when it pops is the “lifetime” of a moment of subjective experience. This momentary subject (the mental pole) is literally informed by the “spray” of expired past bubbles (the objective physical pole).

Each bubble, therefore, is both mental and physical—just as panpsychism tells us. These oscillating poles of mental-physical-mental, leap-frogging each other through time, are the fundamental ingredients of reality: bubbles or quanta of *sentient energy* or *purposeful action*.

Time is our experience of the ongoing succession of these momentary bubbles of being (or bubbles of *becoming*) popping in and out of the present moment of *now*. We feel this succession of moments as the flow of the present slipping into the past, always replenished by new moments of “now” from an apparently inexhaustible source we objectify as the future.

But there is no future. The future does not exist except as *potentials* or possibilities in the present moment—in *experience*—which is always conditioned by the objective pressure of the past (the physical world). Subjectivity (consciousness, awareness) is what-it-feels-like to experience these possibilities, and *choosing* from them to *create* the next new moment of experience (again, always informed and conditioned by the objective past).

Time, Space, Matter, and Mind

The world, reality, is not made up of “things” existing in space; rather, Whitehead’s profound insight was that it is made up of “actual occasions.” And each actual event—our “quantum bubbles” of sentient energy—is both mental and physical, both purposeful and determined.

What we know or experience as “space” is the simultaneous existence of and relationships between countless popping bubbles. German philosopher Leibniz called them “monads.” Space, then, is the experience of the relationships between nested hierarchies of these bubble-monads. And what we know as “matter” is composed of nested hierarchies of these monads that have already “popped” to become, literally, the objective raw material for all the bubble-monads that exist together *right now*.

Time, then, is the sequential popping in and out of these bubble-monads. Space, is essentially experiencing simultaneous *relationships*. And matter is nested hierarchies of expired monads or moments of experience. We feel the pressure of the past as “matter,” and this is the source of our experiences of and ideas about *causality*. Mind, or consciousness, is both the experience of sequentially popping monads (time), and the experiencing of relationships between simultaneously existing monads (space), as well as experiencing nested hierarchies of expired monads (matter and physical causality).

But that is not all: We are not just caused; we are also causes—or, more accurately, we are “*causers*.” Mind or consciousness is not just the passive ability to experience time, space, and matter; it is also the ability to actively *choose* possibilities, and thereby participate in creating the world as it is, and as it will become.

Integral Ontology

One of the attractions of Whitehead’s panpsychist ontology is that it embraces the core insights of dualism, materialism, and idealism. It recognizes that mind and matter co-exist (just as dualism intuits), emphasizing the distinction and irreducibility (though not separateness) of the physical and the mental. It acknowledges that the objective physical past determines the present (just as materialism intuits), emphasizing the reality of matter and its causal impact on mind. For Whitehead, matter (the physical pole consisting of past moments of experience) is a necessary ingredient of every actual occasion. Past matter endures into the present moment where it is experienced by the current subject as the world of physical objects.

Yes, the objective past conditions the present; but that is not the whole story. In every new moment, the experiencing subject chooses and creates itself from the raw material of the past and the ripe potentials of the present. Determinism and free will coexist in each actual occasion.

Whitehead’s process panpsychism, thus, acknowledges the insights of both forms of idealism—emanationism and immaterialism. On the one hand, by recognizing that the ultimate components of reality are “moments” or “occasions” of *experience*, Whitehead affirms the emanationist intuition that reality is intrinsically mental or experiential, and that these moments of experience give rise to the physical or material world as they expire. On the other hand, panpsychism acknowledges the notion that nothing exists except moments of experience—either *now* or expired (immaterialism or *maya* idealism).

Combining these multiple intuitions in an integrated process is the fundamental insight of panpsychism.

Bottom line: We can know the physical world because our knowing (consciousness) actively participates in creating it; and because the physical world inevitably and pervasively determines, shapes, and informs whatever we

know. Knowing and being are mutually causally coupled—an insight common to many of the world's perennial mystical or spiritual traditions (as well as Parmenides in ancient Greece). Postmodern metaphysics comes full circle.

References

Cornford, F. M. (1957), *Plato and Parmenides*. New York, NY: The Liberal Arts Press.

de Quincey, C. (2002), *Radical Nature: Rediscovering the soul of matter*. Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities Press.

Descartes, R. (1952), *Descartes' Philosophical Writings*. Boston, MA: Little Brown & Co.

Kant, I. (1977), *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. (Originally published 1781).

Whitehead, A.N. (1978), *Process and Reality: An essay in cosmology*. New York, NY: The Free Press. (Originally published 1929)

The ideas in this essay were inspired by, and evolved from, conversations with Peter Russell late into the night on his boat in Sausalito, California.

Christian de Quincey, Ph.D., is Professor of Philosophy and Consciousness Studies at John F. Kennedy University; Academic Director for Conscious Evolution at The Graduate Institute; and Director of the Center for Interspecies Research. He is also founder of The Wisdom Academy, offering private mentorships in consciousness; and cofounder of The Visionary Edge, committed to transforming global consciousness by transforming mass media. Dr. de Quincey is author of the award-winning book *Radical Nature: Rediscovering the Soul of Matter* and *Radical Knowing: Understanding Consciousness through Relationship*. His new book *Consciousness—from Zombies to Angels* will be published in 2008 by Park Street Press. Samples of his writings on consciousness and cosmology are available at www.deepspirit.com.