Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Interacting with the Interaction Problem: A Yogācāra Buddhist Account of the Mind–Body Relation and Psychosomatic Causality

Venema, Ruben Daniël

Citation
Venema, R. D. (2025). *Interacting with the Interaction Problem: A Yogācāra Buddhist Account of the Mind–Body Relation and Psychosomatic Causality.*

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4280984

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Universiteit Leiden

Interacting with the Interaction Problem

A Yogācāra Buddhist Account of the Mind–Body Relation and Psychosomatic Causality

Master Thesis for *Philosophy: Global and Comparative Perspectives*

Written by Ruben Daniël Venema (S2920956)
Supervised by Dr. Sleutels, J. J. M.

Leiden, The Netherlands, July 2025

The one is the purified	*Ay éyá ver ay glínání*
The one is nothing, it is empty	*Ay éyá ver vénaní, te ver vénanos*
The one contains the two, it contains the many	*Ay éyá kámin ay léyáon, te kámin ay ítáon*
The one contains all that there is,	*Ay éyá kámin kolosíon,*
And yet the one holds nothing.	*En nû ay éyá kénan vénaníon.*

While writing my thesis, I found some inspiration to put the insights I developed into a poetic form. It is inspired by both Buddhism and Daoism (even though I do not engage much with Daoism in this thesis). It reflects an understanding that paradoxes are fundamental and necessary to transcend the limitations of language. On the right is a translation of the poem into Aethos, a fantasy language I am creating.

Abstract

The dichotomy between mind and body has deeply shaped Western philosophy, psychology, and medicine, often with alienating and reductionist consequences. While commonly attributed to Descartes, this dualism predates him and persists as an implicit metaphysical assumption that distorts our understanding of self and experience. This thesis critically examines the conceptual and metaphysical underpinnings of the mind–body divide through a dialogue between Western philosophy and Yogācāra Buddhism. I argue that the mind–body problem arises from mistaken reification of conceptual categories and an implicit metaphysical assumption, which takes mind and body to be fundamentally separate substances. By contrast, I develop a non-dual framework, drawing on Yogācāra, in which mind, body, and consciousness are understood as interdependent aspects of a single field of conditioned experience. This perspective allows us to reconceptualize psychosomatic causality as the dynamic structuring of experience within a localized, embodied consciousness, instead of as a problematic interaction between two distinct substances. In doing so, I aim to dissolve the conceptual deadlock of the mind–body interaction problem while preserving the meaningful distinctions we draw between mental and bodily phenomena as conventional and provisional. This reorientation could have implications not only for philosophy of mind, but also for healthcare practice, suggesting a more integrated and holistic approach to human experience, health, and suffering.

Keywords

Mind–Body Relations, Interaction Problem, Dualism, Yogācāra, Non-Duality, Psychosomatic Causality, Consciousness, Philosophy of Mind.

Acknowledgements

It was a challenge, writing this thesis. It was an intellectual puzzle which at times I was not sure if within my capabilities to solve. To say that it was a challenge is not to say that I did not enjoy it. I in fact did quite a lot; it was stimulating, engaging, puzzling, and enriching. There were also times when I enjoyed it less, however. For with all the puzzling there was a lot of going back and forth, of trying to find the right angle to approach the topic and to say what I wanted to say. Unfortunately, even what the topic was and what I wanted to say, I was often not sure. I felt a clear pull and sense of direction, but it showed itself more in rejecting what seemed not quite right yet, then in telling me what I should then do instead. I was feeling my way through the intellectual darkness ahead of me, and in the end I found something that I was happy with.

In this process of finding what I wanted to say, my supervisor, Jan Sleutels, played an important role. He challenged my ideas and pushed me for explanations of ideas that seemed self-explanatory to me. He asked the right questions and poked at the needed spots to refine and sharpen this thesis. At times, I felt misunderstood, but that pushed me to clarify my ideas and arguments and to learn to trust in what I had to say. It helped me mature philosophically. And to learn to be both confident and humble.

In the supervision, a theme from my bachelor thesis played out again as well: my resistance against academic expectations. I wanted to unfold my thoughts to the reader, and to take them on an intellection journey of exploration, as I was exploring them myself. This led to poetic language, and a loose structure and implicit arguments. In the end I folded, and adapted my writing style; in order to match the analytic academic expectations better and to make it more readable, especially for those in the field of analytic philosophy of the mind – for that is my primary target audience. And I think it made my work better. There is a value in and a place for that other style of writing, but it is not the best fit for this master's thesis. For this all, I want to thank Jan Sleutels.

Someone else who deserves my thanks, is my good friend Laurens Koops, who helped me greatly in understanding and voicing my ideas through all the conversations and discussions we had. He was on a converging path in the western tradition of phenomenology, and so we understood each other well, although we did not always agree with each other. This created a fertile ground for the development of our arguments.

One who should certainly not be left unmentioned, is my dear girlfriend, Zsófi Szalavári, who always is a rock of support for me. Both emotionally and intellectually. She always patiently and full of interest listened to my sharings of my ideas, and critically and open-mindedly engaged them. I always enjoyed our conversations a lot, and they were extremely helpful in the formation of this thesis. Her assistance with editing the final version was also a huge help.

Of course, lastly, I should also thank the thinkers who came before me, and on whose shoulders I developed these ideas and wrote this thesis, most notably Vasubandhu.

Table of Contents

Abstract 3
Keywords 3
Acknowledgements 4
Table of Contents 5
Introduction 6
Chapter 1: How Dualism Endures: A Critique of Western Mind-Body Thinking 8
1.1 Descartes, Dualism and the Interaction Problem 8
1.2 Philosophy of Mind after Descartes 12
1.3 Psychosomatism: an Argument and a Contradiction 19
1.4 Conclusion: the Embeddedness of Dualistic Thinking 21
Chapter 2: Vasubandhu's Yogācāra as a Conceptual Reorientation 23
2.1 Dualism, Non-Dualism and the Three-Natures 24
2.2 The Teaching of Consciousness-Only 26
2.3 Knowledge Without Foundations: Conventional and Ultimate Truth 29
Chapter 3: Reconsidering Mind and Body through the Yogācāra Lens 32
3.1 Mind and Body as Things and Phenomena 32
3.2 Reflecting on Western Theories in Light of Non-Dualism 35
3.3 Consciousness, Mind, and Body 42
3.4 Psychosomatism Revisited 46
Summary and conclusion 47
Bibliography 48

Introduction

Who, or what, am I? Am I this body? This mind? These famous philosophical questions led Descartes to say that he is a thinking thing. The Western tradition of philosophy of mind has often been understood to have been shaped by Descartes' legacy of establishing mind and body as fundamentally separate substances. This is partially true, but we would be placing too much blame on Descartes if we ascribe to him the mind-body problem, instead of simply the modern formulation of it. It should be clear that perceiving and conceptualizing mind and body as distinct has been a tendency in Western thought for time immemorial. Plato already conceived of mind and body as separate entities, famously describing the soul (which could be understood as being synonymous with the mind in this case) as being trapped in the body – a condition from which philosophy seeks to liberate it.[1]

This deeply ingrained dichotomy still informs much of contemporary thought in philosophy, psychology, and medicine, and it still poses problems of mind-body interaction. It has led to a disconnection with and a disdain of the body,[2] and to a medical system which treats the two as completely separate, thereby failing to account for psychosomatic illnesses and to adequately provide holistic healing.

Therefore, in this thesis I ask '*How can we move beyond the entrenched mind–body divide by rethinking the concepts of mind, body, and consciousness through the non-dual framework of Yogacara Buddhism?*' This thesis does not intend to conflate the two into a meaningless unity, but instead to understand how dualistic thinking arises; how concepts are formed; and how we can come to a true understanding of mind and body relations, that accounts for the conventional nature of conceptual understanding.

To answer this question, I explore how dualism arises and how it persists. In chapter one, I do this by looking in depth at Descartes' thought, and the general Western tradition of philosophy of mind that developed after him. This maps the Western mind and the framework it uses to engage with mind-body problems, and shows its limitations. I then introduce a different framework – Yogācāra Buddhism – in chapter two: one which acknowledges and maps this dualistic dimension of our being, which in turn helps us understand what non-duality entails. From this new perspective, in chapter three, I will revisit and reflect upon the theories of mind that I introduced in chapter one, to see how we might rethink mind-body relations by bringing Yogācāra and western theories together.

In doing this, I do not attempt to cover all relevant traditions and theories, nor to construct a comprehensive theory of psychosomatic causality. My aim is more modest: to critically examine key conceptual assumptions that sustain the mind–body divide and to propose an alternative way of thinking

[1] Frank Chouraqui, *The Body and Embodiment: A Philosophical Guide* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 16-17.

[2] See: Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self : the Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

about mind, body, and consciousness that is philosophically coherent and practically useful. While I defend the view that the self is conventional and that consciousness arises dependently, these conclusions are developed within a specific comparative and conceptual framework, and are not tested against every possible metaphysical or empirical alternative. Likewise, important perspectives outside the scope of this thesis, such as other non-Western traditions, empirical neuroscience, or detailed clinical models, remain to be integrated into future research.

This entire project is ambitious, and some might wonder if not *too* ambitious. For claiming that the Yogācāra framework can meaningfully address mind-body problems in Western philosophy is a big claim – especially considering how long Western philosophy has been grappling with this problem. But I believe it can be done. The justification for undertaking this project is in the thesis itself: the fact that I can use this framework and do some meaningful analysis with it, shows that it is sensible and realistic to do so. Whether it was also successful to meaningfully address the mind-body problem, I'll leave for others to determine.

One might wonder about or question the usefulness of this - to concern ourselves with the fundamental metaphysics in order to say something about the real empirical experience of mind and body, and their relation. There seems to be a gap between metaphysics and empiricism. However, there are certain experiential phenomena - such as psychosomatic experiences - which cannot fully be explained by empirical data or reductive physicalism alone. There is a foundational structure – an irreducible metaphysical framework – that underlies how mind and body interact: how experience emerges, how interpretation actively shapes bodily states, and how they are both separated and connected. Without acknowledging this metaphysical background, any account of psychosomatic relations remains incomplete, unable to capture their dynamic, culturally inflected, and interpretive nature. And so it is not simply justified, but necessary to start with metaphysics.

The answers to the question that I explore in this thesis might have implications for how we do philosophy; how we have been thinking about and relating to the mind and the body. Additionally, it might provide an argument for a transition in our healthcare practices, towards a more holistic system in which mind-body interaction is understood much better. For this reason, this thesis will be notably relevant for healthcare professionals, scholars of philosophy of mind, comparative philosophy, and anyone engaged in bridging Western and Buddhist conceptual worlds.

Chapter 1: How Dualism Endures: A Critique of Western Mind-Body Thinking

This chapter will explore how metaphysical dualism was established by Descartes, the problems it created, and how later philosophers dealt with this inheritance, and thus how philosophy of mind developed after Descartes. This will lead me to psychosomatic phenomena as a proof of mind-body interaction, and how this is situated in the discussion of mind-body relations. The goal of this chapter is to show how deeply embedded and problematic dualistic thinking is in the Western tradition.

What is important to note, is that the way I use the concept of *dualism*, is more liberal than often done. For me, Descartes' dualism refers to a strict *mind-body dualism*; it is the reification of mind and body as different. We can also have a *subject-object dualism*; here object and subject are seen as fundamentally opposed. These are closely related, but differ subtly. What we can note in both concepts, is that we think in differences, and that these differences are reified into fundamental metaphysical categories – be it mind and body, or subject and object, or any other dichotomy for that matter. From this my use follows: I use the term *dualism* to refer to the experience of separations, and metaphysical dualism is the reification of these separations. Therefore, Descartes' dualism is a metaphysical dualism.

This use of *dualism* also clarifies how I will later use the term *non-duality*. By *non-duality*, I do not mean simply rejecting the idea that mind and body are different, nor collapsing them into one indistinct substance. Rather, non-duality refers to the insight that such distinctions, while experientially and conventionally meaningful, lack ultimate metaphysical reality. As we will see, non-duality is not the denial of difference, but the refusal to reify difference into fixed, independent categories.

1.1 Descartes, Dualism and the Interaction Problem

Descartes famously wrote, "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito ergo sum),*[3] establishing the certainty of the self as a thinking being. For him, thought (*cogitatio*) is the defining attribute of the mind (*res cogitans*), just as extension (*extensio*) is the defining attribute of the body (*res extensa*). The *cogito* does not claim that thinking is more fundamental than extension, but rather that thinking is the essence of the mind and the first thing of which we can have certain knowledge.

He comes to this conclusion in his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*.[4] In there, he seeks to establish a firm foundation for knowledge, free from error, doubt, and the instability of sensory experience as he sees it. He writes that much of what he had taken for granted, turned out to be wrong. He did not know what to believe any more, and his mind was full of doubt. His response to this uncertainty was that he

[3] This exact formulation is found in *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and *Principia Philosophiae* (1644), but not in the *Meditations* (1641).
[4] René Descartes, *Meditations*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

embraced this doubt, and made it fundamental as a philosophical exercise. He decided to doubt everything in order to free himself from all prejudices, and to find that which could not be doubted. This would form the foundation on which to reconstruct his knowledge.[5]

Descartes claims that our senses are at least for sure not to be relied on; they are notorious for deceiving us. To support this idea, he brings up several arguments, one of them being about dreaming: in both a dreaming and a waking state, he perceives and experiences; he can not tell dreaming apart from being awake. At this stage, then, we cannot be certain what is real and what is illusory, and so we must suspend our trust in sensory experience for the time being. Additionally, our knowledge of composite things – those made up of multiple parts – appears particularly prone to error, since we derive our knowledge of them through the senses, and should therefore be doubted. In contrast, simple and general truths, such as mathematical principles, seem more stable and certain, as they do not depend on our senses, nor on whether we are awake or dreaming.[6]

Since he can not trust his senses, he concludes that he must do away with his belief in anything that these tell him, including the existence of his body. He writes that he "[has] no senses at all; body, shape, extension, motion, and place are unreal".[7] Perhaps that is the end of it; he doubts everything and is stuck in this doubt. But no: he sees some light; something beyond doubt, for he realizes that he is doubting. There is an 'I' that convinced himself that there is nothing at all in the world. If that 'all' included himself, then he would not be able to come to that conclusion, and thus he must exist. And so he asks himself, 'what is it that exists?' It is the thinking thing. This capacity to think he ascribes to the soul; to the mind. Thought can not be detached from him. For if he ceased to think, he would disappear. His conclusion from this is that he is not his body. He is a thinking thing.

And so as he turns away from the body, he turns towards the soul, the thinking mind. This is necessary "so that it can perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible"[8]. He uses the example of wax to show how ideas are more clearly known: the wax has properties, but when it melts, these properties change, and yet we still recognize it as wax. Thus, what makes the wax is not found in the things we sense, but in what we can think. We can only properly perceive what wax is in the mind. The way we talk about it suggests that we know the wax through the senses: e.g. we see the wax. But in truth, we know the wax through the reflection of the mind. Descartes says he can not perceive the wax without a (human) mind. Perception, he says, is a mental experience. It is thinking – for when he perceives in dreams, there is nothing to perceive, and everything happens in the mind. But he is surprised at how inclined his mind is to errors, for he is still "restricted to these words and [...] almost deceived by ordinary language."[9]

Descartes understands the body as being extended in space and as a composite: it consists of many parts. As such, he classifies a body as an extended thing – a *res extensa*. The mind, on the other hand, is not

[5] Ibid. Meditations I-II.
[6] Ibid. Meditation I.
[7] Ibid. Meditation II. 17.
[8] Ibid. 21.
[9] Ibid. 24.

extended in space and is singular; it does not consist of parts. Thus, he calls the mind the *res cogitans*. At this point in his reasoning, he only knows that the mind exists, the body is still pure speculation, for nothing apart from the mind has been proven to exist. As such, nothing can be perceived more clearly than his own mind.[10]

Though he once believed he was his body, he now realizes that bodily sensations present themselves to him whether he wants them to or not, while thoughts follow his will. From this, he concludes that thoughts originate from himself, whereas sensations come from something external. These external sensations come to him via the body. The mind, however, is not directly affected by all parts of the body, but only "by the brain or, perhaps, only by one small part of the brain, namely the part in which the common sense is said to be."[11]

At the same time, he is unable to separate himself from his body, and thus it belongs more to him than other bodies do: he experiences that body, and not other bodies. The experience of the body, is in other words the body affecting the mind:

> Why does a certain sadness of the mind follow from some unknown sensation of pain, and a certain happiness from a sensation of pleasure? Or why does the unknown tightening of the stomach that I call hunger advise me to eat food and a dryness of the throat advise me to take a drink, and so on for all the others?[12]

Mind and body are linked very closely, forming some kind of unity, where they mix together. But, he insists, they are truly separate things:

> I correctly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing. And although I may (rather, as I shall say soon: I certainly) have a body that is joined very closely to me, since I have on the one hand a clear and distinct idea of myself insofar as I am a thinking, non-extended thing and, on the other hand, I have a distinct idea of the body insofar as it is merely an extended, non-thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and that I can exist without it.[13]

He summarizes it best himself in the summary he provides as an introduction. He writes: "one ought to conclude that all those things which are conceived clearly and distinctly as distinct substances – and mind and body are so conceived – are truly substances that are really distinct from each other."[14] And so the strict separation of mind and body – mind-body dualism – is established.

---

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid. VI. 80.
[12] Ibid. 68.
[13] Ibid. 71-72.
[14] Ibid, Introduction. 6.

The Interaction Problem

Elisabeth, the Princess of Bohemia, read his *Meditations* and wrote Descartes a letter in which she asked "how the soul of a human being (it being only a thinking substance) can determine the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions."[15] In other words, if mind and body are entirely distinct substances, as Descartes claims, how can they interact? How can a purely thinking, non-physical substance produce effects in a physical, extended one? This question became the most well-known challenge to Cartesian dualism.

For such an interaction between the mind and the body to occur, there must be a causal relation between them. But causation, as Descartes himself describes it, requires a kind of contact; a shared realm of existence in which one thing can influence another. The physical world, as he conceives it, is a mechanistic system governed by extended motion and efficient causality. The mind, by contrast, is defined as non-extended and immaterial – outside the spatial and mechanical order.

This creates a fundamental tension: to maintain the ontological distinction between mind and body is to make any interaction between them impossible. And yet, such interaction is obviously observed: we act, we move, we suffer physically. Denying this would contradict lived experience. Thus, Descartes' dualism produces an internal contradiction: it posits interaction while making it conceptually impossible.

This is an explanatory gap of his theory, and one which Descartes recognizes. But he does not know how to resolve this tension and bridge the gap in his letter exchanges with Elisabeth. In a later work, *The Passions of the Soul*, he makes a final attempt to address this problem:

> "[...] looking into this very carefully I think I can clearly see that the part of the body in which the soul directly [immédiatement] does its work is. . . . a certain very small gland deep inside the brain, in a position such that. . . .the slightest movements by it can greatly alter the course of the nearby spirits passing through the brain, and conversely any little change in the course of those spirits can greatly alter the movements of the gland." [16]

In this proposed solution, the soul exerts its influence on the body through the pineal gland, a small, central organ in the brain. According to him, the pineal gland is uniquely suited for this task because it is the only part of the brain that is single and centrally located, while most other brain structures are mirrored in both sides of the brain. The soul, being indivisible and unified, could thus interact with the body at this centralized point, influencing the flow of 'animal spirits' that govern motion and sensation.[17]

---

[15] Elisabeth of Bohemia, letter to René Descartes, 6 May 1643, in The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes, ed. and trans. Lisa Shapiro (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62.

[16] René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Jonathan Bennett (Early Modern Texts, 2004), https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf. Article 31.

[17] 'Animal spirits' refers to the functioning of nerves, shared by all animals.

This answer is however not a real answer to the problem, as it does not resolve the deeper tension. Descartes identifies a location where the interaction is supposed to take place, but it does not explain *how* the interaction is taking place. And so the problem remains. The gap unbridged. For although Descartes tried to pin down where the bridge is supposed to be found, the two opposing sides remain fundamentally incompatible in his framework, and the intended bridge, rather than uniting, only underscores how far apart the two sides truly lie.

1.2 Philosophy of Mind after Descartes

In this subchapter, I will trace the development of the philosophy of mind after Descartes in bird flight, passing over the major developments, in order to show how dualism has shaped the field, what attempts have been made to solve the problem, and how it remains unsolved. This will allow me to reflect on the Western tradition in general in the third chapter from a Yogācāra perspective. This in turn will help me built up the conclusion of the thesis.

Leibniz – Pre-Established Harmony

Descartes shaped the philosophy of mind that evolved after him with his substance dualism. His successors struggled with the divide that he cemented as foundational. In the 17th century, for example Leibniz accepted the mind-body dualism, but attempted to avoid the interaction problem by rejecting the interaction from happening at all. What appears as interaction is, according to Leibniz, the result of a *pre-established harmony*: mind and body run in perfect parallel without causal influence, coordinated by God. He talks about mind and body, but he has quite different ideas about what these are than Descartes. For him, there are three distinct mental substances: bare monads, minds, and soul. For him, the soul is not the same as the mind; where the mind is a thinking thing, the soul is not. He refers to mental activity not as thought, but as perception. Thought is only the aspect of minds, perception an aspect of all mental substances. Perception is representational, and consciousness is a special form of representation. Consciousness is not central, because one form of perception is unconscious perception. One way in which he defends unconscious perception is through his principle of pre-established harmony. Alison Simmons writes that "although mind and body are causally insulated from each other, [there is] a perfect correspondence between them. [And this] correspondence takes the form of the mind's representing corporeal reality, and in particular its own body."[18] Leibniz explains that mental states are "expressions of corresponding states of the world"[19] – it mirrors the world in representation through this pre-established harmony, but it does not act on or is acted on by the body. This principle requires everything bodily to be represented – as a form of perception – but since we are not aware of all of this, they must be unconscious mental events.

[18] Alison Simmons, *Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness, The Philosophical Review* 110, no. 1 (January 2001): 45-46, https://doi.org/10.2307/2678401.
[19] Ibid, 46.

Bodies themselves are not denied outright by Leibniz, but neither does he see them as independent substances. They are *well-founded phenomena*: appearances grounded in the coordinated activity of monads. They exist, but only as dependent and derivative of the mental substances that express them. While there is much debate in the literature about how exactly to interpret this metaphysical position, what is clear – and relevant here – is that Leibniz's account avoids the interaction problem only by denying that mind and body ever truly interact, at the cost of demoting bodies to mere phenomenal status.[20]

This shows the stakes of preserving a strict mind-body dualism: the body is no longer ontological, but an appearance. In this way, embodied existence is deemphasized, or perhaps even denied: Leibniz shows us that a coherent dualism tends to become a kind of idealism – in which only mind truly exists.

Spinoza – Double-Aspect Theory

Spinoza, also in the 17th century, on the other hand, denied both. Both the dualism itself, and the interaction, according to him, are unreal. As Jaegwon Kim explains: "Spinoza claimed that mind and body were simply two correlated aspects of a single underlying substance [God/Nature] that is in itself neither mental nor material", and "it does not invoke God's causal action to explain the mental-physical correlations. The observed correlations are there because they are two distinguishable aspects of one underlying reality."[21] This theory is referred to as the *double-aspect theory*.

Huxley – Epiphenomenalism

Two centuries later, in the 19th century, T.H. Huxley denied one side of the interaction in his theory of *epiphenomenalism*. To him, mental events are real, and caused by the body, but do not have any power of their own. Mental events are the effects of physiological processes in our nervous system – notably the brain. But they have no causal power in these physiological processes: mental events do not cause anything, not even other mental events.[22]

20th Century Philosophy of Mind

Modern philosophy of mind also continues to be shaped by this lingering dualism. The very name of the field, "philosophy of mind," reveals the divide: "mind" became an isolated object of inquiry, implicitly detached from the body. Even "philosophy of mind and body," would have continued to treat the two as separate entities to be joined.

---

[20] Ibid, 40-46. I do not intend here to offer a full account of Leibniz's metaphysics of monads, bodies, and perception, as the secondary literature on this is extensive and contested. I only aim to highlight those aspects most relevant to the mind–body problem and its proposed solutions.
[21] Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 51.
[22] Ibid., 51-52.

In the thinking about the mind, over time, the focus shifted from metaphysics to language and empirical observation. In the 20th century, this led to physicalist and reductionist theories of mind – and reactions to these. This was the attempt to explain mental phenomena in terms of physical processes, a tendency which was already visible in Huxley's *epiphenomenalism.*[23]

The rest of this section offers a brief overview of this development of modern philosophy of mind: from behaviorism, to identity theory, and functionalism. These theories aim to move beyond dualism – but as we will see, they often do so in ways that preserve its basic structure or fail to fully address the phenomena they seek to explain. I'll trace and sketch out this development based on the work, *Philosophy of Mind*, of Jaegwon Kim.

Behaviorism

One of these forms of reductionism was *behaviorism,* and emerged in the early 20th century. Its primary concern was not the interaction problem, however, but Descartes' conception of the mental and its implication for the scientific study of the mind. For Descartes, mental phenomena are "essentially private and subjective: [...] only a single subject, the one to whom it occurs, has direct cognitive access to it."[24] As Jaegwon Kim notes, this view renders other minds unknowable and excludes mental states from empirical science.[25]

In response, early behaviorists proposed a radically different approach: to focus exclusively on observable behaviour. Philosophers such as Carl Hempel and Gilbert Ryle advanced what is now called *logical behaviorism* – the idea that all meaningful psychological statements can be translated – *reduced* –, without loss of content, into statements about behavioural and physical phenomena.[26] Mental terms like 'belief' or 'pain' are thus not inner states hidden behind behaviour, but dispositions to behave in certain ways. According to this view, there are no mental states beyond or behind the observable behaviour through which we interpret them. As such, there is no need to posit any inner, private state behind the behaviour – mental language is reducible to behavioural descriptions.[27]

While this position makes sense from the standpoint of empirical study, and offers a solution to the interaction problem, it fails to account for the subjective and experiential aspects of mental life. If mental states are just external, observable patterns of action, then what does it mean to observe them? What does it mean to perceive, interpret, or reflect upon that behaviour? Behaviorism fails to explain what it is like to have a mind at all.

---

[23] Kim, *Philosophy of Mind,* 51.
[24] Ibid. 26
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid. 29.
[27] Ibid. 25-29

Logical Positivism

This demand for empirical verification did not come from nowhere, but was the result of a long development, with roots in, amongst others, empiricism, the scientific revolution, and Kant's critique of speculative metaphysics. This development was formalized and sharpened by the *logical positivists*. Logical positivism was not a theory of mind, but a theory of science, centred on the idea that a statement is only meaningful if it can be empirically verified or analytically true. Although behaviorism was formally developed before logical positivism, they developed in close parallel and came to reinforce one another. This core view of logical positivism had profound implications for how mental states were treated. Since Cartesian mental states could not be publicly observed or verified, talk of them came to be seen as scientifically meaningless. Behaviour, on the other hand, was observable, and therefore meaningful. This verificationist framework helped shape the development of logical behaviorism, which sought to reduce all meaningful talk of the mind to descriptions of observable behaviour.[28]

Similarly, where Descartes could assume mind-body interaction based on introspective experience – taking it as intuitively given – modern theories influenced by logical positivism required empirical proof. Mind-body interaction could no longer be intuitively accepted. It needed to be demonstrated physically; observed through correlating mechanisms in the brain and body.

Ironically, although logical behaviorism collapsed mind and body into observable physical processes, this move had the unintended consequence of reinforcing the very divide it sought to dissolve. In demanding proof of interaction, it reasserted a conceptual gap between mind and body. In this way, we find ourselves circling back to the post-Cartesian thinkers, who tried to resolve the interaction problem not by bridging the gap, but by denying interaction altogether.

Mind-Body Identity Theory

In the late 1950s, the *mind-body identity theory* offered another theory for explaining what the mind is, based on scientific research and became quite popular for a while. It worked with the legacy of logical positivism, but tried to overcome the limitations of behaviorism: it aimed to be a scientific theory, which would also be able to address the conscious experience. Its proponents could not believe that states of consciousness could not be explained in terms of physics, and so they set out to do just that.

The theory is known under a lot of different names, such as: t*ype physicalism, reductive materialism, type identity theory,* and *psychoneural identity theory*. The name follows the doctrine that the mind is identical to the body, and specifically to neural activity. It basically states that there is no such thing as a 'mind' apart from neural activity. This does reintroduce the inner states that behaviorism left out, albeit purely physical ones. This opens up the possibility again for interaction, but it still needs to be empirically

[28] L.D. Smith, *Behaviorism and Logical Positivism: A Reassessment of the Alliance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), *Introduction*, 3-13.

verified; in other words, it needs to be causally verified, like any other physical relation. An example is that the sensation of pain is simply the activation of C-fibres.[29]

Physicalism

This gave rise to several related, but diverging, theories, such as *type* and *token physicalism*, *reductive* and *eliminative materialism*. Type physicalism holds that the mind is identical to physical states: every mental state corresponds to, and is in fact nothing more than a physical state. Token physicalism makes a more nuanced claim, saying that for every mental state, there is a corresponding physical state. Type physicalism reduces the mind to the physical, while token physicalism does not make any claims to affirm or deny that mental processes are physical processes – for it does not talk about the relationship between the two.[30]

Physicalism is sometimes referred to as *materialism*. Materialism holds that all that exists is matter; is physical. Two types of materialism are generally distinguished: reductive and eliminative materialism. The first simply holds that what we perceive as mental can be reduced to physical processes: the mental is nothing more than the physical, or at most is generated by it. The study of neuroscience has given this way of thinking a huge boost.[31] Eliminative materialism goes further, and extends the conclusion that mental states are physical states to also imply that the way we normally talk about mental states is nonsensical; in fact there are no mental states; there are only physical states – and thus to talk about 'pain' or 'desire' is inaccurate and misleading. These so-called mental states have no causal role to play, and are therefore redundant.[32]

Some thinkers, however, pointed out a major problem for reductive theories: there is nothing in the experience of pain that inherently links it to C-fibres stimulation. In other species, or even in artificial systems, it might just as well be caused by something else – a "D-fibres" or a silicon circuit. This insight led to the conclusion that we do not know why specific physical processes correlate with specific mental states. We simply observe that they do. But the connection itself cannot be deduced or explained.

Emergentism

This gives rise to the theory of *emergentism*: the idea that mental phenomena emerge from complex physical systems, but in a way that cannot be further reduced or explained. As Jaegwon Kim summarizes, "mental phenomena are brute emergent phenomena, and we should expect no further explanation of why they emerge."[33]

---

[29] C-fibres is the anime given to a type of nerve fibres that play a role in experiencing pain, temperature and itchiness. See Kim, Philosophy of Mind, 51-53, for more information on the mind-body identity theory.
[30] 58-62
[31] Stoljar, Daniel. 2009. "Physicalism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University. September 9. https://plato.stanford.edu/archIves/spr2010/entries/physicalism/.
[32] Ramsey, William. 2024. "Eliminative Materialism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University. November 12. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/materialism-eliminative/.
[33] Ibid., 52-53.

Functionalism

From this discussion, a new theory emerged, proposed by Hilary Putnam. He changed the course of the discussion when he introduced *machine functionalism*; the mind as a computer. He recognized that the physical process was not what defined the mental. Instead, it is the function this mental state has which determines it: we should understand these mental states not by what they are made of, but by what they do. This insight allowed for what is now called 'multiple realizability': the idea that different physical systems (e.g. a human brain, a silicon-based alien, a computer) could all realize the same mental state through different underlying mechanisms. Therefore, mental states cannot be identified with physical structures alone. Putnam illustrated this point with an analogy to engines: just as different engines can perform the same function using different mechanisms, mental states can perform their role in different substrates. "They include no constraint on the actual physical/biological mechanisms or structures that, in a given system, realize or implement them," as Kim explains.[34] What matters is the functional role, not the material. This led Putnam to formulate the physical realization thesis: every mental state must be physically realized – minds must be embodied – but there is no single physical realization for any given mental state.[35] Yet problems remained, and functionalism did not satisfy everyone. Thinkers such as Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers pointed out that none of the previous theories – whether behaviourist, identity-based, or functionalist – can fully explain consciousness. This, Chalmers argued, is the "hard problem" of philosophy: the challenge of accounting for subjective experience itself.

The Hard Problem of Consciousness

Where functionalism edged toward anti-reductionism by shifting focus from substance to function, Nagel and Chalmers embraced the idea more radically: subjective experience cannot be reduced to physical processes. These experiences – known as *qualia* – refer to the felt quality of perception, the what-it-is-like of being conscious. And knowing the function a mental state serves, or the neural process that underlies it, is not the same as knowing the experience itself. These may correlate, but they are not identical.[36]

For Chalmers, this is what sets the hard problem apart from the so-called "easy problems" of consciousness; such as explaining behaviour, attention, or information processing. Those may be difficult, but they are tractable. The real mystery lies in why and how subjective experience arises at all – a question we should not dismiss, no matter how elusive it seems[37].

[34] Ibid., 75.
[35] Ibid., 73-77.
[36] Kim, Philosophy of Mind, 157.
[37] David J. Chalmers, *The Character of Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), *introduction,* xi-xxvii.

Extended-Mind

What Chalmers additionally argues for, together with Andy Clark, is a theory of *extended mind*. They hold that that mental processes are not confined to the brain but can extend into the external world through tools and environments. Cognitive states can include external elements, like notebooks or calculators, when they functionally integrate with the mind to support memory, reasoning, or decision-making. This challenges a more traditional view of the mind, which sees the mind as internal, suggesting that cognition can span brain, body, and world as a unified system. One consequence of this theory of extended mind, is that is it implies an extended self: the self stretches out into the world, as a network of relations, rather than being confined by the skin of our bodies.[38]

Rooted in Separation

As seen, the general tendency in the philosophy of mind has been that the mind, and consciousness, is considered to be something completely distinct from the body: the conceptual separation between mind and body often remained intact, albeit differently reframed. Consciousness is seen as a property of the mind, and not of the body. Even though physicalism emphasized that minds must be embodied, what this body is, was undefined. It could be a brain, or an artificial neural net. In philosophy of mind, the brain is typically thought of as the centre of consciousness and constitutive of the mind, which could exist in complete isolation from the body; as a brain in a vat. So despite their diversity, all theories which I introduced above begin with the same separation – between mind and body, between inner and outer – and attempt to bridge or explain it. The question we must eventually ask is whether this structure of separation itself is part of the problem.

Phenomenology

A tradition that responds to this tendency is *phenomenology.* What phenomenology points out to us, is that regardless of whether the idea of a brain in a vat is intelligible, it is a fact that we *are* always embodied. Because of this, "our perceptions and actions depend on the fact that we have bodies, and that cognition is shaped by our bodily existence."[39] What it points to, is that mind and body are so deeply intertwined, that minds are always embodied. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *lived body* challenged the Cartesian split by showing that consciousness is always situated, localized, and embodied.[40] Even a mind as a brain in a vat is: it has a brain with dimensions, and it needs physical stimuli to create experiences, as well as the right nutrition to keep it functioning. A computer would be no different. And so to think of minds apart from bodies would be a mistake. This led to the later formulation of the theory of *embodied cognition:* disembodied cognition is unintelligible. We are embodied beings, upon which our perceptions and

[38] Clark, Andy, and David Chalmers. "The Extended Mind." Analysis (Oxford) 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/58.1.7.
[39] Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (London: Routledge, 2008), 131.
[40] Ibid. 134-141.

actions depend, and our cognition is shaped by our embodied existence; it is situated and has a perspective – precisely because it is embodied.[41]

Yogācāra Buddhism reflects in many ways a phenomenological account of the world, which starts with our own experience, and emphasizes that we always perceive the world through our habitual conditioning, and therefore never neutral[42]. This thesis will not in depth explore the similarities and differences between Yogācāra and Western phenomenology, but phenomenology mirrors many Yogācāra insights, and thus I will return to phenomenology in chapter three, to help anchor Yogācāra to the Western tradition, in order to make it more intelligible.

1.3 Psychosomatism: an Argument and a Contradiction

What we have seen thus far, is that after Descartes, mind and body were largely perceived as strictly separated. And that in the 20th century this split was further deepened when their interaction was no longer intuitively accepted, but needed to be proven.

Psychosomatic research was this response to the desire for proof of mind-body interaction. The term "psychosomatic" was introduced by Heinroth in 1818, but modern psychosomatic medicine was founded only in the early 1930s. Psychosomatic medicine is a field of scientific inquiry concerned with psychosomatic processes: "the reciprocal relationship of mind and body as two integral aspects of the human organism."[43] It is seen as "represent[ing] a counterpoint to the dualistic and reductionistic conceptions [of Western thought]."[44] It is a response to the separation seen in Western medicine as a result of the deep lingering dualism: there are doctors for the body, and there are doctors for the mind, and their work fields rarely overlap. We generally treat them as if they had nothing to do with one another. For this reason, when doctors and researchers, such as Alexander Lowen, started to suggest that mind and body should be treated together, this was seen as something novel and alternative – rather than as a going back to older, intuitive, knowledge. For, as Zbigniew Lipowski wrote: "from Hippocrates on, countless writers, medical and non-medical, have asserted that emotions, or passions as they were called initially, could not only influence all functions of the body but also cause disease."[45]

A well-known example of a psychosomatic process is the placebo-effect. A clear example is that an ill person receives a pill with no active substance, but believes that it will help. As a result, their symptoms improve. The physical change is real, but the cause is not chemical – it is expectation. Nothing in the

---

[41] Ibid. 129-133.
[42] Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002. Preface.
[43] Lipowski, Zbigniew J. "Psychosomatic Medicine: Past and Present Part I. Historical Background." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 31, no. 1 (1986): 2–7. https://doi.org/10.1177/070674378603100102.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

body changed, and yet something in the body changed. Placebos are treatments without any known real effect. They are used to please a patient – from which the name is derived, meaning 'I shall please' in Latin – or in research as a neutral testing background. The placebo-effect arises when these inert treatments end up having a real effect. There has been a sense of condescension from the medical world towards placebo-effects, and the people who could be fooled by them.[46]

The separation of mind and body also shaped how psychosomatic illnesses are often perceived: There is an attitude that 'it is not a real problem, because it is just mental.' And because of the influence of materialism, mind is seen as less real than matter. That it is often not clear whether something is physical or mental, or even when we accept their influence, where they originate, becomes clear in the example of nervousness. Nervousness is a mental experience, but also a physical state. When we have to give a presentation and feel nervous, we might feel the following: a churning or tense feeling in the stomach, clammy palms, perhaps trembling hands or a shaky voice, and a breath that rises shallowly into the chest. The heart races, the mouth may feel dry, and there is a subtle or overwhelming urge to escape the situation altogether. In our mind, we perceive a heightened sense of alertness, often tinged with anticipatory fear. Thoughts may circle rapidly: *What if I forget my words? What if they judge me?*

We experience this as nervousness. But where does the sentiment arise? On the one hand, we interpret these bodily signals as stress, and so in that sense nervousness follows from a bodily state. But why was the body in that state? There was no direct physical danger that it responded to, there was only the expectation of having to give the presentation. It seems like the experience of nervousness before a presentation is a complex interplay of mind and body, in which they mutually influence each other; thus giving rise to our experience of nervousness. The mental concerns are not just disembodied concerns; they shape and are shaped by the bodily state. Nervousness is thus not merely *felt* in the body or *thought* in the mind – it arises in the dynamic between them. It is a psychosomatic event in which interpretation, expectation, sensation, and posture form an interwoven pattern of experience.

The research into psychosomatic processes aims to move Western medicine towards a more holistic perception of mind and body, in order to treat them as deeply intertwined, instead of as fundamentally separate. As such, psychosomatism is meant to show both the interaction of mind and body, and their unity. The term used to describe this is *holism* and "it refers to the postulates that mind and body constitute an indivisible unity, or whole, and that the study and treatment of the sick need to take into account the whole person rather than isolated parts."[47]

As psychosomatic research is proving and mapping the mind-body interaction, this poses an argument against several of the theories of mind discussed above. If mind and body are seen as distinct, then how can belief – something mental – cause a bodily effect? If they are identical, then why does expectation not behave like other physical processes? As such, it underlines the interaction problem and is thus a problem

---

[46] Anne Harrington, *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), *Introduction,* 3.
[47] Lipowski, *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 4.

for dualism. And poses a problem for reductive physicalist theories such as type physicalism (also called mind-body identity theory) and functionalism.

Psychosomatic research can show that the mind and body interact; that there is a connection. But this alone does not solve the interaction problem. In fact, it reintroduces it. So as it establishes the split between mind and body in the process, it circles us right back to Descartes, and we are still stuck with the same problem that he already had. For the term 'psychosomatic' is made of the Greek words *psyche* (mind, soul) and *soma* (body). The term was meant to bring mind and body together; to indicate their connection and interaction. But in doing so, it took on a double role. On the one hand, it challenged the strict separation between mind and body. On the other, it depended on that separation to make its argument. To describe something as "mind influencing body" already presupposes that these are two separate things. The language carries the split. Psychosomatic research, even when it tries to bridge the gap, ends up reinforcing it. Insofar as psychosomatism is used as an argument for the unity of mind and body, it becomes a contradiction. The problem does not lie in the phenomena – what we see and experience – but in the conceptual categories we use to make sense of them. Psychosomatism makes this contradiction visible. It is both the demonstration of interaction and the symptom of a conceptual trap.

In this thesis, I will be using the term *psychosomatism* to effectively refer to psychosomatic processes. This is not an established term, but one that I use in two ways. First, in its most direct sense, it refers to the phenomena of psychosomatic processes: the phenomena in which mental and bodily processes appear to causally influence or condition one another. Second, it also refers to the way these phenomena have come to function within a framework of dualistic assumptions. Psychosomatism, as I use the term, is thus both a description of observed interactions and a symptom of unresolved conceptual tension at the heart of the mind-body problem.

1.4 Conclusion: the Embeddedness of Dualistic Thinking

I hope that in this chapter I could show that dualistic thinking is deeply embedded within the Western philosophical tradition. Descartes did not create this dualism, nor did he invent the words for mind and body, separating them in the process. He was presented with this dualism, and simply embedded it even deeper.

This mode of dualistic thinking, which conceives of mind and body as separate, comes very natural to us. Much more so than the opposite: non-dual thinking. And there is of course a reason for that. We are beings. And to be a being, is to be distinct, to be separated, and differentiated. And so to recognize ourselves and to navigate the world, we perceive differences. Language reflects this, while at the same time language also shapes the way we see the world: if we have words for mind and body, but not something that indicates their unity, we will be conditioned to perceive them as separate too.

This dualistic thinking has given us much clarity; it allowed us to separate things and develop an understanding of them. But at the same time, it also obscured what they really are. It left us with the interaction problem and seems to prevent us from truly grasping what we are dealing with.

To conclude this chapter, what is clear is that mind and body remain a philosophical problem. There certainly has been progress; new theories have been explored and rejected, but while these developments mark real progress in analytic clarity, they still tend to work within the Cartesian inheritance: assuming that mind and body are distinct phenomena whose relation requires explanation, rather than questioning whether this distinction itself may be a conceptual artifact. This philosophical inertia, even among critics of dualism, reveals just how deeply the categories of "mind" and "body" structure Western thought. The tradition is shaped by the language it uses. The kind of dualistic thinking we encountered seems to be engrained within this language, and although language is needed for conceptualization and understanding, as such, it is also a trap. One which has kept western philosophy from solving the mind-body problem. And as long as we keep working from within this philosophical system, we might keep falling in the same pits. Perhaps drawing on another tradition might give the fresh perspective we need to break free from the limitations of our own tradition.

In this sense, my turn to Yogācāra is not in itself a rejection of the western philosophical tradition, but an attempt to extend the inquiry through a different philosophical lens – one that treats conceptuality, perception, and embodiment as co-constructed processes rather than as merely given or pre-reflectively known. Yogācāra as a philosophical system is centred around non-duality. Drawing on their insights, I will attempt to explain how categories like 'mind' and 'body' are constructed, and how we can work with these created constructs in building up knowledge and understanding.

Chapter 2: Vasubandhu's Yogācāra as a Conceptual Reorientation

In the first chapter, I showed how prevalent and ingrained dualistic thinking is in the Western tradition, and promised that Yogācāra might offer a way out. This might have created the expectation that there are traditions, such as Yogācāra, who do *not* think dualistically. But that would be misleading, for dualistic thinking is not only inherent in the Western traditions, it is inherent in all thinking, in all traditions. It arises not from a cultural error, but from the very structure of conceptualization and experience. Yogācāra's contribution, then, does not lie in showing how to think non-dualistically, but instead in showing us what dualism is, and how it conditions us. Once we understand how we are being conditioned by the condition of our existence, we can begin to work with those conditions – to find freedom from them – and perhaps to go beyond them.

In this chapter, I will start by exploring *why* dualism is so ingrained in our thinking. I do this by asking *what* dualism really is, and *how* it arises. This will also provide an answer to the question of why dualistic thinking is actually a philosophical problem. The dualistic character of our experience – our sense of being both body and mind, of feeling thoughts in a body and sensations in a self – cannot simply be denied. Even if we reject Descartes' metaphysical conclusions, the structure he identified remains deeply embedded in how we live and reflect. To move beyond dualism, we must begin by acknowledging it: as a deeply felt and conceptually ingrained mode of interpretation, rather than as a necessary truth. Theories that attempt to dissolve the divide without confronting the lived experience it expresses, risk failing to account for consciousness altogether. And what use is a theory of mind if it cannot speak to the experience of having one?

Vasubandhu's writings, which form the cornerstone of Yogācāra thought, can help us understand the arising of dualism as a process of interpretation, and point us to the answers to the questions surrounding dualism. With this, we will develop an understanding of what the negation of dualism; non-dualism, is like in this chapter. How understanding this relation between dualism and non-dualism can help us understand mind and body better, and perhaps overcome the interaction problem, will be the topic of the third and final chapter.

2.1 Dualism, Non-Dualism and the Three-Natures

Why Dualism Arises

We are sentient, conscious beings. This means that we are aware of our own existence. This already implies a few things. First of all, it suggests that there is a perspective from which we perceive. Secondly, it implies that there is something that is experienced, which is separate from other things. This follows, because there is an 'I' that is being identified, which is different from other things. An 'I' is sensible if there is an 'other'. This 'other', might have its own subjective experience; its own viewpoint of experience, which makes it another 'I'.

Apparently, the world in which we exist is a world of things, of objects. To be aware of our own existence, and to identify an 'I', means that we experience ourselves as an object as well. The identification with this object is what constitutes the subject. A subject is the perspective that is taken; it is the conscious experiencer, and what it identifies with, becomes the person.

Without distinctions and separations, there could be no subjects, no conscious beings. For when there are no distinctions, there is nothing that separates one 'I' from another 'I', and thus the meaning of 'I' is lost. It seems that to be, is to be an object. And to be an object, is to experience oneself as one. In order to experience oneself as an object, we must experience a world of objects. And so to experience at all, as a subject, is to experience separations and differentiations.

This shows us that experience is dualistic: it is the experience of separations, which are created through differentiation. Metaphysical dualism then is the cementing of these separations as fundamental metaphysical categories. The term "dualism" originates from the Latin word *dualis*, meaning "twofold" or "of two." This does not strictly have to mean two things, or two-sided. Instead, it also holds the distinction and separation that splits the one into two, and two in the manyfold. It also shows us that dualism is so ingrained in our thinking, simply because it arises together with consciousness – it is not a specific Western error to think dualistically, instead it is a necessary feature of thinking in general.

A common misunderstanding of non-duality is to take it as a simple affirmation of unity over separation. On this view, one might say that consciousness unifies what is otherwise separate by grouping it into shared categories, rather than creating separations. But unity and difference are conceptually interdependent: to think unity, we must already posit difference. Both arise within consciousness as mutually conditioning aspects of experience; the very dichotomy between separation and unification is itself a dualistic construction.

The Imagined Nature

When we analyse our dualistic experience like this, we realize that distinctions arise within consciousness. In other words; we create these distinctions ourselves. This is what Vasubandhu realized. Existence,

according to him, is to experience. And to experience is to perceive, and it is to conceptualize; perception is conceptualization. He called this aspect of existence the *imagined aspect* (the *parikalpita-svabhāva*). He does so in his work the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*: the *Treatise on Three Natures*. The word 'nature' is a translation of the Sanskrit word *svabhāva*, which means 'intrinsic nature' or 'essence', and it refers to the way a thing truly is. The three natures thus relate to the three ways, or aspects, in which reality exists – or is. It can also be understood to describe how *any thing* exists. For this reason, *parikalpita-svabhāva* is also often translated as the *imagined nature*. The imagined nature holds that when we experience, we are always interpreting, and this process of interpretation is a process of separation and differentiation; of conceptualization.[48]

The Dependent Nature

What we should understand about this world that we imagine, according to him, is that all things in it arise in dependent origination: nothing exists independent of causes and conditions. There is a causal system at play in which things bring each other into existence. This is the second nature; the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*). It describes how appearances (the objects) exist and transform, thereby giving rise to something new. This process is a continuous flow of causal connectivity. And it is this entire causal story that is called the dependent nature.[49]

The Ultimate Nature

If our experience is constructed, and it is constructed through dependent origination, then we might ask what reality is really like; outside of our experience. Vasubandhu calls this ultimate reality. Since experience is dualistic in nature, ultimate reality, as the reality beyond experience – the way reality is before it appears to us – must be non-dualistic. To fully understand how things exist, we must realize that one aspect of a thing is its non-existence: since it is imagined, it exists as such only within consciousness. Outside of consciousness, the object as such does not exist; the differentiations that drew up its shape within consciousness, dissolve outside of it. This is the third and final aspect Vasubandhu describes, which is called the ultimate nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*). The ultimate nature, often also translated as the perfected nature or consummate nature, describes how things exist beyond their appearances. To go beyond appearances is to go beyond object-subject duality.[50]

Is non-dualism a possible mode of thinking? Can we think non-dually? If all thinking depends on distinction, and all experience is dualistic, can non-duality be meaningfully grasped? At first glance, it might seem that non-duality refers only to what is not – to nothing. But that's a misunderstanding.

---

[48] Garfield, Jay. 1997. Vasubandhu's treatise on the three natures translated from the Tibetan edition with a commentary. Asian Philosophy, 7:2, 133-154, DOI:10.1080/09552369708575458. 133-135.
[49] Ibid. 135-152.
[50] Ibid.

Non-duality is not the absence of being, but the absence of separateness. It is not a void, but undifferentiated reality: reality before it is carved up by perception and conceptualization. So we cannot think about things in a non-dual way, but understanding that reality beyond experience is non-dual helps us put our dualistic experience into perspective – funnily enough.

2.2 The Teaching of Consciousness-Only

This teaching of the three natures – how things exist – is summarized in Vasubandhu's most famous teaching: the world of experience is consciousness-only.[51] I cite: "what belongs to the triple world is mind-only".[52] The triple world refers to the world as consisting of three layers; the desire realm, the form realm and the formless realm. Together these include all possible experience. So the world and everything that can possibly be experienced is consciousness-only.[53]

Vasubandhu sets out to defend this doctrine against an unnamed realist in his work the *Viṁśikā,* which translates as the *Twenty Verses*. The realist holds that external objects exist, while Vasubandhu denies this. In the first verse, he writes that 'only' is stated in order to "rule out external objects."[54] In other words, objects external to consciousness. The Sanskrit term for consciousness-only is *vijñaptimātra*, which is also being translated as mind-only, manifestation-only, and thought-only.[55]

External Reality: Idealism and Solipsism

Is this a denial of the existence of a reality outside of our minds? A form of idealism? Does everything, including the body, exist within the mind – and is being reduced to it? We might think so, and conclude that Vasubandhu's contribution to the mind-body debate is that the body can be reduced to the mind, since everything exists within it. In my reading of Vasubandhu, however, this is not the case: a denial of external objects does not equal a denial of an external reality. For what we interpret is the data our sense organs present us with. This data is not fabricated out of thin air, but comes from an external reality; a reality outside experience. In this way, we can see sense organs as bridges, connecting external reality to consciousness. In this external reality, no objects exist, for nothing is yet differentiated. Nothing is separated. Within consciousness, form is created through interpretation, and reality – the world as we know it – is shaped.

---

[51] Jh, Vasubandhu, and Silk, Jonathan A. 2016. *Materials towards the Study of Vasubandhu's Viṁśikā: Sanskrit and Tibetan Critical Editions of the Verses and Autocommentary, an English Translation and Annotations*. Harvard Oriental Series. Department of South Asian Studies, Harvard University. 203.
[52] Ibid. Verse I.
[53] Keown, Damien. "triloka." In *A Dictionary of Buddhism*. : Oxford University Press, 2004. https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/view/10.1093/acref/9780198605607.001.0001/acref-9780198605607-e-1890.
[54] Silk, Vasubandhu's Vimsika, 203.
[55] Ibid.

Similarly, mind-only might seem to imply solipsism – the idea that only one's own personal mind exists. It should, however, not be understood as such. Vasubandhu does not claim that only an individual's mind exists, nor that other minds or a shared world are illusions. The Yogācāra account of consciousness includes intersubjectivity: shared, so-called, karmic conditions give rise to shared but still interpretive experiences.[56] Mind-only does not mean 'my mind only' – rather, it describes the way experience is structured as mental representation, not that the world is a projection of a private ego. The role of karma in this process of conditioning will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Experience as Interpretation

The process of experience is essentially one of bringing external reality into an inner reality. To make phenomena appear within consciousness, is to illuminate what is dark. This is essentially what the *imagined nature* describes. To imagine objects, is to experience phenomena. When these phenomena are not wholly conjured up by the mind, but have some ground within external reality, then we can aptly speak of a process of interpretation: the creation of a world (of objects), is a process of interpretation. Experience is interpretation.[57]

These interpretations are not arbitrary or random; they follow karmic conditioning, which I will go into detail about further down. What we can experience is conditioned by the structure of reality; of our structure and that of the world. What the eye can perceive is one karmic conditioning, what there is to see is also karmically conditioned, how we conceptualize something is also conditioned (through experience; language; education).[58]

Interpretation might suggest a choice, a decision to see something a certain way. This is however not really the case. It is rather that things appear a certain way to us. They are given, and can not be chosen. But they are not given as they are, since they become these things in the very same process. The way they

---

[56] Ibid. 206-208.

[57] What appears to us, is how we interpret our perceptions. We seem to live in a shared world, with shared objects. According to Yogācāra this is due to our shared karmic conditioning. So there is some universality in our experiences. But apparently we do not share all karmic conditioning, for if all karmic conditioning was shared, we would experience the same things and develop the same concepts. There would in fact be no different subjects; we would all be the same. And that is not what we observe. There is much cultural diversity when it comes to our interpretations of the world, and of our experience. Culture is karma in action: it is shared experience that continues to condition experience, shaping frameworks and guiding perception and categorization. This underlines the idea that mind and body are not concrete things to be found, but concepts created.

For an overview of non-Western conceptions of mind and body, see Emily A. Schultz and Robert H. Lavenda, *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*, 11th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Many indigenous and Asian traditions understand mind and body as integrated aspects of a larger relational whole, rather than as separate substances.

[58] If you want to, you could conflate essentially all of these conditions into experience, but this might not be very practical. There is a reason why we like to conceptualize and categorize: it makes knowledge possible, and makes it more precise.

appear to us, and thus the way they are, is a result of a myriad of conditions: such as the senses, the conditions in which these senses perceive, what external reality they perceive, the language we use to identify this, prior experience with these or similar appearances, and our memory of these.

Karma and Dependent Origination

In Yogācāra Buddhism, the process of conditioning is called karma. Karma refers to the habitual structuring of consciousness through countless conditions, as described above. These conditions shape what we can experience and how we experience it. Potential experiences are metaphorically called karmic seeds (*bīja*), which, under the right circumstances, ripen or sprout into actualized experience. Through repeated exposure to certain conditions, we develop tendencies to interpret and respond to the world in particular ways. In this sense, karma is the habitual conditioning of consciousness: we do not encounter each moment as an isolated event, but always in the light of past experiences.[59]

These karmic seeds are stored in the *ālaya-vijñāna*, the 'storehouse consciousness'. This *ālaya* is not 'conscious' in the ordinary sense, nor is it a hidden self or essence. Rather, it functions as the underlying ground from which conscious experience emerges. It is neither self-aware nor intentional, and neither luminous nor reflexive. We might think of it as a dynamic, structured field of potential – not yet divided into subject and object, yet still conditioned. It is reality beyond dualistic experience, but not beyond causality: a pre-conscious, sub- or unconscious ground from which experience arises. At the same time, everything we experience is nothing other than this *ālaya* manifesting in a particular form.[60]

The way I read it, neither 'consciousness' nor 'reality' exists independently; both are constructed and co-arise in dependence. Their apparent separation is itself karmically conditioned. The *ālaya* is a conceptual tool for speaking about this ongoing karmic structuring of experience: a process without a subject, without interiority or exteriority, and without beginning or end. It does not exist prior to the world, nor is it caused by it. It is the very flow of dependent arising, the conditioned ground of appearance, from which dualities like 'mind' and 'world' emerge.

In Western contexts, karma is often seen as a moral law of reward and punishment across lifetimes.[61] But in the Yogācāra framework, karma is not inherently moral; it is neutral. Actions have consequences, but there is no judging agency embedded in the process. Moral meaning arises only when sentient beings interpret the outcomes of karma as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. Thus, the moral dimension of karma is itself a projection, an interpretation layered onto an otherwise neutral causal flow.

More fundamentally, karma describes what Yogācāra calls the dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*): the interdependent, conditioned arising of all phenomena. Karma and dependent origination are not two

---

[59] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 244-249.
[60] Ibid.
[61] 2025. Accessed July 4. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/karma.

separate processes but two names for the same causal law: describing how things transform and how potential experiences take shape as actual ones. Importantly, nothing about this process confines it to the 'personal' or 'mental'. To imagine karma as operating only in the mind, distinct from external reality, would reintroduce the kind of dualism that Yogācāra denies. Karma is better understood as describing the functioning of reality itself: an interwoven stream of causes and effects that appear to us as 'mental' and 'physical' only because of our conceptual constructions.

Finally, it must be stressed that karma is not a substance. It is a concept – a conventional construct – shaped by our own karmic conditioning. Like all concepts, karma is empty of intrinsic nature: it is a tool for making sense of experience, but it remains conventional and limited. This does not make it useless; on the contrary, it is a valuable way of describing the world and helps us function effectively within it. But we must remain aware of its limits, and not mistake it for ultimate reality.

2.3 Knowledge Without Foundations: Conventional and Ultimate Truth

All this has created a challenge that needs to be addressed: *How can we have knowledge if objects don't exist and concepts are imagined?* Due to karmic conditioning, we do share a large part of our experience, but concepts are not strictly universal; we share some, but disagree on others. Cultures around the world have conceptualized similar experiences differently. Philosophy itself is built on this struggle: debating concepts, their relationships, their usefulness, their aptness, and their truth.

Even though this chapter aims to describe non-duality, we inevitably end up speaking in distinctions – most obviously, the distinction between duality and non-duality. I anticipated this, and warned of it, but still: what are we to do with it? One option would be to affirm the non-duality of duality and non-duality: to go beyond *all* distinctions altogether. But that is easier said than done, and since this can not be done through philosophical writing, I will suggest another strategy: the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth.

Famously articulated by Nāgārjuna, this distinction reflects two ways of speaking about reality. Conventional truth describes how things appear to us; ultimate truth points to what really is. Take the example of the self: conventionally, we experience ourselves as stable subjects. We rely on this sense of self in daily life. But when we investigate it, we find no essential, unchanging self. The self is a construct – not unreal, but conventionally real.[62] The same holds true for all conceptual constructs. They are not found in reality, but arise through interpretation.

[62] Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), Introduction.

Our access to reality is always mediated – by perception, language, bodily experience, and cultural framing. It is a process of interpretation. And interpretation is conceptualization. If concepts are created rather than discovered, what becomes of knowledge? How do we test or refine it?

Interpretation happens on multiple levels: in how we perceive, how we categorize, and how we position phenomena within a broader framework. This process of interpretation leads to cultural diversity. This diversity of interpretation manifests as a form of relativism: multiple interpretations can arise from similar experiential data. However, this does not imply that such interpretations are arbitrary. We can test how good our interpretations are by exploring how internally and logically consistent they are, and how well they capture and explain experience. Knowledge, then, is not the discovery of what is ultimately real, but the construction of interpretive frameworks that are coherent, experientially adequate, and responsive to causal conditions. Knowledge is meaningful and testable within conventional truth, as it helps us navigate experience – life – wisely and clearly – even as it remains open to revision or dissolution under deeper insight.

This distinction between conventional and ultimate truth helps us to affirm duality, so that we can move beyond it. It is like seeing through an illusion: you have to see it for what it is, which means to affirm it first, before you can deny it. Denying the illusion then means to see through it – to go beyond it.

Thinking Non-Dual

How does that work? To affirm and transcend the illusion of dualism? For how can we say anything meaningful about non-duality? It seems that all we can say of it will be in terms of what it is not. And even that will be in terms of dualistic distinctions, because that is all that is meaningful for us. Conceptualization is dualistic; it depends on distinctions. For that reason, so does our knowledge and even our experience. Language itself works through making distinctions; through cutting the world into parts.

What we can do is to search for paradoxes. To approach the non-dual is to meet apparent contradictions head-on: light behaves as both particle and wave; a magnetic field contains both north and south poles at every point; mind and body seem both distinct and inseparable. Reality appears both one and many. These contradictions are not simply a failure of thought, but a sign that we have encountered some of the limits of thinking. Paradoxes invite us to hold two seemingly opposed truths at once, and to see that their opposition arises only within the framework of dualistic conceptualization. In this sense, paradoxes are not in the way of understanding, they point towards an understanding beyond distinctions. Paradoxes reveal the limitations of language, and show where dualistic conceptions can not fully capture what is experienced. In this sense, paradoxes lead us towards a non-dual understanding of the world.

To think with non-duality, then, is not to resolve paradoxes into simple answers, but to let them do their work: loosening our attachment to rigid distinctions, softening the boundaries we habitually impose, and allowing us to see the conventional truths we rely on for what they are: constructs. Rather than trying to

speak the unspeakable, we can let the tension of paradox remind us of the limits of language and point us back to the experience itself, where these opposites merge.

This leads some – like Zen masters[63], and Wittgenstein in the Western tradition – to conclude that metaphysical philosophy is useless and distracting. And it is a fair concern; for should we even try to say something about that what can not be spoken about? If concepts obscure reality, going back to them might seem like an unwise move. Wittgenstein refers to our conceptualizations as *language games*, and warns us not to mistake the game for the reality it gestures at.[64]

I take a different approach: once we realize everything is a language game, and concepts are only conventionally true, then we can play the game as a game. Concepts are tools, not truths. This allows us to affirm and transcend the world as it is presented to us, while not clinging to it and the concepts we draw from it. To make sense of this world, and to navigate it, we must conceptualize. But what we should keep in mind, is that they are merely conceptions; they are constructed, and not inherent. They describe the world, but they are not the world. As long as we know they are only conventionally true, it is alright and even useful to work with them – it is better to see through the illusion, than to not see anything at all.

In the end, we cannot think in a non-dual way – thinking is inherently dualistic. And so rather than trying to grasp non-duality directly, we can let it reshape how we think within duality. Maybe we cannot think *about* non-dualism in the ordinary sense, but we can think *with* it. We can use it to reconsider the concepts we do have – like mind and body – and to soften the rigid lines we've drawn between them.

---

[63] See: D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. 3rd ed. New York: Grove Press, 1956. Chapters 1–2.
A classic Zen koan expresses this relation between concepts and the world: "the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon".

[64] See: Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Centenary Edition*. Edited by Luciano Bazzocchi. Anthem Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv22d4t7n.
He famously wrote: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". Ibid. 56.

Chapter 3: Reconsidering Mind and Body through the Yogācāra Lens

Having explored the nature of dualism and the non-dual perspective through Yogācāra, we are now in a position to return to the question of mind and body with fresh eyes. The previous chapter demonstrated that dualistic distinctions between mind and body arise from interpretive, karmically conditioned processes. While indispensable at the level of conventional truth, they obscure the underlying non-dual nature of experience.

This chapter takes on the difficult task of saying something about what the mind and body are. I will try to play with language and concepts in such a way that it deepens our understanding of mind and body, while steering clear of falling into the trap of reifying these distinctions as new fundamental realities – a difficult task.

In this chapter, I will do this by returning to the Western tradition of philosophy of mind, and rethink these theories from within a Yogācāra-informed framework – with non-duality in mind. I examine how mind and body appear as phenomena rather than independent substances in 3.1, and test some of the theories of mind against this perspective in 3.2, to see how logically consistent they are and how well they are able to capture experience. The list of theories I test is not meant to be exhaustive, but serves the function of showing how we might start to approach the topic differently. This leads me to outline a revised account of consciousness, mind and body, and thinking and feeling, in 3.3 that avoids the common contradictions of dualistic thinking.

3.1 Mind and Body as Things and Phenomena

Mind and body were metaphysically distinct and ontologically independent for Descartes. In a way, we could say that for him, they were things that existed on their own; they were things-in-themselves. As he wrote: they are clear and distinct ideas. This would indicate that they exist as such as well. But one thing that should have become clear in this text since then, is that mind and body are not things independent of our experience; outside consciousness. And so, to talk of their existence in solely their own right, cannot be done, and would be meaningless.

What is less clear, is what we can instead say about them that will help us further. One straightforward thing we can do is to describe our experience; to turn towards how mind and body appear to us; as phenomena. This is what phenomenology has done – to take experience as the starting point – and which I will take as a starting point to build up an understanding of mind and body.[65] Notably, because it aligns closely with the Yogācāra approach, as I will also show.

[65] Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*. Preface.

A Phenomenological Account of Mind and Body

Dan Zahavi explains that the contribution of phenomenology to the mind-body problem is that it "seeks to understand to what extent our experience of the world, our experience of self, and our experience of others are formed by and influenced by our embodiment."[66] In the Cartesian tradition, the body is an object that is experienced – by the mind. But what phenomenologists point out is that the body is also something that experiences. They describe the body in this way as the lived body: "it is the way the body appears in experience. [And] it is the way the body structures our experience."[67] In this way, the body constitutes the subject and the agent. We cannot think of the mind as separate from the body, nor of the body as separate from the world: the world is given to us as bodily revealed; the body is already in-the-world. To quote Merleau-Ponty: "the world is given to the subject because the subject is given to himself".[68]

But to say that the body "structures our experience" and "constitutes the subject" raises a question: who or what is it that has this experience? And what, exactly, is a subject? If we do not treat mind and body as two separate substances, then how do we account for the perspective of experience that emerges within this embodied context? Phenomenology talks about the subject as a shift of focus away from 'mind' as a detached, thinking substance. It is the embodied, situated perspective through which the world is experienced. But can we say that the body fully constitutes this subject?

To do so already presupposes a conceptualization, an interpretation, of what 'body' means. Merleau-Ponty wants to go beyond this: "[...] the chiasm, the intentional "encroachment" are irreducible, which leads to the rejecting of the notion of subject, or to the defining of the subject as a field, as a hierarchized system of structures opened by an inaugural *there is.*"[69] What he says here, is that to see ourselves as a subject, we have to see ourselves as an object: subject and object always go together. This is what the chiasm points at. The notion of the subject as a transcendental subject – as something that exists in itself – is what he rejects. Instead, he points out that having a perspective means being localized, which in turn implies that there is a starting point and a limit to our being. This is why he describes the subject as a field; the subject is not a discrete thing, but a web of relations in the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, we experience the world from somewhere: we have a perspective. A perspective is required for perception to be made possible. Perception always implies both access and restriction – it is a paradox. Being itself is ambiguous, because it is never given in its entirety, but only appears through the partial, situated perspectives of embodied existence. Being presents itself with thickness (*épaisseur*): it is never fully transparent to us, but always retains depth and inexhaustibility beyond what appears on the surface. We see into it, but to see something, is to not see something else. To see the front is to not see the

---

[66] Shaun, and Zahavi. *The Phenomenological Mind*, 136.
[67] Ibid. 137.
[68] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), Preface, xxiii.
[69] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 239.

back; the outside obscures the inside. Because we have a perspective, we can never see everything, and thus the future is always uncertain. Complete certainty is impossible. We can predict some ways in which it can be, but only when it is, will we know what has become: I might know that I could see a tree, for I have eyes, and there is light, and trees exist, but whether there will be a tree to see around the corner of the street I have never been to before, I do not know. As such, the world is pregnant with potential, which we can only partially see; the way the presence of a baby can be perceived, but not directly seen in the belly of a pregnant woman.[70]

We can translate this into Yogācāra terms: the ocean of being is covered by the waves of experience. The ocean of Being is the *ālaya-vijñāna*, where karma describes the potentiality of being; of experience – which we have some access to, but never full access. The visible is what is known and is what we can access; it is our experience, and thus the conventional. What is hidden is invisible, and is that which is not experienced, and thus not conceptualized; it is ultimate.[71] Both phenomenology and Yogācāra remind us that reality is not fully given in experience, yet it is only through experience that we encounter it – as localized, partial, and shaped by the very structures through which we perceive.

The Role of Metaphysical Concepts

It might be tempting, at this point, to argue that we should avoid metaphysical claims altogether. After all, if conceptualization always risks reifying experience into mistaken categories, why engage in metaphysical speculation at all? Would it not be more consistent to remain silent about the nature of reality, focusing only on immediate experience and refusing to construct yet another conceptual structure?

This worry is not groundless. There is a real danger in metaphysical thinking: it can solidify fluid phenomena into rigid categories and foster new dualisms in place of the old. However, what is often overlooked is that conceptualization is inevitable. We are conceptualizing creatures; to think, speak, or even reflect on experience at all is already to conceptualize. Even the choice to refrain from metaphysical claims is itself grounded in an implicit metaphysical stance – often unexamined and thus more likely to mislead us.

The task, then, is not to abandon metaphysics, but to practice it skilfully: to make explicit the assumptions we inevitably carry, and to articulate them in a way that remains provisional and open to revision. Metaphysical thinking is necessary because it shapes how we understand experience. If left implicit, it continues to operate unconsciously, often perpetuating exactly the mistaken dualisms and reductions we aim to overcome. Better to bring it into the open, to examine it critically, and to use it as a tool for clarifying rather than obscuring experience.

---

[70] Ibid. 135-137.

[71] Clearly, Yogācāra has much in common with phenomenology. It might not be surprising then that Vasubandhu has also been read as an early phenomenologist. See: Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

The danger of metaphysical reflection is not in the act itself, but in forgetting its conventional, dependent nature. When metaphysical concepts are reified – taken as ultimate truths rather than as interpretive tools – they harden into dogmas and distort our understanding. But when we remain aware of their conventional status, metaphysical frameworks can help us make sense of experience without mistaking the pointing finger for the moon.

This is the spirit in which I propose to think metaphysically here. The non-dual, process-oriented metaphysics – through the emphasis on the (re)structuring nature of reality and karma as the description of this process – I have drawn from Yogācāra is not meant to replace Cartesian dualism with another rigid system, but to provide a more coherent and experientially grounded way of thinking about mind, body, and consciousness. One that aligns with the lived, interdependent nature of experience itself. Conceptualization, when done well, allows us to avoid worse mistakes: to see through the illusions created by unexamined assumptions, and to orient ourselves more skilfully within the field of experience.

3.2 Reflecting on Western Theories in Light of Non-Dualism

Drawing on the insights of Yogācāra, I will now revisit some of the central Western theories of mind introduced in the first chapter. My aim is not only to critique their assumptions but also to explore what they can still teach us when viewed through the lens of dependent origination, karmic conditioning, and non-duality. Each theory reveals something about how we conceptualize experience, and each carries both limitations and possibilities.

I do not claim this account to be final or beyond critique, it simply is my best attempt so far. Many more theories could be examined in this way, but doing so would exceed the scope of this thesis. Still, I believe that the reflections offered here make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing conversation and may help inspire new ways of thinking about mind and body.

Reflections on Descartes

There is a lot to say about what Descartes wrote based on the progression of insight through Yogācāra, which will help us deepen our understanding of the phenomena we are dealing with. I'll touch upon the most important ones.

Thought, Self, and No-Self

Descartes wrote he could not detach thinking from himself; thought and self are intimately intertwined: "if [...] a foot, an arm, or any other part of the body is cut off, I know that nothing is thereby taken away from the mind."[72] As he identifies with the mind, he feels like his essence does not lie in the body.

[72] Descartes, meditation VI. 79.

Through this, he cements the thinking mind as the essence of his being: his self. Since he then concludes that he is a thinking thing, he realizes that he is not his thoughts. He is that which thinks these thoughts.

Buddhists, on the other hand, deny there to be any self at all. This creates a conflict, but one I believe which can be reconciled. To have a self, to conceive of a self, we have to think. Our self is created in the process of experiencing; it is the creation of our subject, and this process of experience is the process of thinking; whether that is linguistically or perhaps in images, or other perceptions or sensations. In this sense there is a self, yet at the same time it underlies the Buddhist position. Namely, that the self is not a thing; no eternal essence. Instead, it is a process – of identification that follows from self-experience.

Descartes in fact seems to understand this, when he writes: "[...] if I ceased completely to think, I would thereby cease to exist at all."[73] His sense of self; his self-experience, depends on his thinking. This can be understood in two ways: firstly, our sense of self is created through identification; the recognition that something that belongs to you *is* you. This leads to the concept of the subject as a field of relations, as proposed by Merleau-Ponty. When this ego process stops, the sense of self dissolves, and you no longer exist. Secondly, when experience disappears, the mind is empty of content and there is nothing left to identify with, nor to be conscious of – nothing to be conscious with.

Although his conclusion is not that the self is conventional and mortal – as something that can fade away – but that thinking is an integral part of the soul, for he believes the soul to be immortal. He is the thing that thinks; the thinking mind. He identifies with the conscious experience, which he calls thinking, and this, he believes, will always persist.

The way I see it against the backdrop of Yogacara thought, however, is that because the self is tied to thinking – where thinking means conscious experience – it is as much embodied as it is mental. The self is therefore conventional: it exists within consciousness, arises through identification, and depends on bodily and mental processes, but it is neither eternal nor unchanging. To identify with consciousness itself, as Descartes does, is to mistake the condition of experience for a substantial essence. Consciousness is not a self; it is the dynamic, situated field in which the illusion of self takes form.

The Independence of Thought

It is not surprising that Descartes thought of mind and body as really distinct, and of mind as being able to exist apart from the body, for that is how it appears to us. That is how we can experience them. Thought feels like our most intimate experience: we seem to inhabit it directly, as if we *are* the thinking thing. This immediacy makes it easy to imagine thoughts continuing without the body, while the reverse seems impossible.

And yet, while the body can at times feel distant or secondary, it also grounds our most vivid and compelling experiences. A thought carries much less weight than a feeling; the thought carries weight as it

[73] Ibid. Second meditation.

is accompanied by a feeling; similarly, thoughts do not motivate us, feelings do; thoughts motivate us insofar as they bring about a certain feeling. This reciprocity suggests that thought and feeling are not entirely separable but arise together, conditioned by one another.

Even what we might call "pure thought" depends on experience, and experience is always the experience of something. And because our consciousness is situated – localized within a body – our thinking is always entangled with bodily processes, even if this is not immediately apparent. We cannot simply sever the two. Even if we imagine consciousness to experience something other than the physical body, let's say the ethereal body (assuming such a thing exists), it is still connected to something that can be understood as a body. A body is a space of interpretation; a structure of reality; it is the localization of consciousness.

The way I would put it, is that our experience is more directly known than that which is experienced: we know the experience for what it is, but we know what is experienced only as experience, and not as what it is. Although the mind is not clearly known at all, because it is not a thing to be known, but the field of experience itself.

Thus, while Descartes was not wrong to observe the apparent independence of thought, this independence is only partial. The seeming separation between thinking and embodiment is a feature of how experience presents itself, not evidence of two entirely distinct substances.

Prejudice, Doubt, and the Wholeness of the Mind

Doubting everything from the start was supposed to free us from all prejudices – but did it? What about the ways our experience structures our concepts? Descartes experienced mind and body, or soul and body, as separate, and thus he conceptualized them as separate. The fact that he takes mind to be a pure substance, would seem to be a prejudice. For what about the content of the mind? The mind he talks about is a thinking mind, which means it consists of thoughts. These seem to be parts of the mind; they make up the mind, for he says that he is the mind, and also that if the mind stops thinking, he would disappear. And so thinking is not just something that is held in the mind; it makes up the mind. Then the mind is not whole, but a composite or a collection. Thus, the idea that the mind is unitary and pure seems to have been a prejudice.

His argument that the mind is a clear and distinct idea is interesting to me, for perhaps it was to him – I can't know – but to me, it is not: I think it is not at all intuitively clear what the mind is, nor how it is distinct from other phenomena. To me, mind is rather elusive, it is very hard to capture it and pin it down. It is experienced most intimately, but precisely because of being so up-close I feel like I lack an overview and in fact do not know what I am experiencing so intimately. I wonder if Descartes experienced mind differently, or that it was a preconceived notion after all that he relied on.

To circle back to the previous section, mind can not be the self, if a self needs to be unitary; unchanging and eternal. The mind is also in constant flux: thoughts arise and fade. Memories are made and forgotten.

Sensations arise one moment and are replaced the next. We might hold that the mind itself is not these thoughts that arise within it, but the vessel holding them, and that this is what is the self. But what self would this be? It would be empty. The entire reason we struggle so much to define the mind, might be because of this: as it is empty, it can not be experienced. The mind resists definition precisely because it is not a thing but the condition of experience itself – a perspective situated within and dependent upon reality.

The Experience of Changing Wax

The wax example shows how experience is interpretation. We have a way of reaching out to reality, we gather information, which we interpret into a specific experience. The structure of reality (the karmic conditioning) shapes our experience, but our experience is not reality itself. What we get to know is our interaction with the structure: the smell, the taste, the colour, sound, and feel of the wax. These are not inherent qualities; they are not found in the wax: instead, they arise within consciousness. When the structure changes, for example when the wax melts (reality restructuring itself through thermal equilibrium), our experience of it changes. If we were to perceive the same things as before, then we would not be able to perceive the structure of reality effectively. Some of the structure remains: the atoms are still there, but their configuration has changed; there is more energy within the system, and therefore the atoms behave differently, therefore we (correctly) interpret and experience it differently as well.
Descartes believes wax has some kind of essence, which the mind can grasp (a very Platonic idea). He is not entirely wrong; the same reality is restructuring itself, and thus something remains that is being restructured. But the wax is not a fundamental part of that reality, it is a surface layer; a wave on the ocean: as an object, it is imagined.

Reflection on Leibniz

Although Leibniz's account of mind and body is generally not given much attention today, and I remain doubtful of his doctrine of pre-established harmony and his reduction of the body to a mere phenomenon, his work contains insights that still resonate. His notion that bodies are *well-founded phenomena*, for example, strikes me as a valuable intuition – even if he interprets it to mean that bodies are less real than minds. It seems more plausible, and more productive, to see this as an indication that all things, whether mind or body, are well-founded phenomena: constructs that arise dependently, conditioned and provisional. In this light, his position foreshadows a way of thinking that avoids privileging either side of the dualism.

His view of mental activity as representational perception, extending even into the unconscious, also resonates with Yogācāra's account of mind. Both emphasize that perception is not simply awareness of an independent reality, but the representational process through which reality appears at all – much of it shaped below the level of conscious awareness.

Reflection on Functionalism

What inspires certain interpretations? Are there fixed categories of mental experience, which can arise across different systems – for example, in different beings? Are these categories somehow pre-given, or are they constructed, inherent to experience itself? Functionalism seems to suggest that what defines a mental state is not its intrinsic, qualitative character, but its causal role. In doing so, however, it risks creating a subtle dualism: mental states on one side, and physical processes on the other. Linked only by their functional relations, as though the function is a bridge that could accommodate many right answers. But is that really how it works?

I tend to think that what makes a certain experience the same kind of experience, across different beings or systems, is not its functional role but the experience itself. Pain, for example, is the experience of intense discomfort; whoever truly experiences this, experiences pain. It sounds almost naïve in its simplicity, but it speaks to a more foundational reality: experience itself precedes and grounds our categories. The deeper problem, of course, is that we can never know for certain whether others' experiences are the same as ours, since experience is inherently private. But then again, do we need to know? Must pain have an identical functional role or cause in order to be recognized as pain?

Functionalism defines mental states by the causal roles they play within a system, irrespective of how they are realized physically. As Kim put it, "a mental kind is a *functional kind*, or a *causalfunctional kind*, since the ″function″ involved is to fill a certain causal role."[74] Thus, to be in pain, for the behaviorist, is merely to wince and groan – or to be disposed to wince and groan. For the functionalist, by contrast, to be in pain is to occupy some internal state that causes winces and groans, regardless of what that internal state is made of or how it is implemented.

Yet this stands in sharp contrast to Yogācāra, which, like phenomenology, insists that the qualitative, first-person character of experience is irreducible. They do not care whether a state plays the correct causal role; they care whether there *is* something it is like to be in that state. This is where functionalism seems to miss the point: it accounts for behaviour and system-level roles, but it risks neglecting the very thing it aims to explain: the experience itself.

Reflection on Behaviorism

Behaviorism contributed an important reminder that mind and body are not purely private or internal phenomena: they manifest in and through behaviour. From a Yogācāra perspective, however, this exclusive focus on outward behaviour misses the deeper, subjective construction of experience and the interpretive role of consciousness itself.

[74] Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 76.

Reflection on Physicalism

Type physicalists believed the mind could be fully explained by physics. Their theory has since lost popularity, but I still think it is reasonable to assume that physics may one day account for the mind, though not yet. The problem is not necessarily that the mind lies outside the scope of physics, but that our current physical models are still too limited for such a task. They remain incomplete, narrowly focused on the measurable and external, and incapable of accounting for subjective, qualitative experience. But that does not mean it can never be done. If we can already make sense of the mind, at least partially, through the causal patterns described by karmic seeds, then the bridge to physics may not be as wide as it appears. While karma might sound esoteric or mystical, it is in fact surprisingly logical and grounded: a causal system that describes how potential experience unfolds into actual experience. There is no reason, in principle, why such a system could not be expressed in physical terms. To deny this possibility would itself create an unnecessary dualism, as though karma were some spiritual substance standing apart from material reality. Yet the whole point of Yogācāra is to overcome such metaphysical separations. I do not see physics and philosophy as strictly distinct domains. They overlap, and their gaps are slowly closing – as all fields of knowledge are gradients on a continuous scale: separated but connected, as the world itself is continuous, not fragmented.

Token physicalism rejects the idea that there is a universal, fixed physical basis for each kind of mental state. Instead, it holds that each individual mental event corresponds to some physical event, even if the physical realization differs each time. In this sense, it avoids the essentialism implicit in type physicalism and acknowledges that mental categories are constructed over a variety of physical processes. This resonates, at least superficially, with the Yogācāra understanding that mental phenomena arise dependently, without an intrinsic essence.

Yogācāra suggests that mind arises from the structure of reality – from karmic conditioning – and as such, it is to be expected that mental experiences correlate with physical processes. The mind is not an independent substance hovering outside the world, nor is it reducible to physical states alone. Rather, both mind and body emerge as co-dependent aspects of the same conditioned field. In this way, Yogācāra allows us to see why mental events might always coincide with physical configurations, without equating the two. Token physicalism gestures toward this insight but remains within a reductionist framework that mistakes correlation for identity, and thus still falls short of a truly non-dual understanding.

Reflection on the Double-Aspect Theory

Double-aspect theory holds that mind and body are two aspects of one underlying reality, which itself is neither mental nor physical but can manifest as both. In this way, it avoids reducing one to the other and preserves a kind of unity. This is closer to a non-dual insight than most Western theories manage, and in some respects it mirrors the Yogācāra view: both see the apparent duality of mind and body as a product of perspective rather than as an absolute metaphysical division. Just as light is both particle and wave, mind and body are not two distinct substances but two aspects of a single, conditioned reality.

But double-aspect theory remains vague about the nature of the "underlying reality" and treats it as a kind of metaphysical placeholder. By contrast, Yogācāra names and analyzes this ground as the flow of dependent origination – karma – which conditions and gives rise to both "mental" and "physical" appearances. Mind and body are not simply two sides of a hidden substance; they are constructed in relation to each other through karmic processes. So while double-aspect theory avoids the pitfalls of reductionism, it lacks a deeper account of how and why the duality appears in the first place.

Reflection on the Extended Mind

The extended mind thesis proposes that mental processes are not confined to the brain or body but can include tools, environments, and social structures – anything that plays an integral role in cognitive functioning. This idea, too, aligns in interesting ways with the Yogācāra understanding of mind as arising within a field of conditions, rather than as a private, internal substance. It emphasizes that mind (and in fact also body) are not clearly separated from the world – they do not exist in a vacuum. As a network, they stretch out into and are interwoven with it.

Yogācāra would even go further: not only is mind shaped by its surroundings, but the very distinction between "mind" and "world" is constructed within the same field of karmic conditioning. Mind is not merely extended; it is fundamentally interdependent with what it extends into. The extended mind thesis helpfully pushes against individualism and internalism, but it still tends to assume that there is a "mind" somewhere to be extended, rather than questioning whether the boundary was ever there to begin with. From a Yogācāra point of view, the insight is not simply that mind extends into the world, but that "mind" and "world" are co-arising constructs that have no independent existence apart from each other.

Conclusion

All of these Western theories covered above seek in their own way to explain how mind and body relate. But each remains conditioned by the dualistic assumptions they inherit. By reframing them through Yogācāra, we see that mind and body are neither wholly separate nor simply identical, but two aspects of an ongoing, interdependent process of experience and interpretation. This perspective does not resolve all the tensions – these will remain, since being itself is paradoxical – but it helps us see them for what they are: constructed distinctions within a non-dual, conditioned reality, like waves on the same ocean.

3.3 Consciousness, Mind, and Body

What is the mind? Is it the body? Is it something else entirely? These questions have shaped the history of philosophy, but their persistence suggests they are not easily resolved. We associate the mind with thinking and the body with feeling. To understand mind and body better, in this section I propose an account of not just mind and body, but also of consciousness, thinking, and feeling that draws from Yogācāra – now that it has become clear that it is a useful framework to think about mind and body, and reflect on other theories – and integrates insights from these contemporary perspectives, while remaining attentive to the limits of dualistic thinking. Again, this is simply my best attempt so far at putting the puzzle pieces together – one which I hope will inspire an ongoing conversation in which we build our understanding up together.

Mind as Field of Experience

The mind is not the body. Yet it is not separate from it either. Instead of equating mind with the brain or reducing it to neural processes, I understand mind as the *field of experience*, within which the body plays a central and inescapable role. The body is not just a vessel for the mind but a participant in its very structure. The whole body contributes to our mental life – not just the brain. We feel emotions in our gut, in our chest, in the tension of our muscles. Recent research[75], such as on the gut–brain axis, only reaffirms what many traditions have long recognized: the gut, heart, and other organs shape our mental and emotional states. When we feel nervous, we do not "think" nervousness in our brain, we feel it in our stomach. When we stub our toe, the pain is felt in the toe.

Mind and body arise together: as Yogācāra teaches us, they are dependently originated and co-arising aspects of the same field of reality. In this sense, mind is not a thing in itself, but the localized, situated *perspective of experience* that emerges within reality. Like a sense organ, the mind is a way reality encounters itself.[76] This also aligns with the idea that mind is a process, not a substance; a stream of interpretations, intentions, and experiences arising within and through the body.

Thinking and Feeling

One persistent error in Western thought has been to sharply separate thinking and feeling. But this is a false dichotomy. Both are modes of experience, and their distinction is only conventional, not fundamental. They overlap, intertwine, and shade into one another.

---

[75] John F. Cryan and Timothy G. Dinan, "Mind-Altering Microorganisms: The Impact of the Gut Microbiota on Brain and Behaviour," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 13, no. 10 (2012): 701–12, https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3346.

[76] Buddhism generally conceptualizes the mind as a sense organ. See: Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 244-246.

We tend to conceptualize thinking as linguistic or imaginative: as a series of words, sentences, and mental pictures. But paying close attention reveals something more subtle: often, we are aware of a thought before it becomes "voiced" in our inner speech, or "visualized" in our minds eye. This suggests that thinking itself is an interpretation, a translation of underlying patterns of experience. The fact that we can think in multiple languages, or in images rather than words, indicates that thought is not primary but a re-expression of something deeper.

The dream arguments of both Descartes and Vasubandhu support this view.[77] Neither external reality nor an external body is strictly necessary to account for our experiences; all that is required are patterned processes – "energy patterns" – interpreted within consciousness. Whether these patterns arise "inside" the body or are conditioned by what we conventionally call the "outside world" makes no fundamental difference, since all experience is mediated through consciousness and is ultimately situated within the body. Through dependent arising, the so-called external world becomes internalized as experience: consciousness interprets the field of conditions, whether bodily or environmental. In this sense, all experience can be understood as an interpretation of energy patterns in consciousness.

Feelings seem even more deeply rooted in the body; raw, pre-reflective, and often ineffable. Once they are reflected upon, and put into words, they become what we call emotions. Feeling is experience itself, an unconscious interpretation of bodily states: tension and relaxation, hormonal surges, shifts in posture and breath. But like thought, feeling is still a way of experiencing the world. Both arise from the same field of conditioned energy patterns, interpreted within consciousness.

This also invites reflection on the unconscious. The unconscious mind can be understood as those processes that remain uninterpreted; not yet presented to consciousness. These latent patterns still participate in shaping experience and behaviour, but without appearing as explicit thoughts or feelings. In this sense, what surfaces as conscious thought or feeling is only a small, articulated part of a broader, ongoing field of interpretation.

The distinction between thought and feeling, then, is one of convenience. Both are ways of making sense of energy patterns in consciousness, and both are shaped by karma: by habitual patterns, conditioning, and associations that predispose us to certain responses. Even Descartes, in *Meditation II*, recognized this continuity when he observed that "sensing is nothing other than thinking."

Intention and Attention

We often assume that the mind forms intentions and then directs the body accordingly: "I decide to drink, and so I reach for a glass of water." Yet, research suggests that the neural activity underlying action

[77] I did not cover these arguments, but they are worth exploring. See: Descartes, Meditation I, and Vasubandhu, *Twenty Verses*, verses III and IV.

often begins before the conscious decision to act.[78] This challenges the idea of the mind as an independent agent that commands the body. Instead, it suggests that intention itself is part of the ongoing process of interpretation; not a cause outside the system, but another moment in the unfolding of conditioned patterns within consciousness.

This does not mean that conscious experience is irrelevant, nor that we have no influence over our actions. Rather, it invites us to rethink what agency means. What we call "thoughts" appear to be interpretations or translations of ongoing brain activity; a way consciousness gives form and meaning to the patterns of the body. In this sense, thoughts follow brain activity as their condition and correlate, without being reducible to it. Our sense of deciding is itself one more interpretation in this unfolding process.

We might think of intention as the ability to choose our own thoughts. But do we really choose them? When we try to speak, for example, do we consciously survey all possible words and pick one? Often we say we "can't find the right words" – but does that mean we can't decide, or that the right words simply do not arise? This suggests that intention is not best understood as a series of deliberate choices. And yet, we experience a certain sense of control over our thoughts – is this an illusion? No, instead, what we call intention might more accurately be described as *attention*: the ability to orient ourselves toward a certain field of possibilities, to notice what arises there, and to direct the flow of thinking accordingly.

This does not imply absolute freedom, but rather a conditioned freedom: even our intentions and our attention are shaped by karmic patterns; by habit, memory, bodily states, and present conditions. For example, we may "decide" to drink not because of some pure, unconditioned will, but because thirst arose in the body and drew our attention to it. The question "free from what?" is important here: we are not free from causes and conditions, but within those conditions we can exercise a kind of responsiveness, a capacity to orient and shape the patterns of thought and action that arise.

The example of writing a poem illustrates this well. We set the intention to write, and then words arise – or they don't. We cannot force inspiration. What comes to mind is never wholly under our control; it emerges through association, habit, and present conditions. While we appear to choose, we can only choose among what actually arises in the field of experience. In this sense, thoughts follow attention and arise through conditioned patterns; the habitual tendencies shaped by our past actions and experiences.

Consciousness and the Shaping of Mind

In much of Western thought, *mind* and *consciousness* are often used interchangeably. This conflation makes sense intuitively: both refer to the domain of subjective experience. But if we look more closely, we

[78] Benjamin Libet, Curtis A. Gleason, Elwood W. Wright, and Dennis K. Pearl, "Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential)," *Brain* 106, no. 3 (1983): 623–42, https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/106.3.623.

see that they are not the same. *Mind* refers to the process of thought and interpretation, the flow of impressions, concepts, intentions, and feelings that make up our experience. *Consciousness*, on the other hand, is the condition for these processes to appear at all: the open field in which mind manifests and where experience takes place.

In the Yogācāra perspective, consciousness and reality are not two independent realms, but mutually conditioning aspects of one process. Consciousness co-arises with the structure of reality: the way the world appears to us is always already shaped by our consciousness, and our consciousness is shaped by the conditions of the world. This interdependence is karmic: past patterns of interpretation shape the present, while the present experience plants seeds for the future.

This perspective also reframes the question of whether consciousness is active or passive. Rather than simply observing what arises, consciousness participates in shaping it. What we experience is neither a purely subjective projection nor a purely objective given: it is the co-emergence of both, conditioned by karma. The content of our minds – our stream of thought, our intentions, and even the possibilities we can attend to – arises from this interplay.

This is why it can feel as if mind has agency while also being conditioned: consciousness provides the openness in which attention can orient itself and in which intentions take shape, but the field of possibilities it moves within is conditioned by karmic habits. In this sense, consciousness is neither a detached spectator nor a fully determined mechanism, but the dynamic interface through which mind and world meet and shape one another.

Toward a Non-Dual Understanding

In this way, we can begin to see mind as a field of experience that arises within the structure of reality, conditioned by both consciousness and body, rather than as a substance or a self-contained organ. Consciousness is not merely passive, but co-arises with the structure of reality itself, actively shaping the flow of thought and experience as it reflects and interprets karmic conditions. This understanding softens the sharp divisions between thinking and feeling, subject and object, mind and body, revealing them as provisional and interdependent.

Mind and body cannot be sharply separated. Nor can thinking and feeling, subject and object, intention and action. They are different aspects of the same dependent, conditioned field of experience. What we call "mind" is not something above or beyond the body, nor something identical with it, but the very process of experiencing reality, situated within it.

Yogācāra allows us to see how both mind and body are constructed, dependently arisen, and empty of inherent essence. The mind is not reducible to the brain, nor is it a ghostly observer floating above the world. It is the field of experience itself; localized, conditioned, and inseparable from the world it perceives. It has allowed to soften the rigid lines between concepts such as mind and body – not obscuring, but deepening our understanding in the process.

3.4 Psychosomatism Revisited

It is both intuitive and supported by research that what we call the mind influences the body. But if we understand the mind as a sense-organ – something that perceives the body – then how could it causally influence what it perceives? Does the eye affect the object it sees? Does the ear change the sound it hears? This analogy challenges the straightforward idea of mind-body causation as a one-way influence, and it would seem that we are no closer to understanding the interaction problem and psychosomatism.

What is seems to lead to instead is that it is not the mind itself that acts as an agent of change, since the mind is nothing in itself, merely a field of experience, but rather consciousness that does so. Consciousness, as shown, arises from the very structure of reality and functions as a self-structuring, dynamic process that both perceives and participates in shaping experience.

From this non-dual vantage point, reality is understood not as a collection of discrete substances but more as a unified field of interdependent patterns or energy structures.[79] Both what we call 'mind' – the stream of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions – and 'body' – the physiological and biochemical processes – arise as interconnected configurations within this field.

Karma, as the principle of dependent origination or conditioned causality, offers a framework to understand psychosomatic interactions. Each moment of mental or physical experience is conditioned by prior causes and conditions, forming a complex, reciprocal web of influence. Thought and body are not separate entities acting on one another, but complementary aspects of the same ongoing process.

The mind is the conscious experience of the body and the world through the body. What is untranslated remains unconscious. When we learn to, sometimes intentionally, ignore or reinterpret certain bodily signals, we can become disconnected from the body – as we are no longer aware of what the body tries to communicate with us. A disconnection from the body, is a disconnection from the self – it is an incomplete self. Trauma research, such as the work of Bessel van der Kolk, illustrates how altered bodily awareness can disrupt this integrated sense of self, affecting well-being and the ability to function in the world profoundly.[80]

Thus, removing the artificial boundaries between mind and body dissolves the mystery of their mutual influence. They are both expressions of the same fundamental, self-structuring field of consciousness, continuously conditioning and reshaping one another according to the causal law of karma understood as psychosomatic causality.

---

[79] Although this of course still draws on dualistic distinctions, it moves closer towards a dissolution of these.

[80] See: Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking, 2014.

Summary and conclusion

In this thesis I have shown that the mind–body divide, though deeply entrenched in Western thought, is not inevitable. It is a conceptual construct sustained by habits of interpretation and by a tendency to reify the self and its experiences. Drawing on Descartes, the Western philosophical tradition, and Yogācāra Buddhism, I have shown how dualistic thinking arises, and how it leads to conceptual and practical difficulties – from the inability to account for psychosomatic causality to the alienation of the self from the body.

From here, I argued for a non-dual, process-oriented understanding of mind, body, and consciousness. One which emphasized the constructing and transforming aspect of consciousness, and in fact, reality. Yogācāra Buddhism provides a framework in which the duality of mind and body can be recognized as conventional: real within experience but empty of independent essence. From this perspective, the self appears not as a fixed subject, but as a dynamic process of identification arising within a localized and conditioned field of experience; mind and body emerge as two aspects of this same field, inseparable yet distinguishable within consciousness.

This reframing dissolves the conceptual deadlock of the mind–body problem. It allows us to make sense of psychosomatic causality as patterns of conditioning within a single, situated process, instead as an interaction between two substances. It also suggests a more integrated and holistic approach to human experience, health, and suffering, where the interdependence of thought, feeling, embodiment and environment are recognized and understood. In this way, it urges us to think more in terms of dynamic processes and systems, rather than in distinct, independent parts.

There is still more to say: about how this account interfaces with empirical science, about how it might inform ethical practice, and about how other philosophical traditions might complicate or refine this view. But these are questions for further inquiry. What I have shown here is that to move beyond the mind–body divide, we must rethink our concepts, and in doing so, we open ourselves to a deeper and more coherent understanding of what it means to experience, to act, and to be.

Bibliography

Cambridge Dictionary. *"Karma."* Accessed July 4, 2025. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/karma.

Chalmers, David J. *The Character of Consciousness.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Chouraqui, Frank. *The Body and Embodiment: A Philosophical Guide*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

Clark, Andy, and Chalmers, David J. "The Extended Mind." *Analysis* 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/58.1.7.

Cryan, John F., and Timothy G. Dinan. "Mind-Altering Microorganisms: The Impact of the Gut Microbiota on Brain and Behaviour." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 13, no. 10 (2012): 701–12. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3346.

Descartes, René. *Meditations.* Translated by Desmond M. Clarke. London: Penguin Classics, 2010.

Descartes, René. *The Passions of the Soul.* Translated by Jonathan Bennett. Early Modern Texts, 2004. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf.

Elisabeth of Bohemia. *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes.* Edited and translated by Lisa Shapiro. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Gallagher, Shaun, and Dan Zahavi. *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science.* London: Routledge, 2008.

Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Harrington, Anne. *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Kim, Jaegwon. *Philosophy of Mind.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Libet, Benjamin, Curtis A. Gleason, Elwood W. Wright, and Dennis K. Pearl. "Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential)." *Brain* 106, no. 3 (1983): 623–42. https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/106.3.623.

Lipowski, Zbigniew J. "Psychosomatic Medicine: Past and Present Part I. Historical Background." *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 31, no. 1 (1986): 2–7. https://doi.org/10.1177/070674378603100102.

Lusthaus, Dan. *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih Lun.* London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

Mauss, Marcel. *Sociology and Anthropology.* Translated by Ben Brewster. London: Routledge, 1979.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible.* Edited by Claude Lefort. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Ramsey, William. "Eliminative Materialism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Stanford University. Last modified November 12, 2024. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/materialism-eliminative/.

Schultz, Emily A., and Robert H. Lavenda. *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*. 11th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Siderits, Mark, and Katsura, Shōryū. *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā.* Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013.

Simmons, Alison. "Changing the Cartesian Mind: Leibniz on Sensation, Representation and Consciousness." *The Philosophical Review* 110, no. 1 (January 2001): 31–75. https://doi.org/10.2307/2678401.

Smith, Laurence D. *Behaviorism and Logical Positivism: A Reassessment of the Alliance.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986.

Stoljar, Daniel. "Physicalism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Stanford University. Last modified September 9, 2009. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/physicalism/.

Suzuki, Daisetsu T. *Essays in Zen Buddhism.* 3rd ed. New York: Grove Press, 1956.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* New York: Viking, 2014.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Centenary Edition.* Edited by Luciano Bazzocchi. London: Anthem Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv22d4t7n.