

UNITED WISDOM

Materialism, Idealism, and Panpsychism: Three Answers about the Nature of Reality

World and Consciousness

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W39 · EN

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Materialism, Idealism, and Panpsychism: Three Answers about the Nature of Reality

What comes first: the physical world, consciousness, or a deeper relationship between them?

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W39 · “World and Consciousness” · W-18 “Knowledge in Early Modern Philosophy” · Research article

> *“for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived.”*
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> *George Berkeley, A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, §2. Original English text, Project Gutenberg.*

What this article explores

Imagine an ordinary morning. A cup sits on the table. We can weigh it, measure the temperature of the drink, and describe the composition of the ceramic. Yet the warmth against a palm, the bitterness of coffee, and a feeling of calm belong to another way of encountering what is happening: we experience them. How do these two descriptions connect? Is there only a physical world, within which consciousness arises? Or must consciousness be a starting point for what we call reality? Could the simplest forms of experience belong to nature itself?

Materialism, idealism, and panpsychism distribute the burden of explanation differently. Each offers a starting point and leaves a difficult question. We will examine those questions while keeping philosophical argument, scientific inquiry, and personal impressions distinct. Comfort alone is a poor guide to choosing a worldview. It is more useful to understand exactly what a position claims, what its explanation costs, and where a familiar statement about the world quietly becomes a much stronger conclusion.

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1. Two ways of encountering the same cup

The debate about the nature of reality begins with a distinction between describing what happens and experiencing it. The cup in our hypothetical scene belongs to a shared world: we can hand it to someone else, check an instrument's readings, or break it. At the same time, someone encounters it as a visible shape, a surface beneath their fingers, a smell. Science seeks descriptions available to different observers. Experience is always lived from a particular point of view.

This difference does not by itself establish two separate realities. A map of a city differs from a walk through it, but that does not give us two cities. The analogy has a limit, however. In the debate about consciousness, the very possibility of a walk as an experienced event needs explaining. Why do the processes we describe in a person have a felt side at all?

We can clarify the question without rushing: are we looking for the cause of a particular sensation, a general mechanism of perception, or an explanation of why experience is possible in the first place? An answer to one question need not settle the others.

Two inquiries matter here. **Ontology** asks what exists and what underlies it. **Epistemology** asks how we know the world and how justified our knowledge is. “I learn about the cup through perception” addresses the second inquiry. “The cup exists only as something perceived” already answers the first. An argument is needed to get from one to the other.

In ordinary conversation, these moves often go unnoticed. Someone says, “Everyone sees the world differently,” then adds, “So there is no objective reality.” Someone else replies, “Perception is connected with the brain,” and concludes, “Therefore inner experience has been fully explained.” In both cases, the second statement needs more support than the first.

The three families of views considered here help us see different possible answers. They do not exhaust the options, nor are they three theories constructed in the same way. Dualism and neutral monism, for example, lie beyond this article's scope. Each family also contains disagreements. Calling someone a materialist or an idealist begins a conversation about their position; it does not complete the description.

So alongside “What do you believe?” we can ask, “What exactly do you take as fundamental?” Physical processes? Experience? A more basic reality that our familiar terms divide too crudely? Until that choice is made clear, two people can argue over a single word while committing themselves to different things.

2. Materialism: the world does not need our presence

A strength of the materialist approach is its attempt to explain human beings within nature. We do not introduce a separate substance whenever we encounter memory, desire, or pain. We investigate the processes that make them possible and their relationships with everything else that happens.

Earlier forms of materialism and contemporary **physicalism** should not simply be identified, although the terms are often used interchangeably today. Earlier accounts could rely on bodies, motion, and mechanical interactions. The contemporary concept of the physical is broader than the familiar image of solid particles. As a general orientation, physicalism treats concrete reality as physical or wholly grounded in the physical; precise accounts of this dependence differ. It does not necessarily require translating every useful explanation into the language of microphysics. Daniel Stoljar discusses the distinction between physicalism and reductionism in “Physicalism”.

We can acknowledge the physical basis of a conversation and still explain it through intentions, linguistic rules, and circumstances. If someone misses a meeting, an account of their promise and subsequent decision can offer an understanding that a list of particle movements cannot. A physicalist must reconcile these levels of explanation, but need not declare one of them meaningless in advance.

In our scene, the cup does not cease to exist when someone leaves the kitchen. Events continue independently of their attention. This view fits well with shared methods of checking: measurements can be repeated, errors discovered, and ideas corrected as the world resists our expectations. Yet successful research practices and a comprehensive philosophical position make different claims. Explaining many processes does not already amount to explaining every aspect of consciousness.

The word “physical” itself also needs care. If it means “whatever eventually turns out to be real,” physicalism becomes almost invulnerable but loses its ability to distinguish one position from another. If the definition is fixed to today's physics, we must take that physics' incompleteness into account. This is a real challenge for the position, rather than a reason to equate it with a naive confidence that the world has already been understood completely.

The materialist answer is interesting precisely where it undertakes difficult work: showing consciousness' place in nature without concealing an unknown mechanism behind the word “just.” Saying “it is just the brain” is insufficient. Like any explanation, it must reveal the relationships that the phrase stands for.

3. Why describing a mechanism leaves a question

The sharpest disagreement concerns the explanation we should expect, rather than whether the brain participates in human experience. We can investigate sound recognition, attention, memory, and verbal reports. Then we can ask why these processes have an experienced side at all.

In “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness”, §§2–3, David Chalmers distinguishes explaining functions from the “hard problem” of experience. His “easy” problems may be extraordinarily difficult in practice: the word refers to the kind of explanation envisaged. His argument is that describing how functions are performed is insufficient for the hard problem; we must explain why subjective experience exists. This is a philosophical argument about explanatory adequacy, not experimental evidence that science has suffered its final defeat.

A physicalist's response deserves equally serious consideration. Our present inability to understand a connection does not show that it is unintelligible or requires things of a different nature. The difference might lie between two ways of knowing a single reality. That possibility is not proof either. Both sides must clarify where the current limits of knowledge end and a claim about an in-principle limit begins.

Return to the cup. We can explain why its surface heats up and why a hand responds. But “show me what it feels like to experience this warmth” does not necessarily request another instrument reading. It concerns a different side of encountering the event. One mistake would be to take the instrument's lack of such a sensation as evidence of a special immaterial force. Another would be to decide that the question disappears as soon as accurate readings are obtained.

This distinction also affects how we assess arguments. Dissatisfaction with an explanation can be productive: it may reveal something missing. By itself, however, it does not tell us which explanation is right. “Science has not explained consciousness, so idealism is true” leaves its second half unsupported. Likewise, the difficulties of idealism do not automatically establish the victory of any particular physicalist view.

A good discussion allows this pause. We can demand a fuller explanation while acknowledging what an existing approach has achieved. We can consider the hard problem badly framed, but then we need to explain exactly where the framing goes wrong. A label for our position cannot do that work for us.

4. Berkeley: what is perceived and who perceives

Idealism becomes clearer when we read a particular thinker rather than the popular formula “it is all in our heads.” George Berkeley proposes a rigorous, though contested, reconstruction of what we take to exist.

In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, §§1–6, Berkeley distinguishes ideas from perceiving spirits. Among the things he calls ideas are the qualities given through the senses: colour, sound, warmth, hardness. A spirit is an active perceiver, not another idea. A familiar thing, such as an apple, is described as a collection of qualities perceived together. Berkeley rejects a supposed material substance existing independently of every mind; he does not deny the tables, trees, and apples we perceive.

Berkeley also challenges the distinction between “primary” qualities regarded as properties of bodies themselves—extension, shape, and motion—and “secondary” qualities associated with sensation, such as colour, warmth, and taste. His argument is that extension and shape cannot be conceived without colour or other sensible qualities (§§9–10). This supports his rejection of an independent material framework hidden behind sensations, though the legitimacy of moving from the structure of our conceptions to the structure of reality remains disputed.

In §23, he considers an objection: surely we can imagine trees in a park with nobody there. He answers that whoever imagines them is still thinking of the trees. We have left an observer out of the picture, but have not removed the act of imagining. For Berkeley, this shows the failure of trying to conceive what is perceived entirely outside thought and perception.

Here lies a point of dispute. An opponent can agree that imagining takes place in a mind, yet ask why the imagined object cannot also exist independently of a mind. The representation of an empty room and the empty room itself are not already established as the same thing. Berkeley answers within his own theory of ideas; whether to accept its foundations is a substantial part of the philosophical choice.

Nor does his position imply that my personal wishes create the cup. In §6 Berkeley appeals to an eternal spirit; in §§45–48 he answers the suggestion that things are continually disappearing and coming into being. Their existence is not restricted to the periods when we ourselves perceive them. Within his system, the world's order is connected with God, rather than an individual's whim.

The popular promise “change your thoughts and external reality will obey” therefore misrepresents Berkeley. Perception differs from fantasy. I can imagine sweet coffee, but that does not mean its bitterness will vanish at the next sip. An idealist ontology must also explain the stability of experience, the possibility of error, and the world's resistance to our wishes.

Berkeley's seriousness lies in his demand that we examine what we mean by the existence of a sensible thing. We do not have to accept his answer. Passing over the question itself becomes harder: the familiar word “exists” proves less straightforward when we try to separate it from every way of encountering what exists.

Consider two statements. “I am seeing a tree now” describes my perception. “The tree continues to exist when no human being sees it” says more. A materialist may understand the latter as a claim about an independent physical object. In Berkeley's system, it concerns an order of perceived things that is not exhausted by my present encounter with the tree. People can agree that tomorrow they will find it in the same place while understanding the basis of that expectation differently. Agreement in ordinary action does not yet amount to agreement in metaphysics.

Conversely, different explanations need not change every everyday decision. Someone who accepts Berkeley can still take shelter from rain: his philosophy does not suggest wishing the rain away. Lose sight of this, and the debate quietly becomes a contest between common sense and an absurdity we ourselves have attributed to an opponent. It is more interesting to ask whether their system explains the familiar constraints of experience better than an independent material basis does. That is where arguments are compared, rather than conversational ingenuity.

5. Idealism is not confined to a single mind

“Idealism” brings together different answers, and their differences change the meaning of the discussion. A metaphysical claim about the world's mental basis does not follow automatically from investigating the conditions under which we know it.

In “Idealism”, Paul Guyer and Rolf-Peter Horstmann distinguish metaphysical from epistemological arguments for idealism. A doctrine of the primacy of spirit or mind differs from an argument about knowledge's dependence on forms of thought. Kant's transcendental idealism cannot, without further argument, be reduced to the claim that only my personal consciousness exists. Nor does Descartes' distinction between thinking and extended substances make him an idealist: it is a dualist position.

This matters even if we have no intention of studying the history of philosophy. “The world is given to me through experience” and “the world consists entirely of experience” sound similar, but commit us to different claims. The first leaves open what exists independently of the knower. The second supplies an answer. Discussions of idealism sometimes stall because one person defends the first statement while another criticises the second.

Imagine a second hypothetical scene. Someone receives a short message: “Let's talk this evening.” They hear a threat in it; the sender meant making plans together. An event has

occurred whose meaning depends on perception and context. But this dependence does not settle the ultimate nature of reality. We can recognise that the initial interpretation was mistaken without becoming idealists. We can also be idealists and insist on checking what the sender intended.

Idealist approaches remind us that a knower cannot simply remove themselves from the process of knowing. Building an ontology, however, requires more than a reminder that we are involved. How do we explain a world shared by several people? Why are some expectations fulfilled and others disappointed? What makes a message exist for someone who has not read it? Different schools answer differently; the word “consciousness” does not automatically resolve these questions.

We can preserve a useful tension here. We have no acquaintance with the world outside all acquaintance. At the same time, we constantly distinguish accurate representations of it from mistaken ones. Philosophy needs to account for both sides. Preserving only the first risks arbitrariness; preserving only the second risks forgetting how anything becomes known at all.

6. Panpsychism: experience may not begin with us

Panpsychism invites us to consider whether elementary mental or experiential properties belong to nature at a basic level. Human consciousness would then not arise in a world wholly devoid of such properties at every level.

This does not mean that every object thinks. In the author version of “Panpsychism and Panprotopsychism”, §1, Chalmers explicitly distinguishes a hypothesis about basic experience from the claim that towers, cities, or numbers are conscious. The hypothetical experience of a fundamental entity is not equivalent to human memory, language, intentions, or personality. At that level, we do not even know how to give a substantive picture of such experience. “The stone understands my pain” therefore adds much more than panpsychism itself claims.

The related view of **panprotopsychism** proposes **protophenomenal properties** that are not themselves experiences, but may collectively constitute experience when appropriately organised. How this happens still requires explanation (Chalmers, §4 of the same work).

The idea's appeal concerns a difficult transition. If the starting description of nature contains nothing experiential, why does a particular arrangement of its elements begin to feel? The panpsychist proposes changing the starting description. An attractive move must then show what it explains and which additional assumptions it uses. Taking experience as basic does not yet explain its familiar complex forms.

Galen Strawson offers a particularly revealing variant. In “Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism”, §1, he affirms the reality of experience and regards it as a physical

phenomenon. Under this understanding of the physical, panpsychism extends realistic materialism. This is one author's argument, not a generally accepted consequence of physicalism. It nevertheless shows why our three families of views cannot be placed in three perfectly sealed compartments.

Two further statements should also be distinguished. “Experience occurs in nature” is a starting fact in our own case. “Experience belongs to nature's fundamental constituents” is a much stronger philosophical hypothesis. We cannot reach the second from the first by simply enlarging the scale.

A reader may be drawn to the image of a world in which human beings are less alone. That feeling is understandable as a personal response. It does not establish the world's structure. If panpsychism interests us, we should allow it to remain a demanding hypothesis with questions of its own, rather than turn it into a beautiful answer valued solely for the mood it creates.

7. If the parts experience, who experiences the whole?

Versions of panpsychism that ground human experience in the simplest experiences of its constituents face a transition of their own: they must explain the unity of complex experience. We experience a connected situation—a cup on a table, a conversation, a thought about the coming day—rather than a dust of isolated sensations.

In §6 of “Panpsychism and Panprotopsychism”, Chalmers examines the **combination problem**: how can many separate microexperiences constitute the experience of a new subject? Recognising experience at the starting level does not automatically answer this. It is particularly difficult to explain why a set of sensations belongs to a single experiencer, alongside accounting for the sensations themselves.

Imagine a third hypothetical scene: several people listening to the same melody. Each hears it, and their impressions may resemble one another. But agreement between the listeners does not turn them into an additional listener experiencing the sum of all their impressions. This analogy does not refute panpsychism: people and fundamental entities are organised differently. It simply makes the question of a new subject visible. Combining reports and constituting a unified experience are different tasks.

Explaining how elements interact physically does not yet explain how their hypothetical experiences combine either. We need to show why these particular connections produce this particular unity. If saying “the parts came together” is enough, the objection can be returned to materialists and panpsychists alike: the explanation we need remains concealed inside “came together.”

These approaches face different initial difficulties. A physicalist seeks to explain experience on a physical basis that is not ordinarily defined as experiential. A panpsychist has already included elementary experience in that basis, but must explain how it constitutes complex experience. The problem does not disappear; the point at which it demands a solution shifts.

An appeal to quantum physics offers no shortcut across this gap. For it to become an explanation, we would need a specific mechanism, its relationship to experience, and grounds for testing that relationship. The word “quantum” alone neither establishes a particle's consciousness nor explains the unity of human experience.

The question for panpsychism is therefore more useful when framed as “What exactly bears the simplest experience, and how does a complex subject follow from it?” than as “How can anyone believe everything thinks?” This framing lets us discuss a strong version of the position. A caricature offers an easy answer while leaving the philosophical task untouched.

8. Compare explanations, not promises

Comparison helps when it reveals which question each position takes on. We cannot assess these three families of views solely by how simple they feel. Sometimes apparent simplicity is achieved by renaming the difficult part or setting it aside.

The following table is a guide to the versions considered here, rather than a description of every school without exception. Differences within each family remain. Definitions and varieties of panpsychism were also checked against “Panpsychism” by Philip Goff, William Seager, and Sean Allen-Hermanson.

Question	Materialism / physicalism	Idealism	Panpsychism
What is taken as basic?	Physical reality	Mental reality in metaphysical idealism; transcendental idealism requires separate treatment	Basic mental or experiential properties of nature
Does the cup need my attention to exist?	No	For Berkeley, existence is not restricted to my perception	No: a hypothesis about basic experience does not make my attention the creator of the cup
What account of consciousness is needed?	Its place in physical nature	The connection between individual experience, other subjects, and a shared world	The connection between the simplest properties and human experience

Question	Materialism / physicalism	Idealism	Panpsychism
Where is the difficult transition?	From physical description to the experienced side	From fundamental consciousness or the conditions of experience to a stable shared world	From elementary experiences to a unified complex subject
What should not be attributed automatically?	Denial of feelings and meaning	Personal thought's power over any event	A human mind in every stone
Does a ready-made ethics follow?	No	No	No

Empirical connections between brain states and human experience constrain acceptable explanations, but do not by themselves select an entire ontology. Different philosophical positions may accept the same observations while interpreting their significance differently. For a difference to become a testable scientific disagreement, we need specific, incompatible observational consequences. Philosophical compatibility with evidence is therefore weaker than the evidence's confirming a particular position.

Another check is whether the thing being explained has disappeared. If we were given only an account of reporting a feeling in place of the feeling itself, we should clarify the move. If a stable world was replaced with an arbitrary stream of imagination, shared constraints need explaining. If elementary experience was simply renamed human consciousness, the difference between them still demands an account.

A considered choice can draw on an argument's coherence, economy of assumptions, and ability to preserve what needs explaining. None of these criteria works as an instant button. They help a discussion more than a contest between alluring images: a cold machine, an omnipotent thought, and an animate cosmos.

9. What this means in practice

A philosophical position may influence which questions we notice, but it does not supply a ready-made instruction manual for life. The following suggestions are the authors' application of the distinctions developed here, rather than rules Berkeley or contemporary philosophers prescribe for every reader.

We can begin by taking one of our judgments about the world and separating observation from inference. “I read the message and felt anxious” describes an episode. “The sender wanted to frighten me” interprets someone else's intention. “My anxiety created the event” adds a

metaphysical and causal hypothesis. These statements need different checks. Asking the sender may change the second; it does not settle the debate about idealism.

Next, we can ask what move our preferred explanation makes. “We depend on our bodies” helps us take living conditions into account. It does not imply that feelings deserve no attention. “We perceive what happens through experience” helps us notice interpretations. It does not make someone responsible for every misfortune they suffer. “Experience may be fundamental” opens a philosophical possibility. It does not imply that nature sends personalised advice.

These checks matter especially when a worldview begins to justify actions. Someone might say, “Everything is physical, so responsibility is meaningless.” Someone else might say, “All minds are connected, so another person's consent is unnecessary.” Both require a separate ethical argument. Reality's constitution and an action's permissibility are related but different questions. None of the ontologies considered here removes the need to discuss harm, obligations, reciprocity, and boundaries.

We can also restate someone else's position so that its supporter recognises their own reasoning. A materialist tries to keep consciousness within nature. An idealist asks about consciousness' primacy or the conditions of knowledge. A panpsychist investigates the possibility of basic experience. Criticism then becomes more precise: it addresses the actual difficulty rather than an opponent made convenient in advance.

A small exercise is enough to begin. Write down the strongest argument for your chosen position and, alongside it, the question it answers least well. Do the same for the closest alternative. If your own position has only strengths and another has only weaknesses, check whether you are comparing equally serious versions. The exercise need not change your convictions. Sometimes its result is a more precise account of why you retain them and what grounds could make you reconsider.

Finally, we can leave room for what remains unknown. We can recognise the objectivity of many checks, the reality of experience, and the incompleteness of our own explanation at the same time. We do not need a final metaphysics to handle facts more carefully or listen to someone better. If we have chosen one, however, it is worth knowing the question it leaves open as well as its appeal.

The cup is still on the table. We can investigate it, feel its warmth, and debate what makes all this possible. Philosophy becomes fruitful when none of these ways of encountering the world is declared dispensable before its place has been explained.

Key quotation

> *"Consciousness" is an ambiguous term, referring to many different phenomena.*

David Chalmers, "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," §2. Original English text on the author's website.

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Tags

Materialism, physicalism, idealism, panpsychism, consciousness, reality, ontology, epistemology, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, subjective experience, perception, phenomenal consciousness, hard problem of consciousness, combination problem, reductionism, monism, dualism, neutral monism, Berkeley, Kant, Descartes, Chalmers, Galen Strawson, early modern philosophy, scientific explanation, limits of knowledge, interpretation, ethics, critical thinking.

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