Philosophy's Phantom Pain: On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Cartesian Legacy

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Article

Philosophy's Phantom Pain: On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Cartesian Legacy

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Abstract

This essay argues that the classic mind-body problem is a pseudo-problem resulting from an outdated substance-based ontology. Instead of searching for a causal bridge between two separate entities (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*), a dissolution of the problem is proposed through a paradigm shift towards a processual, dynamic perspective. Based on a synthesis of the free energy principle (Friston), synergetics (Haken), spatio-temporal brain dynamics (Northoff), and 4E cognitive science (Gallagher), a unified model of the brain-mind system is developed. In this model, "body" and "mind" appear not as substances but as two inseparable perspectives—the physical score and the phenomenal performance—on a single, self-organizing process. A mechanism of downward causation is postulated, in which meaning and values function as the highest-level order parameter, shaping neural dynamics by modulating precision weighting. The philosophical consequence is an absolution from a chronic ailment of metaphysics, which is revealed to be the phantom pain of an amputated ontological assumption.

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Public Significance Statement

For centuries, Western thought has been haunted by the mind-body problem: the seemingly unbridgeable gap between our inner, conscious experience and our physical, biological existence. This is not merely an abstract academic debate; it shapes our fundamental understanding of selfhood, consciousness, and has profound implications for how we approach medicine and mental health, often treating the mind and body as separate domains.

This essay argues that the mind-body problem is a "phantom pain"—a persistent ache resulting from a self-inflicted conceptual amputation dating back to Descartes and earlier philosophical traditions. Instead of attempting to build another bridge across the divide, the article proposes to dissolve the problem altogether by shifting from an outdated ontology of static "substances" to a more dynamic and integrated ontology of "processes." By weaving together insights from cutting-edge neurophilosophy (such as the predictive brain theory), phenomenology, and psychology, the essay reframes "mind" and "body" not as two interacting things, but as two perspectives on a single, unified process: a living organism's continuous, embodied engagement with the world.

By moving beyond this false dichotomy, the essay offers a more holistic and scientifically grounded understanding of what it means to be human. This perspective has significant implications, suggesting that mental suffering can be understood as a disruption of the entire living system, not just a "chemical imbalance" or a "thinking error." It provides a coherent framework for making sense of consciousness and selfhood in an increasingly fragmented world, ultimately arguing that the soul is not a ghost in the machine, but perhaps the most beautiful rumor the body spreads about itself.

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Introduction

The history of philosophy is often a history of inheritance, and not every heirloom adorns the house of the present. We carry with us an entire household of venerable concepts that were once considered bold acts of liberation, only to reveal themselves, after a few centuries, as antique but rather cumbersome pieces of furniture. Subsequent generations constantly stub their toes on them, never quite knowing whether to restore them, put them in a museum, or discreetly dispose of them. One such magnificent heirloom was bequeathed to us by the undoubtedly astute Mr. Descartes, with his famously sharp incision between the world of thought (*res cogitans*) and that of extended things (*res extensa*). It was an operation on the open heart of reality, one that left a clean, but also a deep, scar.

This division of the world was perhaps an unavoidable defense mechanism, a kind of intellectual armistice to secure an autonomous space for fleeting thought, safe from the grasp of the all-too-confident mechanical sciences. But the price for this security was high: we burdened ourselves with a stubborn philosophical ghost, the so-called mind-body problem. Ever since, it has haunted the halls of academia, where we rack our brains over how the ghost got into the machine—a question with the charm of a reverse exorcism. How, one asks with scholarly concern, can the incorporeal specter of "mind" control the biochemical hardware of the "body"? And conversely, how can a blow to the machine's shin lead to an undeniable pain in the specter? This question, posed with the acumen of a detective trying to solve an impossible case, has produced more scholarly convolutedness than viable answers, cementing a deep trench between the supposedly private inner world of feeling and the objectively measurable outer world of bodies.

Given the tireless but ultimately fruitless attempts to build ever new and ever bolder bridges across this trench, one begins to suspect that we are dealing with one of those problems that are not so much solved as retired. A pseudo-problem, then; a phantom pain resulting from an amputation we performed on ourselves. And perhaps it is unfair to name Mr. Descartes as the sole perpetrator; he only stood, as is so often the case in philosophy, on the shoulders of his predecessors, wielding the scalpel with particular determination. The trail of evidence runs deeper. Already in ancient skepticism, the suspicion was fermenting that the act of consciousness itself divides the world in two: a subject that perceives and an object that is perceived. What Franz Brentano later termed the "intentionality" of thought—its constant directedness toward something—is essentially the description of this original split, which Karl Jaspers would eventually label crisply as the "subject-object split." Perhaps the roots lie even with the Presocratics, when Heraclitus's flowing truth (aletheia) as a "shining unconcealment" had to yield to the Platonic ideal of a fixed idea. At the latest with Aristotle's logic, which recognized only "true" and "false" statements and categorically excluded a third (tertium non datur), the ground was prepared for a way of thinking that prefers to dissect the world into neat, static, and separate units. It is the bookkeeper's mentality of philosophy, which demands a separate, clearly demarcated account for everything, and then wonders why there is no organic connection between the accounts, only the sterile emptiness of the ledgers.

Perhaps, then, the solution lies not in chasing the old ghost with ever-newer theoretical ghost-hunting equipment, but in gently retiring the very concepts that summoned it in the first place. This essay, therefore, would like to take a step to the side and change the perspective. We are abandoning the ambition of the cartographer who maps separate continents of 'body' and 'soul,' only to be stumped by the question of how to cross the sea between them. Instead, we propose the more modest gaze of the meteorologist, for whom there are not two worlds, but only a single, indivisible, and constantly changing weather pattern. The mind, then, would not be the invisible inhabitant in the house of the body, but the ever-current weather report on the shared, indissoluble atmospheric conditions of inside and outside. It reports high-pressure systems of joy and low-pressure troughs of melancholy, without ever claiming that the weather is something other than the atmosphere itself.

Such a change in the intellectual climate has its precedents. Modernity has already taught us to no longer fear fate as the capricious whim of an external goddess—the unpredictable Fortuna—but to understand it as contingency: as the principal, built-in openness of worldly processes themselves.

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Modern life is the permanent attempt to interpret this unforeseeable weather pattern so as not to get completely soaked. We have become artists of compensation who, not only in life but also in thought, constantly try to maintain balance on shifting ground—and philosophy itself becomes the most artful compensation for the very unity it once abandoned. Or, as thinkers of the "predictive brain" like Karl Friston would put it today with the cool elegance of a formula: it is a matter of minimizing one's own "free energy"—or, more prosaically, surprise. The great question is therefore no longer how the soul negotiates with silent matter, but how the brain, this tireless probability calculator, learns to read the world in a way that keeps it in sync.

It is a departure from the drama of grand interaction toward the everyday practice of synchronization. Philosophy relinquishes its role as a priestess mediating between two gods and becomes a more modest interpreter, trying to make the whispers of one process intelligible to the other. Perhaps the most stubborn of all philosophical ghosts is, in the end, just a flash of heat lightning on the horizon. You don't hunt it; you learn to read it. And sometimes the best reading is the insight that there is nothing to read at all.

The Brain as a Restless Weather Service: On the Art of Predicting the World

To finally put the old ghost out of business, one must inspect the house it supposedly haunts more closely. The image of the brain as a kind of passive telephone exchange, patiently waiting for incoming calls from the world to then forward them to the "consciousness" department, is itself a relic of a mechanistic age. Modern neuroscience, a notorious disturber of old certainties, paints a decidedly more restless picture: the brain is never silent. Even when we are dozing in an armchair, thinking of nothing in particular, it consumes the lion's share of its energy on a ceaseless, highly complex monologue, an inner murmuring that never ceases. It is not a blank canvas awaiting the brushstrokes of experience, but a canvas already crisscrossed with countless, overlapping patterns and rhythms, a dynamic painting that paints itself. The world does not paint on a blank slate; it merely adds a few new accents to this background noise, shifting the overall picture first in one direction, then in another.

Some researchers, such as Georg Northoff, suggest that we should understand this internal background noise not as interference, but as the actual main melody. The brain, so the idea goes, has its own deeply ingrained sense of time, an internal score of fast and slow rhythms. The sensory areas, busy with the fleeting present, tick at a rapid pace; those networks, however, that are concerned with our self-image and long-term plans—who we were, who we want to be—oscillate at a much more leisurely tempo. The great art of the mind now consists in harmonizing this internal score with the external world, a delicate diplomatic mission between one's own rhythms and the beat of things. The "world-brain problem," as it is called, supersedes the old mind-body problem: it is no longer about the impossible connection of two substances, but about the daily, albeit demanding, synchronization of two dynamic processes. From this perspective, psychological suffering would primarily be a rhythm disorder: a permanent jet lag in one's own existence, where the internal clock stubbornly shows a different time than the world outside.

This drive for synchronization serves, if one follows thinkers like Karl Friston, a fundamental purpose: the avoidance of surprise. The brain is, if you will, a paranoid prophet, a tireless futurist whose prime directive is: "Whatever happens, don't get caught unprepared." Surprises are not just unpleasant; they are also metabolically costly and potentially dangerous. So the brain does what any good bookmaker would do: it creates an internal model of the world and constantly places bets on what will happen next. If the prediction holds, all is well. If reality deviates from the forecast, a "prediction error" occurs, and the system comes under stress because its map of the world is suddenly wrong. To end this state, there are two options: either you adapt your model to reality—which we commonly call "learning"—or, a shortcut that humans have always preferred, you try to bend reality to fit your model. This we then call, somewhat euphemistically, "acting." The "self," in this reading, is not a captain on the bridge, but the tireless, self-organizing process that keeps this

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prediction machine running, constantly mediating between adjusting the map and redesigning the landscape.

The quality of our experience, so another clue suggests, depends crucially on the operating state of this machine. Researchers like Robin Carhart-Harris speak of mental "entropy," a measure of the system's disorder or flexibility. States of low entropy, such as those found in depression, resemble a frozen, wintery landscape: thoughts circle in the same, worn-out paths; everything is rigid, gray, and painfully predictable. At the other end of the scale are states of high entropy, such as those induced by psychedelic substances: here, the mind is like a raging spring river overflowing its banks. Everything is in flux, new connections are formed, but nothing is stable; the world becomes a kaleidoscope without a firm hold. Healthy, waking consciousness, it is presumed, resides on the narrow coastal strip between these two seas of order and chaos, at a point that physicists call "criticality." It is the state of maximum adaptability, the dance on the edge of chaos that allows for both stability and creativity—a precarious equilibrium that must be won anew each moment.

What emerges from these different, yet complementary, perspectives? The brain appears as a physical stage (Northoff) on which an infinite play is performed, whose script is the minimization of surprise (Friston), and whose emotional coloring depends on the particular staging between order and chaos (Carhart-Harris). The "body" is this dynamic stage with its own internal score; the "soul" is the play performed upon it—an endless dress rehearsal for the encounter with the world, in which the script is constantly being rewritten. A ghost is no longer needed for this performance; it may have had its place in the old haunted castle, but in this modern theater, it only disrupts the rehearsals.

The Fleeting Self: On the Attempt to Grasp Oneself in the Flow

The disenchantment of the brain as the control center of a disembodied spirit is only the first step. The second, perhaps even more delicate, is to take a closer look at the supposed inhabitant of this house: the "self." The notion of a fixed, unchanging core of selfhood, a kind of commander-in-chief soul residing in the head and pulling the strings from there, is possibly the most stubborn of all philosophical heirlooms. It is a comforting idea, to be sure, for it promises continuity in a fleeting world and a firm anchor in the sea of change. But it hardly stands up to closer, less wishful, scrutiny. For where exactly is this self to be found? Who or what remains when one strips away all transient qualities, memories, and sensations? Usually, just a void that we hastily fill with a new term.

Modern approaches, such as those of Shaun Gallagher, therefore suggest that we should not search for the self as a thing, but understand it as a pattern—a dynamic, self-organizing pattern that extends far beyond the confines of the skull. The self, accordingly, is not an isolated point but a wide-ranging network of relationships. It is embodied, for without the body—with its "gut feelings," its posture of confidence or dejection, its possibilities for action—there would be no sense of self. It is embedded in a culture, a language, and an environment that shape us and provide us with the very tools for our thinking. It is enacted, for our self is constituted in the constant adventure of active exchange with the world, a kind of flight forward in which a path is created only by walking it. And finally, it is extended, for our mind does not end at our skin. It outsources itself into notebooks, into the architecture of our cities, and above all, into our smartphones, these external memory prostheses where we store what once was considered the soul: our memories, friendships, and plans. The self, then, is not a solid core but rather a vortex in the river of life, an eddy that maintains its shape only through constant interaction with the current and disappears as soon as the river comes to rest.

This insight is by no means new; it is a kind of rediscovery of common sense that philosophy seems to have lost on its path to abstraction. Phenomenology has always insisted that the separation of mind and body is a subsequent, artificial construction, an act of intellectual violence against lived experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty spoke of the lived body (le corps propre), which is not an object among others that we possess, but the primary site of our being-in-the-world, the zero point from which the world makes any sense to us at all. We do not look out from the body as if through a window; we are this body that feels, perceives, and acts, all in one indivisible, pre-reflective act. Before we think "I see a tree," our body has already grasped the tree as a possibility for climbing or

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as an obstacle. Hermann Schmitz took this idea to its extreme by distinguishing the felt, indivisible Leib from the measured, objective Körper. For him, feelings are not private states in an internal container but atmospheres that corporeally seize us. Fear is not "in me"; it is a palpable tightness in the space that surrounds me. Cheerfulness is not an inner emotion but an expanse that opens up before me.

If one follows this path, many psychological disorders also reveal themselves not as defects of an isolated psyche, but as disturbances of this corporeal being-in-the-world. They are, as Thomas Fuchs describes, either a form of "disembodiment," in which the connection to the world and one's own body is severed and one's limbs appear as foreign, mechanical appendages, or a form of "hyper-embodiment," in which the body becomes an alien object to be suspiciously observed, monitored, and controlled, as the hypochondriac does. Here, dualism is no longer a philosophical subtlety but lived, daily suffering, the daily experience of alienation from oneself.

While phenomenology describes the exile of the mind from the body, other thinkers assail the fortress of the self with the cooler tools of logic and neurophilosophy. The result is strikingly similar; only the diagnosis sounds more technical. Analytic philosophers, who otherwise have little in common with phenomenology, arrive at astonishingly similar conclusions. Thomas Metzinger declares the self to be an elegant illusion, a self-model generated by the brain that is so perfect and transparent that we do not recognize it as a model—much like a perfect user interface that makes us forget we are interacting only with symbols and not with the hardware itself. Daniel Dennett calls it a "narrative center of gravity"—a useful fiction created by the stories we tell about ourselves. The self is the protagonist in a novel that we ourselves write and of which we are also the readers; a character who gains contour over the chapters but has no existence outside the narrative.

In the end, it comes down to a simple but consequential diet: philosophy gives up the heavy fare of substance and contents itself with the lighter but more nutritious study of process. The "I" is not an unmoved mover but the name we give to the ceaseless process of self-organization. It is the attempt to maintain one's integrity in a world of constant change. The question, then, is not how a disembodied self interacts with a physical brain. The question is how the process we call "brain" organizes itself in such a way that the process we call "self" emerges. It is the dissolution of the problem into a new perspective: the brain in a vat, that old horror story of philosophers, is an impossibility. The brain is always already out in the world because its predictions relate to the sensory consequences of actions. Without a body that acts, there would be nothing to predict. The mind is not the prisoner of the body, but its accomplice in the infinite adventure of being in the world. The body is not the prison, but the getaway car.

The Siamese Twins of the Soul: Why Feeling Thinks and Thinking Feels

Philosophy has not only dissected the human being into body and soul; it has also wielded the scalpel within the supposed soul itself, making another, hardly less consequential, separation: that between cool, sublime reason and unpredictable, base emotion. Reason, according to the doctrine passed down from Plato to Kant, is the noble charioteer who must rein in the wild horses of passion—an image particularly popular with those who have never tried to quell a fit of rage with sheer willpower. It was considered the master of the house, with affect as the uncivilized troublemaker in the basement, to be kept under lock and key lest it damage the furniture. This dichotomy, this internal apartheid, is the little sister of the mind-body problem, born of the same spirit of separation. Its dissolution may provide us with the best blueprint for finally retiring its older brother.

For what modern psychology and everyday experience teach us is the simple insight that this separation is a fiction—a useful one, perhaps, for Sunday sermons, but unfit for understanding real life. Feeling and thinking are not warring powers but Siamese twins, sharing a common bloodstream and unable to survive without each other. Luc Ciompi spoke of an "affect logic," meaning that our feelings are not the enemies of logic but its secret organizers, its invisible directors. Affects are not so much the glue as the gardeners of our mental world: they decide what is allowed to grow in the flowerbed of attention and what is plucked as a weed. In the landscape of fear, catastrophic scenarios

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grow all by themselves, appearing more plausible than any reassuring statistic; in the landscape of joy, optimistic plans sprout, and risks seem manageable. Even the most abstract mathematical problem is driven by an emotional tension—the torment of not understanding—and finds its resolution in the pleasurable release of insight, that small "Eureka!" happiness.

This inseparable entanglement becomes even clearer when one asks about the fuel for the whole system. Klaus Grawe put it in a simple but compelling formula: our entire psychic system strives for "consistency," for a state of internal coherence, for a fragile peace between our various inner parts. This striving is driven by a few fundamental "primal hungers" of the soul, as basic as the hunger for bread: the need for attachment, for orientation and control, for self-esteem enhancement, and for pleasure gain. When these basic needs are chronically violated, inconsistency arises—an aversive state we feel as a diffuse malaise, as anxiety, or as emptiness. This feeling is not an irrational fog that clouds the clear view of reason. On the contrary, it is a highly precise cognitive signal, a kind of internal breaking news from the front lines of our existence. It reports a discrepancy between what we need and what we have. Feeling is not the enemy of cognition, but its impatient, yet usually accurate, messenger.

When we bring these two insights together with the model of the predictive brain, the puzzle falls elegantly into place. Grawe's basic needs are nothing other than the deepest, evolutionarily ingrained predictions of our system, the axioms of our existence: "It is expected that the world will be a place where I am securely attached, can orient myself, and am valued." A violation of these needs—the betrayal of a friend, the loss of a job—creates a massive, high-level prediction error, an information-theoretic tsunami, a state of high "free energy," as Friston would call it. And what is the phenomenological side, the experienced correlate of this alarm signal? It is negative affect: fear, grief, pain. The feeling is the felt prediction error. Its function is to focus attention, shut down all other programs, and turn up the "volume" of the error signal so high that the system is forced either to reconsider its world model ("Perhaps the world is not as safe as I thought") or to intervene through action to bring the world back into line with its own basic assumptions.

So, if feeling and thinking, two phenomenologically so different experiences, turn out to be inseparable aspects of a single information-processing process, why do we hesitate to draw the same conclusion for body and soul? If we have long since exposed the surgery to separate the Siamese twins of "feeling" and "reason" as malpractice, why do we defend, with the zeal of a surgeon unwilling to admit his mistake, the correctness of the even cruder operation on the twin pair of "body" and "soul"? The alleged chasm between neural process and conscious experience is perhaps no wider than that between a cognitive appraisal and an affect. They are two sides of the same coin, two languages describing the same state of affairs: one in the terminology of ion channels and action potentials, the other in the poetry of joy, suffering, and insight. The dissolution of the one dualism is the definitive proof for the dissolution of the other. Whoever gives back to feeling its right to think and to thinking its right to feel simply has no more use for ghosts to mediate between worlds.

Conclusions

At the end of a long journey that has led us in a zigzag through the fashionable landscapes of neurophilosophy, the venerable gardens of phenomenology, and the clinical rooms of psychology, what remains is less a great discovery than a modest sense of relief. Above all, the insight that we were dealing with a ghost we created ourselves, by turning a word—"soul"—into a thing. The mind-body problem is not a riddle that lies in the world, but a knot in our language, a grammatical tripwire that we mistake for an ontological abyss. It is a cramp in our conceptual framework that loosens as soon as we stop dissecting the world into substances and learn instead to think in processes. The departure from an ontology of things in favor of an ontology of processes is the decisive, albeit unfamiliar, step.

There are no two entities, "body" and "soul," whose mysterious interaction we would have to explain, just as there are no two things, 'weather' and 'atmosphere,' whose mysterious connection we would have to fathom. There is only a single, indivisible, self-organizing process that we call "life"

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or "existence." The terms we use are merely different perspectives on this one process, different tools from our philosophical toolbox for speaking about it.

"Body" is the name we give this process when we observe it from the outside, with the instruments of science, with the detached gaze of the observer. It is the third-person perspective. Here we speak of the dynamic stage of the brain with its rhythms, of neural firing rates, of the biochemistry of the body acting in the world. It is the view of the meteorologist who collects atmospheric data, the measurable facts of air pressure and wind speed.

"Soul" is the name we give the same process when we experience it from the inside, as a participant, not a spectator. It is the first-person perspective. Here we speak of the performance taking place on the stage: of the experienced quality of red, of the bitterness of grief, of the narrative construction of our self, and of the search for meaning. It is the lived weather report, the feeling of rain on the skin, the premonition of an approaching storm.

The problem was never how the weather interacts with the atmosphere. The problem was the assumption that they were two different things. The distinction is not real but conceptual. It is useful, just as the distinction between a musical score and the performed music is useful. But no one would seriously ask how the notes on the paper causally affect the vibrations of the violin string. The score does not cause the music; it is the silent announcement of the sounding event. Whoever mistakes the notes for the sound has understood neither.

The phantom pain ceases when we stop searching for the amputated limb and instead acknowledge that we have always been an indivisible, whole body. Philosophy then no longer has to act as a bridge-builder between two separate shores. It can retreat to what it perhaps always was: the artful compensation for a lost unity, the art of speaking about the event of being-in-the-world—not to explain it, but to make life in its undivided form more bearable.

In the end, man is perhaps neither angel nor beast, neither pure spirit nor mere machine. He is an artist of compensation, who balances the deficiency of his finitude and the imposition of contingency with the infinite interpretation of himself. And the soul? It is perhaps just the most stubborn and beautiful rumor that the body spreads about itself.

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