Where Explanation Stops

What Physicalism and Idealism Actually Disagree About

Project: Return to Consciousness
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Abstract

Contemporary debates between physicalism and idealism often generate more heat than light—critics charge idealism with denying science while defenders of physicalism insist emergence handles everything. This essay argues that the core disagreement is not about mechanisms, complexity, or scientific legitimacy, but about something more fundamental: **where explanation is allowed to stop**. Every explanatory framework must terminate somewhere; these terminal points are brute facts. Emergentist physicalism places its brute fact at the existence of organization-enabling laws and structures. Analytic idealism places its brute fact at the existence of mind and its capacity to partition itself, treating organization as intrinsic to the primitive rather than as an emergent anomaly. Both frameworks accept the same science; they differ on what grounds the reality that science describes. Neither placement is cost-free, and the essay names each framework's burdens plainly. This essay is diagnostic, not advocative — it clarifies where explanation stops but does not adjudicate which stopping point is more defensible. Naming where explanations stop is not metaphysical excess; it is philosophical responsibility.

Keywords: brute facts · explanatory terminus · emergentism · analytic idealism · ontological comparison · physicalism · philosophy of science · emergence

I. The Hidden Question

Contemporary debates between physicalism and idealism often generate more heat than light. Critics of idealism charge it with denying science; defenders of physicalism insist that emergence handles everything. Both sides frequently talk past each other.

This essay argues that the core disagreement is not about mechanisms, complexity, or scientific legitimacy. It is about something more fundamental: **where explanation is allowed to stop**.

Every explanatory framework must terminate somewhere. At some point, further "why" questions receive the answer: "That's just how things are." These terminal points are **brute facts**—

the primitives that a framework accepts without further grounding.

"Brute fact" here is **framework-relative**, not absolute. The question is not whether a framework has brute facts (all do), but **where it places them** — and what that placement costs.

This distinction is rarely stated clearly. Making it explicit identifies what is actually at stake between physicalism and idealism.

II. What Science Explains

Science explains *how* things work:

- How quantum fields give rise to particles and forces
- How embryos develop into complex organisms
- How neural activity correlates with mental states
- How evolutionary pressures shape biological form
- How feedback loops and attractors generate stable patterns
- How bioelectric signals coordinate cellular behavior

These explanations are powerful, predictive, and continually refined. They are also **ontologically neutral** — not in the sense that science floats free of all constraints, but in the sense of **underdetermination**: the same mechanistic account is compatible with physicalism, idealism, panpsychism, or neutral monism. A developmental biologist describing morphogen gradients is doing science, not metaphysics.

Science describes *how reality behaves*. It does not, by itself, settle *what reality fundamentally is*. When a scientist says "we now understand how X works," this is sometimes heard as "we now know that X is nothing but physical processes." But the first claim is scientific; the second is metaphysical.

III. Emergentism as Representative Physicalist Position

Physicalism takes many forms — functionalism, identity theory, illusionism, various grades of emergence. This essay analyzes **emergentism** as a representative package: the view that complex organization develops from simpler components through non-linear dynamics, feedback, and systemic interaction. It is chosen not because all physicalists are emergentists, but because emergentism makes the strongest case for how organization arises within a physicalist framework, and thus provides the most charitable target for comparison.

Emergentism, as a methodological framework, successfully explains *how* organization develops and stabilizes:

- **Non-linear dynamics:** Small changes can produce large effects; systems exhibit sensitive dependence and bifurcation.
- **Feedback loops:** Outputs influence inputs, enabling self-regulation and adaptive behavior.
- **Attractors:** Systems converge toward stable states defined over state-space, not observable at the micro-level.
- **Control architectures:** Goal-directed behavior emerges through error-correction and homeostatic mechanisms.
- **Evolutionary shaping:** Selection pressures tune these dynamics over deep time.

This is genuine explanatory progress. Analytic idealism does not contest any of it. The disagreement lies elsewhere.

IV. Where Emergentism Stops

Emergentism explains how organization develops and stabilizes. But it does not explain **why reality is the kind of thing that supports such organization**.

Consider: emergentist explanations presuppose that the universe contains:

- Laws that permit non-linear dynamics
- Initial conditions that allow complex organization to develop
- A mathematical structure that makes feedback, attractors, and control architectures possible
- Regularities stable enough to support evolutionary shaping over billions of years

These are not explained by emergentism. They are **presupposed** by it.

When asked "Why does reality have these organization-enabling features?", emergentism must answer: "That's just how things are." The existence of laws, regularities, and organization-friendly initial conditions is treated as a **brute fact**.

This stopping point has a structural parallel in fundamental physics. Cosmological explanation eventually confronts the fact that the laws and constants of nature fall within ranges that permit complex, stable structures—the "fine-tuning" observation. No dynamics *within* the universe explain why those laws have this form rather than another. In both cases, the issue is not mechanism but *precondition*.

Every explanatory framework must stop somewhere. Emergentism stops here: it presupposes an **organization-fertile ontology**—a reality whose fundamental character already has the capacity to generate complex, stable, self-organizing structures. This fertility is not explained by emergentism; it is the unexplained condition that makes emergentist explanations possible.

The question is whether this is the right place to stop—or whether there are alternatives.

V. Where Analytic Idealism Stops

Analytic idealism — developed most systematically by Bernardo Kastrup and examined in detail in *Return to Consciousness* — places its brute fact differently.

Under analytic idealism, the fundamental nature of reality is **mental** — experiential, intentional, organized. "Mental" here does not mean *your* individual mind or *my* individual mind. It refers to a transpersonal consciousness of which individual human minds are dissociated segments — localized expressions of a unified mentation that is itself the ontological ground. Physical structures are the **extrinsic appearance** of this underlying mental reality, not the ground floor of it.

On this view, organization is not an emergent anomaly that requires special explanation. It is **intrinsic to the nature of mind itself**.

Mental processes are inherently:

- **Goal-directed:** Intentions, purposes, and aims are characteristic of mental activity.
- **Self-organizing:** Thoughts cohere, narratives unfold, attention structures experience.

- **Error-sensitive:** We notice when things go wrong; correction is native to cognition.
- **Integrative:** Mental life binds disparate elements into unified wholes.

If reality is fundamentally mental, then the organization we observe in physics and biology is not surprising. It is what we would expect mind to look like "from the outside."

Analytic idealism's brute facts are: **reality is mental in nature**, and **consciousness partitions itself** — dissociation, the mechanism by which individual minds arise from universal mind, is taken as given rather than derived.

Just as emergentism takes the existence of laws and regularities as given, analytic idealism takes the existence of mind and dissociation as given.

Analytic idealism faces its own explanatory burdens — but they must be stated precisely to avoid charging idealism with costs that physicalism silently shares.

The most common objection — the **public world constraint** — asks: if reality is mental, why does it present with rigid, impersonal, mathematically regular structure? But as *Return to Consciousness* argues, this objection rests on a hidden asymmetry. *Regularity itself is equally brute under both frameworks.* Physicalism cannot explain why the laws have the form they do, why the fine-structure constant has its value, or why reality is "organization-fertile" at all. Both frameworks take regularity as a given feature of their primitive; neither explains it. The intuition that mathematical precision is "natural for matter" but "surprising for mind" presupposes the physicalist ontology under examination — it assumes that non-experiential stuff is inherently orderly while experiential stuff is inherently chaotic, an assumption drawn from individual human psychology, not from anything we know about undissociated consciousness. Charging idealism with regularity while giving physicalism a pass is asymmetric skepticism at the level of explanatory demands.

Similarly, **intersubjective agreement** is sometimes presented as an idealism-specific debt. But under analytic idealism, dissociated minds are not separate entities requiring an external mechanism to synchronize — they are aspects of one reality that were never ontologically separated. Coordination is the *default condition*, because there is only one thing. What needs explaining is not how separate minds achieve agreement but how one reality produces the *appearance* of separation while maintaining consistency.

Idealism's **genuine** remaining burden is the **granularity problem**: why dissociation produces *this* specific configuration of individual minds rather than some other — why *these* partitions, with *these* boundaries. This is a real debt, connected to the details of dissociative structure, and it is differently located than emergentism's, not lighter. Contemporary analytic idealism treats physical regularities as stable invariants of mental processes and intersubjectivity as arising from the shared ground of universal consciousness. This is coherent, but the specific structure of the dissociative partitioning remains underdeveloped.

There is a structural mirror here. Physicalism starts from separate parts (particles, atoms, molecules, neurons, brains) and must explain how they produce the unified experience we actually have — the binding problem. Idealism starts from unity and must explain how it breaks into separate minds — the granularity problem. Each framework's natural strength on one side is its debt on the other.

The frameworks also differ on fragmentation *within* an individual mind — phenomena like DID, dissociative amnesia, and depersonalization, where a single person's experience splits into com-

partments with limited mutual access. Both frameworks recognize that this occurs and accept the same neural mechanisms. Both accept that functional compartmentalization within the brain correlates with dissociative fragmentation. They differ on what this *is*: physicalism treats the neural compartmentalization as producing the experiential split, idealism treats it as the extrinsic appearance of consciousness fragmenting — the same process that produces individual minds in the first place, now operating at a smaller scale.

The difference is in **what kind of primitive** each framework accepts.

VI. The Real Disagreement

We can now state the disagreement precisely:

Dimension	Emergentist Physicalism	Analytic Idealism
Accepts mechanistic science	Yes	Yes
Accepts emergence, feedback, attractors	Yes	Yes
Brute fact	Organization-enabling laws and structures exist	Reality is mental in nature; consciousness partitions itself
Organization is…	An emergent feature requiring explanation	Intrinsic to mind, not anomalous

The disagreement is metaphysical, not scientific. It cannot be settled by discovering more mechanisms. The question is what those mechanisms ultimately rest upon.

VII. Misreadings and Limits

This distinction prevents several common errors:

"Analytic idealism denies science." False. Analytic idealism accepts mechanistic explanation fully. A biologist who is an analytic idealist gives the same account of embryogenesis as one who is a physicalist. The science is identical; the metaphysical interpretation differs.

"Emergentism solves the problem." Emergentism explains *how* organization develops given organization-enabling laws. It does not explain *why* reality has such laws. This is where emergentism places its brute fact—not a failure, but a stopping point.

"Physicalism is more parsimonious." Parsimony depends on what you count as primitive. Physicalism must explain how mentality arises from non-mental primitives; analytic idealism must explain how non-mentality appears from mental primitives. Neither is obviously simpler.

"This analysis proves idealism." It does not. Naming where each framework stops is diagnostic, not advocative. Asymmetric skepticism becomes harder when both sides' stopping points are visible — but visibility is not a verdict.

What this essay does not establish: That idealism is correct. That physicalism fails. That one framework is more scientific. That the question can be settled. The value is clarity, not resolution.

VIII. Implications for the Project

This analysis connects to several themes in the broader *Return to Consciousness* project:

- **Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality (mmn):** The claim that science is metaphysically neutral is correct at the level of mechanism. But the choice of where to place brute facts is not neutral—and this choice is often made implicitly, without examination.
- **Asymmetric Methodological Restraint (amr):** If the disagreement is about grounding rather than mechanism, then dismissing analytic idealism as "unscientific" is inappropriate. Both frameworks accept the same science; they differ on interpretation.
- **Biological Competency (bio):** The constraint established in that essay—that biological explanation requires control-level primitives—is accepted by both physicalism and idealism. They differ on what grounds the reality in which such control architectures are possible.
- **First-Principles Assessment (fpa):** Takes the brute-fact distinction established here and asks which placements are more coherent — conducting a comparative assessment with explicit criteria.

The question of where explanation stops is not peripheral to this project. It is central. Many apparent disagreements dissolve once it is recognized that the debate is about primitives, not mechanisms.

IX. Conclusion

Every explanatory framework stops somewhere. The question is where.

Emergentist physicalism stops at organization-enabling laws and structures. Analytic idealism stops at the existence of mind and its capacity to partition itself. Both accept the same science; they differ on what grounds it.

Neither placement is cost-free. Physicalism must explain how experience arises from non-experiential primitives. Idealism must explain why a unified consciousness fragments into this specific configuration of minds — the granularity problem. Both must accept regularity as a brute feature of their primitive; neither explains why reality exhibits lawlike structure. Each side's stopping points should be stated as plainly as the other's.

This essay does not answer which brute fact is more fundamental. It clarifies what the question is and makes each framework's stopping points explicit.

Appendix A: Ontological Frameworks and Their Brute Facts

Different ontological frameworks locate their explanatory stopping points differently:

Framework	Where Explanation Stops
Physicalism (Emergentist)	Laws of physics permit organization
Panpsychism	Fundamental entities possess experiential aspects
Neutral Monism	A neutral substrate underlies both mind and matter
Dual-Aspect Theory	A single underlying reality has inseparable physical and experiential aspects
Analytic Idealism	Mind-like organization is ontologically primitive

The frameworks differ not on mechanism but on what kind of primitive reality makes mechanism possible.

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Return to Consciousness (rtc) — The core framework

Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality (mmn) — Why neutrality is impossible

Asymmetric Methodological Restraint (amr) — Exposing selective skepticism

Biological Competency (bio) — Constraint analysis that surfaces this issue in biology

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