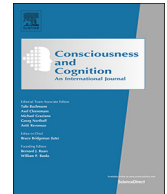




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A free will needs a free mind: Belief in substance dualism and reductive physicalism differentially predict belief in free will and determinism

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we show that lay people's beliefs about how minds relate to bodies are more complex than past research suggests, and that treating them as a multidimensional construct helps explain inconclusive findings from the literature regarding their relation to beliefs about whether humans possess a free will. In two studies, we found that items previously used to assess a unidimensional belief in how minds relate to bodies indeed capture two distinguishable constructs (belief in substance dualism and reductive physicalism) that differently predict belief in free will and two types of determinism (Studies 1 and 2). Additionally, we found that two fundamental personality traits pertaining to people's preference for experiential versus rational information processing predict those metaphysical beliefs that were theorized to be based on subjective phenomenological experience and rational deliberation, respectively (Study 2). In sum, beliefs about mind-body relations are a multidimensional construct with unique predictive abilities.

1. Introduction

Questions about the metaphysical properties of reality have long fascinated students and scholars of many disciplines—from philosophers to theologians to hobby mycologists. What constitutes true knowledge? Does everything that exists serve a purpose? Is there a life after death, and is it really true that people always get what they deserve?

Over the past few decades, more and more psychologists and experimental philosophers have become interested in how lay persons think about these “big questions,” facilitating empirical investigations into, for example, people's conception of whether good and evil are real agentic forces in the world (Bastian et al., 2015), their beliefs about intentionality and consciousness (Knobe & Prinz, 2008), or their theories about psychological phenomena such as the malleability of personality traits (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Molden & Dweck, 2006) or the availability of self-control resources (Job, Dweck, & Walton, 2010). Based on the idea of people as lay scientists who test hypotheses through observation of the world, psychologists believe that people develop complex belief systems about how the world operates, which are then used to categorize and interpret novel information (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997).

These belief systems not only revolve around tangible issues with real-life implications. In fact, many of them include ontological claims—views on what constitutes reality or on how things really *are*. Studying such metaphysical beliefs can help researchers understand how people make sense of the world around them, rationalize their own phenomenological experience, or deal with the

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prospect of their inevitable death. It can further our understanding of the general processes behind belief formation and help identify certain common cognitive processes or biases that may be responsible for the formation of seemingly unrelated beliefs about metaphysical or philosophical issues. As a result, over the last years, there has been extensive research on people's beliefs in these domains (Zedelius, Müller, & Schooler, 2017).

As this research shows, lay beliefs are oftentimes more complex than they appear on the surface. To understand them, their antecedents, consequences, and relationships with other belief systems, scientists need to assess them accurately. It is especially crucial to capture the complexity of lay people's beliefs accordingly, in that people typically do not think about metaphysical questions like trained philosophers do, but rather apply their own common-sense thinking to these issues (Wegner & Petty, 1998).

In the present article, we are primarily interested in one specific metaphysical belief people hold, namely their belief about the relationship between mind and body. Although past research has often considered this belief a unidimensional construct (e.g., Forstmann, Burgmer, & Mussweiler, 2012; Hook & Farah, 2013), in the present research, we argue in favor of treating it as a multidimensional construct. We further contend that such a differentiation helps explain inconsistent findings from the literature on metaphysical beliefs, specifically regarding the relationship between belief in mind-body dualism and free will beliefs—another construct that is now widely regarded as being represented by multiple unique dimensions, and that has long been argued to be closely tied to belief about how minds relate to bodies. Lastly, in line with past theorizing, we argue that certain subdimensions of both metaphysical beliefs are intimately linked to individual preferences for intuitive versus rational thinking styles, but that these thinking styles do not entirely explain the association between these constructs in question.

In the following, we will discuss both the philosophical and empirical literature on belief in mind-body dualism and free will, followed by a section about how and why these constructs should be related.

1.1. Mind-body dualism

1.1.1. Philosophical positions on mind-body relations

One philosophical concept that both scholars and lay people have tried to wrap their heads around for centuries is the relationship between mind and body, also referred to as the mind-body problem. The mind-body problem is a complex topic in the philosophy of mind, and involves both ontological questions about what mental and physical states are (e.g., whether they are one and the same, whether they are fundamentally distinct, or whether one is a subclass of the other) and questions about causal effects between the two (e.g., whether the mental causally effects the physical, the physical causally effects the mental, or both/none) (Robinson, 2017). Specifically, the debate often revolves around how the human mind (i.e., the self, consciousness, or intentionality) relates to the human body, with philosophers arguing for different kinds of *monist* or *dualist* views on this issue.

One fundamental issue in this debate is the question whether the mind can be considered entirely independent of the physical realm. As the first “modern” philosopher to discuss the problem in more detail, Descartes (1641/1984) argued in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* that minds are separate from bodies and not part of the physical realm. For Descartes, the mental (the *res cogitans*) and the physical (the *res extensa*) are two distinct kinds of substances that make up the world, adhere to different rules, and have vastly different properties. While the mental substance can think and is spatially and temporally unrestricted, the opposite applies to the physical substance: it is spatially and temporally finite and cannot think.

Descartes thus argued in favor of a view often referred to as *substance dualism*, that is, the idea that mental states are not made from (or merely the result of) physical “stuff,” but exist as an entirely independent substance that is fundamentally non-physical in nature, and that can even exist in the absence of the physical. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one can find *reductive physicalism*, the view that mental states are nothing more than physical states (or descriptions of physical states) and entirely reducible to this one substance (see, for example, Churchland (1981) for an extreme reductive physicalism referred to as *eliminative materialism*).

However, some views fall between those two extremes. Although they acknowledge that only a single physical substance exists, supporters of *property dualism* argue that this substance has both physical and mental *properties*. Unlike in reductive physicalism, philosophical positions related to property dualism (such as *strong emergentism* or *non-reductive physicalism*; Chalmers, 1996) consider the mind to not merely be a different description of certain physical states, but consider it to be more than the sum of its parts—a fully emergent property that is irreducible to its physical origins. However, in contrast to Cartesian substance dualism, these positions consider the mental property unable to exist in the absence of the physical substance out of which it emerges. In other words, this view holds that while the mind cannot be entirely reduced to its physical counterparts, it is not understood as a non-physical source of thought.

Regardless of whether mind and matter are conceptualized as distinct substances or different properties of the same substance, philosophers who endorse a dualist view on this matter differ with regard to their belief in the causal relation between both constructs. Some positions argue that mental states are nothing but an epiphenomenon (*epiphenomenalism*; Jackson, 1982), and that only physical states can causally affect mental states. Others argue that there is a bi-directional influence between the two kinds of substances/properties (*interactionism*; Popper & Eccles, 1977), or that there is no causal relation between the two at all (e.g., *parallelism*, Broad, 1925/2014).

In sum, philosophers have a variety of different takes on the mind-body problem, primarily differing with regard to whether they postulate the existence of one or two substances, one or multiple properties of a substance, as well as the causal interplay between the respective concepts. Yet, and more important to the current research, how precisely do lay people construe the relationship between mind and body and what effects does it have?

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