

Every time dualism is mentioned in clinical debate, a philosopher is thrown out of heaven

ABSTRACT

Scamvougeras and Castle argue that appeals to dualism are frequently deployed to dismiss psychological explanations in favour of framing functional neurological disorder (FND) as a “brain disorder.” Yet participants on all sides of this debate often conflate “dualism” with Cartesian substance dualism. Contemporary philosophy of mind, by contrast, accommodates multi-level, non-reductive accounts that are fully compatible with the brain as the organ of the mind. Positions such as property dualism and non-reductive physicalism demonstrate that recognising psychological mechanisms does not entail commitment to a non-physical substance, nor denial of the dependence of mental processes on brain function. A more pressing question, therefore, is why psychological explanations are resisted at all, given that scientific psychology, as opposed to folk psychology, does not necessarily equate the psychological with conscious will or personal control. We may be better off by ditching debates about dualism and focusing instead on the integration of neurobiological and psychological accounts within evidence-based models of FND, with each explanatory level evaluated on its merits.

KEYWORDS

Functional neurological disorder; philosophy; dualism; physicalism; neuropsychiatry

Scamvougeras and Castle ([in press](#)) argue that the frequent invocation of “dualism” in scientific debates surrounding functional neurological disorder (FND) is often a strategic attempt to reject psychological explanations rather than a principled attempt at understanding mechanisms.

They document how many authors cite “dualism” in their arguments, either implicitly or explicitly identified as Cartesian dualism, in their opposition to psychological causation and as a foil to apparently sophisticated and modern views of FND as a “brain disorder”. Cartesian dualism, also known as substance dualism, is the belief that mind and body are fundamentally different kinds of substance with the mind being non-material and potentially spiritual in nature, implying that mental events are independent of brain function. Scamvougeras and Castle rightly express surprise that railing against 17th Century Cartesian dualism has become a feature of modern debate, given it is roundly rejected by modern neuroscience and cognitive science.

However, it is worth briefly reviewing some mainstream positions on dualism in the philosophy of mind because many positions labelled dualist today are compatible with the idea that all mental functions depend on brain activity. Clarifying this helps prevent the mistaken

impression that recognising psychological causation requires a belief in a separate, non-physical substance, or presumably, in its weaker form, requires an untenable belief that the brain is simply irrelevant.

Importantly, there are types of contemporary dualism that are positioned as compatible with physicalism, the view that all mental functions fully supervene on brain function, such that no change in mental function occurs without a corresponding change in neurobiological function.

Property dualism is the view that there is only one kind of substance but it instantiates two kinds of properties—physical and mental (Yang, 2015). In other words, mental states always depend on the brain, but they cannot be fully explained by describing physical processes. Non-reductive physicalism, sometimes called “soft dualism”, holds that everything that exists is physical but maintains that mental states are higher-level properties that emerge from physical systems and cannot be fully explained or reduced to lower-level neurobiological accounts, even though they are wholly grounded in them (Wilson, 2010).

To give an analogy, no one believes that the economic system exists in anything except the physical world. Yet there are properties like “value” that conceivably won’t reduce to specific, reliable physical mechanisms because the property of “value” is instantiated in multiple ways, supervenes on multiple mechanisms, and is distributed across the system. Despite this, it would be hard to argue that “value” is not a central causal component in the economy. Property dualism and non-reductive physicalism argue that mental states may show a similar relationship to brain function.

If you believe that the brain has emergent properties that cannot be fully explained solely by reference to underlying mechanisms, it is quite possible you are a “dualist” in this contemporary sense. Indeed, several authors who have railed against dualism have also championed cognitive and predictive coding explanations for FND that could conceivably be dualist given that cognition and predictive coding are identified as being, at least in part, emergent properties of brain function (Friston & Kiebel, 2009; Miller et al., 2024).

As is common in debates in the philosophy of mind, there are many nuanced positions which I have not done justice to here, including those that disagree that property dualism is possible without substance dualism (Lycan, 2013). But it is important to highlight that attributions of “dualism” are not a slam-dunk critique of the validity of psychological mechanisms of FND.

It is notable that these mainstream philosophical positions are absent from both sides of this debate. Neither Scamvougeras and Castle, nor the authors they critically cite, conceive of dualism as anything other than Cartesian dualism. In contrast, you can be a property dualist, accept that the brain is the organ of the mind, and still value psychological mechanisms as valid components of any complete mechanist explanation of FND.

It is also worth taking a step back and reflecting for a moment what lies behind the attempt to rhetorically link psychological explanations with “bad dualism” because the rhetoric matters less than (if you’ll excuse the pun) the substance.

For many decades, and still in many places, the experience of people with FND is one of being misunderstood, sidelined, and subject to many damaging and detrimental myths that impede their access to effective care and support. FND researchers have done much excellent work in dispelling these myths—for example, marshalling evidence to show that FND is clearly distinct and distinguishable from feigning (Edwards et al., 2023) and that FND is not a diagnosis of exclusion (McLoughlin et al., 2025). However, studies have reported that patients with FND are at best wary, and sometimes outright reject, psychological explanations because they perceive them as implying willfulness, blame, and stigma (Foley et al., 2024).

It is quite possible that the psychological explanations they have encountered have implied willfulness, blame, and stigma. But the “psychology” in these “psychological explanations” is rarely scientific psychology but folk psychology—the everyday cultural practice of explaining and predicting behaviour that cites conscious decisions, willpower, and character as central to mental life. These folk psychological explanations have been widely identified as a source of stigma across medicine and particularly neuropsychiatry (Weiner, 1995). Scientific psychology, in contrast, understands that conscious agency is but a small part of mental function and that many processes and, consequently, many difficulties, are outside of direct personal control.

Convincing society, and frequently, healthcare professionals, that “psychological” doesn’t mean “can be solved just by trying harder” is an ongoing problem. But we owe it to both the public, patients and ourselves to accept that sophisticated, evidence-based models of function and dysfunction cut across multiple levels of explanation, and that sophisticated, evidence-based interventions, likely do the same.

Ultimately, invoking “dualism” as a rhetorical foil risks obscuring rather than clarifying the pressing issues at stake in debates about functional neurological disorder. Rejecting Cartesian substance dualism does not entail rejecting psychological mechanisms, nor does recognising psychological causation require positing a non-physical mind. Contemporary philosophy of mind makes ample room for multi-level, non-reductive explanations that are fully compatible with the brain as the organ of the mind. It is clearly more productive to move beyond caricatures of dualism and instead focus on how best to integrate neurobiological and psychological accounts into coherent, evidence-based models of FND, with each component judged on its own evidence base. The debate in this issue appears to be doing this exceptionally well, and we can look forward to continued progress as a result.

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