

Gerald Vision's *Re-Emergence: Locating Conscious Properties in a Material World*

Jim Blackmon

2012

Gerald Vision is making room for emergentism about mental properties, articulating it among the current competitors in philosophy of mind and advancing it as the best contender.

For Vision, emergence is a brute relation from physical properties to dependent non-identical mental properties which in turn bear causal relations to subsequent physical properties and typically to subsequent mental properties as well. The stipulated “bruteness” of this relation distinguishes it from reductionist views of the mental. Because the properties related are asserted to be of different types, Vision’s emergentism is a version of property dualism or dual aspect theory, rejecting any monism about properties and divorcing it from the emergentism about physical properties in the special sciences (chemical, geological, biological) that have long inspired standard emergentist accounts of the mental. And of course, the stated causal efficacy of mental properties clears it of any kind of epiphenomenalism. These three points—bruteness, property dualism, and a specific kind of causal efficacy—classify his view as a version of supervenience emergentism and establish it as a distinct view that manages to avoid some of the indeterminacy found in the classical versions of emergentism without creating a view that is emergentist in name only. Vision gives us an emergentism that permits deeper productive analysis, and for that reason alone, *Re-Emergence* should be read by anyone interested in current work on the arguments for and against emergentism. After outlining the book’s contents, this review will consider how successfully Vision manages these three points.

The book consists of two parts, the first of which describes and advances Vision’s emergentism in five chapters, the second of which seeks to undermine competing views in three chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 place Vision’s emergentism in its historical context, providing both a useful primer on classical and current kinds of emergentism and an analysis of his own view, one gracious enough to permit further scrutiny along a number lines. Chapters 3 and 4 confront a variety of problems and considerations involving supervenience, realization, the notion of coincident objects, and non-physical causation. Here the reader will find some provocative arguments involving statue/clay cases and downward causation, though as I will argue here, the statue/clay argument is problematic. In Chapter 5, Vision argues that some effects require non-physical conscious causes. Part Two seeks to undermine competitors to emergentism in order to show that emergentism wins out. Physicalism, representationalism, and varieties of physicalism and identity theory are found to fail in ways that emergentism does not, culminating in a victory cry for emergentism.

The book’s organization may not be best for presenting and advancing Vision’s thesis. If readers are looking, say, for Vision’s full argument that mental properties are not physical properties, they will have some searching and unpacking to do; the argument is distributed in parts over Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 8. But between the book’s two parts is a helpful Interlude, and his Epilogue packs more punch (against

anti-emergentist views) than one normally expects of epilogues. See especially pages 228-230 for an explicit challenge that appears to favorably reframe the debate over emergentism.

Regarding editing and readability, it should be said that while Vision is conscientious and clear in the body of his work about where more argumentation can be found, the index is weak. (Philosophical zombies, for example, are indexed at page 16 only, although Vision addresses them in some detail for some pages beginning on page 41.) An unfortunate oversight might confuse beginners; page 37's introduction of strong supervenience ends with a statement, MSS, which should end "and necessarily whatever has  $\beta$  has  $\alpha$ " instead of the converse.

We begin by considering the first point, bruteness. Although Vision often characterizes the bruteness of his emergence relation in terms of being inexplicable, Vision's bruteness is explicitly a metaphysical or ontological feature. He is not defending a merely epistemic claim about our inability to explain the relation between the mental and the physical; instead, our lacking an explanation results from, as he puts it, "the world's not containing one". [p. 52] At some point, explanation ends. And as Vision points out, this much doesn't appear to be so controversial once you consider the alternatives of circularity and infinite regress. (The critic may of course ask why explanation ends right here as opposed to "earlier" or "later".) Despite this absence of explanation, Vision considers this brute emergence relation to be one of realization or supervenience holding of non-identicals, each of these relations being relations of "constitution", but not of composition, the latter of which Vision takes to be mereological. Realization and supervenience are thus more specifically forms of non-mereological constitution.

While Vision takes pains to illuminate differences and similarities between realization and supervenience, his treatment of constitution and composition is not as clear or helpful. Vision wants to characterize emergence as a brute supervenience or realization (*viz. constitution* as he uses the terms) relation. But in trying to establish property dualism, the second of the points as I've listed them, he also needs to avoid the charge that this relation simply holds between identical properties. After all, a physicalist may otherwise object that the best account of A's supervening on or being realized by B is simply that A and B are identical, but of course Vision needs nontrivial realization, i.e., realization without identity (which he calls Rwl). To this end, Vision delves into the notorious and (therefore) beloved problem of the statue and the clay. His goal is to establish that non-identical objects can be spatiotemporally coincident as a motivation for Rwl. Here some trouble begins, even though it's not clear that it ever had to.

Vision speaks alternately of "statues and their matter" and Pericles (the statue) and L ("the lump of clay out of which the statue is formed"). [p. 66] However, he also wants us to accept that we "don't take L to have disappeared if it loses a few atoms, or even if a tiny fraction of its mass is broken off." [p. 67] Surely, people will talk this way, sharing platitudes and initial intuitions. But the concern here is that talking this way is what may create the puzzle instead of solving or even illuminating it. As philosophers, we must ask what is it exactly that loses a few atoms? It cannot be any collection of atoms, properly understood. At best, if we are really talking about a collection of atoms, either some collection of atoms becomes distributed in such a way that a few of the atoms are far from the rest of them (in which case

the collection loses nothing) or at least one atom is annihilated (in which case the collection vanishes and, thus, is no longer around to have lost anything). Some indication of what Vision would say of the latter possibility comes much later; see page 85. But readers versed in the issues of material constitution may find Vision's account unclear.

Related confusion arises over quantities of matter and physical objects seemingly understood sometimes as mereological sums, sometimes not. Vision asserts, "Pericles is a physical object: remove its matter and Pericles vanishes." [p. 83] But what this is supposed to mean is not at all clear. On many accounts (for example those which take a particular side of the related issue of the Ship of Theseus), this is literally false, since the matter which once had the property of being Pericles can be distributed and replaced (bit-by-bit, if needed) with an entirely different batch of matter which now has the property of being Pericles. Granted, Vision might not have meant to write merely about removing the statue's "particular quantity of matter at a given moment", but if so, then this should be more explicitly addressed, for it presupposes many controversial things about what exactly the statue is, what exactly its matter is, and how they relate. Furthermore, Vision here and elsewhere is talking about a physical object *having* matter as opposed to *being* (some quantity of) matter. In doing so, he appears to presuppose (*contra* Quine's *Word and Object* [1960] and others without clear acknowledgement) exactly what should be at issue. Current metaphysicians are careful to avoid such ambiguities. For one compelling example, see Jubien's *Possibility* [2009].

In sum, it's not clear to this reviewer that Vision's assertions about the puzzle of the statue and the clay amount to an argument starting from common ground between disputants and promoting a particular solution to the puzzle, much less one in favor of realization without identity. Apologies, if the foregoing belabors the point, but Vision devotes the bulk of Chapter 3, *Coincidence: Realization and Identity*, to this issue, and his overall view is supposed to draw from a solution to the statue and clay puzzle. Vision believes his treatment of the statue and clay motivates his relation of constitution, which is a supervenient or realization relation. Unfortunately, it is never clear how this is supposed to work.

As mentioned, property dualism is advanced over Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 8. Chapter 3 was meant to establish the possibility of non-identity between coincidental objects, and this is used in favor of the notion that realized properties can differ from their bases. Chapters 5 and 8 are meant to establish the realized property's credentials as distinctly mental, not physical. The core of the argument lies in Chapter 5. Here, Vision argues that "certain behaviors couldn't occur without intentionality in their causal histories." [p. 133] When I fry an egg, Vision claims, that is clearly an action that is just as physical as any natural non-human event, and the action is clearly not mental. Nevertheless, he holds, behavior such as frying an egg requires intention, and intentions (along with beliefs, fears, hopes, and the like) are things that are directly available to their subjects for behavior and reasoning; they are access-conscious properties. Vision holds that such properties, required by real events, are not identical to and do not reduce to the physical; they are nontrivially mental.

Familiar kinds of questions arise, warranting explicit treatment. Because the having of an intention is something we only infer in others from their physical behavior, are egg-frying actions also inferred from physical behavior, even when that behavior involves eggs being relocated into pans which

become heated as a result of a human body's causal interaction with them and a stove? Can identical twins exhibit qualitatively identical physical behavior over qualitatively identical eggs while one twin fries an egg and the other one simply doesn't fry an egg? Or, switching cases, suppose I want to avoid signing a contract. Can I avoid doing so merely by not having the intention to sign it, instead forming the intention to draw a picture of what one of my signatures would look like on that contract? If so, then concepts like *frying an egg* and *signing a contract* become unfamiliar; we don't really know from the physical evidence whether such activities occur. And a consequence like this should be clearly addressed. Until these kinds of questions have clear answers, there is room for resisting the idea that Vision has found fundamentally non-physical properties which arise from the physical. Physicalists can hold their ground and say that human activity even that which requires intentions and including the intentions themselves is simply physical.

The third point to consider is the causal efficacy of emergent mental properties. As would be expected, Vision gives much attention to Jaegwon Kim and the causal exclusion argument. On Vision's account we have a plurality of causal relations because we have a plurality of things (typically at different "levels") that can be causally related. So far, we have a promising alternative to the view that causation must occur at only one level, and Vision is certainly not alone in promoting it. However, a general question arises for Vision and anyone who wants to address his view on this point: How do philosophers go about deciding between (i) a view in which A and only A causes A\* and (ii) a view in which A necessitates (through brute constitution—either supervenience or realization) B and B makes a causal contribution to A\* for which A is insufficient? If A and A\* are successive physical *relata*, then (i) is a commitment of physicalism. If, further, B is some nonphysical emergent, then (ii) captures a core commitment of Vision's emergentism. How do we decide between them? It's not as if we can propose running an experiment in which we compare cases in which only A occurs to cases in which A and B both occur. For, this begs the question against (ii) according to which *ex hypothesis* A's occurrence necessitates B's. Perhaps we could run a *thought* experiment, but this would require distinguishing between different kinds of necessity or different kinds of supervenience, and this Vision isn't so eager to do. We would have to find it conceivable that although B supervenes upon A, it might not have, and if it hadn't, then something other than A\* would have followed. I believe Vision does find this conceivable. And I am not arguing that it is inconceivable. But a clear explanation of how we can say something like this so as to express and test a clear alternative to merely physicalist causation would be ideal.

Few works of philosophy are read because the reader has been assured that the work is correct. What we often want is progress and opportunities for insight or illumination. Vision's book provides both. Indeed, *Re-Emergence* shows that emergentism remains (or is finally becoming) a promising competitor among theories of the mind, and it draws some clear lines that allow one to test it against the other views. Where I find problems in this work, I usually find interesting problems.