

# Two comments on Chalmers classification of idealism

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Interest in idealism has increased substantially since the publication of Sprigge's *Vindication of Absolute Idealism* in 1984,<sup>1</sup> and again with more vigor over the last decade in the context of the mind-body problem and panpsychism. This will probably not come as a surprise to objective idealists, among which Vittorio Hosle has proposed that philosophy cycles through stages with some form of idealism as end point of each cycle.<sup>2</sup> More recently, David Chalmers mused about a corresponding development in the worldview of single individuals from materialism over dualism and panpsychism to idealism.<sup>3</sup> Traditional accounts of idealism include for instance those of Plato, Plotinus, Leibniz, Berkeley, or Hegel. An overview of contemporary approaches is given in the article by Chalmers, where he mentions amongst others a recent collection of essays on idealism,<sup>4</sup> but also for instance the (recently extended<sup>5</sup>) works of Philip Goff on Russellian monism.<sup>6</sup> A more classically oriented collection of works on idealism was edited by Hosle and Suarez Muller.<sup>7</sup>

In his article 'Idealism and the Mind-Body Problem', David Chalmers presents a classification of possible versions of idealism with the goal of assessing the prospects of idealism in the context of the mind-body problem without having to pay too much attention to its 'historical baggage'. This goal seems to me highly laudable and the resulting classification an important contribution to the contemporary discussion. In addition, the conclusions drawn from the subsequent analysis seem very plausible from the viewpoints of dualistic, panpsychistic and similar thinking.

I nevertheless believe that the presented classification is not really adequate to capture the core of traditional idealistic thinking, which in turn leads to somewhat distorted conclusions about the opportunities for idealism to play a role for understanding the mind-body problem:

First, the distinction between micro- macro- and cosmic idealism is not fitting well into the idealistic venture. Instead, idealism is artificially reduced to a bad alternative to panpsychism. Secondly, the initially mentioned, but afterwards not discussed again difference between subject-

involving and non-subject-involving idealism needs to be further extended, to account for the special role of subjects in traditional accounts of objective idealism.

To elaborate on this, I will first give a short summary of Chalmers classification and some of the mentioned problems with idealism. Afterwards I will come back to my two objections in more detail.

### **Chalmers classification**

To avoid the historical classification of subjective, objective, transcendental and absolute idealism, and the historical baggage attached, Chalmers makes three distinctions to classify different versions of idealism. The first distinction is between realist and anti-realist idealism (the world exists independently of observers vs in the experiences of observers). A second distinction is being made between subject-involved and non-subject-involved idealism (experiences by subjects vs experiences by other sorts of entities or none structure the world). The third distinction is between micro-, macro- and cosmic scale idealism, with reality fully grounded at the specified spatial scale. As examples Chalmers lists amongst others Leibniz, Berkeley and Hegel, as well as the three related views of (micro-scale) panpsychism, phenomenalism and cosmopsychism. He then discusses and evaluates different models of micro-, macro- and cosmic (realist) idealism and identifies certain versions of micro- and especially macro-idealism as candidates for further investigations into the mind-body problem.

Chalmers dismisses macro-scale idealism like phenomenalism on the grounds of finding it to be an overly complicated theory when engaging with fundamental physical reality and with little advantage over other types of idealism. Concerning micro-idealism, he sees the motivation behind it as similar to the one behind panpsychism, as both offer a close integration of science and consciousness. He lays out how micro-idealism entails panpsychism (understood as some fundamental physical entities having mental states), but not vice versa, amongst others because micro-idealism is more pure by grounding *all* facts in facts about mental states of micro-entities. Some conceptual advantages of micro-idealism are listed, before two specific and two general weaknesses are discussed: First of all, it is unclear whether micro-idealism can handle all fundamental properties, especially relational ones like space and time. Chalmers discusses proposed solutions

to this, like for instance to not take spatiotemporal relations as fundamental, but emergent; here the question is whether a fitting physical model of emergent spacetime is possible. Secondly, it is unclear how disposition and causation arise within micro-idealist models, if not grounded for instance in 'active experiences such as the will'. Apart from these specific weaknesses, micro-idealism encounters two general problems of micro-scale theories of consciousness, namely holism (that fundamental physics with fields etc. is not about micro-entities) and the combination problem (of how building blocks combine to form macro-scale consciousness). Chalmers then moves on to macro-idealism, which he sees as the most promising approach, because here solutions to the problems of micro-idealism are conceivable: Spacetime, disposition/causation, as well as holism and combination could be realized via cosmos-wide mechanisms. Nevertheless, the combination problem becomes a 'de-combination' problem now (of how our macro-scale experiences arise), labelled 'constitution problem' by Chalmers to avoid the awkward neologism.

### **The distinction between micro-, macro- and cosmic idealism is not fitting well into the idealistic venture**

Distinguishing versions of idealism by spatial scales seems straight-forward at first, but I believe that it actually goes against the very core of most versions of traditional (in the past formulated versions of) idealism. The error somewhat naturally occurs if we take a restricted view of idealism with the goal of understanding the mind-body problem, as Chalmers explicitly does: His focus is largely on 'experiential states and properties'. Idealists in contrast traditionally came to idealism to account for universal non-material entities like goodness or numbers. While the former places the non-material (e.g. qualia) in space, thus leading to the question whether it is organized at the micro-, macro- or cosmic scale, the later posits a more basic existence 'outside of' or maybe better 'beyond' space (of values, numbers, etc.) as a core tenet. If grounded beyond space, the structuring of the world is primarily non-spatial, so that a rigid distinction between micro-, macro- or cosmic-scale structuring in the resulting emergent space does not seem well suited to capture the more essential features of traditional idealism. This can be visualized with a graph representing a 'true' non-spatial structure, which is then embedded in a three-dimensional space. Relations and changes at the non-spatial level (in the graph), might turn up at any scale in the resulting spatial

view (the 3D world).

This sounds superficial at first, but has some important implications for the challenges that Chalmers formulates for idealism. The key issue is that the set-up of idealistic theories according to spatial scales robs them of their central advantage: To take account of entities not positioned in space. In the context of understanding a restricted, spatially situated version of consciousness it is clear how one arrives there, but it nevertheless does not make good use of the idealistic ansatz. If idealism is restricted to the micro-scale, then the material world has to be a question of specific 'material' relations between non-material building blocks, as unlike for panpsychism or dualism a realization via substance in spacetime is impossible. The corresponding development of a fundamental theory relating the scales is an extremely hard task for idealism, which nevertheless can most likely not be avoided by the idealist, as he has to take into account the micro-scale machinery discovered by science. But this task makes only sense for the idealist as a preparation for reaping the fruits of idealism afterwards, to account for non-material – including, but not restricted to mental – phenomena at all spatial scales. Micro- and cosmic-scale restricted idealisms are then effectively bad versions of the corresponding panpsychisms (and a macro-scale restricted idealism remains hardly tenable due to science).

That the classification along spatial categories does not fit well for traditional idealism can also be seen from the fact that Chalmers examples for idealistic theories never fall neatly into his categories: 'Leibniz's view has at least a flavor of micro-idealism, with all reality grounded in the mental states of monads, although his monads may include macro and cosmic entities as well as micro-entities. Berkeley looks like a macro-idealist, at least before God enters his picture, and other British empiricists such as Hume and Mill have elements of this view. Many of the 19th-century German and British idealists (e.g. Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Bradley) as well as Hindu and Buddhist idealists (e.g. from the Advaita Vedanta and Yogacara schools) at least tend in the direction of cosmic idealism.'

Chalmers of course aims at identifying possible models of idealism which might solve the mind-body problem, and therefore his classification should rather be seen as an analytic tool than a historical account of idealisms proposed until now (after all, he wants to get rid of the historical baggage). We could probably nevertheless agree that if the goal is not to solve the mind-body problem (understood as finding a place for consciousness within modern science), but to account

for non-material phenomena in general (and my claim is that traditional idealism has this goal), then emergent space has to be a central feature of idealism and a classification along spatial scales is not helpful. Chalmers classification should then be understood first of all as a systematic assessment of challenges for realizing idealism as a direct alternative to panpsychism. But such a view is artificial to traditional idealism, where *Geist* is operating everywhere, i.e. at every scale.

In Chalmers classification, emergent space is an option to fix issues of micro-idealism. Far from this, emergent space is a (if not the) essential feature for the functioning of traditional idealism. It allows for panpsychism-like description at the micro-scale in combination with a unifying macro-scale consciousness like the one we experience. Interactions between scales thus come naturally to traditional idealism, not as an ad-hoc fix to micro-idealism, when we understand emergent space as essential feature.

As a result, idealism, if not restricted to one spatial scale faces a different set of problems than those outlined by Chalmers for the artificial idealisms constructed for his analysis: Most importantly, 'scale-integrated' versions of idealism have (like the cosmic version) no constitution (combination or de-combination) problem. They thus allow for macro-scale consciousness without resorting exclusively to macro- or cosmic idealism, but they can deal with (maybe only some parts of) holism like cosmic idealism does.

The important message to idealists nevertheless is that also the traditional idealist needs to explain not so much what is happening at the microscale, but how what's happening leads to what science finds at the micro-scale. The idealist does not have to posit micro-scale building blocks in space, but needs to show how the functions of the material world (spatial individualization, material causation) can arise from an essential non-spatial reality, and in addition, how the 'gap' was formed, which dualism takes as granted.

As Chalmers mentions, this would indeed still in a way mean to account for all fundamental physical problems including spacetime, as well as the issues of disposition and causation, which brings us to my second comment on Chalmers classification.

### **The distinction between subject-involving and non-subject needs to be further extended**

After his first distinction between realist and anti-realist idealism, roughly covering the most

common interpretation of the older distinction between objective and subjective realism, Chalmers lists a second distinction between subject-involving and non-subject involving idealism, also sometimes distinguished by the labels subjective and objective idealisms. In his article Chalmers concentrates on realist idealism and then continues along his third distinction of idealisms at different spatial scales, but does not come back to his second distinction in the course of his analysis.

Most likely, I think, Chalmers understands the second distinction as to make a distinction between a subject and some other entity or none which by perceiving establishes and/or guarantees the ongoing existence of the idealist world. As this distinction makes only sense for anti-realist idealism, it seems perfectly fine for Chalmers to not consider this distinction further in his investigation of realist idealism.

I nevertheless believe that there is a related distinction to be made for realist idealism, and I think not considering it is the second issue that goes against the very core of many versions of traditional idealism: The distinction is between having subjects as separate building blocks of reality or subjects as being build up completely out of more basic building blocks. A non-subject involving realist idealism understood this way lends itself to the analysis presented by Chalmers (though susceptible to the objection made above against using spatial scales for this purpose), but the corresponding subject-involving, realist idealism implicitly posits a second type of basic building blocks, i.e. subjects (in the sense of active elements). The error of ignoring the latter option again occurs naturally if we take a restricted view of idealism with the goal of solving the mind-body problem by the positioning of additional, now non-material building blocks in space. Through the lens of a micro-scale panpsychist for instance, subjects are themselves build of the first type of building blocks, but this folds subject-involving on non-subject involving realist idealism, as non-subject involving realist idealism would not mean a reality without subjects, but a reality in which subjects are a resulting rather than a foundational part of reality. Traditional attempts at objective idealism on the other hand usually posit non-material building blocks as making up the basic structure of the world, but they additionally posit subjects (or at least one subject) who operate(s) on these building blocks. Below the *logos* of ideas, a *demiurge*, a 'world-spirit' and/or other souls are operating, still beyond the level of the material world. In addition, this combination (and the rejection of foundational structuring in space) seems to have been so natural to idealists in the past, that the traditional distinction of subjective vs objective idealism conflates

the underlying three distinctions worked out by Chalmers (as he points out himself). But like the problem discussed in the first part, some important implications for the challenges that Chalmers formulates for idealism result from this.

In subjective (anti-realist) idealism like in panpsychism, the subject is a nexus of qualities in the form of mental states. In objective (realist) idealism, an object is an independent nexus of qualities, so that perception by the subject (the idealists equivalent of a mental state) and therefore the subject are separate from the nexus of qualities itself. Like emergent space is assumed to be just a design decision within micro-idealism instead of a core feature by Chalmers, he assumed agency to be just a design decision to deal with disposition and causation. Considering only micro-scale functionality, it of course is, but in the greater view of the traditional idealist, the subject is essential for the idea of objective non-material building blocks itself, as it is the subject which experiences the unified cut-outs of reality which let traditional idealism avoid the combination problem. (Idealism understood this way is nevertheless no crypto-dualism, as both qualities and agents are part of the same fundamentally non-material realm.)

The most likely reason why Chalmers is not following up on the second distinction for realist idealism is, I assume, that it seems to posit what it wants to explain; the subject. But this does not have to be the case: The subject as a building block needs to be no more than a basic element with the ability to conceive the first type of building blocks (and bundles thereof), and to act (shift relations) according to any acquired rule-giving building blocks (e.g., some idea of growth). In a simple case, it could perceive attached spatial relations and act according to an acquired set of rules on such relations. Micro-scale panpsychism for instance requires similar basic building blocks with the ability to perceive, only that in objective idealism the subject 'building block' can guarantee the unity of experience, while micro-scale approaches suffer from the combination problem (of how separate perceptions align with each other into a unified experience.) The ability of the subject to act comes as an additional requirement, but provides also additional explanatory power (for mental causation). To distinguish such a simple 'automaton' from a subject as we normally understand it, we could call it an agent 'module', as it requires additional 'machinery' to become a proper agent.

Here we again see that the distinction of spatial scales is not well suited for classification from the viewpoint of a subject-involving realist idealist: Subjects act on non-material elements, and

therefore bundles of building blocks structured at least partly beyond space. Depending on the subject and the (also non-material) structures it is interacting with, the perceptions and actions of the subject might end up being localized on the micro-, but also the macro- (or even cosmic-) scale. A very simple agent module might be at work at the micro scale while a much more complicated one turns out to be a full person. Both have a unified perspective of the world and the power to cause things, but one understands basically nothing and can only decide to do the thing it thinks it has to do a little bit earlier or later (leading to indeterminant noise at the micro-scale), while the other writes poems. An idealist can restrict himself to agent modules on specific scales, only to have them at all scales would not be some kind of fix to micro-scale idealism, but an essential feature of *Geist* working at every scale. Why would it be restricted to a scale anyhow?

The challenge of physicalism against idealism is thus not one of particle(-like) interactions in spacetime and natural laws against non-material building blocks of a passive consciousness, but against non-material building blocks including at least one very basic form of agency.

## **Conclusions**

In this article I have argued against Chalmers classification of idealism by claiming that emergent space and basic agency are essential features of traditional idealism, thereby mitigating some of the challenges for idealism discussed by him. I agree with Chalmers that depending on the formulation, idealism has no especially favorable set of advantages and disadvantages over panpsychism to solve the 'narrow' mind-body problem of integrating consciousness into existing science. My claim is that an analysis which focuses on this 'narrow' problem does not serve justice to idealism. Instead, idealism was traditionally concerned with the 'broad' mind-matter problem, of integrating the material with a proposed non-material world (of values, numbers, etc.). Chalmers analysis then should be read as to put new emphasis on the fact that to proceed, idealism first of all needs a model for the integration of modern science. Staying true to the spirit of traditional idealism, this would not have to be panpsychism-like version of micro-idealism, but a mathematically consistent re-interpretation of the physical world as a limiting case of a both material and non-material world. This of course is a formidable task, and it is quite unclear whether it is achievable at all, but it is not completely different from established projects like the re-interpretation of



quantum theory from the view of string theories or digital physics, and thus similarly accessible to scientific investigation.

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