

Original Article

Philosophy of Mind and its Implications in the Present Era

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Abstract

The philosophy of mind is one of the major branches of philosophy dealing with understanding the nature of the mind, consciousness, mental states, and their relationship to the physical body and the external world. From ancient metaphysical inquiries to contemporary debates involving neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science, the philosophy of mind has profoundly influenced human self-understanding. In present times, its relevance has expanded beyond theoretical reflection into practical domains such as mental health, ethics, artificial intelligence, education, leadership, and well-being. This article presents a comprehensive examination of the philosophy of mind, tracing its historical development, major theories, and contemporary debates, and critical exploration of its applications in modern society. By integrating classical philosophical insights with contemporary scientific findings, we try to demonstrate how philosophy of mind remains indispensable in addressing modern challenges related to consciousness, identity, technology, and human flourishing.

Keywords: Philosophy of Mind, Consciousness, Dualism, Physicalism, Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Science, Mental Health.

Introduction

The question “What is the mind?” has occupied human thought for millennia. Unlike tangible objects, the mind appears elusive, private, and subjective, yet it governs perception, thought, emotion, intention, and action. The philosophy of mind seeks to understand the nature of mental phenomena, their origin, and their relationship to the physical body and the world. While traditionally considered a purely theoretical discipline, philosophy of mind has gained increasing relevance in modern society due to advances in neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence, and technology. Modern life raises pressing questions about consciousness, free will, personal identity, and moral responsibility—questions that cannot be resolved by empirical science alone. For example, while neuroscience can identify neural correlates of consciousness, it cannot fully explain subjective experience itself (Chalmers, 1996). Similarly, artificial intelligence challenges traditional notions of mind, intelligence, and agency. As such, philosophy of mind plays a critical role in integrating scientific knowledge with conceptual clarity and ethical reflection. This article aims to provide a research-based, systematic exploration of the philosophy of mind and its applications in modern contexts. It begins with a historical overview, followed by a discussion of major theories and debates. It then examines interdisciplinary connections and practical applications in contemporary life.

Historical Foundations of the Philosophy of Mind

The roots of philosophy of mind can be traced to ancient civilizations, particularly Greek philosophy. Plato viewed the mind (or soul) as an immaterial and immortal entity distinct from the body. In *Phaedo*, Plato argued that the soul pre-exists the body and survives bodily death, emphasizing the mind’s rational and eternal nature (Plato, trans. 1997). Knowledge, for Plato, was a recollection of innate ideas, suggesting a sharp distinction between mind and matter. Aristotle, Plato’s student, offered a more integrated account. In *De Anima*, Aristotle proposed hylomorphism—the view that the soul is the “form” of the body, not a separate substance (Aristotle, trans. 1984).



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Aristotle's approach influenced later debates by emphasizing the functional and biological aspects of mental life. In Eastern traditions, particularly in Indian philosophy, the mind was explored through metaphysical and introspective methods. Schools such as Advaita Vedānta viewed consciousness as fundamental and ultimate, while Buddhism emphasized the impermanent and non-substantial nature of mental phenomena (Ganeri, 2011). These perspectives continue to influence modern discussions on consciousness and selfhood.

During the medieval period, philosophical inquiry into the mind was closely linked to theology. Thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas integrated classical philosophy with Christian doctrine. Augustine emphasized inner experience and introspection, anticipating modern discussions of subjectivity (Augustine, trans. 1998). Aquinas, drawing on Aristotle, argued that the soul is the form of the body but capable of intellectual activity that transcends material processes (Aquinas, trans. 1981). The early modern period marked a turning point with René Descartes' formulation of substance dualism. Descartes famously distinguished between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance), asserting that the mind is non-physical and fundamentally distinct from the body (Descartes, trans. 1984). This dualistic framework profoundly shaped subsequent philosophy but also generated the enduring "mind-body problem": how can two fundamentally different substances interact? Empiricist philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume challenged innate ideas and emphasized experience as the source of mental content. Locke conceptualized the mind as a "tabula rasa," while Hume questioned the existence of a unified self, arguing that introspection reveals only a bundle of perceptions (Hume, trans. 2000). These views laid the groundwork for modern psychology and skepticism about metaphysical notions of the self.

Major Theories in Philosophy of Mind

Dualism

Dualism asserts that the mind and body are fundamentally different in nature. Substance dualism, associated with Descartes, holds that the mind is an immaterial substance capable of thought and consciousness, while the body is a physical entity governed by mechanical laws. Despite its intuitive appeal—especially in accounting for subjective experience—dualism faces significant challenges. The interaction problem questions how an immaterial mind can causally influence a physical body (Kim, 2011). Additionally, advances in neuroscience increasingly demonstrate correlations between mental states and brain activity, undermining the need for a separate mental substance. Nevertheless, some contemporary philosophers defend property dualism, which holds that mental properties are non-physical even if they arise from physical systems (Chalmers, 1996). This position attempts to reconcile scientific findings with the irreducibility of conscious experience.

Physicalism

Physicalism is the dominant view in contemporary philosophy of mind. It asserts that everything that exists, including mental states, is ultimately physical. According to this view, mental phenomena can be explained in terms of brain processes and physical laws. Identity theory, a form of physicalism, claims that mental states are identical to brain states. For example, pain may be identical to specific neural firings (Smart, 1959). Functionalism, another influential approach, defines mental states by their functional roles rather than their physical composition. This allows for the possibility that different physical systems—biological or artificial—could have minds if they perform the same functions (Putnam, 1975). Despite its explanatory power, physicalism faces the "hard problem of consciousness": explaining why physical processes give rise to subjective experience at all (Chalmers, 1996). Critics argue that physical explanations account for behavior and cognition but fail to capture the qualitative aspect of experience, known as *qualia*.

Intentionality and Mental Representation

Intentionality—the "aboutness" of mental states—is a central concept in philosophy of mind. Thoughts, beliefs, and desires are directed toward objects or states of affairs. Franz Brentano famously argued that intentionality is the defining feature of the mental (Brentano, trans. 1995). Contemporary debates focus on how mental representations acquire meaning. Naturalistic theories attempt to explain intentionality in terms of causal, informational, or evolutionary relations (Dretske, 1981). These discussions are particularly relevant to artificial intelligence, where the question arises whether machines can genuinely possess intentional states or merely simulate them.

The Nature of Consciousness and the Self

Consciousness is perhaps the most challenging topic in philosophy of mind. It encompasses subjective experience, awareness, and phenomenal qualities. While neuroscience identifies neural correlates of consciousness, explaining how and why these processes produce experience remains unresolved. Philosophers distinguish between access consciousness (*availability of information for reasoning and action*) and phenomenal consciousness (*what it feels like to have an experience*) (Block, 1995). This distinction highlights the gap between functional explanations and subjective experience. Questions about the self concern what makes a person the same over time. Psychological continuity theories emphasize memory and consciousness, while bodily continuity theories focus on physical persistence (Parfit, 1984). Buddhist philosophy challenges the very notion of a permanent self, suggesting that clinging

to selfhood is a source of suffering. Modern debates about identity are increasingly relevant in contexts such as neurodegenerative diseases, brain enhancement, and digital identity. Philosophy of mind provides conceptual tools to navigate these issues responsibly.

Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind

The philosophy of mind in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has undergone a significant transformation, driven by scientific advances and renewed philosophical scrutiny. While earlier debates focused primarily on dualism versus physicalism, contemporary discussions are increasingly pluralistic, addressing questions of consciousness, embodiment, cognition, and normativity. One of the most prominent debates concerns whether consciousness can be fully explained within a naturalistic framework. Reductionist physicalists argue that advances in neuroscience will eventually explain all mental phenomena in physical terms (*Churchland, 1986*). In contrast, non-reductive physicalists maintain that while mental states depend on physical processes, they cannot be reduced without loss of explanatory power (*Kim, 2011*).

Another major debate involves the explanatory gap—the perceived inability of physical explanations to account for subjective experience (*Levine, 1983*). Even if every neural process correlated with consciousness were identified, critics argue that such explanations would still fail to explain *why* those processes feel like something from the inside. This debate remains unresolved and continues to motivate alternative approaches, including panpsychism and neutral monism.

Philosophy of Mind and Interdisciplinary Connections

Neuroscience has transformed our understanding of the brain, revealing the neural basis of perception, emotion, and cognition. However, philosophical analysis remains essential for interpreting these findings. Correlation does not entail explanation, and philosophical clarity is required to avoid reductionist assumptions (*Bennett & Hacker, 2003*). Cognitive science integrates philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and computer science to study the mind as an information-processing system. Philosophical questions about representation, computation, and embodiment shape theoretical models and experimental design. AI raises fundamental questions about the nature of intelligence and mind. Can machines think? Can they be conscious? While functionalist perspectives suggest this possibility, critics argue that syntax alone cannot generate semantics or understanding (*Searle, 1980*). These debates have profound implications for ethics and technology governance.

Neurophilosophy seeks to integrate philosophical analysis with findings from neuroscience. Advocates argue that philosophical theories of mind must be informed by empirical discoveries about brain function (*Churchland & Churchland, 1998*). However, critics caution against “neuro-reductionism,” the assumption that neural explanations can fully replace psychological or phenomenological accounts. *Bennett and Hacker (2003)* warn against the “mereological fallacy”—attributing psychological properties to brain parts rather than to whole persons. A balanced neurophilosophical approach recognizes that while the brain is necessary for mental activity, understanding the mind also requires higher-level explanations involving meaning, context, and agency.

Applications of Philosophy of Mind in Modern Society

Philosophy of mind informs approaches to mental health by shaping concepts of mind, self, and agency. Understanding the relationship between mental states and brain processes helps reduce stigma and supports integrative treatment models that combine biological, psychological, and social factors. Debates about free will and determinism directly affect legal and moral responsibility. If mental states are fully determined by physical causes, questions arise about accountability. Compatibilist theories attempt to reconcile determinism with meaningful agency (*Dennett, 1984*). Philosophical theories of mind influence educational practices by shaping views on learning, cognition, and creativity. Constructivist approaches, for example, emphasize active mental engagement rather than passive information absorption. In a world increasingly shaped by digital technology, philosophy of mind helps address concerns about attention, identity, and well-being. Understanding how technology affects cognition and consciousness is essential for designing humane and ethical systems.

The Hard Problem of Consciousness

David Chalmers' formulation of the “hard problem of consciousness” has reshaped modern philosophy of mind (*Chalmers, 1996*). Unlike the “easy problems,” which concern behavioral and cognitive functions, the hard problem asks why physical processes give rise to subjective experience at all. Several philosophical responses have emerged:

1. **Eliminativism** argues that consciousness, as traditionally conceived, is a flawed concept that will be replaced by neuroscientific explanations (*Dennett, 1991*). Critics argue this view dismisses lived experience rather than explaining it.
2. **Panpsychism** proposes that consciousness is a fundamental feature of reality, present in varying degrees throughout the universe (*Goff, 2017*). While this approach avoids emergence problems, it faces the “combination problem”—how simple conscious elements combine into unified experiences.

3. **Neutral Monism** suggests that both mental and physical properties emerge from a more fundamental neutral substance (*Russell, 1927*). This view has gained renewed interest due to its compatibility with modern physics.

Each response reflects a broader philosophical struggle: balancing scientific explanation with the irreducibility of experience.

Embodied, Embedded, Enactive, and Extended Cognition (4E Cognition)

Traditional cognitive theories often conceptualized the mind as a brain-bound information processor. However, contemporary philosophy increasingly emphasizes the role of the body, environment, and social context in shaping cognition. Embodied cognition holds that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in bodily interactions with the world. Perception, reasoning, and emotion are influenced by sensorimotor capacities rather than abstract symbol manipulation alone (*Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991*).

For example, studies in psychology demonstrate that bodily posture can influence emotional states and decision-making. Philosophically, this challenges Cartesian dualism by emphasizing the inseparability of mind and body. *Clark and Chalmers (1998)* famously argued that cognitive processes can extend beyond the brain to include external tools, such as notebooks, smartphones, and digital systems. According to this view, when external resources function equivalently to internal memory, they become part of the cognitive system itself.

Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Psychology

Few philosophical questions are as practically significant as the problem of free will. If mental states are determined by physical causes, can individuals be morally responsible for their actions?

Classical Positions

- **Libertarianism** argues that free will is incompatible with determinism and that humans possess genuine indeterministic freedom.
- **Hard determinism** denies free will, asserting that all actions are causally determined.
- **Compatibilism** holds that free will is compatible with determinism, redefining freedom as acting in accordance with one's reasons and desires (*Dennett, 1984*).

Experiments by Libet and others suggest that neural activity precedes conscious awareness of decisions. Some interpret this as evidence against free will, while others argue these findings do not undermine meaningful agency (*Mele, 2009*). Philosophy of mind plays a crucial role in interpreting such data, distinguishing between conscious deliberation, automatic processes, and moral responsibility.

Legal systems presuppose that individuals possess rational agency. Philosophy of mind helps clarify when this assumption holds and when it breaks down. Neuroscientific evidence is increasingly used in courtrooms, raising concerns about neuro-determinism. Philosophers caution against simplistic interpretations of brain data. While neural predispositions influence behavior, they do not necessarily eliminate moral responsibility (*Morse, 2011*). Philosophy of mind provides conceptual tools to distinguish explanation from excuse. Moral psychology investigates how emotions, reasoning, and social cognition shape ethical behavior. Studies suggest that moral judgment often involves intuitive emotional responses followed by rational justification (*Haidt, 2001*). Philosophy of mind critically evaluates these findings, questioning whether moral truth is reducible to psychological processes or whether normative standards transcend empirical description.

Philosophy of Mind and Language

Language is central to human cognition and self-awareness. Philosophers have long debated whether thought depends on language or whether language merely expresses pre-linguistic mental states. *Wittgenstein* argued that meaning arises from use within social practices rather than private mental representations (*Wittgenstein, 1953*). This view challenges the idea that mental states are entirely private and suggests that mind is partly constituted by social interaction. Contemporary philosophy of mind examines how linguistic structures shape perception, categorization, and self-concept, influencing debates in linguistics, anthropology, and AI.

Consciousness Studies and Altered States

Modern consciousness studies investigate phenomena such as dreaming, meditation, hypnosis, and psychedelic experiences. These states challenge standard models of consciousness by demonstrating its variability and plasticity. Philosophers analyze whether altered states reveal deeper truths about consciousness or merely unusual neural configurations. Research into meditation and mindfulness suggests that sustained attention training can alter subjective experience and neural patterns, bridging philosophy, psychology, and contemplative traditions (*Thompson, 2015*).

Cultural and Cross-Philosophical Perspectives

Western philosophy of mind has historically emphasized individual consciousness, rationality, and autonomy. In contrast, many non-Western traditions emphasize relational and process-oriented views of mind. For example, Buddhist philosophy denies a permanent self, viewing consciousness as a dynamic process arising from interdependent causes. This perspective aligns with contemporary process philosophy and challenges substance-based metaphysics (*Garfield, 2015*). Cross-cultural dialogue enriches philosophy of mind by revealing alternative conceptual frameworks and ethical implications.

Philosophy of Mind and Mental Health

Mental health is not merely a medical or psychological issue; it is deeply philosophical. Philosophy of mind shapes how mental disorders are conceptualized—whether as brain diseases, cognitive dysfunctions, existential crises, or socially constructed categories. The biomedical model views mental illness as resulting from neurochemical imbalances or structural abnormalities. While effective for certain conditions, this model risks reducing persons to brains. Philosophical critiques argue that mental disorders involve meanings, values, and lived experience that cannot be captured by neurobiology alone (*Fulford, Thornton, & Graham, 2006*).

Phenomenological philosophy emphasizes first-person experience, focusing on how individuals experience depression, anxiety, or psychosis. This approach has influenced contemporary psychotherapy by highlighting empathy, narrative identity, and subjective meaning. Philosophy of mind informs debates about agency in mental illness. If actions are driven by pathological mental states, to what extent is the individual responsible? Compatibilist frameworks allow for degrees of responsibility, supporting compassionate yet accountable approaches to treatment. Recovery-oriented models emphasize autonomy, meaning-making, and self-understanding. These approaches align with philosophical views that see the mind as an active, interpretive system rather than a passive mechanism.

Ethical Implications of Artificial Minds

Artificial intelligence presents one of the most significant challenges to philosophy of mind. Functionalist theories suggest that if a system performs the right functions, it may possess a mind regardless of its physical substrate. However, critics argue that computation alone cannot generate understanding or consciousness. Searle's Chinese Room argument maintains that syntactic manipulation of symbols does not produce semantic comprehension (Searle, 1980). If machines were to develop consciousness or moral status, ethical obligations would arise regarding their treatment. Even in the absence of true consciousness, AI systems influence human cognition, decision-making, and autonomy. Philosophy of mind informs debates on AI governance, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and respect for human agency. The extended mind thesis further complicates these issues by blurring boundaries between human and machine cognition.

Attention, Memory, Education, Learning and Creativity in the Digital Age

Digital technologies profoundly reshape cognitive processes. Smartphones externalize memory, alter attention spans, and influence self-concept. According to extended cognition theories, these tools become part of our cognitive architecture. Philosophers debate whether such extensions enhance or diminish human agency. While technology increases efficiency, it may also fragment attention and undermine reflective thought (*Carr, 2010*). Online identities raise philosophical questions about authenticity and selfhood. Are digital personas extensions of the self or curated performances? Narrative theories of identity suggest that the self is constructed through stories, increasingly mediated by digital platforms. Philosophy of mind provides a framework for understanding these transformations without reducing identity to mere data or performance.

Technological developments—brain-computer interfaces, virtual reality, and digital avatars—raise new questions about personal identity. If memories or cognitive functions could be enhanced or altered technologically, what remains essential to the self? Philosophers debate whether identity depends on psychological continuity, bodily integrity, or narrative coherence. These questions are no longer speculative but increasingly relevant to medical ethics and digital culture. Educational theory implicitly relies on assumptions about the mind. Behaviorist models emphasize conditioning, while constructivist approaches emphasize active mental engagement. Embodied cognition supports experiential learning, highlighting the role of movement, emotion, and social interaction in understanding. These insights inform contemporary pedagogical practices that prioritize critical thinking and creativity. Creativity involves imagination, intuition, and unconscious processing. Philosophy of mind explores whether creativity is a mysterious gift or an emergent cognitive process. Understanding creativity has implications for education, innovation, and artificial intelligence, where the limits of algorithmic generation remain philosophically contested.

Mindfulness, Well-Being, and Applied Philosophy

Mindfulness and meditation practices, rooted in ancient philosophical traditions, have gained scientific validation. These practices alter attention, emotion regulation, and self-awareness. Philosophers analyze whether mindfulness reveals a non-substantial self, aligning with Buddhist philosophy, or merely cultivates a particular mode of consciousness (*Thompson, 2015*). Well-being involves more than pleasure or productivity; it involves meaning, agency, and self-understanding. Philosophy of mind contributes to holistic models of flourishing by integrating cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions of life. Public policy increasingly relies on neuroscientific insights. From education to criminal justice, assumptions about the mind influence institutional practices. Philosophers warn against "brain overreach," where complex social problems are reduced to neural explanations. A philosophically informed approach emphasizes multi-level explanations incorporating biology, psychology, and culture. Emerging technologies such as neural enhancement, brain-computer interfaces, and virtual reality challenge traditional notions of the human mind. Transhumanist thinkers envision radically enhanced cognition, while critics warn of ethical and existential risks. Philosophy of mind plays a crucial role in evaluating these possibilities, asking not only what is possible, but what is

desirable. The future of mind philosophy will increasingly involve normative questions about the kind of beings we wish to become.

Conclusion

The philosophy of mind stands at the intersection of science, ethics, technology, and lived experience. From ancient metaphysical debates to contemporary concerns about artificial intelligence and mental health, it continues to shape how humanity understands itself. Modern applications demonstrate that philosophy of mind is not an abstract or obsolete discipline. It provides conceptual clarity, ethical guidance, and integrative frameworks essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary life. As scientific knowledge expands and technological power increases, the need for philosophical reflection becomes more urgent. Philosophy of mind reminds us that understanding the brain is not the same as understanding the person—and that the deepest questions about consciousness, meaning, and identity remain central to the human condition. The philosophy of mind remains one of the most profound and relevant areas of philosophical inquiry. By exploring the nature of consciousness, mental states, and the self, it bridges the gap between subjective experience and objective science. In modern society, its applications extend far beyond academic debate, influencing mental health, ethics, education, artificial intelligence, and everyday life. As scientific and technological advances continue to reshape human existence, philosophy of mind provides the conceptual foundation needed to navigate these changes wisely. Rather than being rendered obsolete by science, philosophy of mind complements empirical research by addressing questions that cannot be answered through experimentation alone. Its enduring value lies in its capacity to illuminate what it means to be a thinking, feeling, and conscious being in an increasingly complex world.

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