

# Emergence and Experience: Systemic Emergence and the Prospects for a Mechanistic Explanation of the Existence of Experience

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy

March 2017

## Abstract

The dominant view among philosophers and scientists today is that the world, and everything in it, is constructed from a relatively small set of fundamental entities: roughly those picked out by physics. This view is known as materialism. Materialism is not the view that only these fundamentals exist. The world contains many wondrous things that are not themselves fundamental physical entities: things such as flowers, organisms, families, feelings of joy. Rather, materialism, as I shall defend it, is the view that only the fundamental microphysical entities are instantiated in a *basic* way. Everything else *emerges*, in a non-mysterious fashion, as a result of intricately organized collections of more basic entities.

Materialism has a lot going for it but it also faces a number of major challenges. One of those challenges is to account for conscious experience. Consciousness is an undeniable feature of the world. And yet, we currently have no idea as to how something like a subjective conscious experience could be a non-mysteriously emergent feature of material systems. So puzzled are we on this front that a number of philosophers think that ultimately materialism cannot be correct. They think that somewhere along the way, consciousness must be taken as a fundamental (or basic) feature of the world.

As it stands we have two intuitively appealing, yet hard to reconcile theses:

1. *Materialism*: Only the fundamental entities described by physics are instantiated in a basic way. Everything else emerges with organized collections of these fundamentals.
2. *Conscious Realism*: Conscious experiences are real, causally potent, and in need of explanation.

This thesis will work towards their reconciliation.

I develop and defend a conception of emergence—emergence as systemic novelty—that is in keeping with discussions in systems biology and the other sciences of the mind. This picture allows us to understand how causally potent systems can emerge without jeopardizing the core tenets of materialism. Consciousness still poses a serious problem for this view as there are a number of intuitively powerful reasons to think that, unlike other systemically emergent phenomena, conscious experience cannot be accounted for in terms of the organized

interactions of the system's constituents. A number of thinkers have argued that this entails the falsity of the materialism in all its forms. In addressing this concern, I argue that there are in fact two problems associated with consciousness: there is the problem of accounting for the existence of *experience in general*, and there is the problem of accounting for the *qualitative character* of experience. While the second of these problems may indeed be intractable, there is reason to be optimistic about the prospects of solving the first. If *experience in general* is not itself something we experience, then there may be space for a conceptual renovation that allows for an illuminating explanation of the existence of experience. Further, I argue that a solution to the problem of accounting for the existence of *experience in general* is all that is needed to vindicate materialism.

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## Declaration

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I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Signature:

Date:

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people whose help has been invaluable during the process of completing this thesis: Dr. Jon Opie especially, and also Dr. Gerard O'Brien for expert guidance and helpful comments on early versions of this thesis; the University of Adelaide Philosophy Department for helpful feedback on early versions of this material; Ed Heddle for the unquenchable supply of Jazz piano and for being a first-rate sounding-board; my Dad for raising me on questions rather than answers; and finally, my Mum for her unwavering love and support.