

One way to conceive of the task of contemporary philosophy of mind

The empirical facts should determine which branch of this tree our best theory of M ends up taking -- but while the situation is uncertain we try to find reasons (including conceptual and other philosophical reasons) to prefer one branch over another.

Can our best (scientific) theory T explain (predict) mental phenomenon M (as described*)?

Apparently yes

Apparently no

Continue to apply T (to explain M)

Find a way to explain M with T that does not add to T's ontology or to T's basic relations (laws) (reductivism)

Deny that M exists (eliminativism) or deny that M is properly described (e.g., some psychological behaviorism)

Expand or revise T

Revise T, perhaps add to its basic relations (laws), but do not add to its ontology (e.g., non-reductive physicalism)

Add to T's ontology and basic relations (perhaps rejecting and replacing much of T)

(Eliminativism is given as a dashed line because it is typically an attempt to revise our understanding of the phenomenon M in a way that may be -- to some degree -- independent of our consideration of the theory T; in this sense the option is different in kind from the other options shown. Also, eliminativism is as conservative of T as is reductivism.)

More conservative of T

Less conservative of T

* The question of whether our description of M is necessarily correct of M, or is in some other sense privileged, is hotly debated. Those who claim their description of M is necessary, or that they otherwise have special understanding of M, may deny eliminativism or various forms of reductivism on the grounds that they cannot be wrong about their description of M.

What makes a theory “best” (or better)?

In order of importance:

- Predictive power -- the amount and accuracy of predictions
- Productivity -- the degree to which the theory fosters new research and new theory
- Coherence -- the degree to which the theory fits with existing other accepted theories
- Simplicity -- more compact theories with the same predictive power, productivity, and coherence are preferred.

Note that Descartes’s theory, for example, appears to fare poorly in terms of predictive power and productivity and coherence. It does not tell us how to make predictions regarding mental events, and offers no way to improve the theory except introspection, which is problematic because we cannot resolve disagreements. This does not mean that interactive substance dualism is false, but it does mean that future interactive substance dualists need to explain how the theory can be predictive and productive, if they expect others to follow them in believing the theory; or they need to convince us that the other contending theories are not more predictive, productive, coherent, or simple.