Dualism, Materialism and Idealism

Essentially the most basic question in metaphysics is: what exists? An account of the kinds of things that exist is called an ontology. To use a hackneyed phrase, an ontology is an account of the “furniture of the world”—the things that exist.

Naturally, there are a wide variety of approaches to ontological questions, and a wide variety of ontological accounts. The problem of determining what exists is deeply connected to our epistemological limitations, which we have examined over the last four weeks.

One approach to thinking about the problem is the following: all we have access to is our own individual experience and, as a result, we can know nothing certain about what exists outside of our own experience, whether it be physical objects, other people or other minds.

Nevertheless, the regularity of our experience, along with the impressive success of the description, prediction and explanation of natural phenomena by scientific theories, does give us significant evidence to support belief in the existence of an external physical/spatiotemporal world, the world described by physics (or science in general). This evidence, naturally, is so convincing that you would be hard pressed to find anyone that doesn’t believe that an external world exists, irrespective of whether someone believes in this or that scientific theory.
So this is a statement of the problem. The attitude one takes to this situation can lead to very different ontological views. The main three general approaches, or sides, that are taken with respect to general ontology come out of how seriously one takes our experience and how seriously one takes the evidence.

Two of these approaches consider our mental experience to be something beyond the physical, something that cannot be explained in terms of purely physical stuff. What is beyond the physical is generally considered to be a non-physical mind, which experiences a variety of ideas or phenomena. This notion of a non-physical mind is connected historically to notions of the self or the soul.

One of these approaches takes the evidence for an external world seriously and, thus, considers there to exist both a mental kind of substance and a physical kind of substance. This general ontological view is called dualism (or more accurately, mind-body dualism). The term ‘dualism’ is appropriate because there are two entirely distinct ontological categories.

The other takes the epistemological skepticism we have considered more seriously and considers there to exist only a mental kind of substance. This general ontological view is called idealism. On this view, no physical world exists. And to quote Berkeley: “to be is to be experienced.”
The final approach takes the evidence for an external world seriously, and takes the lack of evidence for a non-physical mind just as seriously. This leads to a view that *all* that exists is physical stuff. This general ontological view is called *materialism* (or *physicalism*, which is similar but slightly different).

What problems emerge for each of these different positions? What do each of them have difficulty explaining or accounting for?
What aspects of experience does materialism easily explain and what aspects does materialism have difficulty explaining?

Most people these days, at the very least most scientifically oriented people, are materialists (or physicalists). On this view, there are the four things mentioned in class that materialism has a difficulty explaining: life/living; reason and calculation; goals and purposive behavior; and consciousness.

The only thing that materialism cannot account for is the fact of consciousness—the fact that a conscious experience of phenomena exists. It is not clear how our conscious experience can be reduced to, or explained in terms of, physical stuff. As Prof. Thorp mentioned this leads to the problem of explaining \textit{qualia}—mental properties such as the experience of colour, feelings, tastes, etc.
What aspects of experience does dualism easily explain and what aspects does it have difficulty explaining?

Those who are dualists have a, possibly more, difficult problem in accounting how a non-physical mental substance relates to physical substances. And if they interact, it is difficult to understand how a non-physical substance can have any effect on a physical substance, and vice versa.
What aspects of experience does idealism easily explain and what aspects does it have difficulty explaining?

Finally, those who are idealists, have the problem of accounting for how it is that the phenomenal world has such a high degree of regularity and how scientific theory, which posits an, in some sense coherent, external reality, is so successful at explaining, predicting and describing what we would want to call natural phenomena.

You all know what Berkeley’s answer is going to be…

What would we have to say about scientific theories in such a case?
What aspects of experience does materialism easily explain and what aspects does it have difficulty explaining?
What aspects of experience does dualism easily explain and what aspects does it have difficulty explaining?
What aspects of experience does idealism easily explain and what aspects does it have difficulty explaining?