One of the basic themes in contemporary discussion of the relationship between mind and matter is the causal closure, or completeness, of the physical: all physical events have physical causes (roughly). However this doctrine of the causal closure be supported or questioned, it remains a difficulty to say precisely what the margins are that delineate the physical domain against others, such as the mental.

An interesting case in point is raised by the famous-infamous question “what is an electron?” On the surface, an electron is a stable massive particle with negative charge and spin 1/2. But the response of a mathematical physicist will be very different and, at least on his own view, much deeper: an electron is an irreducible unitary representation of the Poincaré group. A representation of the Poincaré group is clearly not a physical entity, although an electron, naively speaking, is just a particle with mass, charge and spin.

Of course, this delineation problem evaporates for the physicalist, who tends to say that all events that exist are physical events anyway (roughly). For the non-physicalist, a problem mirroring the causal closure of the physical is the problem of the causal closure of the mental. The question of mental causation has been one of the major problems in the philosophy of mind for a long time, but it remains a difficulty to say precisely what the margins are that delineate the mental domain against others, such as the physical.

The article by David Hommen directly touches the margin between subjective (conscious) mental states and objective physical (bodily) states. It investigates the often made argument that our mental states must contribute to the causation of our behavior and actions in order to make human agency possible. The consequence of this argument would be that an epiphenomenal account, which holds that mental states are causally inefficacious, contradicts human agency. In other words, the “agency objection” is intended to reject epiphenomenalism.

Although epiphenomenalism has been met with “particularly passionate disapproval”, Hommen argues that it actually is the kind of physicalism desirable to preserve dualist intuitions without falling victim to interactive (Cartesian) dualism. Based on a meticulous reconstruction of the agency objection, he demonstrates that it is not as valid as it is often thought to be. Rather than attributing a causal role on behavior and action to mental states, he sketches how replacing the notion of causation by contextual constraints might be a useful move. At the end, human
agency turns out to be compatible with epiphenomenalism – which, of course, does not yet establish that epiphenomenal is cogent in general.

The contribution by Gordon Globus reacts to a previous publication by William Seager in this journal, who vehemently defended the existence of consciousness against claims that it might be an illusion. By taking the concept of existence seriously, Globus resorts to existentialist and phenomenologist philosophers such as Heidegger in deconstructing consciousness and turning it into Heideggerian “existence”. In this way he dissolves the dualism of consciousness and world.

Globus sees potential to inquire into Heidegger’s existence through a quantum field theoretical approach that was originally launched by Umezawa and collaborators in the 1960s. Recently expanded by the work of Vitiello and others, this approach offers a speculative way to talk about existence as something between, and more fundamental than, consciousness and world. The margin between them becomes a domain on its own, not transcendent but experienced in situatedness moment-to-moment.

It is illuminating to compare this step with what William James suggested in his 1904 article “Does Consciousness Exist?”, where he proposed the notion of “pure experience”, “an instant field of the present” which is only “potentially either object or subject”. It is no accident that Globus outlines some basic similarity in spirit with the way “QBism” (à la Fuchs and coworkers) looks at quantum mechanics. The most recent issue of Mind and Matter contains an introduction into QBism that emphasizes its affinity with James’ ideas on pure experience and neutral monism.

In his reply to Globus, William Seager turns to the distinction of “thick” and “thin” conceptions of consciousness. While thick versions refer to reflective knowledge about inner states, thin versions just require that it is “something it is like” to be an experiencing creature – consciousness as nothing more than pure presence. Globus, it seems to me, wants to say that this thin version of consciousness is actually already existence – or something near enough.

Arkady Plotnitsky’s paper addresses an ongoing theme, which is broadly couched in terms of the realism versus anti-realism, or ontic versus epistemic, debate in the philosophy of quantum theory. His primary sources are Heisenberg and Bohr who, together with others, proposed the so-called Copenhagen interpretation in the 1920s and thereafter. On this view, quantum states and processes as such, independent of their measurement, cannot be represented in the theory, mathematically or otherwise. (Once measured, they give rise to classical phenomena.)

Plotnitsky radicalizes this view to the extent that quantum states and processes are not only beyond representation, they are even beyond conception. This “structural nonrealism” as he calls it, is based on the concept of an ontic reality which, different from structural realism, is a “reality without realism” – hence “nonrealism”. This means that we are not
only unable to represent that ultimate reality but we cannot even con-
ceive of what it is. The structured world of observed quantum phenom-
ena emerges in a structureless and lawless fashion, and the nature of this
emergence is “beyond the reach of thought altogether”. A fundamentally
impenetrable margin of the subjectively mental.

The target of the essay review by Donata Schoeller and Neil Dunaetz
is Eugene Gendlin’s book “A Process Model”. Gendlin was a philosopher-
psychologist who is best known for the practices of “focusing” and “think-
ing at the edge” that he developed inspired by Carl Rogers. A key idea in
these practices is to experience thoughts or ideas in the process of their
emergent formation – access to the implicate on its way of becoming explic-
cated. (A comparison with David Bohm’s implicate order and his subtle
notion of dialog implied by it suggests itself.)

Meaning in this model is a “felt sense” that arises out of a situated-
ness in which “body and cognition are not just split apart” and “every-
thing is interaffected by everything”. Schoeller and Dunaetz relate this to
Wittgenstein’s dictum that “meaning is language use in situations”, which
Gendlin specifies by articulating what “situation” means in his framework:
a mind-body process in which the felt sense of the implicit is conveyed as
a meaningful relation between the results of its explication.

The issue opens with an essay by Scott Jordan, who recently joined the
board of the society and intends to focus his support primarily on public
outreach activities. His main background is in psychology, with a remark-
able interest in philosophical and historical questions accompanying his
work. Jordan’s contribution examines the link between embodiment and
consciousness that attracts much interest in recent research in general
(including Gendlin’s) and in his own work in particular.

The notion of embodiment does not only mean that mental processes
are expressed bodily, but it also covers the opposite, that bodily pro-
cesses feed back on the mental. A corresponding action-perception cycle
has been proposed by a number of authors in the past, sometimes with
different notions such as “feedback control” (Wiener), “intentional arc”
(Merleau-Ponty), “self-organization” (Ashby), “synergetics” (Haken), “di-
rect perception” (Gibson) or, quite recently, “closed-loop approaches” in
cognitive neuroscience.

All these “cycles of holism”, as Jordan calls them, undercut classical
dualities such as that of the mental and the physical and allow us to
express and better understand concepts (such as intentionality and mean-
ing) that transgress the margins between them. Along with Spinoza’s
aspect monism, Jordan suggests that the embodiment movement might
lead us to an ontology that does not posit the mental and/or the physical
as fundamental essences but rather regards them as aspects of a more
comprehensive reality that we just begin to divine.