

Postscript to 'There is no question of physicalism'

by Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor

We have been accused of ignoring the most plausible versions of physicalism (Robinson 1991, Pettit 1993), of not taking account of the methodology of physical science (Smith 1992, Papineau 1993) and of giving an invalid argument against supervenience (Menuge 1993). We have rebutted some of these accusations in detail elsewhere (Crane 1993, Mellor 1993). Here we address more general issues.

Although all the doctrines we attacked have been explicitly advanced as physicalist, many of our physicalist critics now deny that they hold any of them. Their combination of Puritan zeal with Anglican equivocation does make our Hydra-headed opponents hard to pin down, but it also suggests a worship of the physical that owes more to emotion than to argument. We must however confess to ignoring one fashionable physicalist credo, the cry that all entities, if not reducible to physical ones, are at least *composed* of or *constituted* by them: i.e. that mental particulars, properties and facts are 'nothing over and above' the physical entities which constitute them (see Charles and Lennon 1992 for versions of this view). Many physicalists seem surprised by our reluctance to be impressed by this modest proposal.

But how modest this proposal is depends on what 'composed of' means. Agreeing with De Morgan that 'great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em, and little fleas have lesser fleas, [perhaps] *ad infinitum*', we admitted in our paper that 'everything extended in space either is physical or has some physical parts', simply because the study of the smallest entities, including spacetime points, is traditionally assigned to physics departments. What we deny is that this is a serious reading of physicalism, unless these little points and parts are taken to be all there is. For *contra* Pettit (1993), non-physical fleas, such as our minds, are not made physical by having little physical fleas inside 'em: so either these non-physical entities do not exist or this so-called 'physicalism' admits all we assert, namely that not everything is physical.

To this most physicalists reply that non-physical wholes depend on their physical parts: remove the latter and you remove the former. But so what? All wholes depend on their parts in this way: does that make our galaxy no more than the spacetime points it occupies and without which it would not exist? Moreover, as we observed, many parts depend just as much on the whole they are parts of: as, for example, each particle in a gas sample depends for its temperature on the mean kinetic energy of all the others; or as the colour of a small part of a painted surface depends on the colours that surround it. The supposed truisms of mereology do not show mental or physical wholes to be nothing more than their trivially physical smallest parts.

In any case the relevant relation between the mental and the physical is not that of wholes to parts. That is a relation between particulars, whereas physicalism is a thesis about properties. What our constitution theorists must therefore argue is that physical properties in some sense 'constitute' mental ones. But in what sense? Two proposals have been made recently: that mental properties are related to physical ones (i) as determinables like colour are to their determinate values, like green (Yablo 1992), or (ii) as a 'role' is to a 'realiser' of that role (Papineau 1993). Although we reject both these views, here we remark only that they both credit the world with containing more than a 'true completed physics' would assert. Why then call these views physicalist? The only reason we can think of is to signal their inconsistency with Cartesian dualism. But it is bizarre to reduce physicalism to a mere denial of one of the most contentious theories of the mind there has ever been.

We do however have a diagnosis of why constitution theorists jump through so many hoops to say how mental and physical properties are related. We think it is because they take denying Cartesian minds to entail accepting some principle about the generality or universality of physics, such as the principle Papineau (1993) calls the ‘completeness’ of physics—that all physical effects are completely determined by purely physical causes. Once accepted, this principle generates a seemingly hard but actually quite spurious problem of how to explain the reality and causal efficacy of mental entities. Our solution is to avoid raising the problem in the first place, by rejecting the principle. For as our paper shows, neither physics in particular nor the non-mental sciences in general are complete in any sense that poses any problem for mental causation. There would only be a problem if physical laws were so complete that adding mental laws would create a contradiction. But in that sense physics is not complete at all: for example, the physical laws which require our thoughts and actions to conserve energy and momentum are consistent with any number of psychological and psychophysical laws and consequent mental causation.

The vogue for constitution theories also exemplifies two other defects in recent physicalist literature. The first is that it deflects serious debate about the mind’s place in nature into attempts to answer the silly question, ‘given that we must be physicalists, what sort of physicalists should we be?’. All this produces is vague or vacuous formulations of physicalism, which do nothing to solve any real philosophical problems about the mind, such as those posed by consciousness and intentionality. The right approach is to start with those problems and see if their solutions require us to suppose that the mind is physical, and if so in what sense. These physicalists are like Christians or socialists posing such questions as ‘The Middle East: what should a Christian/ socialist think?’, to which the only sensible answer is: first think about the real problems of the Middle East and see if they demand, or even admit, Christian or socialist solutions.

The literature’s second defect is its tendency to rely on a few talismanic words to ward off belief in spooks. Take ‘supervenience’: despite all the effort put into defining all the possible versions of this vague idea, even physicalists are beginning to realise that it cannot on its own define a serious kind of physicalism (see Horgan 1993). We think the significance of ‘constitution’ has been exaggerated in much the same way. It makes perfectly good sense to talk of the constitution of a particular thing or event by its spatial or spatiotemporal parts. But this, as we have noted, is not how the mental is related to the physical. Yet far from being discouraged by the obvious disanalogy, constitution theorists respond by claiming that, even though the precise notion of constitution here has yet to be formulated, they do know that the physical must ‘in some sense’ constitute the mental. In short, as with ‘supervenience’, they find solace in a physicalistically correct word, almost regardless of its meaning (see e.g. Pettit 1993, p. 215).

So much for today’s physicalist orthodoxy. Other critics have complained that our paper did not adequately address its precursors. For instance, we did not discuss the arguments of David Lewis and others for various forms of identity theory. Thus Lewis (1966) argues that if mental states are defined in terms of their causal roles, and physics is ‘explanatorily adequate’, then mental states must be physical states. But if we did not tackle this argument directly, we did tackle it indirectly, by attacking in our §2 its second premise, that physics is explanatorily adequate.

Similarly with the ‘overdetermination argument’ for token identity (see Papineau 1990). This assumes that (i) some token physical effect has a token mental cause, (ii) all physical effects have complete physical causes and (iii) there is no causal overdetermination, and infers that the token mental cause is identical with some token physical cause. Here the premise we challenged was (ii): we denied that all physical effects have physical causes which are complete in any sense that stops them also having different mental causes. To this

we would now add that (iii) is also false in any sense that would yield the conclusion, even if (ii) were true. Take the members of a firing squad all firing at once, perhaps to try and absolve each other from the charge of causing the death of their victim, Don. Who then killed Don? Such cases do pose a problem for counterfactual analyses of causation, but that is no reason to pretend that they cannot occur. And in the mental case the problem need never arise if, as we have argued, psychophysical laws link mental and physical events and states. For then Don's wife Kim's distress and a state of her brain can both be sufficient causes of her collapse, since a psychophysical law can make each of these causes supervene on the other, thus making each such that, without it, Kim would not have collapsed. The problem of overdetermination, such as it is, arises only when two or more sufficient causes are nomologically independent, which the distinct mental and physical causes of Kim's collapse need not be. But even if they were independent, they would pose no worse a problem than the firing squad does—and the theory they would pose it for is not any non-physicalist theory of the mind but the counterfactual theory of causation.

These and other links between identity theories and our anti-physicalism are developed in more detail in Crane (forthcoming). Here we can only repeat that we have not yet found a serious version of physicalism that is immune to the arguments of our paper. This however brings us to the other common complaint about us, namely that we did not say what our own position is: dualist, non-reductionist, naturalist, anti-naturalist? To this complaint we must first reply that it misses our main point, which was to deny the significance of the problem to which physicalism, dualism and the rest offer solutions. However, to satisfy those who want a label for our view of the mind, we shall conclude by offering one.

Although we have explicitly rejected Cartesian dualism, we should not mind being called 'dualists' if this implied no more than our belief that some mental items are not physical. But it implies more than this. In particular, it implies that we think the mental–physical distinction matters more than, say, chemical–electrical, biological–economic or thermal–gravitational distinctions. But we do not think it does. Accepting the existence of irreducibly mental entities does not make us divide empirical entities into just two significant classes: the mental and the physical. 'Dualism' is therefore a misleading label for our view.

We should also quite like to call our view 'naturalism', if all this meant was that minds are natural entities which can be studied by the natural science of psychology. For we are opposed not only to Cartesian dualism, but also to the view, popular with Wittgensteinians and others, that there cannot be a science of the mind. Unfortunately physicalists like Pettit (1993, p. 213) have recently hijacked 'naturalism', originally applied in ethics to views identifying values like goodness with factual states like happiness, as a euphemism for 'physicalism', which makes it even worse than 'dualism' as a label for our view.

Pending redemption of the term 'naturalism', we think the least bad label for our view is 'egalitarian pluralism'. There are many kinds of particulars, properties and facts, including physical, chemical, biological, psychological and social ones, none of which we see any *a priori* reason to believe more basic than any other. In particular, we see no philosophical reason to require or expect mental (or any other kind of) phenomena to have what Menzies calls a 'deeper, purely physical explanation' (1993, p. 230). That is one of the two chief morals of our paper.

The other is contained in our final plea to philosophers of mind to waste less time on the question of physicalism. And here, although many still make ritual obeisances to the physical, we do see some hopeful signs. It is starting to dawn even on physicalists that solutions to the most important problems of the mind are not advanced by accepting—or by rejecting—physicalism. Current theories of content, for example, need assume nothing about the physical or non-physical nature of the mind. We do not of course foresee our present-day

physicalists recanting; but we do see them, like Soviet philosophers towards the end of that regime, devoting themselves, after increasingly perfunctory incantations of their party dogma, to more serious issues in the philosophy of mind.

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