

1 Physicalism and Panpsychism

I hope this note gets precisely at what physicalism claims. A brief alternative to it is added in the last paragraph.

Physicalism purports that mental events (thoughts, desires, emotion, sensation, etc.) are physical events. This would imply that a purely physical description of a mental event should exhaust everything there is to know about the mental event. The problem is that mental events such as desires to eat chocolate or the urge to itch your ear are not amenable to descriptions in terms of physics. Even if they were, how would one understand what is being described as being a desire to eat chocolate when the description is in terms of volt-meter readings or connections between neurons, that is nuts and bolts. One would still have to go from the physics to the mental state. The way physics works is as follows. Physics describes the content of some phenomenon in terms of other physical things: forces, fields, and particles. The relationship among such things is summed up in some equation. There could be no equation, once understood by a listener, that would adequately or fully convey the subject's *feeling* of the desire to eat ice cream. It is unclear what that would look like because what one obtains from the physics is, in most cases, a reductive account of the phenomenon in terms of the physical constituents. Physics does not entail mental states. It is on this ground that the physicalist program is questioned, thereby leading to the hard problem of consciousness. Namely, there is an explanatory gap between a physical description of what is going in your brain and what it is that you are thinking. We talk about thoughts and desires entirely in terms of language that is devoid of physical referents. Describe Marxism in terms of voltages and neurons firing and you are no closer to understanding Marxism than you were before you read *das Kapital*.

The examples of Frank Jackson's and Nida-Rumelin are an attempt to show that there is something left out in a physicalist account of the mental. Let me simplify them because they are needlessly complicated. Take for example Nida-Rumelin's Marianne who engages in a housing experiment that deprives her of seeing colors in their natural state but otherwise she receives complete knowledge of the world. Someone asked if she is able to deduce the wavelength of the red paint on the wall. Let's assume she is given all the equipment to do this. So the situation is as follows. Marianne knows the fact, "the sky is blue," though she has never seen a blue sky and but she has seen the blue of the sky. The question is does she learn anything new when she steps outside the room and sees a blue sky. Is there something beyond the neurons firing in her brain (and the neurobiology that is contingent on that) when she looks at a blue sky that we have to account for? If the answer is no, then physicalism is true. But even the physicalist has to explain what it is like for Marianne to see a blue sky. Such a description will not be in terms of physics, however. What it is like for someone to have an experience is not objective and hence a third-person account leaves something out. Physics is entirely third-person. Hence, it cannot account for experience. The solution is to deny that qualia exist. Then how do you account for the itchiness of itches or what it is like to kiss your grandmother

or to have your arm ripped off by a pit-bull? In each of these cases, there are physical facts but there is also an experience. One can say that the physics causes the experience but is not entailed by it. If this is so, then physicalism is false because what is being caused is not physical—it is the inner quality of the experience. So then it seems that the physicalist program leaves something out, namely experience which was precisely what it was attempting to describe in the first place. Simply, the problem of what an experience is like for Marianne or anyone else is not summed up by studying her neurobiology. This would be true only if there were a necessary connection between the mental and the physical. Kripke's modal argument shows that this is not the case.

You might find the following quote from T. Nagel's article, *Panpsychism*[1] to the point: "The theories that physical data provide grounds for may take extraordinary leaps which permit the deduction of radical physical consequences (convertibility of matter and energy and the deflection of light by gravity). But without mentalistic evidence, there is no reason to give mental content to the explanation of physical events. (Someone who infers from a drought that the rain god is angry is not basing his hypothesis on physical evidence alone. He is making a psychological interpretation of the drought, based on his familiarity with human motivation. Any inference of this kind, reasonable or unreasonable, does not belong in physics)." In the same essay, Nagel[1] offers a possible way out of the problem of the irreducibility of the mental. The answer is rather shocking: Panpsychism. That is, the constituents of matter have nonphysical properties. This follows from 4 assumptions: 1) Material Composition: by this Nagel means that all organisms are composed of material stuff, simpliciter. There is nothing more than matter. 2) Nonreductionism: Mental properties such as feeling, emotions, thoughts of Marxism and sensation are not physical properties of an organism. That is, they are not implied by physical properties alone. 3) Realism: Such non-physical properties must have come from something. That is, there is no soul. 4) Nonemergence: No property of a complex organism is truly emergent. Emergence is inherently an epistemological statement reflecting our knowledge of the working of a system. That is, it might appear that our current level of understanding of the physical constituents does not admit the property missing. Nonetheless, it is still possible that at some later date, other constituents will be discovered that will allow a complete explication of the properties of the organism.

Panpsychism follows necessarily from these assumptions simply because if mental events are derived from the organism and the matter which makes up organisms is quite varied and in principle could be any matter (all carbon atoms are equivalent) then all matter must carry the ingredients necessary for consciousness to arise. This might seem absurd and indeed that all matter has non-physical properties should strike you as an unacceptable alternative in the mind-body debate. But try to defeat any of Nagel's assumptions. If you deny (1), then you end up with dualism. If you deny (2), then you do not have the mind-body problem. That is, you deny the mental. It is unclear what a realistic alternative to the denial of realism (3) would look like. One seems to be inevitably stuck with belief in souls if you deny (3). Now the last one on

nonemergence. Denial of (4) results in irreducible contingent laws connecting mental states and complex organizational patterns of an organism. As Nagel[1] puts it, denial of nonemergence would entail that mental states have no necessary causal connection to brain states. This seems implausible. Hence, although panpsychism seems outrageous, it is more plausible than its denial.

References

- [1] T. Nagel, Panpsychism in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.