

Physicalism¹

Philosophy of mind is a branch of metaphysics, and different theories in philosophy of mind disagree on metaphysical questions about *what* exists and its nature. Questions about what exists are questions about ontology. According to a traditional metaphysics, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. It has ‘ontological independence’. For example, this book is a (physical) substance. Substances are also understood by contrast with properties.

1. Substances are what possess properties. The chair (substance) is solid (property). Properties can’t exist without substances - they depend on substances to exist. Solidity depends on things being solid; the property ‘being 1 metre long’ depends on something being that long; and, Descartes claimed, thoughts can’t exist without a thinker.
2. Substances persist through changes in properties - something can change from being 1 metre long to being 1.1 metres long, e.g. by growing. Obviously, its property of ‘being 1 metre long’ does not persist through this change. It loses that property and gains another. Or again, a thinker can think a series of thoughts - the thinker persists, the thoughts do not.

A central question in metaphysics of mind is ‘is the mind a substance?’ Can your mind exist on its own, independently, or is it dependent on something else in order to exist? In particular, is your mind dependent on your body, perhaps especially your brain, in order to exist at all? Many people believe, and many religions teach, that your mind can exist after death, i.e. the death of your body. This can mean many things, which we can’t review here, but one common interpretation is that your mind is a separate substance from your body. If the mind is a substance, then the end of your body’s existence is not the end of your mind’s existence.

The view that the mind and the body are separate substances is known as *substance dualism*. Substance dualism claims that there are two fundamental *kinds* of substance - mental and physical. The most common alternative to substance dualism is the view that there is only one kind of substance, which is matter. Thus the mind is not a distinct substance; it is not ‘ontologically distinct’ from what is material, not a separate thing from the body. The claim that there is only one kind of substance, physical substance, is often called ‘materialism’.

In recent years, talk of ‘materialism’ has been supplanted by talk of ‘physicalism’. The most important reason for this is that physics has shown that ‘matter’ is too crude an identification of the most basic substance that exists, e.g. matter can be changed into energy. But in rethinking materialism, philosophers have also refined

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 209-14

the claim from being just about what type of substance exists to include other conditions as well. It is not enough that the only *substance* is physical. The fundamental *nature* of the universe is physical, and this covers events and properties as well.

PHYSICALISM

As a first attempt, we could define physicalism as the view that everything that exists - every substance, every property that substances have, every event that occurs - is either physical or completely depends upon something that is physical. 'Physical' means something that comes under the laws and investigations of physics, and whose essential properties are identified and described by physics.

But we should be more precise. Physicalism claims that what is physical is metaphysically fundamental. So physicalism says:

1. the properties identified by physics form the fundamental nature of the universe;
2. physical laws govern all objects and events in space-time;
3. every physical event has a physical cause that brings it about in accordance with the laws of physics. (This is known as the 'completeness of physics' or 'causal closure'.)

It is worth saying more about the first and third claims.

The third claim states that all physical events have sufficient physical causes. Of any event involving a change in physical properties (e.g. every movement of your body), that event can be brought about by something physical alone. No other, non-physical causes are necessary. So if there are non-physical causes, they don't contribute anything *in addition* to physical causes to the way the physical world changes over time.

The first claim states that the properties identified by physics are ontologically 'basic'. Other properties, in particular mental properties, are ontologically dependent on the properties identified by physics (or more broadly, the natural sciences). Mental properties, therefore, if they exist at all, are not part of the *fundamental* nature of the universe, but ontologically dependent on other properties.

There are three different ways in which this could be true.

1. Elimination: mental properties don't exist. The theory eliminative materialism claims that at least some mental properties, as we usually think of them, don't exist. At least some of our basic concepts of mental properties, such as CONSCIOUSNESS or INTENTIONALITY, are fundamentally mistaken - these concepts don't refer to anything that exists. (And any other mental properties that do exist are physical properties.)
2. Identity: mental properties are, in fact, just types of physical properties. For example, they could be neurological properties. This is the view of

mind-brain type identity theory. Neurological properties of the brain, such as what brain cells are made of, the connections they form with each other, the chemicals they exchange, are physical properties. They depend on other more fundamental physical properties to do with molecules and atoms that physics investigates. So mental properties are neurological properties, which are physical properties that depend on more fundamental physical properties.

3. Dependent but distinct: mental properties are not physical properties of the brain, but they completely depend upon physical properties (perhaps even just physical properties of the brain). But what is it to say that mental properties 'depend' upon physical properties? Philosophers spell this out in terms of the idea of 'supervenience'.

SUPERVENIENCE

The essence of supervenience is this: properties of type A supervene on properties of type B just in case any two things that are exactly alike in their B properties cannot have different A properties.

For example, a painting has various aesthetic properties, such as being elegant or balanced. It also has various physical properties, such as the distribution of paint on the canvas. The aesthetic properties supervene on the physical ones, because we cannot change the painting's being elegant or balanced without changing the distribution of paint on the canvas. There can be no change in aesthetic properties without a change in physical properties. And two paintings exactly alike in their physical properties (i.e. duplicates) will have the same aesthetic properties. If two paintings are completely identical in terms of how the paint is arranged - if they look exactly the same - then they must also be identical in terms of their aesthetic properties. Of two physically identical paintings, one can't be graceful while the other is awkward. Any differences in their aesthetic properties entail that there is a difference in their physical properties.

We need to notice the strength of this claim. For physicalism, it is not enough to say that if the paintings are physically identical, then they *are* aesthetically identical. Suppose we say simply that in this case, as it happens, they are both graceful. This allows that in another case, one could be graceful and one not. But that means that aesthetic properties would be able to vary even as the physical properties remained the same. It allows that the physical properties don't *fix* the aesthetic properties.

This isn't right. We want to say that if the paintings are physically identical, then they *must be* aesthetically identical. It is not merely false but *impossible* that one is graceful while the other is awkward, if they both look exactly the same. Put another way, once the physical properties of a painting are finalised - when the painting is finished - there is no further work to be done to 'add' the aesthetic properties. They are already part of the painting. To change the aesthetic qualities, you *must* change the physical properties.

According to physicalism, physical properties 'fix' *all* the other properties in such a way that it is *not possible* for the other properties to change without changing the physical properties. This is what physicalism means by claiming that everything 'depends on' what is physical.

We can picture this with the idea of 'levels' of existence that correspond to the different sciences. At the bottom is physics, investigating elementary particles and atoms. Molecules involve complex organisations of atoms, and cells involve complex organisations of molecules. Multicellular organisms involves complex organisations of cells, including organs such as the brain. Physicalism understands psychology as relating to the brain and the interactions of living things as just the next level.

If mental properties supervene on physical properties, then they are fixed by physical properties such that it is impossible for two things to have the same physical properties and different mental properties. According to physicalism, just as two paintings with an identical distribution of paint must have the same aesthetic properties, two people with identical properties of their brain, say, must have identical mental properties.

Someone who denies this, who argues that what someone thinks or believes or feels is not completely dependent on their physical properties denies physicalism. They claim that (whether or not it happens) it *is* possible for two beings to have identical physical properties but different mental properties. They may argue, for instance, that physicalism is false because the mind is a separate substance (substance dualism), or because mental properties are somehow independent of physical properties (property dualism).

Physicalism claims that what is physical is metaphysically fundamental. This means either than mental properties don't exist at all, or that they are identical with certain physical properties, or that they supervene on physical properties.