

CHAPTER 2

PHYSICALISM

2.1. A NEGATIVE ACCOUNT OF 'PHYSICAL'

With the ontological picture of the previous chapter in mind, I will now sketch the picture of psychophysical dependence that will be the basis of my further arguments. This picture is physicalistic, but 'physicalism' is a term that needs to be given a clear sense before being used. This I will try to do below.

In contemporary philosophy of mind it is generally assumed that all minded particulars, such as human beings, are physical. This can be taken to mean that they are of a physical kind, or have physical properties. Unfortunately, it is by no means clear what 'physical' is supposed to mean. 'Mentioned in contemporary physical theory' is clearly inadequate as a definition: it refers to time and culture, which makes it useless for metaphysics. 'Constitutive of a basic law of nature' is slightly better, but it leaves out inaccurate but intuitively physical concepts such as thick, hard, heavy, sticky, etc. There is not even very much recognizably 'physical' about entities like electrons or neutrinos, or properties like the 'flavour' or 'colour' of quarks. Needless to say that a notion of 'physical' that depends on a Cartesian mind-matter dichotomy will not help us very much either. There thus does not seem to be a consensus definition of 'physical' available on which we can rely; and I do not consider this the right place to mount some proposal for a definition. It can even be doubted that the project of trying to define 'physical' will ever succeed, for no clear criteria of success seem available.²⁵

But does this mean that a clear understanding of 'physicalism' is out of our reach? I think not. For the intuition behind physicalism, or materialism, seems quite clear, and does not seem to depend on any sophisticated account, let alone definition, of what it is to be physical. When it comes to it, physicalism is just the view that life, mind and society have arisen in a lifeless, mindless and nonsocial world, depend for their reality on the basic laws of that world (which are not recognizably biological, psychological or social) and in fact are merely special ways in which the stuff of that world behaves.

²⁵ See especially Crane and Mellor 1990.

What this suggests is that by default we can call the lifeless, mindless and nonsocial the physical, or better: *merely* physical. The idea is that physicalism relies on a commonsense conception of ‘dead matter.’ This is a tacitly negative understanding of ‘physical’: not very much metaphysically interesting, and certainly too poor to count as a definition of ‘physical.’ On the other hand, insofar as we can come by an account of what is characteristic to the living, the mental and the social—not an easy affair, it seems, but more tractable than defining ‘physical’ from scratch—it will not be completely uninformative either.

More importantly, it seems precisely good enough to articulate the core idea of physicalism. We can imagine several parties, each with their own understanding of ‘physical,’ but all in agreement on one point: life, mind and society do not require an irreducibly or *sui generis* ‘vital,’ ‘psychic’ or ‘societal’ addition to the ‘physical,’ whatever that is supposed to be. Also, a physical domain that is demarcated negatively can easily be seen to comprise, apart from properties like charge or spin, properties like weight, length, shape, transparency, treaciness, etc.; as well as chemical properties like being a catalyst or being a corrosive substance. This, it seems, articulates fairly precisely the notion of ‘physical’ as we find it in the discussions on the metaphysics of mind.

2.2. SUPERVENIENCE AND PHYSICAL REALIZATION

Let us now try to spell out what physicalism amounts to in a little more detail. For convenience, let us here concentrate on physicalism about the mental, as a stand-in for the ‘higher-level’ in general. We saw that physicalism is the denial of substance dualism: it holds that all particulars are physical. But many physicalists, namely the ones committed to property dualism—or better, pluralism—do not believe that all particulars are *merely* physical. For some particulars have mental properties.

It can be asked why such a position should be considered physicalistic. It seems that allowing nonphysical properties, though not particulars, is just as much a violation of physicalism as substance dualism. Is not physicalism just the claim that everything is physical? Why make an exception for properties? On the other hand, it is either just hollow to proclaim mental properties physical properties or, namely on the negative account of ‘physical’ outlined above, it amounts to an outright denial of their reality.

We will make some progress by noting that physicalism regards merely physical properties as *basic* with regard to other kinds of properties, such as mental ones, in the sense that the latter *depend on* merely physical proper-

ties. This dependence is, in fact, the notion of *supervenience* that we met in the Introduction.

Let us now have a closer look at this notion. With regard to mental states of affairs we already saw that supervenience means that 1) some set of physical states of affairs in a world is required for any set of mental states of affairs in that world, and 2) given the physical states of affairs of a world with mental states of affairs, there could not fail to be the mental states of affairs of that world. As Davidson (1995, 7) says:

The definition of supervenience implies that a change in mental properties is always accompanied by a change in physical properties, but it does not imply that the same physical properties change with the same mental properties.

The notion of supervenience is rather sophisticated, and Kim (1984b) has distinguished weak, strong, and global supervenience. If we understand ‘covariation’ as a one-way, mental-physical relation, then, roughly, weak supervenience is mere *de facto* but not necessary covariation of physical and mental properties; global supervenience is covariation of the undifferentiated totality of physical properties in a world with specific mental properties; and strong supervenience is necessary covariation of specific mental and specific physical properties.

Kim rightly rejects weak and global supervenience as being too weak to express psychophysical dependence. Obviously, mere *de facto* covariation is not dependence. And as for global supervenience, it cannot distinguish bizarre from ordinary kinds of psychophysical correlations. Intuitively, the processes in our brains make a difference to mental properties while many other physical states of affairs, such as the existence of an ammonia molecule in one of Saturn’s rings, do not (see Kim 1987, 85); but on a thesis of global supervenience we cannot make such a distinction.

If this is right, a physicalistic mind-body theory needs at least the notion of strong supervenience. Kim has argued, however, that the mere assertion of mind-body supervenience is not yet a mind-body theory.²⁶ After all, such an assertion is compatible with *various* mind-body theories, including Cartesian dualism, or the bizarre theory, put forward by Malebranche in the 17th century, that mind and body do not interact but are like two clocks kept synchronous by God. Such theories may well assert mind-body covariation in a strong sense, so that the demands of supervenience theory are satisfied. Yet, they are clearly not physicalistic.

Thus, in order to articulate physicalism, psychophysical supervenience should not just be asserted, but also explicated in a physicalistic way. Physi-

²⁶ See his 1993b, 165-9 and his 1998, 9-15.



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Dependencies, Connections, and Other Relations

A Theory of Mental Causation

de Muijnck, W.

2003, XXXVI, 288 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1391-1