

Philosophy of the mind and physicalism philosophy essay



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Most modern philosophers of the Mind claim to be working on the assumption that Physicalism is true. There are, however, difficulties in making precise what they mean by this. Explain these problems. Are there any insoluble problems with Physicalism as a philosophical position?

I posit that physicalism attempts to uphold scientific truth in the realm of philosophy, however it is an incomplete argument and cannot be true.

Physicalism as defined by Crane and Mellor is,

“ Everything is physical: more precisely, that all entities, properties, relations, and facts are those which are studied by physics or other physical sciences.... physical science is a unique ontological authority: the authority to tell us where there is” (Crane & Mellor, 1990).

A Physicalist would argue that we as human beings cannot determine or perceive anything outside of our 5 senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Therefore assumptions that bypass or expand beyond our perception should not be understood as current scientific truths. However our scientific knowledge has grown and is ever growing which brings us to the question: Is there a boundary to our scientific knowledge; will we ever to explain currently non-physical properties in a scientific way? I have five senses, you have five senses, and experts have shown that humans have five senses but are there only five? This essay does not deny that findings using physics and scientific deduction are true but I argue that there are more truths beyond the scope of the observable. Our senses limit us to knowledge but that does not mean we should ignore or dismiss the un-measurable. Over the years arguments for physicalism have been convincing however there are internal

issues within the framework of physicalism that are insoluble. I will present arguments on why physicalism cannot be true by citing matters concerning consciousness, knowledge, prepositions, and finally conceivability. I will offer a typical physicalists' response to the arguments presented and show that even their responses are inadequate.

The first issue that many philosophers have with Physicalism is that it cannot explain the existence of consciousness. To deny consciousness is to deny the fact that you are currently and consciously reading this paper. This argument is typically referred to Descartes first argument for dualism however it also helps prove that a mental state can not be composed of the same substance as a physical state or rather mind and matter are ontologically separate (Graham, 1998). His argument goes as follows:

" I can conceive of myself as lacking a brain, But I cannot conceive of myself as lacking a mind. If I try to doubt that I have a mind, I will discover myself with thoughts like ' I doubt I have a mind', and so much admit that I have a mind - for the activity of doubting is mental. Hence brain and mind must be distinct" (Graham, 1998).

Thinking, as Descartes posits, is therefore undeniable. The basic thought of physicalism is centered on the fact that the mind and body are same thing, a physical substance. How can this be true when one the mind, a hypothetically physical substance, can be doubted, but the brain, another physical substance, cannot?

This incongruence of similar substances violates Leibniz' law, which states that:

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If $x = y$, then every property of x is a property of y , and vice versa

(Braddon-Mitchell & Jackson, 2008)

This law concludes that all properties must be shared in order for two things to be identical. Returning to Descartes' argument, the physical can be doubted but the mental cannot ergo a mental state does not share all qualities with any brain state.

Most physicalists would provide a rather empirical response to Leibniz' law. The fact that, as humans, we once thought that light itself had no mass but have since learned that it in fact does, shows that we lack complete knowledge of the world around us. I am going to prove why this argument is faulty through means of citing subjectivity, access, and propositions.

Thomas Nagel supported the idea that a subjective experience cannot be reduced to brain activity, as a physicalist might believe stating,

"[i]f we acknowledge that a physical theory of mind must account for the subjective character of experience, we must admit that no presently available conception gives us a clue how this could be done"

(Nagel, 1974).

He is saying that currently physicalism does not have a theory behind subjective experience but he is leaving room for future findings. For all we know mental states could in fact have a location in space or other physical properties. However, Nagel argued further in his essay 'What is it like to be a Bat', that the subjectivity of the mind cannot be reduced to science citing

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the example of a bat (Nagel, 1974). Even if humans had access or knows everything there was to know about a bat's sonar sense, we still would lack the actual feeling of being a bat (Nagel, 1974). This idea that there is a non-physical attribute to a mental state is something that will never be disproved by science.

A Physicalist might posit that with time and advances in technology and knowledge we might be able to place physical attributes to all mental states like we did with mass and light. However this argument falls apart when consciousness is considered.

Nagel incorporates the access objection to show that consciousness or mental states are different substances and cannot be reduced into the same thing. The access objection stipulates that the mind cannot be the brain because we know mind – our conscious minds – and brain in different ways (Nagel, 1974). For example we have direct access to our minds, however we do not have direct knowledge of our brains. This leads us back to Descartes' first argument for dualism where we can doubt our brain or any physical substance but we cannot doubt our mind.

Returning to the idea that subjectivity of the mind cannot and will not be reduced to physical substances we find another supporter and strong argument against physicalism, Frank Jackson. His argument, referred to as the knowledge argument, is formulated around a super-scientist named Mary from the future (Jackson, 1982). In this world all physical facts have been discovered and, “ all there is to know about the causal and relational facts consequent upon all this, including of course functional roles” (Jackson,

1982). She has gained this wealth of knowledge by watching a black and white television in a colorless room for her entire life. She then exits the room and sees colors for the first time. Jackson argues that when she left the room she learned about qualia of colors or the properties that characterize and make color what it is (Jackson, 1982). This argument postulates that physical knowledge does not constitute phenomenal knowledge, just as in Nagels example of the knowledge about a bat's sonar sense does not allow for realization on what a bat's sonar sense actually is.

Three main contentions have arisen surrounding this argument that Jackson addresses in a response paper. First he clarifies that Mary, "... could not imagine what it is like to sense red; it is that, as a matter of fact, she would not know" (Jackson, 1986). Secondly, his argument does not rest on the transitional property of 'if $a = b$ and $b = c$ then $a = c$ '. It is about how Mary's knowledge of the world is incomplete. Logical acumen does not fit all the gaps in Mary's knowledge of phenomenal attributes (Jackson, 1986). Lastly, when Mary exits the room she gains knowledge of her own experience and not of others. This is a novel experience and will create new physical changes in her brain which would not happen if physicalism were true.

Subjectivity is a strong objection to physicalism and another philosopher, Jerry Fodor, explored more in depth this idea. He states that,

"It seems as if anything that could be packed into the notion of the causal role of their experience could be shared by them and yet the qualitative content of the experience could be as different as you like" (Fodor, 1994)

He is referring to an example of where there are two observers looking at the same thing but they are experiencing different qualitative experiences. One sees a tomato as green and the other sees it as red (Fodor, 1994). Physically the tomato is the same for both observers because it is the same object but both perceive it differently. This perception leads to two distinct mental states, one red in the first observer and the other green in the second (Fodor, 1994). How can physicalism be true if two observers are sharing the same qualitative experience but are in different mental states? This example follows an argument called the inverted-spectrum thought experiment.

Davie Lewis has somewhat contested this opinion thinking that since an inverted spectrum is intelligible so it should not constitute as an objection to monism (Horgan, 1984). Another confutation is that the situation of the observers can be based in two different relativizations. The two people are under one relativization they are under the same functionally identical states and the other they are in functionally different states (Horgan, 1984).

Terance Horgan formulated a rebuttal stating that,

“ The qualitative content of Jill’s experience when she looks at grass is an absolute, intrinsic feature of her mental like - not a feature that is implicitly population-relative” (Horgan, 1984)

In other words she is showing how the content of qualia does go beyond what is functionally, or physically, definable.

Another argument to show mental states have a physical basis is that of proposition or truth of belief. While there might be some physical aspects of

a belief, there are propositional aspects, which cannot be reduced: intentionality and logical relations.

The essence of a proposition is to be about something. Physical things are not about something. For example, neurons firing lack the property of being about something or aboutness (Searle, 1983). In other words they lack intentionality. A belief has a property that physical things cannot have therefore it cannot be interchangeable with a physical object. Another philosopher, Brentano, held a supporting thesis that aboutness was exclusively and undeniable mental.

An example that follows this ideology is a belief (Graham, 1998). In Graham's book entitled *Philosophy of the Mind* he offers the example of a six-year old's belief that his Uncle Roderick is bald. His argument goes as follows: Believing is a mental activity that mentally points, as in this example the boy's belief points at his uncle. Mental aiming differs from physical aiming, as the boy pointing a dart gun at his uncle (Graham, 1998). The first contrast between mental aiming and physical aiming is that the physical requires the uncle to exist while the mental only requires an imagination (Graham, 1998). The later contrast cites that mental aiming "possesses a specificity or aspectuality which physical aiming lacks" (Graham, 1998). The last proof that is offered by Brentano's Thesis is that the mental aiming could be misrepresented or misinterpreted. Brentano's thesis provides a solid argument about why intentionality discredits physicalism. Intentionality shows that mental phenomenon are not the same as physical phenomenon and that the mind has aboutness whereas the brain does not.

Propositions also have the ability to be true or false, contradict, or presuppose other propositions, which are physical relations. Physical entities cannot be true or false although assertions can be made that is false (Graham 1998). However, those assertions are propositions about an entity. The physicalist who asserts that beliefs are physical brain states has to say that physical things have the property of being true. This is because beliefs have a propositional content and if that content is physical then it has physical properties. Since this is not true then beliefs are not entirely physical (Graham, 1998).

The last argument against physicalism I will present is the zombie argument or rather known as the conceivability argument. Many philosophers such as Nagel, whom I have referenced before, and most notably David Chalmers supported this idea. I will outline Chalmers zombie argument to show another reason why physicalism has insoluble problems. First off lets imagine a world that is physically identical to our world (Chalmers, 2004). If physicalism were to be their then the imagined world would not have any additional aspects because any world that is physically the same as ours is completely the same as ours (Chalmers, 2004). But there is a possible world, which contains zombies, people who lack certain mental states or qualia. These worlds are still physically identical but they are in fact different (Chalmers, 2004). Therefore physicalism is false. Some physicalists argue if a zombie world is possible but Chalmers refutes this argument by stating that because a world is conceivable then it is possible.

This completes my discussion of why there a numerous problems embedded within the physicalism argument. Physicalists attempt to refute arguments <https://assignbuster.com/philosophy-of-the-mind-and-physicalism-philosophy-essay/>

proposed by any type of dualist however even their arguments lack convincing ideas. There still exist many other arguments against physicalism but I think that the topics of consciousness, knowledge, prepositions and conceivability prove to be the strongest.