

# Analysis of the concept of physicalism



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Like most philosophical constructs, the definitions of physical and physicalism vary depending on whom or which school of thought is doing the defining. The main problem with the defining seems to be in the *mind-body* problem so that is the problem this paper will explore by explaining the definition of physical and just how important it is to have a clear understanding of what physical is, the different types of physicalism, and why counterexamples don't undermine the provided definition of physical and physicalism.

The concept of physicalism seems so simple and true in its core belief that everything in this world is made out of the physical until we have to find a way to explain the role of the mind with its thoughts, feelings, emotions, and perceptions, in this physical construct. In order for physicalism to be valid, there seems to have to be a way to describe the mind and its attributes as physical traits.

Physicalism, then, is the basic understanding that everything surrounding us is either physical itself or made up of preexisting physical matter.

Throughout the world around us we are surrounded by a multitude of different items. We also have within us emotions and the power of our mind's imagination, which can be affected by what we experience in the outside world. Without physicalism how would we know how the world exists, and how do we account for all of the non-physical things that we experience throughout our lives? We see color, we hear sound, we smell food, yet neither color, sound, nor smell are considered a part of the physical world.

For physicalism a thorough definition of physical is necessary for philosophers to determine what falls under materialism or theory based physicalism. Leaving physical without a thorough definition provides problems with the viewing of physicalism. Without the proper understanding of what is or what is not physical how do we know where the physical ends and where non-physical begins?

Descartes tackles, and perhaps, resolves, for him, the mind-body problem in his Meditations. The key to grasping his explanation is that he believed that a substance was something that didn't depend on anything else for its existence and that there were only three kinds of substances in the world: God, Mind, Body. For example, desk is not just one substance and a bracelet a different one. They are both substances that fall into the category of body. Descartes went on to explain that all substances have attributes and therefore the principal attribute of mind is thought while the principal attribute of body is extension of the mind. He uses this logic to defend his view on physicalism. In Descartes' view, once the issue of mind is resolved, physicalism is true for him. " Yet I am a true thing and am truly existing; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: a thinking thing." (Descartes, 109)

Witmer presents two different possibilities for solving the mind-body problem: matter approach and theory approach. Those who ascribe to the matter approach simply believe that all there is in the world are a bunch of solid things, small and large, made out of matter. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, physics includes more than just the physical; it includes forces and fields to name a few, something similar to magnetic fields. Physics itself might just negate this approach. Second, this approach

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still does not do a good job of classifying and explaining what to do with the non-physical. Those who ascribe to the theory approach simply believe that the physical should be only what physics deals with and everything in the world that can be described as it relates to physics. The problems with this approach lead to Hempel's Dilemma and go something like this: You have to choose a theory to define physical. You can choose from current theories, but physics theories change and become outdated so the approach could prove false. You can choose some idealized future theory, but since you have no way of knowing what the future will be, this approach could also prove to be false (Witmer).

A definition of physical that encompasses the world surrounding us and accurately fits into the understanding of physicalism is a substance that is tangible to the human body, i. e. a book, a tree, an article of clothing, or even a wild animal. Another part of this definition is that the physical item is made up of previous existing physical matter, as stated in the First Law of Thermodynamics in chemistry, "matter cannot be created nor destroyed." Therefore we cannot simply invent new items, they have to come from previously existing physical substance. An example of this would be the addition of new cells in our bodies; certain cells exhibit a type of reproduction that only requires one cell. It simply copies its DNA and splits into two, a new cell made from an already existing cell. The last part of this definition of physical is that even if the human eye cannot see something it can still be considered physical if it produces a physical effect in the end. For example, someone doesn't have the ability to see fluctuations in pH levels say in the ocean but they are able to see the effect the changes have,

therefore, pH can be considered as physical. With this definition, physicalists are able to understand how we live in a world surrounded by physical substances and that many reactions that we witness are in fact caused by something that is physical.

Even though this definition seems to include everything around us there are still ideas that it does not include. For example, animals experience consciousness; we are awake and aware of the world surrounding us. You cannot view consciousness itself but you are able to see the physical effects consciousness has on animals. Instead of being made up of physical matter or reacting to physical substances consciousness causes something physical to happen. Another counterexample to physicalism is the brain having physical properties but the mind and our experiences are not physical. The brain is made up of different cells, tissues, and blood vessels; all are physical substances one is able to see them. The mind though is not physical; one cannot see their imagination or thoughts that take place within their mind. Our minds are real and we know that we cannot doubt that they exist but we are able to doubt whether or not they are physical.

Physicalism, as a philosophy, continues to be posited, rebuked, questioned and answered by philosophers. It will likely continue to be controversial and the strength of its evidence will continue to be questioned into the foreseeable future just as it has been in the past. In 1938, Albert Einstein summed up the controversy well when he wrote, “ Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world.” (Einstein, 27)

## Works Cited

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