**Is the mental simply physical?**

Grant Bartley, Editor of Philosophy Now, in conversation with Tony Sobrado, Editorial consultant and writer

**GB:** Physicalism cannot just be the doctrine that the brain produces the mind. I believe that, but I do not believe that the mind produced is physical, but distinctly mental. So perhaps some further clarification is called for from physicalists concerning what would distinguish their doctrine from a naturalistic dualism like mine.

**TS:** There is more to physicalism than just the brain producing the mind which I will address shortly, nonetheless if not physicalism then what, materialism? Often used interchangeably when they are not. Either way it looks like the brain produces the mind as evidenced through causation in neuroscience so either have physicalism/materialism produce the mind via second order realisability in which the mental is a subset of the physical and produced by the physical; and basically property dualism – or simply deny the existence of the mental and phenomenological consciousness via parsimony leaving just the physical (e.g., Dennett and Churchland etc.). The latter I do not agree with because even though it is efficient it is too convenient and leaves substantial conceptual problems.

When you say ‘physicalism cannot just be the doctrine that the brain produces the mind’ here lies part of the problem as well - physicalism, as with most things, has different definitions an interpretations, ranging from physical laws to causal explanation and physical supervenience. The main crux of it is that almost everything we know of is explained by physicalism including electrical pulses in the brain, therefore it would go against the general approach of science, which generally proceeds with conservative radicalism as opposed to overall radicalism, to state that the mind is not physical and outside property dualism because this would be a very strong form of exceptionalism going against everything else we know in the world.

Perhaps, ultimately, we may have to choose between all the fancy laws of physics including the main forces in particle physics, quantum mechanics and all the way down to medicine, engineering and why planes fly versus what appears to be the uniqueness of the mind in which it seems more plausible that physicalism wins out.

When you say further clarification is called for from physicalists concerning what would distinguish their doctrine from a naturalistic dualism like yours I’m not entirely sure what you mean by ‘naturalistic dualism’? Not sure what this specifically entails in terms of a precise definition, it could just be a form of property dualism? If you mean substance dualism then that seems rather radical for this century’s approach. Naturalism generally entails an element of cause and effect and does not necessarily have to be purely physicalist but it’s unlikely that the cause and effect relationship would be viable under substance dualism where the mental is completely distinct from the physical/material due to the violation of the conservation of energy principle and elements of over-determination but again I’m not specifically clear how you are defining naturalistic dualism and I don’t think you mean substance dualism.

Either way, regarding the mental and the physical, and either property dualism or naturalistic dualism, there is an interaction problem that most frameworks have to overcome (except for Dennett and Churchland and their opposite - say Chalmers who wants to basically just upend science as we know it) and that interaction problem is best addressed by physicalism at this moment in time - a variation of physicalism that allows for the interaction of the physical brain and the mental without having an overall ontological or metaphysical contradiction which is often encountered due to some of the consequences of the interaction problem.

**GB:** I call my position 'naturalistic dualism' because I want to indicate that the mind is a product of the brain but nevertheless a different sort of thing entirely from the brain that produces it’s not physical, but mental, in both properties and substance. To me the substance of experience is experience, as there is nothing to an experience but the experience. So it definitely is substance dualism. I think property dualism is an odd position because only in the case of brains are physical things taken to have mental properties, so it is too ad hoc, and leaves the mind's generation unexplained. I believe my position does not violate physical laws but it does say there is more to the world than the physical. The latter should not be surprising, minds and their contents are nothing like anything physical, after all. As for how mind and brains interact, I think it's basically because the information in the mental contents is embodied in brain activity.

**TS:** I believe we are almost back to square 1 then, and so everything I have said previously still stands. You say ‘the mind is a product of the brain but nevertheless a different sort of thing entirely from the brain that produces it: not physical, but mental, in both properties and substance’. This is essentially second order realisability that the mental, however defined, is produced by the brain and this also applies to the information in the mental contents being embodied in brain activity as you say. It looks like we both agree on that. This entails that the mental is a product of the brain, and we have very good reason to believe the brain is physical - being located in time and space, composed of particles and possessing electronic charge (all elements of physicalism) we also have a mental world grounded in mental experience and we both agree on that – illusionism is a bit too strong and mental eliminativism is not required.

As a consequence, we have two options, the physical that we have very good reasons to believe in (thermodynamic laws, particle physics and probabilistic theories of quantum mechanics) is subsumed under the mental i.e. panpsychism and elements of theism and eastern philosophy or we subsume the mental under the physical (basically the entire practice of neuroscience). If not, we are left with a metaphysical problem of how the mental and the physical are completely distinct yet interact, and this is why I do not believe they are or can be distinct. Property dualism addresses this issue better than substance dualism because the latter has an extreme interaction problem to overcome.

When you say ‘I think property dualism is an odd position because only in the case of brains are physical things taken to have mental properties, so it is too ad hoc, and leaves the mind's generation unexplained’. The symmetrical argument can easily be made - it’s odd that out of everything in existence only the mind is not explained by physicalism, both your position and mine have to adress exceptionalism which I think physicalism is more proficient.

Whilst I’m not a strong illusionist, and I do believe in internal mental sensations, I think if need be (although not necessary) it would be easier to eliminate the mental instead of the physical as we have too much evidence for the physical and the mental can instead be conceptually repackaged into other ontological frameworks such as functioning knowledge, representationslism and weak forms of behaviorism. I’m not advocating these positions myself I am just stating that this would likely win out over a traditional Cartesian Theatre approach to the mental in which the mental is some standalone unified category - which it is not as evidence by neuroscience.

‘Minds and their contents are nothing like anything physical, after all’ but can ultimately be reduced to them?’ I assume when you say this you mean the mental is still a product of the brain? A lot of these philosophical issues are down to semantics, definitions and interpretation - the way philosophers of physics can’t agree about the exact same mathematical equations and some insist that they must by definition cause logical sequences whilst others say there is no causation whatsoever in physics. I feel these problems are often evident in philosophy of mind as well. If we agree that the mind is a product of the brain, it can be explained by, and reduced to, the brain which is physical then your description ‘naturalistic dualism’ recognises both the brain and the mental, which could be tantamount to saying they interact and the mental is a subset of the physical. Your term ‘naturalistic dualism’ entailing cause and effect is itself a subset of naturalism which is a subset of physicalism (laws, forces, energy, cause and effect etc). One could argue that the term ‘naturalistic dualism’ is incoherent because naturalism cannot be dualistic it is only naturalistic, and thus monolithic, but that just goes to show the issues of conceptual definitions at play in philosophy.

You say ‘the substance of experience is experience, as there is nothing to an experience but the experience’ so there is never more to hallucinations than hallucinations? What about the chemical properties in hallucinogenic substances that chemically causes hallucinations and moreover that hallucinations do not represent objective reality by definition? So there seems to be more to the experience of hallucinations than just the experience of hallucinations themselves.

You assert that ‘there is more to the world than the physical’ but there need not be, dualism and extra mental categories and distinct metaphysical issues are superfluous - physicalism producing/causing the mental is sufficient and you already have stated this by saying ‘the mind is a product of the brain’ Therefore we have to overcome a combinatory problem of marrying the physical with the mental and I feel the way some of this is addressed by you is tantamount to second order realizability. I think we are talking about very similar things in different guises. If think we have common ground here but if the mental is a product of the brain we don’t need to treat the mental as being metaphysically distinct or we have a combination issue, and given what we know about physicalism and the brain and the mental, the brain produces the mental and thus in effect the mental is a subset of, and ultimately, physical.