

The Formulation of Physicalism

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Intuitive formulations:

- The world is physical.
- The world is entirely physical.
- The world is fundamentally physical.
- Every explanation is physical.
- Every explanation is entirely physical.
- Every explanation is fundamentally physical.
- Being is physical.
- Being is entirely physical.
- Being is fundamentally physical.

Problems:

Stability While physicalism is contingent, it should be a modally stable thesis, i.e. if true, also true in nearby worlds. *But*: perhaps brute contingency is good enough, if the philosophically controversial claim is not taken to be that physicalism is true, but that we know it to be true (the sensitivity condition will then rule out epistemically close non-physicalist alternatives).

Foundation With respect to any plausible choice of ‘physical’ vocabulary, it is not applicable to many existing things. Thus some transmission principle is needed: either we build non-physical, but ‘ultimately’ physical vocabulary out of the physical one by some construction C or we count things as physical if they stand in some relation R to things to which physical vocabulary applies. Candidates for C : disjunction, Ramsification, analytic entailment. Candidates for R : supervenience, grounding. Main problem for C : it applies at the type-level, rules out multiple realizability. Main problem for R : (heterogeneous) blockers, i.e. aliens that are incompatible with things actual grounded or supervening in our world (Leuenberger 2008: 147). *But*: Perhaps neither R nor C are needed if the vocabulary in question is enlarged to encompass all ‘physical’ sciences, including technology.

Totality If physicalism entails the claim that there are no non-physical entities, which it surely does, it must include a totality clause. Normally, this clause is reified into a totality fact. Such a totality fact, if indeed it is itself physical, can play its role in two ways: On one view the totality fact is part of what grounds the negative fact. On another view it is not part of the ground but is a necessary condition for the other positive facts to count as a ground for the negative fact. *But*: Given that the totality fact is not clearly itself physical, perhaps we can do without entailment?

Emergence Emergentists agree that the world is fundamentally physical but believe that it contains non-physical non-fundamental things and that this, or the way they ‘emerge’ from the fundamental, is incompatible with physicalism. *But*: If we let go *micro*physicalism, perhaps emergentism is compatible with physicalism after all.

Physicalist grounding¹ The contingency of physicalism is not exhausted by its compatibility with the mere possibility of blockers. If some mental fact, in our world, is not fundamental but could have been, physicalism to me seems false. But how do physicalists exclude this possibility? The only way, it seems to me, is to count not just “there are electrons” but also “fundamentally, there are electrons” as a physical fact. But this is highly problematic. *But*: Perhaps we should be contingentists about fundamentality in general.

What type of contingency? Physicalism is the thesis that the physical determines the mental, that – in our world – all fundamental facts are physical, that once God had created the physical facts in our world, there was nothing else left for Him to do. Physicalism thus implies:

(- **E**) There are no Cartesian egos.

We may easily imagine another world, w_E , where God created some Cartesian egos. But the mere possibility of such a world does not yet show that *our* world is not physicalistic. Intuitively, at least, the truth of physicalism is compatible with the possibility of its falsehood – physicalism is a contingent thesis:

Materialism is meant to be a contingent thesis, a merit of our world that not all other worlds share. Two worlds could indeed differ without differing physically, if at least one of them is a world where Materialism is false. (Lewis 1983: 35)
...physicalism is not a claim about every possible world, but only a claim about *our* world to the effect that its physical nature exhausts all its nature. (Jackson 1998: 11)

Even though physicalism is thus not committed to the *necessity* of (- **E**), it claims more than just that (- **E**) is true – by metaphysical accident as it were. The physicalists’ claim is that the determination of the mental by the physical is a deep, important, essential fact about our world, that a world containing Cartesian egos is different in important ways from ours. Both Lewis and Jackson want to say that Descartes

1. Perhaps a version of the purity problem? Perhaps a combination of the Blocker sub-problem for **Foundation** and of **Totality**?

is wrong, but they do not want to say that he is necessarily wrong. We might be Cartesian egos, but we are not. Lewis' and Jackson's definitions do not capture what the physicalist wants to say. They oblige him to claim that the world about which Descartes is right is not a *physical* duplicate or contains *alien* properties. But the physicalist should not burden Descartes with these extra claims. What he and Descartes disagree about is whether there is, between brain- and mental states, a relation of determination; both can agree that in some other possible world this link might be absent, without there being extra properties of either the physical nor the mental kind. For Descartes asserted no such thing: he is not committed to the claim that a world where we are Cartesian egos differs in its distribution of *physical* properties, nor to the claim that in such a world properties are exemplified that are not exemplified in the actual world.

Perhaps physicalism is best construed as a claim about the essence or nature of properties. Contingency could then be achieved either by allowing for contingent essence or by counterparts of properties: while the actually exemplified properties are essentially physical, non-physical properties could have the same causal roles.

Explanation-based account have the advantage to satisfy **Stability**, and plausibly also **Foundation**, **Emergence** and, on a suitably 'necessitarian' account of explanation, **Totality**: physicalism is true iff there is a physical description *P* of reality such that if there would exist something extra non-physical, *P* would be false. But are they comprehensive enough? One might worry that they yield physicalism only if coupled with a sweeping version of the PSR, a distinctively non-empiricist commitment. We may note, however, contra Dasgupta (2016) who conflates the two,² that we need only a (comparatively) weak, not a strong version of the PSR:

weak PSR Everything has an explanation.

strong PSR Everything has an ultimate explanation.

We need to strengthen, however, Dasgupta's PSR in another direction: while he limits its scope to non-essentialist facts (more precisely: as to content, in Fine's terminology), we need to include essentialist statements such as "it is essential to water that it is a substance composed of H_2O " among the things requiring a physical explanation.

Being-formulations of physicalism come as a family:

- Being is a physical property.
- Being entails having a physical property.
- To be is to be physical.
- To be is to be the object of a physical science.

References

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2. Starting with the weak characterisation, Dasgupta (on pp. 4-5 of the preprint) just assumes that it rules out "non-terminating chains of grounds": "So all we have in a non-terminating descending chain is infinitely many bad answers. And infinitely many bad answers do not constitute a good answer."