

Showing the mental to be (really) physical:

Is it possible? Is it necessary?

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As one of a small group of philosophers who have inspired a movement that has brought consciousness back to the center of attention in science and philosophy, Galen Strawson has made a number of cogent criticisms of previous attempts at showing that the mental is (really) physical such as we find in the context of traditional materialist theories like behaviourism, functionalism, the identity theory and eliminativism, which were characteristic for the preceding period, aptly called the “age of avoidance” (of consciousness or experience) by the psychologist Bernhard Baars, and which still continue to influence thinking on the mind-body problem. He has also given a penetrating diagnosis of how, in they way they professedly reject dualism, such accounts often reveal a certain covert Cartesianism which resides in the presupposition that in order to show that the mental is physical, it is necessary to conceptually reconstruct it in terms of phenomena already unproblematically accepted as physical, or to identify it with such phenomena or even eliminate it in their favour. That is, there seems to be a tacit agreement with Descartes that consciousness could not be physical as such. Our conception of it must be changed, all too often beyond recognition, and/or it must be identified with something apparently different. As against this, Strawson urges we should think of consciousness or experience as such – the real thing, not some behaviourist or functionalist substitute – as being physical. Inspired by certain ideas of Bertrand Russell, he suggests that a revolutionary extension of current physics might include experiential or proto-experiential phenomena within its domain and proposes to replace the common opposition between the mental and the physical through a distinction between the experiential and the non-experiential, now conceived of as a distinction within the physical.

While he is thus acutely aware of the pitfalls inherent in the dualistic opposition between the mental and the physical, and highly critical of earlier attempts at showing that the mental is physical, Strawson’s position is still unashamedly in the tradition of these attempts, that is in the tradition of materialist monism. Because of this commitment to materialist monism, Strawson in an important respect still accepts the requirement that the mental be

shown to be physical, which however now should be reformulated as the requirement that the (proto-) experiential be shown to be part of the physical.

In my talk, I will suggest what I believe is a more radical rejection of the terms of the traditional debate which make it look like we are forced to choose between either monism or dualism. I will sketch a perspective that can be described as pluralistic or polyistic. Arguing from a standpoint very close to Strawson's with regard to the conception of experience and its central importance in the study of mind, and also rejecting the abovementioned traditional materialist theories, I still find his case for the incorporation of experiential (or proto-experiential) into physics only compelling given an antecedent commitment to materialist monism and thus to the view that physics is ontology, that the world can be exhaustively described in terms of the concepts of physics proper. Of course, if physics is ontology, the identity theory false and experience real, experience somehow must belong to the subject matter of physics. But, I shall argue, depending on how the notion of proto-experience is interpreted, either a version of panpsychism according to which even stones etc. have experience can be derived from these premises, in which case I will suggest – in the “what is one philosopher's modus ponens is another's modus tollens”-vein – that we contrapose and consider the premise of monism to be the relevant culprit, or the notion of proto-experience becomes so elusive that it is not clear whether there really is a significant difference at this point to the position I'm advocating. (Some will think that the mistaken premise is the rejection of the identity theory, or even of eliminativism, but to argue on this front is beyond the scope of my talk, so that I have to treat these premises as assumptions.)

As this position is quite close to emergentism in at least one crucial respect – it assumes that qualitatively new macro phenomena emerge in the course of history, but not that the behaviour of these entities cannot be explained with reference to their micro level bases –, I then go on to consider two arguments against emergentism also used by Strawson. The first is that it is simply unintelligible that something experiential should emerge from a physical basis, if the physical is conceived to be something intrinsically non-experiential. In reply, I claim that we need not envisage an incorporation of (proto-) experiential entities into physics proper in order to reject the view that the physical is intrinsically non-experiential. It is not intrinsically experiential, but that does not make it intrinsically non-experiential in the relevant sense. In this context, I also argue that Strawson's opposition between the experiential and the non-experiential, while an improvement over the traditional

mental/physical dualism, can still easily lead us astray because it preserves its binary structure, while we should be rather thinking in terms of (at least) a three-partite division between the experiential, the non-experiential and the unexperiential. The second argument says that, even granting the reply to the first, there still is a crucial difference between experience and other phenomena such as liquidity often also considered to be emergent, with regard to how these can be explained with reference to the relevant micro levels. Versions of this familiar claim are expressed by saying that facts about macro level physical phenomena, but not about experience, logically supervene on the relevant micro level facts, or by saying that it is inconceivable, given the micro level explanantes, that the macro level physical explananda should fail to be present, but still conceivable that there should be no experience.

I believe that at this point we reach the crux of the whole matter, indeed of the entire mind/body debate. In my talk I shall argue that there is at most a difference of degree between the cases mentioned, and that all appearances of a deep asymmetry disappear, once a thorough pluralism, including an unashamed realism with regard to so-called manifest properties, that is properties immediately accessible perceptually, is adopted. It is obvious that if, for example, naive realism about colour is true, it is also conceivable and possible that light with a wavelength of 650 nanometer should not be red, and corresponding remarks apply to the other so-called secondary properties and also to liquidity and similar phenomena. If a view of this kind is adopted, we can unproblematically think of experience as one of a whole variety of macro phenomena above the level of micro physics, many, if not all of which are conceptually irreducible to their micro level bases – conceptual reduction being a dubious notion – which, however, does not preclude that they can be explained according to a more relaxed and thus more realistic standard of explanation. To think that experience would have to be given a special status just because it is mental in contrast to other, physical macro phenomena, would only show an incurable allegiance to the obsolete Cartesian opposition of the mental and the physical.

The upshot is that, in my view, what we need is a revolution in metaphysics rather than in physics. (And, by the way, this revolution seems well under way in the work of, among others, Mark Johnston and Barry Stroud.) I suspect that the mind/body problem is unsolvable given the metaphysical background against which it is commonly posed. When, through the notion of secondary properties, colours, sounds and smells are relegated to the status of mere appearances caused by realities that are in themselves exhaustively describable

in the terms of physics proper, and, as a result, all macro level phenomena are conceptually reduced to mere aggregates of micro level entities, it becomes impossible to deal with the appearances themselves in a satisfying way. As many, including Strawson, have argued, it makes no sense to try to repeat the manouever and claim that it is a mere appearance that there are appearances and thus experience. Nor is there any chance to conceptually reduce the experiential to the non-experiential physical. But given the background I have sketched, with its elimination of conceptually irreducible macro phenomena, it must look like there is something very special about experience, that it is fundamental either in the sense of dualism, or in the sense envisaged by Strawson, namely that it has to be incorporated into the fundamental theories of physics. But the assumption of such a special status is not borne out by science, and to the extent it leads to panpsychism, as it tends to, perhaps inevitably, it is at odds with common sense. So this once again creates pressure to avoid this result by showing that the mental is yet, after all, (really) physical, but this still seems impossible because of the asymmetry in the relation between the micro physical level and the macro mental and macro physical phenomena created through the tacit or explicit elimination of the latter.

This dilemma can be solved, or perhaps rather dissolved, if pluralism is adopted. We then still could and should acknowledge that physics has a special status because of its comprehensiveness: the basic physical entities compose all others. But we would stop treating physics as ontology, and would thus not feel anymore that it is necessary to try to do what, I think, is impossible anyhow: to show that the mental is (really) physical, by conceptual reduction to or a posteriori identification with the physical, or by its downright incorporation into physical theory.

Of course, the argument that the mind/body problem can be (dis)solved if a pluralistic ontology including a naive realism about colours etc. is adopted, even if valid in its own right, does not prove the adequacy of such an ontology. Much less does it solve the problems in this area, which is way beyond the scope of this talk. But I think it does provide strong support for it and at least shows that it is an option to be taken seriously.