

Physicalism and Its Discontents: Carl Gillet and Barry Loewer (eds.) Cambridge University Press, 2001 369+xi pages.

This is a book of new essays by different authors on physicalism. The essays are divided into three sections. In the first, the papers are, the editors say, ‘generally sympathetic’ (p. ix) to physicalism. The opening paper, by Papineau, is a compelling historical discussion of the thesis of the completeness of physics, together with the suggestion that an appreciation of the empirical basis of this thesis lead to the widespread acceptance of physicalism itself in the second part of the twentieth century. The next two papers, by Loewer and Witmer, concern the formulation of physicalism, concentrating (especially in Witmer’s case) on questions of supervenience and determination. The next two papers, by Shoemaker and Rey concern the connection between physicalism and mental causation. Shoemaker concentrates on George Bealer’s well-known argument that functionalism has the objectionable consequence that people routinely have beliefs about the realizers of their pains, but he places the discussion in a larger framework dealing with the notion of realization and mental causation. Rey’s paper is a vigorous discussion of those who view folk psychology as being insulated in an important theoretical sense, and hence as providing no causal explanations at all. The following paper, by Robinson, makes the point that contemporary discussion of non-reductive physicalism confuses two senses of ‘reduction’, one appropriate to philosophy of science and one to philosophy of mind. The penultimate paper in this part of the volume, by Latham, is an attempt to clarify the idea of token-physicalism, while the final paper is a fascinating attack on the Kripkean notion of metaphysical necessity by Leeds.

In the second section of the book, the papers are, the editors say, “more or less critical” (p.ix). Sturgeon discusses why reductionism has such a grip on our philosophical imagination, and draws the conclusion that the arguments based on mental causation for physicalism are less compelling than is sometimes supposed. Crane’s paper is a contribution to the vexed issue of the relationship between British emergentism of the kind typified by C.D.Broad and contemporary non-reductive physicalism—his conclusion is that these two positions are metaphysically identical but are different in their associated epistemic attitudes. Gillet’s paper is an interesting discussion of physicalism in its methodological role, while Gates examines how the doctrine of physicalism emerged from the logical positivism of the 1930s and in particular in the work of Neurath (who coined the term) and Schlick.

The final section of the book concentrates on the relation between physicalism and consciousness. The papers by Kim, McGinn, and Horgan and Tienson are generally critical of what Horgan and Tienson call ‘new wave materialism’, i.e. materialism according to which there is no a priori connection between the physical and the mental. McLaughlin’s paper is a response to Horgan and Tienson, while Melnyck’s paper, the final one in the volume, is a critical discussion of the conceivability argument as it appears in the work of David Chalmers.

All the papers here are of high quality and well worth careful attention—individually very impressive. A bit less impressive, from my point of view, is the organization of the whole. The volume is generally arranged around the question of who is in favour of physicalism and who against. But this method of organization sits uncomfortably with the papers themselves. For example, in the last part of the volume,

the papers by Kim, McGinn, and Horgan and Tiensen are billed as containing ‘arguments for pessimism.’ But, as indicated, what these writers are really pessimistic about is not physicalism per se but the idea that physicalism might come in a non-analytic or non-reductive form—quite a different matter. To take another example, the paper by Rey (officially a paper ‘in sympathy’) expresses considerable discontentment with physicalism as it is usually discussed, while the papers by Sturgeon and Gillet (officially critical) contain considerable sympathy.

This organizational difficulty is connected with something else a reader may find disappointing about the volume: the lack of a general introduction in which the papers are welded into a thematic unit. Of course one might think physicalism is so multifaceted it is not appropriate to have a formulaic response to it. But the editors *do* start their preface with the remark that “Every era has its weltanschauung and in much contemporary philosophy the doctrine of ‘physicalism’ plays this role”. If every era has a weltanschauung (not obvious, after all) and if physicalism is the weltanschauung of this era, one would have liked an explicit statement of what it is, where the controversies associated with it lie, and how the papers in the volume contribute to a greater understanding of these controversies.

Of course these issues do not affect the substance of the papers themselves, which are, as I have said, of a very high quality indeed. And of course there are too many ideas here to discuss in a review. Let me therefore finish by selecting one, the idea that the physical can be defined in terms of the non-mental. Here is Papineau’s way of putting the point (a similar point is made differently by Loewer on p. 40):

...it isn’t crucial that you know exactly what a complete physics would include. Much more important is to know what it won’t include. Suppose...that you have an initial idea of what you mean by mental...And suppose you understand physical as simply meaning nonmental...This understanding of physical as nonmental might seem a lot weaker than most pretheoretical understandings, but note that it is just what we need for philosophical purposes, because it still generates the worthwhile conclusion that the mental must be identical with the non-mental—given, that is, that we are entitled to assume that the non-mental is complete (p. 12)

Papineau makes this suggestion in response to those, such as Chomsky and others, who argue from the premise that there is no legitimate clarification of the notion of the physical to the conclusion that the problems distinctive of philosophy of mind ought to be rejected rather than taken up and discussed seriously. In response to this argument, it is certainly helpful to say that what is at issue is whether the mental supervenes on (or is identical to) the non-mental. However, this point can be taken in two ways, and the difference matters when the topic is physicalism.

On the one hand, you might take it as being strictly consistent with the premise of the Chomskian argument, regardless of whether that premise is true. *Even if* there is no notion of the physical in good-standing, one might say, this will have no effect on philosophy of mind, for here all that is at issue here is the non-mental. On the other hand, you might take it as a suggestion about how ‘physical’ *itself* is to be understood, i.e. as a direct response to the premise of the argument. As I understand him, Papineau intends the suggestion in this second sense, and therefore advances a negative definition of the physical. However, this has the consequence that we have no positive account of the weltanschauung of the era. In addition, we lose the sense in which contemporary versions

of physicalism are continuous with, but developments of, the materialism the 17th and 18th centuries. After all, materialists of that era did not shrink from providing a positive account—the most notorious being the Cartesian view that matter is extension.

One may put the general point by noting two different philosophical contexts in which the notion of the physical plays a role. (The point is connected to Robinson's discussion of 'reduction.')

First, it plays a role in philosophy of mind, in which we are mainly concerned to adjudicate various arguments concerning experience, intentionality and so forth. In this context, while people talk a lot about the physical, all they seem to mean or need to mean is the non-mental, and people may disagree about whether this is equivalent to the physical in any strict sense or not. Second, it plays a role in the philosophy and history of science, in which we are mainly concerned to describe a particular picture of the world, and how contemporary versions of that picture differ from earlier versions. As far as I can see, in this context one has no choice but to provide a positive account. So, if the Chomskian argument is right that there is none, this is a serious matter.