Emergence and its Discontents
By Vern Crisler, 2015

1. British Emergentism

In this section, a brief review of emergentism will be given, depending mainly on Brian McLaughlin’s essay. McLaughlin calls attention to Jaegwon Kim’s claim that the popular brand of materialism, non-reductive materialism, was really a version of “emergent materialism” and McLaughlin provides a short historical account of the rise (and fall) of British Emergentism.

John Stuart Mill was the first to provide a thorough discussion of emergent properties. He distinguished between “homopathic” laws and “heteropathic” laws. The first were mechanical in nature. For instance, two causes working against one another can propel an object in two directions at the same time, leaving the object in its place. This result is described by Mill as a case where the “joint effect of several causes is identical with the sum of their separate effects.” McLaughlin refers to this as vector addition, where the effect of more than one force acting together is the vector sum of the forces considered severally.

In contrast to this “homopathic” result is the sort of emergence we see in chemical reactions. For instance, hydrogen and oxygen are separate elements, but when combined in the right way, they produce water. The resulting compound water, however, is nothing like the original elements even though made up of the same elements. The emergence in the latter case would produce a “heteropathic” effect.

The philosopher Samuel Alexander was so taken by the notion of emergence that he believed emergent properties brought about a “new order of existence” which was a “brute empirical fact” and one that needed to be accepted with “natural piety.”

The last of the important British Emergentists was C.D. Broad, who argued that emergence involves a hierarchy of scientific laws which are not reducible to lower levels. Each level consists of “intra-ordinal laws” or what might be called horizontal laws because they stay on the same level. Each level is connected, however, by “trans-ordinal laws,” or vertical laws, and the properties of a higher level cannot be reduced to the properties of a lower level. Properties that can be reduced to lower levels are described as “reducible characteristics” while properties that cannot be so reduced are the emergent properties.

According to McLaughlin, British Emergentism more or less disappeared about a “new order of existence” which was a “brute empirical fact” and one that needed to be accepted with “natural piety.”

2 In discussion of the mind-body issues, materialism is nowadays usually described as “physicalism,” so McLaughlin will attempt to prove in his essay that the opposite of non-reductive physicalism, “reductive” physicalism, is false. Our concern is not with McLaughlin’s argument but rather with his history of British Emergentism.
3 J. S. Mill, *System of Logic*, 1843, p. 428; quoted in McLaughlin, p. 82.

after Broad’s work mainly due to the quantum mechanical revolution that occurred shortly thereafter, which was able to provide a reductive explanation of chemistry. In addition, the discovery of DNA routed the concept of vitalism out of the life sciences. McLaughlin, however, believes it is possible to revive the notion of an emergent property that can be used to show that non-reductive physicalism is a viable competitor with “reductive” materialism.

Unfortunately, the revival has met with some significant criticism, especially from Jaegwon Kim, who has challenged emergentism and non-reductive physicalism with what is known as the “exclusion problem” (discussed under section 3).

2. Problems with Emergentism

The main problem with emergentism is not whether there are or whether there are not non-deducible systems. Let us grant that there are non-deducible systems. Moreover, let us also grant that the non-deducibility of an emergent system is a formal property of the system, that is, it is an apriori truth that some emergent systems cannot be reduced to lower level systems. This sort of emergence is sometimes called “strong” emergence.8

The main problem with emergentism of this type is a familiar criticism, that there were some primary examples of non-reducible emergent systems touted by the emergentist, but the progress of science showed that these were reducible systems after all. In other words, supposedly non-deducible systems could be deduced based on what was learned by scientific advance. Let us call these deducible systems materially emergent systems.9

Now, an emergentist can readily grant that there will be some situations like this, that there will be mistakes about naming emergent systems. Many emergent systems will turn out to be only materially emergent systems.

However, emergentists do not regard this as sufficient reason to reject the concept of non-deducible emergent systems. We can certainly grant this point. Supporters of emergentism have even provided examples of what they regard as non-reducible systems, e.g., the Game of Life (cellular automata), consciousness, etc.


7 McLaughlin, p. 88. I would argue that the rise of the neo-Darwinian synthesis in the 1930s, when Darwinists finally accepted the truth of Mendelian genetics, also helped end for a time the philosophical advance of emergentism.


9 This view was famously expressed by Smart, John Jamieson Carswell. “Sensations and Brain Processes,” Philosophical Review, 1959, 68: 141-156. Smart’s view of scientific progress represents an attitude of scientism, a view I do not share. However, many things that were once mysterious have been explained (to some extent), so the notion of Feigl’s “nomological danglers” should be regarded with caution. The notion of a “dangler” comes from warnings in grammar school to watch out for dangling participles. In Feigl’s sense, it is a law that is novel, mysterious, inexplicable in terms of physics, hence, dangling outside of physics. In short, it is misplaced in terms of our current understanding of science.
While these examples are problematic, let us grant that they are examples of non-reducible emergence. The problem is not with the formal nature of emergence, nor whether emergent properties are possible, or whether emergent properties are actual. The problem is with regard to the criteria of determining what counts as a formally emergent system, and what counts as a materially emergent system. So far emergentists have not provided such criteria.

As a matter of fact Chalmers denies that there are any clear examples—outside of consciousness!—of strongly emergent systems.\(^{10}\) How has he determined this? What criteria did he use to make this claim? There are plenty of things in this world that science has not fully explained. The mind certainly is not the only mystery.

So, unless Chalmers is merely indulging in philosophical obiter, his critics have every right to ask what criteria he has used in making such a judgment. And if he cannot provide these criteria with respect to all of those putative strongly emergent systems, how could anyone accept his view that consciousness provides the only unproblematic example of such a system? This is important because the criticism having to do with an emergent system that was once thought of as non-reducible gets its teeth from the lack of any criteria for distinguishing the two sorts of emergence.

It might be suggested that no criteria are really possible, due to the nature of the subject-matter. Rather, the only way to argue is not to provide criteria, which is impossible, but to show the falsity of any other alternative. Demonstrating that physicalism or Cartesian dualism are false leaves emergentism the only viable alternative.

Of course, proving an alternative to be true based on disproving alternatives only works if the disjunction is exhaustive, that the field of alternatives is limited to the current alternatives. That would require a secondary argument, and does not look promising given the plethora of alternatives on the philosophical market.

There is also the problem that spokesmen for the “other” alternatives can use the same type of argument to rule out emergentism. A physicalist, for instance, can show difficult problems with emergentism and Cartesianism, then argue that these alternatives exhaust the field, and that physicalism is thereby proved by showing that the limited set of alternatives are all false. Nice work if you can get it.

Another argument might be that no criteria are necessary for the simple fact that emergence is a “brute” relationship.\(^{11}\) Unfortunately, this sort of response suffers from the same tu quoque problem as the previous argument, namely that the physicalist and Cartesian dualist can make the same argument, namely, that physicalism or Cartesianism represent a “brute” relationship, and that just settles the matter, world without end.

---


Nevertheless this appeal to “natural piety” to support one’s philosophical position is to substitute subjective feeling for logical argument, a change of subject from philosophy to doxology.

It may be granted that criteria for the right kind of emergence are both necessary and possible but that such criteria have simply not been found yet. The defender of emergentism who takes this line of argument will offer an argument that is parallel to his opponent’s view. Just as the opponent of emergentism argues that in the future science will solve all problems with respect to consciousness, so the defender of emergentism can argue that in the future a test will be devised that will enable us to recognize irreducible from reducible emergent systems.

The one drawback to this response is that some emergentists, such as Chalmers, claim that they have already recognized a true irreducible emergent system, namely consciousness. If so, surely they had some means of recognizing it as truly irreducible, other than the fact that it is currently unexplainable, to some extent. If not, then such recognition can at best be only a guess or a hope not a criterion.

A final strategy for the emergentist is to engage in wholesale revision as to what emergence means. This is the approach favored by Barnes. This approach would redefine emergent properties as “fundamental” and therefore as having causal powers, which blocks the threat of epiphenomenalism.

There is also a denial of ontological levels, so that there is really no emergence in the traditional sense. By denying an ontology of levels and claiming that emergent properties are causally fundamental, the way is laid open for a response to the problem of overdetermination (discussed in the next section).

I will not pursue this approach as I believe revisionary emergentism merely changes the subject through redefinition of terms. In any case, it appears to promote a simplistic ontology of fundamental and derivative in place of the more complex hierarchical structure of classical emergentism. At least the classical view had empirical evidence on its side, given that the world seems to be a scale of being, a hierarchy of increasingly complex organization.

In my view the notion that there is a mental state over and above the physical state must be defended on its own. An appeal to emergentism as a quick way to do that is to appeal to a very weak reed, and it becomes even weaker if emergentism already assumes that consciousness is a formally emergent phenomenon. For that would simply add begging-the-question to an explanation that already makes too much use of the mysterious.

---

13 As to whether the world should be described in terms of levels, I tend to think that there is real structure in the world, but how one describes it tends to be more of a conceptual preference. I once imagined that I could develop a hierarchy of levels by obtaining a standard University course catalogue and use every class in the curriculum as an ontological level. It would be one of those "atoms to ecologies" hierarchies that "systems philosophy" likes to build. Nevertheless, I'm not sure how valuable an exercise this would be. An ontology of levels tends to generate a desire in oneself to pigeonhole every aspect of life into some ontological level or modal sphere. In addition, it tends to generate the idea that in order to be truly knowledgeable one must be a walking encyclopedia. In other words, it tends to encourage the quantitative over the qualitative, and a vain and vexatious quest for exhaustive knowledge.
If the only way emergentists can rescue the concept of emergence is to redefine terms and engage in revisionary schematics, then it appears emergentism may simply be philosophically inadequate to provide any significant illumination for the relation between the mental and the physical.

3. Jaegwon Kim & the Exclusion Problem

In addition to the criterial problem, there is also the familiar exclusion argument against mind-body dualism, non-reductive physicalism, and emergentism. This argument involves causal closure and the exclusion principle.

Some definitions: The causal closure principle of the physical domain as stated by Kim is: “If a physical event has a cause (occurring) at time t, it has a sufficient physical cause at t.”

This means that of all events of a physical nature that are caused, each one has a physical cause to bring about the event at a particular time, and this cause is entirely sufficient.

I would say this is a close cousin to the evolutionary principle of developmental uniformitarianism, i.e., that the present is the key to the past. Whatever happened in the past is the same as what happens today. Because this would exclude (say) creationism and intelligent design, I believe Kim’s causal closure principle is a general principle rather than a special principle. I can accept the special principle but not the general principle. The general principle is simply atheism, but it has no bearing, in my opinion, on the more specific issue of the mind-body relation.

The exclusion principle is according to Kim: “No event has two or more distinct sufficient causes, all occurring at the same time, unless it is a genuine case of overdetermination.”

This means unless causes genuinely overdetermine an event, there cannot be two or more sufficient causes simultaneously bringing about the same event. Thus, when combined these two principles tell us that a physical event has only a physical cause, and when a physical event has a sufficient physical cause, it can have no more than one sufficient physical cause. The only exception would be a case of overdetermination.

The exclusion problem presupposes the physical closure principle. This means that appeals to non-physical causes (angels, ghosts, etc.) at any time during the causal chain must be excluded from any explanation of a physical effect. Likewise, appeals to more than one sufficient cause for an event should also be excluded.

For Kim, the closure principle is a principle of explanation, so in a sense it is a methodological axiom. For purposes of explanation, the universe is “self-sufficient and self-contained.” Furthermore, unless an effect is a genuine case of overdetermination (two

14 Jaegwon Kim, “Emergence: Core ideas and issues,” Synthese, 2006, 151:547-559. On the importance of Kim for this discussion, Vision says: “I can do no better than to repeat a remark I recall reading somewhere. Although I disagree sharply with some of his views, if it weren’t for Kim I would have no views at all on the subject.” Vision, Re-Emergence, xi.

15 Kim, Philosophy of Mind, 214.

16 Kim, Philosophy, 216.

17 Kim, Philosophy, 214. This is the language of general materialism and therefore of atheism. However, properly limited it need not have atheistic implications.
bulls in firing squad example) it cannot have more than one sufficient cause, i.e., the exclusion principle. Most emergentists and non-reductive physicalists are committed both to the closure principle and the exclusion principle, as well as to avoiding overdetermination.

Kim’s argument also involves an explication of the notion of downward causation. For emergentists, emergent systems have causal powers which cannot be reduced to the causal powers of their base systems. The reason is that such causal powers must make a difference.\(^{18}\) If the mental did not make a difference, did not have causal powers, the emergentist would be left with epiphenomenalism. At the same time, the emergentist must avoid the problem of overdetermination, for such cases are rare and the door must remain closed to causal extravagance.

Philosophers sometimes illustrate the exclusion principle using a diagram involving M and P and M* and P*. In the diagram, M is the letter standing for mental causation and P is the letter standing for physical causation. In this case, M is the sufficient cause of M* (another mental event). Additionally, M must also sufficiently cause P*, the base of M*, so as to preserve the notion that the mental is driving events, and is not just an epiphenomenal passenger.

Finally, in terms of the causal closure principle P, as the base of M, is also the sufficient cause of P* since a physical event must be caused by another physical event. So both M and P cause P*. The bottom line is that such a multi-causal situation runs afoul of the exclusion principle. In other words, if one must eliminate the mental cause in order to avoid such overdetermination, one will be left with the view that there are no mental causes of physical events.

Kim summarizes: “This argument is a form of the much-debated ‘exclusion argument,’ since it aims to show how a mental cause of a physical event is always excluded by a physical cause. The apparent moral of the argument is that mental-to-physical causation is illusory; it never happens. This is epiphenomenalism, at least with regard to causation of physical events.”\(^{19}\)

In short, to avoid overdetermination, the champions of the mental are logically required to accept epiphenomenalism, contrary to their main goal of defending the mental.

4. Response to Exclusion: Bennett’s Compatibilism

There have been some responses to the exclusion argument. The main ones have been either to deny the closure principle in some way, or to reexamine the notion of sufficient causation in relation to overdetermination. In this paper I consider only the latter, under the name of compatibilism. Karen Bennett has argued that there is a “tremendous tension between the claim that mental events and properties are causally efficacious, and the claim that they do not overdetermine their effects. The more you go out of your way to establish the full-fledged efficacy of the mental, the more it sounds like its effects are overdetermined.”\(^{20}\)

---


\(^{19}\) Kim, Philosophy, p. 217.

\(^{20}\) Karen Bennett, “Why the Exclusion Problem Seems Intractable, and How, Just Maybe, to
Bennett’s solution is to defend what she calls “causal compatibilism.” This view will affirm the distinction between the mental and physical, the efficacy of the mental, the completeness of physics, and that “reductive” physicalism is wrong. At the same time, this view will avoid overdetermination.

In Bennett’s view, the compatibilist must show that mental causation is different from standard cases of overdetermination (firing squads, lighting strikes, etc.). The mental must still be efficacious without leading to overdetermination.

“[W]hat the compatibilist needs to say,” says Bennett, “is that the mental/physical case is importantly different from the standard textbook examples of firing squads, houses that are struck by lightning at the same moment that someone tosses a lit cigarette into the draperies, and so forth. The compatibilist needs to break the analogy between the two types of case.”

In order to get at this difference, Bennett starts out with an analysis of what overdetermination is, and provides a test or criterion for overdetermination involving counterfactual requirements. I will state these without using Bennett’s symbolism:

A) If Cause 1 had happened without Cause 2, the Event would still have happened.
B) If Cause 2 had happened without Cause 1, the Event would still have happened.

Although Bennett uses general terms for any sort of sufficient cause (which generality can be misleading) I will also restate these requirements using the terminology of mental and physical. An effect (e.g., raising one’s arm) is overdetermined by a mental cause and a physical cause only if:

(1) If the mental cause happened without the physical cause, the effect would still have happened.
(2) If the physical cause happened without the mental cause, the effect would still have happened.

With respect to mind-body issues, these two requirements provide a necessary condition for overdetermination. The effect will have happened no matter which cause was in play.

Of course, both the mental and physical cause must occur together to be a case of overdetermination, since a single sufficient cause by itself cannot overdetermine an event.

According to Bennett, if the above principles were false, then it would be a case of joint causation. With regard to the firing squad example, joint causation would be where each bullet needs the other bullet to kill the victim. It is only when each bullet could kill the victim without the other that it is a case of overdetermination.

I personally wonder whether it is possible for anything to be overdetermined, i.e., whether it is logically possible to have two sufficient causes for an event. In the firing squad

---


---

21 Bennett, p. 5.
22 Bennett, p. 8.
scenario, when a bullet hits one side of the victim’s heart, it only blows out one side of the heart, while the second only blows out the other side of the heart. Neither may result in death, for it is possible that an advanced heart specialist may install a “Picard” heart into the victim, thus saving his life (just as Captain Picard of Star Trek was saved in a similar manner).

Aside from intervention, however, it is usually the first lethal bullet that does the job. If the bullets hit simultaneously, with no temporal or lethal slack between them, this would no longer really be two sufficient causes, but rather one sufficient cause. However, I will accept the hypothetical possibility of overdetermination in order to engage with the main argument.

Bennett believes the general form of (1) and (2) “open the door to the idea that a tighter connection between the causes would help defuse the threat of overdetermination.”

She will attempt to overcome the problem of overdetermination by arguing that in order for a mental cause to be efficacious, then the only physical causes that would be relevantly efficacious are those that necessitate the mental. This means that there could not possibly be a physical cause without a mental cause and that overdetermination is avoided by relating the mental and physical in a metaphysically “tight” way, so that there is no redundancy of causes.

The purport of this is to render (2) as vacuously true, and supposedly a vacuous truth undermines the phenomena of overdetermination. Bennett is not too clear on this point, but her main argument seems to be that if both counterfactuals are vacuously true—that is, if there is no possible world where the mental and physical fail to occur together, meaning the antecedents of both (1) and (2) would be false—then this would remove overdetermination. It presumably also follows that even if only one of the counterfactuals is vacuously true, this would remove overdetermination.

5. Two Rocks vs. Compatibilism

Sara Bernstein takes up the challenge of explaining and critiquing Bennett’s views. Of especial interest is the standard Two Rocks scenario that Bernstein will use as a paradigm for causation and overdetermination.

In this scenario, Suzy and Billy each throw a rock at a window and both rocks hit the window at the same time shattering the window. In this case, each rock was sufficient to break the window. This corresponds to Bennett’s two general causal requirements noted above (i.e., Cause 1 and Cause 2).

In Bernstein’s view, we don’t seem to have any serious misgivings about this sort of cause and effect situation. It is “causally satisfying.” On the other hand, the notion of mental and physical causes as both sufficient leaves us unsatisfied because it is hard to determine in what sense mental and physical causes are like Two Rocks causation.

23 Bennett, p. 14.
24 Bennett, p. 21. In other words, there could be no zombie worlds.
26 Bernstein, p. 17.
The important thing to take away from the Two Rocks example is that we can *isolate* the two causes, and because of this isolation, the effects of each can be determined or quantified. It is difficult to see, however, how the mental and physical can be isolated. Thus, the lack of satisfaction with the causal analogy.

Bernstein summarizes Bennett’s view as holding that in (2) above the antecedent is metaphysically impossible and therefore (2) is vacuously true (because a false antecedent in a conditional renders the sentence true).

Bernstein says, “[S]ince there is no possible world [for Bennett] where there is a physical property realizer without a mental property, [2] is vacuous. Thus there is no overdetermination.”

Bernstein also believes overdetermination requires that the relation between causes is a modal relationship and that the causes are modally distinct, i.e., when two relata can exist without the other. As Bernstein summarizes, this notion of modal distinctness leads to the view that “if there is no possible world where there is a neural state without the pain state, then my pain and my neural state are not overdeterminers of my taking [say] an aspirin.”

In response to this, Bernstein argues that compatibilism does not eliminate overdetermination, and provides a counterexample. Aside from that, however, the main problem with Bennett’s compatibilism is that it “skips over” the very worlds that provide us with the best information about the relevant causes.

Recall the Two Rocks scenario. If we want to know about the causal capacity of Suzy’s rock, we go to a possible world in which only Suzy throws a rock. Any world in which both Suzy and Billy throw a rock won’t tell us anything relevant about individual causation. In order for the mental-physical analogy to hold with the causally satisfying Two Rocks scenario, the most informative worlds would be those in which we can evaluate the physical cause apart from the mental cause, or vice versa. Worlds in which the two occur together will not tell us much.

Bennett, however, argues that there are no worlds in which the physical occurs without the mental. So at this point the analogy between Two Rocks and mental-physical causation breaks down. Unlike the mental-physical correlation, there simply is no supervenience involved in Two Rocks, for Suzy’s rock does not supervene on Billy’s rock.

Because Bennett rules out important and relevant “individual-cause” worlds, we are therefore left only with “co-occurrence” worlds, which are metaphysically uninformative with regard to the understanding of mental and physical causation. This is a high price to pay for avoiding the problem of overdetermination. It amounts to changing from the subject matter of causation to the subject matter of metaphysical relationship.

Thus, modal indistinctness is compatible with overdetermination, contrary to Bennett.

---

27 Bernstein, p. 23.
29 She provides the scenario of an alarm bell that goes off if it detects anything that is orange colored, or if it detects the presence of the chemical dichromate (which is always orange). These two causes are modally indistinct, but both are sufficient to cause the alarm to go off, which means they are overdetermining causes.
Bernstein would argue that even if there is a modal relationship between two causes, i.e., that one necessitates the other, that doesn’t take away the independence or “causal responsibility” of either of the causes. Even though Bennett would reject it, there is no need to require both counterfactuals to be non-vacuously true in order to be causal determiners. Vacuous truths can still be causal determiners. Bernstein believes that overdetermination still “punishes” views such as Bennett’s due to their lack of metaphysical clarity about the notion of individual causal contribution.

Nevertheless, Bennett might respond to this by arguing that the relation between the mental and physical is just as important as their causal impact. If regarding the relation as involving at least one vacuous truth results in a better understanding of overdetermination, then there is nothing wrong with that.

The compatibilist is not bound by the “good old-fashioned definition of overdetermination.” Instead the compatibilist can “coin a new term” for the particular sort of overdetermination involved in such scenarios as firing squads (or Two-Rocks) that “break the analogy” between such scenarios and the mind-body relationship.

In defense of Bernstein, it might be remarked that Bennett has basically solved the overdetermination problem by changing the meaning of the terms. She has no trouble in coining a new term for the relationship involved and rejecting the “old fashioned” view of overdetermination. This is a very easy way to engage in philosophical debate: merely change the meaning of terms and presto, problems solved.

Moreover, it might be urged against Bennett that her two counterfactuals (taken generally) may work as a definition for overdetermination in the case of non-supervenient situations such as Two Rocks. But the introduction of supervenience in the relation creates modal entanglement, and this is the source of the disanalogy between mind-body and (say) Two Rocks, not from any lack of sufficient causation in the counterfactuals.

Finally, it might be noted that Bennett’s claim that the physical cannot occur without the mental (i.e., the vacuous truth of the second counterfactual), is a rejection of zombie worlds, and she acknowledges that. Nevertheless, it seems that one should actually put up an argument against the existence of zombie worlds, not merely define them out of existence. Bennett, however, merely shifts responsibility for the argument to others and says the compatibilist “needs to join their camp.”

6. Conclusion

In the above paper, emergentism was traced to British Emergentism, with a brief overview of how the British emergentists thought about what constitutes emergentism. I then provided argumentation to the effect that there were no criteria for distinguishing between a formal emergent system and a material emergent system. Without such criteria, the former collapses into the latter for all practical purposes.

Jaegwon Kim’s concept of the exclusion problem was explicated, along with Karen Bennett’s defense of

---

33 Bernstein, p. 25.
34 Bernstein, p. 28.
35 Bennett, “Why,” p. 27.
37 Bennett, p. 26.
compatibilism vis-à-vis Kim’s exclusion problem.

Sara Bernstein’s response to Bennett was discussed next, showing that Bennett’s compatibilism does not work and her attempt to rescue so-called non-reductive physical from the closure principle failed. I also argue that Bennett redefined the terms in the discussion, which is not recommended as a way to solve philosophical disputes. Finally, Bennett rejects without argument the possibility of zombie worlds, again not a good way to solve philosophical disputes.

7. Appendix: Dualism and the Bible

Is mind-body physicalism incompatible with Christianity? In the past, church anthropology has tended to view man as a composite being with two distinct substances, the one being an immortal soul and the other a mortal body. This dualistic concept is regarded as stemming from what the Bible says about the after-life.

There is no question that the Bible teaches post-mortem existence. One need only think of the thief on the cross, or of Paul’s desire to be absent from the body in order to be present with the Lord, or of the reign of the martyrs in heaven. And yet these things are not described in terms of an “immortal soul” but especially in the latter case as a “resurrection”—a divine miracle.

In my opinion, if we take physicalism in a narrow sense, it does not really involve a denial of Christian anthropology. It is just the denial of Platonic or Cartesian dualism with regard to the mind and body. In this narrower sense, physicalism makes no claims about God or the devil, or life after death, etc. Thus, while physicalists in the larger sense (atheists) are also physicalists in the narrower sense, the reverse is not necessarily the case.

I can believe in God, for instance, and still be a physicalist in the narrow sense. It only requires, as noted, that I hold that the soul is preserved after death by a divine miracle. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, man does not have a soul, but is a soul, and thus the only way his soul can be separated from the body is by miraculous preservation.

Man’s natural state is that his mind and body are identical and only God can sever this natural state of man. (I avoid crude analogies here, such as computer memory downloads.)

This view of things would not sit well with a Platonist who believes the soul goes to the divine as a natural thing. It is part of a method of ascetic ascent. So by definition, a Platonist could not be a physicalist in the narrower sense because the Platonist has no room for the miraculous. It is just the way things are that a pre-existing soul inhabits a body, then ascends back to its original state of bodiless existence. The Platonist must be a dualist, while the non-Platonist can be but does not need to be a dualist with respect to the mind-body relation.

So where does a "mental substance" "go" if it is not physical? I answer that there is no "mental substance" that has to go anywhere. There is only body (i.e., the brain). The soul is not some extra part of the body that floats around like an inner cloud or ghost. The term “soul”

38 Luke 23:43; II Cor. 5:8; Rev. 20:4-6.
is just our common language way of referring to brain activity.

Now if one adopts physicalism doesn’t it also mean that one must also adopt mortalism, the "termination of consciousness”? No, because those physicalists who believe in an afterlife do not need to accept physicalism in the general sense of the term; only in the narrow sense.

As a Christian, I must be an eschatological dualist (soul preserved after death until reunited at the end of all things). I don’t think, however, that one can backtrack from the eschatological to the historical, that is, from the future to the present. That is because, as I said, there’s a radical discontinuity at death, a discontinuity that involves God’s miraculous intervention. Without it, that would be the end of man as a self-conscious being. I thoroughly disagree with Plato that the process is natural.

To put it another way, given what we know about the future (if one accepts biblical revelation), one can backtrack epistemologically from eschatology but one cannot backtrack ontologically from eschatology.

Jesus warned about the One who could cast both body and soul in hell, but that distinction is future, and my point is that the preservation of mentality after death by a miraculous act need not require that the soul is naturally distinct from the body in the present life.

The implications of what Jesus said is that soul and body will be reunited in the future by a similar miracle that separated them, and man will become a single being again, not composite. At that point, he will be subject to divine evaluation strictly as a physical being.

*Man is not a modular being.* The soul is not some parallel substance running alongside the brain. In saying that man is not a modular being, I am saying, for instance, that my arm is not a mere detachable module of the body, like a section of a modular home. A room addition to a modular home, and likewise a room detachment from a modular home, do not change its identity nor damage the home in any way. Because my arm is not modular, if I sever or cut it off, it would do considerable damage to me.

Similarly, the soul is not a detachable module. Thus the act of divine preservation of the soul at death cannot simply be saving a module of the body. It must effect a radical discontinuity in the natural order.

In the natural order, without divine intervention, the concept of “mortalism” must be true. When the body dies, so does the soul, for they are not detachable in the natural order. A radical breaking through into the natural order by God is the only way the self-consciousness of man can be preserved after death.

On this view, the soul will be (temporarily) separated from the body. Man’s post-mortem existence will be an existence more akin to angelic existence. Angels were created as mental beings but without material bodies. Man’s angelic existence is only temporary, for he was not created to be an angel. Rather man was created as a physical being, so at the end of all things, his soul will be united with his body and he will exist forever as a physical being.

It might be thought that this is really dualism, since the reuniting of the soul
with the body presupposes a diversity of parts, but I cannot agree. There is a miracle involved in the divine preservation of the soul at death. A miracle can only be accepted, not analyzed.

Yes, the Bible speaks of a distinction between soul and body. We know from revelation that mortalism is false, but this is, as I said, epistemic. While we can backtrack on epistemic grounds for the distinction between soul and body, we cannot backtrack on ontological grounds. To claim that ontological backtracking is possible is to assume a continuity that is incompatible with the facts of revelation. It would be to posit a sort of inherent Platonic continuity between earthly life and the life to come, which in my opinion is contrary to Christianity.

It might be thought that the distinction between potentiality and actuality might be relevant here. In this view, the soul is “potentially” separable from the body, even if not “actually” separate in the present. However, my contention is that there is no natural potentiality for post-mortem existence since that would assume the truth of ontological modularity in the present.

Consider this: you could argue that because some men are reserved for eternal life and some for everlasting perdition that these men had the potential for heaven or hell even though they are not actually there yet. That would be a rather strange way of putting it, as the notion of potentiality in this case sounds deterministic. So it seems that the idea of potentiality is itself subject to difficulties.

In addition, the notion of “distinctness” of the soul from the body in this life is vague. One can make conceptual distinctions with respect to a thing, but that does not mean the thing is distinct in reality. The classic case would be the form/matter schema for distinguishing the clay of a statue from its form (e.g., the image of Lincoln at the Lincoln memorial as distinguished from its material base). While this view may be in accord with an Aristotelian conception of the soul, it is doubtful that the notion of the soul as the “form” of the material body is compatible with biblical teaching.

In any case, what this all means to me is that a Christian can be an eschatological dualist (in the sense of personal eschatology) while still being an anthropological physicalist. I would not go so far as to say a Christian should be an “eliminative” physicalist, or even a “reductive” physicalist, but perhaps there is nothing wrong with adopting a position that could be called “neutral” physicalism. This leaves open the possibility that the mind or soul is more than neuron processes, but it doesn’t require that it be more. It is neutral on the subject. 39

One might ask, isn’t it possible for God to create a physical being with the

---

39 Greg Bahnsen, a former teacher of mine, argues against “materialism” with respect to the mind, cf., “Empirical Research Cannot Rescue the Disappearance Form of the Mind-Body Identity Thesis,” *Evangelical Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, PA: 1976, 16 pages; available online at Covenant Media Foundation. Bahnsen doesn’t distinguish materialism in the general or narrow sense. Also, he believes eliminating “sensation” terms (feeling pain, etc.) for physical descriptions doesn’t work. We might say in response that it is true that sensation terms will always be with us in our common ordinary speech, but it doesn’t mean such terms will continue to have any relevance to the
ability to think, feel, and choose as a physical being? Interestingly, Locke raised this very issue:

"We have the ideas of matter and thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own ideas, without revelation, to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some systems of matter, fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to matter, so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance: it being, in respect of our notions, not much more remote from our comprehension to conceive that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking, than that he should superadd to it another substance with a faculty of thinking; since we know not wherein thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that power, which cannot be in any created being, but merely by the good pleasure and bounty of the Creator. -Whether Matter may not be made by God to think is more than man can know."  

Here Locke all too briefly entertains the concept of thinking matter, the notion that some "systems of matter" have the power to perceive and reason.

Locke ultimately chose dualism, but we can ask the question: Was God incapable of creating matter that can think? Was he incapable of creating matter that could make free choices? I think that anyone who denies physicalism must affirm that God, for some reason, could not create thinking or willing matter. This is odd because we can review another Lockean issue. Locke asked somewhere the question as to what was the use for God to create all of our five senses if he were just going to bypass them and allow knowledge to go directly to the mind.

Likewise, we can ask: If God created our brains, why did he have to go on to create a superadditum, i.e., the mind? The introduction of something like a superadditum floating above the brain, would seem to render the brain a useless appendage since it is the super-added mind that is doing all the work.

The notion of a superadditum of the mental reflects badly on the wisdom of God, but it would take a whole paper to go into the details of the proper biblical view of the relation of mind to body. G. C. Berkouwer offers a discussion and a critique of dualism and the notion of an “immortal soul” and shows that theologians are not all on the same page with respect to the immortality doctrine.

One can therefore accept any confession of the church which teaches the “immortality of the soul” but only in the sense of personal eschatology and miracle, not in the sense of a Platonic notion of natural continuity. In their deepest intent, the church confessions

---

are only concerned with the former, not with the latter.\footnote{Berkouwer, p. 272. Note that the adoption of physicalism would remove all of the speculation involved in the origin of the soul, i.e., how a soul is obtained at birth. There would no longer be a need for creationism (where the soul is created directly by God) or for traducianism (where the parent souls create the little baby soul).}

Bibliography


Feibleman, James K. *Ontology*, 1951.


