

Physicalism and mental causation (Part II)

Debate by Death Monkey (Philosophy Forum)

[Quote by TechnoTut] If any statement is false, it is the statement that you indirectly perceive my mental states. What you are doing is inferring the existence of my mental states by observing the effects of my mental states.

That is what "indirect observation" means.

You never have observed my mental states and you never will.

By your reasoning, we never observe anything except the neural input from our sensory organs. After all, our sensory organs are just physical systems, fundamentally no different from telescopes, electron microscopes, and MEG machines. When you look at or touch your desk you are inferring its existence and properties from the effects it has on other physical things, namely your sensory organs.

All observation is indirect, in this sense. Your notion that there is some fundamental difference between the way I observe your mental states, and the way I observe my desk, is completely based on naive intuitive preconceptions.

That's precisely what a mental property is: a property that can only be observed by the subject, thus it is ontologically private. A physical property, if observable at all, is ontologically public.

This does not follow, at all. What you *could* say is that properties which can only be observed by the subject are *epistemologically* private, and that physical properties which are observable are *epistemologically* public, but no information about ontological status can be derived from mere observability.

That said, I cannot see any coherent way in which you can claim that mental properties of other people are not observable, but physical properties of objects are. In both cases, you observe these things through their interactions.

It would be ridiculous to ask whether a mental state has any physical properties. Go on. Pick one. Then ask me if it makes any sense saying that my belief that Bush is the president has a certain size or shape. What does that even mean?

Does gravity have a certain size or shape? This argument is just plain silly. Clearly mental states do not have properties like size or shape. Neither do lots of other physical things. That does not mean it is not physical.

You seem to think that there is some closed list of physical properties things can have, and that if something has any properties not on that list, then they are non-physical properties. That is nonsense. A property is physical if it affects the way the thing having that property interacts with other things. That is what physical means. I cannot think of any properties which my mental states have, which do not affect the way my mental states interact with other things. Therefore, all mental properties which I know I possess, are physical properties *by definition*. If I have any mental properties that are not physical, I don't know about them, and I submit that it would be logically impossible for me *to* know about them.

Again, note that this says absolutely nothing about ontological status or metaphysical substances. You can imagine any metaphysical scenario you want, it makes no difference. The fact remains that all aspects of my consciousness which I am capable of knowing I possess, have effects on the world around me, and are therefore every bit as deserving of the label "physical" as anything else we refer to as being physical. Whether or not it functions according to natural laws, or can be described in terms of the laws of nature as

we currently understand them, is a completely separate issue.
By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

[Quote by technoTut]I don't think so. I can infer something without observing it. If I see snow on the ground, I can infer that it snowed without actually observing snow falling down.

Well, it is certainly what scientists mean by "indirect observation", whether it is what you mean or not. In any event, regardless of what you choose to call it, that is how pretty much all of our knowledge about the world is acquired.

By your reasoning, we never observe anything except the neural input from our sensory organs. After all, our sensory organs are just physical systems, fundamentally no different from telescopes, electron microscopes, and MEG machines. When you look at or touch your desk you are inferring its existence and properties from the effects it has on other physical things, namely your sensory organs.

All observation is indirect, in this sense. Your notion that there is some fundamental difference between the way I observe your mental states, and the way I observe my desk, is completely based on naive intuitive preconceptions.

Are you saying that when I look at a material object, there is a mental image indirectly representing the material object that I'm perceiving?

No. I am saying that when you look at an object, your mind is experiencing input from your optic nerve. There is no direct interaction between your mind and the object. What you are observing is neural input from your eyes. You are inferring information about the object from the interaction between the light reflected off of the object, and your eyes.

If so, then that still does not disrupt my position because the mental image is (i) directly perceived (as opposed to the material object which is indirectly perceived in this representational sense) and (ii) the material object is perceived by you and I, but again, my mental states are perceivable only by your truly. You can perceive my brain states, and infer the existence of my mental states from many other things, but you'll never perceive my mental states.

Again, by your reasoning all that we ever perceive is the neural input from our own sensory organs. All observation of any external objects is every bit as indirect as my observation of your mental states.

Well, fields of force can be viewed as particles, e.g. gravitons. But more importantly, do not force fields, whether gravitational, magnetic, or electrical, have some kind of extension? Would it make sense to say that my belief that George Bush is the President is physically extended? Does it make sense to say my belief that George Bush is the President has a positive electrical charge?

You appear to have completely ignored my entire point, and just repeated the flawed argument I already responded to. I repeat:

You seem to think that there is some closed list of physical properties things can have, and that if something has any properties not on that list, then they are non-physical properties. That is nonsense. A property is physical if it affects the way the thing having that property interacts with other things. That is what physical means. I cannot think of any properties which my mental states have, which do not affect the way my mental states interact with other things. Therefore, all mental properties which I know I possess, are physical properties by definition. If I have any mental properties that are not physical, I don't know about them, and I submit that it would be logically impossible for me to know about them.

Do you have any response to this? Or do you wish to just keep repeating the nonsensical argument that anything which does not have specific properties like mass, size, or electrical charge, cannot be physical? Your argument would rule out literally all emergent phenomena as being non-physical.

If you want to claim that consciousness is non-physical in the same sense as things like combustion or computation are, then all you are doing is playing semantic games with the word "physical". You can redefine the word "physical" to refer only to things which have some *specific* set of physical properties, if you want to. But that doesn't change anything, and it certainly does not give any special metaphysical status to the mind.

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

[Quote by technoTut]What scientists mean by "indirect observation" matters little to me. I am not here to quibble about the meaning of words. There is a difference between inferring something (what you call "indirect observation") and actually observing something. When I look at a desk, I do not perceive or observe electrons, but I can infer their existence from a number of things.

Like I said before, even the existence of the desk must be inferred. Your mind has no direct access to it. Everything your mind knows (or thinks it knows) about the external world, has been inferred from interactions between the external world and your sensory organs. Thus there is fundamentally no difference between observation of an electron using sophisticated detection equipment, and observation of your desk using your eyes.

The same can be said about other minds, but not because minds are public things too small to see, but rather, because they are private.

In what sense are they private? If they can be detected and studied through their interactions with other things, then what is private about them? How do they differ from anything else we observe in the world around us?

Again, by your reasoning all that we ever perceive is the neural input from our own sensory organs. All observation of any external objects is every bit as indirect as my observation of your mental states. This "neural input" -- is it a mental image?

No, it is an electrochemical signal being transmitted from your sensory organs to your brain.

I am not interested in your No True Scotsman fallacy.

I have not presented any such fallacy.

You're simply defining away mental properties by saying anything that plays a causal role is physical.

Nonsense. I am not "defining them away" at all. I am simply pointing out that they are every bit as much a part of the physical world as anything else, and that according to the scientific definition of the term "physical", they most definitely qualify.

Just because something plays some causal role with physical things does not mean that that thing is physical.

Actually, that is exactly what the term "physical" means.

Interactionism, after all, says mental properties play causal roles.

Irrelevant. As I already explained, I am not talking about metaphysical substances here. When I say that mental properties are physical, I am not claiming that they consist of some material substance. I have already explained that I consider the concept of material substance to be incoherent. I have also already explained that under interactive dualism, the mind is *physical*, but not *material*. I am using "physical" in the scientific sense, which has absolutely nothing to do with hypothetical ontological substances.

Minty thinks this is a problem because it violates the law of physical closure, viz. only physical things interact with physical things. But as Monroe has said, there is nothing in science that says anything about any physical closure principle. So Minty then agreed, but then said it violates naturalism. I replied that naturalism only entails that any phenomena, whether mental or physical, can be explained by some kind of science -- it does not have to entail physicalism.

Now, you have met to meet my objections, viz. it makes no sense to attribute any physical properties to mental properties.

If you are talking about physical properties in some metaphysical sense, then I have no idea what that even means. I don't see how it makes any sense to attribute metaphysical properties to *anything*. If this was your intention, you explained yourself poorly, because properties such as size, mass, and charge, which you used as examples, are not metaphysical properties at all. They are all defined within the context of science, and therefore are physical properties according to the scientific definition of physical, which has absolutely nothing to do with metaphysical substances.

That said, I have explained exactly why it makes sense to attribute physical properties to the mind, using the scientific definition of physical.

If your argument is that we cannot demonstrate that the mind is ontologically material, then I absolutely agree. If you want to claim that you can demonstrate that the mind is somehow ontologically distinct from the rest of the world, then you have yet to do that. If you want to claim that you have justification for thinking that there is anything more to the mind than what the brain is doing, then you have yet to do that either.

So what, exactly, are you trying to claim?

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

[Quote by technoTut]There is still a difference between actually seeing a graviton through a microscope and inferring its existence. Just as there is a difference between inferring it snowed last night and seeing actual snowfall. That is the distinction you need to understand.

OK. So what's the distinction? Both are examples of inferring facts about the external world based on a combination of sensory input and models of the external world (which are themselves based on sensory input). What's the difference? It seems to me that the *only* real difference is that one *intuitively* seems like your mind directly perceiving information about the external world (even though its not), and the other is more obviously an example of drawing inferences from sensory input based on conceptual models of the world.

In the case of subatomic particles, we cannot see their size, shape, and motion because they are too small. In the case of the mental states of others, size has nothing to do with it. It's a matter of the ontological status of mental states, viz. that it is a matter of them being inherently private things.

This is mere assertion. You have not presented any evidence to substantiate the claim that mental states have a different ontological status from other things, nor have you provided any explanation for why having a different ontological status would render the mind *epistemologically* any different than anything else.

Again, your notion of the mind being "private" is based on an intuitive, and completely unrealistic notion of how observation of the external world works. It is only private in the sense that only one person experiences their experiences. This says absolutely *nothing* about the ontological status of the mind. As I already pointed out, it is simply a consequence of the fact that your mind is something your brain is doing. Other people can observe your brain *doing* it, but only your brain *experiences* doing it, because only your brain *is* doing it.

What you see is a mental representation in your head of the physical object outside your body. If you deny that, then how else do you explain hallucinations?

Deny what? What is it that that you think I am denying the existence of?

phys-i-cal P) Pronunciation Key (fz-kl)

adj.

- a. Of or relating to the body as distinguished from the mind or spirit. See Synonyms at *bodily*.
- b. Involving or characterized by vigorous bodily activity: a physical dance performance.
- c. Slang. Involving or characterized by violence: "A real cop would get physical" (TV Guide).
 1. Of or relating to material things: our physical environment.
 2. Of or relating to matter and energy or the sciences dealing with them, especially physics.

I do not see a definition that states "anything that interacts with other physical things or plays some causal role."

What's your point? Do you think the scientific definition is going to be provided in a dictionary? Dictionaries don't provide formal definitions, they provide common usages.

Anyway, I thought you said you didn't want to play word games? So why are you arguing about what "physical" means? I have explained what I mean by the term. You now have no excuse for misunderstanding what I mean when I use the term. If you think I am using the term improperly, that's fine. I couldn't care less.

Yes, size, mass, and charge are properly defined because it makes sense to say a graviton has X charge and Y mass. But that's not the case when we speak of mental states. It literally makes no sense to attribute any physical (in the normal sense of the word, not the Death Monkey sense) properties to minds.

More quibbling about semantics. Again, I don't care how you choose to define the term "physical". It has no bearing on my argument. If you want to put some completely artificial semantic distinction between properties like size and mass, and properties of emergent phenomena, then go right ahead. Doing so has absolutely no relevance to anything I have said, and certainly does not cause some metaphysical or epistemological distinction to magically appear.

The fact remains that there simply isn't any epistemological distinction. The fact remains that I still infer information about other people's minds in *exactly* the same way that I infer information about any other part of the external world. Namely by drawing inferences about it from my sensory input, using conceptual models of an external world.

Look, I agree with you that mental properties play causal roles, but do you agree with me that it makes no sense to describe mental properties in terms of mass, size, shape, and charge?

I already told you that I do. I just don't see why you think that it is even remotely relevant. Again, lots of

physical things lack such properties. You can choose to not call them physical if you want, but such semantic gymnastics accomplish nothing.

Nobody is claiming that consciousness is a particle, or even an object. It is a process. As such, it does not possess properties which are specific to objects, such as size, mass, or charge. Neither do processes like photosynthesis, child-birth, or eating. But I doubt you would declare them to be non-physical, or ontologically special.

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

[Quote by TechnoTut]You do not see any difference between seeing an electron, i.e. seeing a little small thing flying around protons and neutrons, from inferring such a thing exists without actually seeing it?

I see only the superficial distinction, which is that in the first case I infer the existence of the electron from my visual input by concluding that neural input from my eyes represents an actual electron, and in the second case I infer the existence of the electron by concluding that the combined sensory input from looking at various measuring devices represents an actual electron.

The only difference is that in one case you are relying entirely on your sensory organs as your detection equipment, and in the other case you are using additional detection equipment which interfaces with your sensory organs.

The point, nevertheless, is atoms are too small to see. Do you disagree with that? No? Good. Now, you cannot see mental states not because they're too small, but because they're private.

No, you cannot "see" them because, like many *processes*, they are not the type of thing which has properties which sight is relevant to. They most definitely have other physical properties, which can be detected, just as electrons do.

It is only private in the sense that only one person experiences their experiences. This says absolutely nothing about the ontological status of the mind. As I already pointed out, it is simply a consequence of the fact that your mind is something your brain is doing. Other people can observe your brain doing it, but only your brain experiences doing it, because only your brain is doing it.

That's nonsense. Substitute "brain" for "gallbladder" and "mind" for "bile": production of bile is something only my gallbladder is doing. People can experience my gallbladder producing bile, but does not mean only my gallbladder can experience bile simply because only my gallbladder produces bile.

Your analogy is nonsensical. You are using "experience" and "observe" interchangeably, but they are not interchangeable.

Look. I can *observe* your gallbladder producing bile, but like all observation of external events, my mind does not have direct access to it. I must infer the existence of your gallbladder, and must infer what is doing, from my sensory input. What I cannot do, is actually *perform* the process of your gallbladder producing bile.

Likewise, your experiences are something which your brain is *doing*. I can observe your brain having experiences, just as I can observe your gallbladder producing bile. What I cannot do is *perform* the process of your brain having experiences.

By confusing experience with observation, you are creating an epistemic distinction that simply isn't there. The only thing you ever experience is your own mind (which is just to say that the only thing your brain

can be aware of doing, is what it is actually doing). You never experience external objects. You do not experience the desk in front of you. You experience your brain's response to sensory input, which in turn was affected by the desk.

So as I already explained, there is fundamentally no difference between the way we observe other people's minds, and the way we observe any other part of the external world. At most, you could claim that there is a difference between the way we observe our own minds, and the way we observe the external world. This is certainly true, but also irrelevant, since this distinction is exactly what would be expected from the fact that our minds are something which our brains are *doing*.

Why? Because bile is a physical material thing, thus public. Minds, on the other hand, are not.

Demonstrably false. I observe your mind in exactly the same way as I observe bile, by inferring its existence and properties from my own sensory input. Both are equally public, and equally parts of the physical world.

It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that it is "because only your brain is doing it." After all, it is only because my gallbladder is producing bile, therefore bile is private? No. Bile is public, minds are private. Both are produced by only one organ.

There is no difference. Your intuition is leading you astray, because intuitively you are equating experience with observation.

Are you denying that what we are directly aware are mental images in our heads?

Of course not. On the contrary, that is part of the point I am making. When you see your desk, you are not directly aware of the desk. You are directly aware of the mental image, which is constructed by your visual cortex based on sensory input. You must infer the existence of the actual object from this mental image.

It's not that I think you are misusing the term, you really are misusing the term because you are deviating from the common usage of the term.

No, actually I am not. I am using common usage number 2 from your list:

2. Of or relating to matter and energy or the sciences dealing with them, especially physics.

To understand why this usage corresponds to my formal definition, you have to actually understand how science, and particularly physics, works.

And I've never heard of any "formal definitions" of "physical". Please corroborate your definition – don't just say "well, this is how scientists use the term." Show me some official dictionary used by scientists and not laymen.

Again, dictionaries provide usages, not definitions. For the formal definition you need only look at usage number 2 which you cited, and consider what that implies in the context of how science works. Physics studies all observable phenomena. That is, all phenomena which can either be directly perceived by our senses, or which have effects on things which are. If you disagree with this, then please explain why.

If not, then it should be clear that when usage 2 says "of or relating to physics", it is saying that in this context, "physical" means anything which the science of physics can be applied to. Since mental phenomena clearly affect things which we are capable of detecting, the science of physics can be applied to it. Therefore, by usage 2 which **you** cited, it is physical.

The fact remains that there simply isn't any epistemological distinction. The fact remains that I still infer information about other people's minds in exactly the same way that I infer information about any other part of the external world. Namely by drawing inferences about it from my sensory input, using conceptual

models of an external world.

I am not discussing how you infer the existence of minds and atoms. Again, I'm talking about seeing others minds; seeing electrons, etc. You apparently do not understand the difference between seeing an atom and inferring its existence.

Oh, I understand the difference. One is a specific example of the other. Seeing an atom is an example of one way to infer its existence. But not the only way.

The fact that I cannot "see" the mind is utterly irrelevant. If you want to obsess about this point, go right ahead. I just don't see why you think that the fact that I cannot "see" it, implies that it is any less physical than any of the other things which I cannot see, or that it has some sort of special ontological status.

Photosynthesis, child-birth, and eating are simply aggregates of material bodies and particles in motion, i.e. they are processes of material things, such as particles. But to say that the same is true about my mental states is crazy.

Am I supposed to respond to this as though it were an argument? Because it's not.

Maybe it seems crazy to you. Probably a more accurate statement would be that it is extremely counter-intuitive. But simply asserting that it is crazy does not mean it is not true.

My belief is not made up of particles, thus it is not a process.

Great. Now we know what your belief is. Now all you need to do is provide some evidence to justify it.
By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

[Quote by TechnoTut]The difference between the two cases is not merely how one came about to know about the existence of atoms. There is a visual difference as well, viz. between seeing the object and not seeing the object.

Yes, that is what I listed as the superficial difference. In one case the only detection equipment is my own body's visual system, and in the other case additional detection equipment is used, which interfaces with my visual hardware.

There's another difference, viz. why atoms cannot be seen and why mental states cannot be seen.

Just as there is a difference between the reason why atoms cannot be seen and why computation cannot be seen. So what? I ask again, how do any of these superficial differences imply that the mind has some sort of special ontological status, or even that is anything more than brain processes?

Also, one does not infer one's own mental states. One has direct access to one's mental states, but indirect access to physical objects.

When did I say that people infer their own mental states?

No, you cannot "see" them because, like many processes, they are not the type of thing which has properties which sight is relevant to. They most definitely have other physical properties, which can be detected, just as electrons do.

Sight is not relevant in seeing processes?

Huh???? What I said is that they do not possess properties which sight is relevant to, not that sight is not relevant to seeing processes.

How is sight not relevant in seeing bile production?

I did not say that it wasn't.

But my brain is not aware of what it is doing.

Of course you are. At least, you are clearly aware of at least *some* of what your brain is doing. Take vision for example. There is no question that when you see something, you are being aware of something which your visual cortex is doing. That does not mean that you are aware of all the details, or that you even understand that it is your own brain activity which you are aware of, but there is absolutely no question that you are aware of it.

My brain is not a conscious thing.

You can say that all you want. Saying it doesn't make it so. Either your brain is a conscious thing, or whatever is conscious is interacting with your brain. There is certainly no evidence of any mystical forces interacting with people's brains.

In fact, I am not even aware of what my brain is doing – I do not know what my neural networks are doing.

You don't have to understand how it works, or even what it is, to be aware of it.

My brain may causes consciousness, but that does not mean my brain is conscious.

Then I have no idea what you think it would mean to say that something is conscious.

I am the one who is conscious.

And your brain is the part of you that is conscious.

Also, you have can see the production of my bile, but you can never see my thoughts.

That is because, like atoms, the brain processes which make up your thoughts are not visible to the naked eye. So what? I can detect the brain processes which are your thoughts, using special equipment, just as I can detect the production of bile in your body without cutting you open and seeing it directly. You just don't believe that those brain processes are your thoughts. That does not mean that they are not.

That's the difference between bile and thoughts ;

What? That one process is visible to the naked eye, and the other requires complex machinery to detect?

and between brain processes and thoughts.

You have yet to demonstrate that there is *any* difference between brain processes and thought. You can't see brain processes, but so far the fact that I cannot see them is the only evidence you have cited for thoughts being somehow special.

As you've said, we have indirect access to physical things outside our minds, but we always have direct access to our minds. That's precisely what makes a mental property not-physical: something I have only viz. direct private access

This is nonsensical. *Having* an additional property which other physical things *lack*, does not make

something non-physical. *Lacking* properties which all other physical things *have*, would make something non-physical.

Look at it this way. Something is physical if, and only if, all of its properties are physical. A property is physical if and only if it is either directly perceivable by our senses, or has an effect on something which is. There are no known properties of the mind which do not have effects on things which are perceivable to our senses, therefore all known properties of the mind are physical.

Now, if you think the mind has any non-physical properties, kindly point out what they are, because I cannot think of any, nor can I imagine how we could possibly know of the existence of such a thing.

In any event, I repeat again that the fact that your mind has direct access to itself, and only to itself, does not in any way imply that the mind has any sort of special ontological status. It is simply a function of how the brain works.

No, what the dictionary says is “of or relating to matter and energy or the sciences dealing with them, especially physics.” Meaning physics is the science that deals with matter and energy. Nothing here states your definition, viz. something is physical if it plays some causal role.

Like I said, to understand the definition you have to actually understand something about science and physics. Physics is the science which deals with matter and energy, yes. But physics is not defined in terms of matter and energy. Matter and energy are defined in terms of physics. As I already clearly said, physics studies that which is detectable, which includes everything which is accessible to our senses, and everything which has effects on things which are accessible to our senses. Currently our theories are framed entirely in terms of matter and energy. If this turns out to be insufficient to describe all detectable things, then physics will adjust accordingly. Of course, you have yet to provide any justification for the claim that consciousness is not simply a brain process, which would put it firmly into the category of “of or relating to matter and energy” anyway.

On the contrary, there’s a difference between not seeing something because it is too small to see and not seeing something because it is private. This is a distinction you’re ignoring.

I am not ignoring it, because you have not demonstrated that such a distinction exists. I would say that the reason the mind cannot be seen is because it is brain processes, and brain processes cannot be seen. And of course, the reason that brain processes cannot be seen is *because they are too small*.

The above processes you listed are material processes because material bodies are involved. The mind is not a material thing, nor is it a process.

Please provide your evidence that this claim is justified. I say that your mind is a material process too. It is something which your brain is doing. Simply asserting that it is not, does not justify your claim.

Who is my belief that George Bush is the President a process? I’m sorry, but it makes no sense.

You're right. It does not. It is not even a properly formed sentence.
By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)