

Physicalism and mental causation (Part III)

Debate by (mostly) Death Monkey (Philosophy Forum)

[Quote by TechnoTut] In the sense that minds are private things, i.e. things we have direct access to our minds. Do you have direct access to a computer programs? To atoms? This direct access is the reason why you cannot see my thoughts.

You did not answer my question. You simply reasserted your claim. I ask again, how does the fact that only I have direct access to my thoughts, imply that my thoughts have some sort of special ontological status, or even that they are not just brain processes?

[Quote by TechnoTut] The issue is whether one can see a process. The obvious answer is "yes". Now, can you see my thoughts? No.

That is ridiculous. There are all sorts of processes which cannot be seen. My brain processes cannot be seen. That alone certainly does not imply that they have some special ontological status. And it obviously does not imply that there is anything more to them than brain processes. You are going to have to come up with more than just not being visible to the naked eye to justify your claim.

[Quote by TechnoTut] No I am not. I have no idea what my visual cortex is doing. In fact, I wouldn't even have known that I have a visual cortex had it not been for someone telling me so.

Irrelevant. You don't need to know that what you are aware of is something your visual cortex is doing, to be aware of it. The fact remains that you are aware of what your visual cortex is doing, regardless of whether you happen to know that it is, in fact, your visual cortex's activity which you are aware of.

TecnoTut wrote: 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.

You're question begging. My brain is not a conscious thing. I am a conscious thing. [/quote]
In order for me to be question begging, I would have to be using an assumption to prove that assumption. I am not even trying to prove anything. I am simply pointing out the flaws in your argument. You have claimed that the fact that only I am aware of my thoughts, somehow indicates that my thoughts cannot be brain processes. I merely pointed out that if my thoughts are brain processes, then the fact that only I am aware of them is to be expected. Your argument is thus clearly refuted, regardless of whether my thoughts are actually brain processes or not!

TecnoTut wrote: If you opened up my abdomen, you'd see my bile. But if you opened up my skull, you wouldn't see my thoughts, you'd just see brain processes.

I would see neither thoughts nor brain processes. Both are quite invisible to the naked eye. You have yet to demonstrate that they are invisible for different reasons.

TecnoTut wrote: The word "mental" is being used in the sense of immaterial, and a privately thing.

By whom? You? I certainly don't use the word "mental" in the sense of immaterial. I use the word mental to refer to the mind, which is clearly publicly observable, and thus by the definition *you* gave, material.

TecnoTut wrote: So yes, my mind I not physical because (a) it is not material and (b) I have direct access to it. These two elements are what make the ontological distinction between the mental and the physical.

Again, you have contradicted yourself in asserting that the mind is not material and that material means publicly observable. And you have not even attempted to justify the claim that the private nature of the mind has any ontological implications whatsoever.

TecnoTut wrote:

phys·ics (fzks)

n.

1. (used with a sing. verb) The science of matter and energy and of interactions between the two, grouped in traditional fields such as acoustics, optics, mechanics, thermodynamics, and electromagnetism, as well as in modern extensions including atomic and nuclear physics, cryogenics, solid-state physics, particle physics, and plasma physics.

2. (used with a sing. verb) Archaic. The study of the natural or material world and phenomena; natural philosophy

And your point is??? Oh, wait. You actually think this somehow supports your claims, don't you? That's funny, considering that by the very definition of "material" **you** gave, the mind qualifies.

TecnoTut wrote: So my belief that George Bush is the President is a bunch of atoms bouncing around? Sorry, but I do not know what it means to attribute material properties, such as weight, size, and shape, to my thoughts.

This idiotic strawman of yours is growing very old, very fast. Nobody is attributing those material properties to your thoughts.

If you ever decide you want to discuss this issue seriously, let me know. At this point, I can only conclude that you are either not taking this discussion seriously, and just trying to annoy me by repeating the same vacuous nonsense over and over again, or that you actually think these argument you are presenting make sense. In either case, further discussion of this with you seems pretty pointless to me. I might as well try to discuss philosophy with my cat.

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

TecnoTut wrote:...This direct access is the reason why you cannot see my thoughts.

Actually (for better or for worse) I suspect that this is just a matter of time. See the following links:

<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/03/1208/7a.shtml>

<http://www.carnegiemellontoday.com/article.asp?Aid=156>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week646/cover.html>

By Probeman (John Donovan)

TecnoTut wrote:What I see, in those links, are brain scans, i.e. pictures of brains, not thoughts. I do not deny an intimate causal relationship between the mind and the brain (which is what those links suggest), but I do deny the strict *identity* claim of mind and brain.

On exactly what basis do you make this assertion?

Because of course you could, in principle, be correct. Of course, in practice, you'll never know. Well..., that's metaphysics for you! (or should I say heartfelt intuition?)

I do not deny an intimate causal relationship between reality and the observable universe (which is what physics suggests), but I do deny the strict *identity* claim of reality and the observable universe.'
Ain't metaphysics amazing!

(I'd sure like someone, sometime, to explain to me what exactly the difference is between "metaphysics" and "religion." Besides the spelling and pronunciation of course.)
By Probeman (John Donovan)

TecnoTut wrote:

The reason why our thoughts have a special ontological status is because we have direct access to them (as opposed to anything else) and they have no material properties, i.e. the properties of matter and energy (of physical things) do not apply to our thoughts.

This is a complete non-sequitur. Even if the assertion that thoughts have no properties of energy or matter were true (and it quite clearly is not), that would not in any way imply anything about their ontological status.

TecnoTut wrote:

But of course your brain process can be seen. All one has to do is open another's skull and take a peek. All a process is the behavior of material things. But our thoughts are not material, thus not processes.

You clearly have no idea what you are talking about. If you look inside somebody's skull, you will see a large lump of slightly pulsating flesh. If you look *really* closely, you might even be able to visually identify patterns of blood flow in the larger blood vessels. There is no way in hell you are going to be able to see actual neural activity. You are talking complete nonsense.

TecnoTut wrote:

Irrelevant. You don't need to know that what you are aware of is something your visual cortex is doing, to be aware of it. The fact remains that you are aware of what your visual cortex is doing, regardless of whether you happen to know that it is, in fact, your visual cortex's activity which you are aware of.

Quote by TechnoTut: "The fact remains that I am never aware of what my visual cortex is doing. In fact, I wouldn't even have known I have a visual cortex had it not been for someone else telling me. I am aware of my thoughts, however."

Wow. I just responded to this exact claim, and you simply ignored my response and repeated the claim. Is this your idea of having a discussion?

TecnoTut wrote:

You're right in that I said minds and electrons cannot be seen. But I didn't just stop there. I said that electrons are invisible because they are too small to see, whereas my thoughts are invisible to others because they are immaterial, i.e. they have no size and shape. That's the difference.

Yes, I know you *said* that. And you can continue *saying* it until the cows come home. What you need to do is justify this claim of yours, rather than just asserting it over and over again like some sort of broken

record.

TecnoTut wrote:

By whom? You? I certainly don't use the word "mental" in the sense of immaterial. I use the word mental to refer to the mind, which is clearly publicly observable, and thus by the definition you gave, material.

If you do not use the word "mental" in the sense of being immaterial and private, then you are misusing the word. Notice the antonym:

mental

adj 1: involving the mind or an intellectual process; "mental images of happy times"; "mental calculations"; "in a terrible mental state"; "mental suffering"; "free from mental defects" [ant: physical]

So what does "physical" mean? As I've shown already, it means of or relating to material things.

The very fact that you would think that a dictionary entry can somehow support your metaphysical and epistemological claims, just makes me even more convinced that this is a total waste of time. I could not possibly care less whether or not you think I am using the word improperly. If you define mental to mean "non-physical", and define physical to mean "publicly observable", then it is trivially clear that our thoughts, awareness, emotions, memories, and pretty much every thing else which we commonly refer to as "mental", do not fit your definition. The word is thus rendered useless.

Of course, it does not surprise me in the least that you so conveniently forgot when you posted the above that the dictionary also listed several usages for the term "physical", and that only one of them has to do with science. Perhaps the "physical" your dictionary is claiming to be the antonym of "mental" is one of the their usages? If not, then your dictionary is clearly not consistent with reality. It certainly would not be the first time.

TecnoTut wrote:

The point of my posting the definition of "physics" is show you that it is a science that deals with material things and their causal relations. Nowhere in the definition does it say "the science that deals with anything with causal powers."

As a physicist, I find the notion that you think that my field of scientific study is limited to what your dictionary entry says to be simultaneously amusing and insulting. I don't need you to tell me what "physics" means, thank you very much. I have only been studying the subject now for about 14 years.

Perhaps you should try learning about things like physics, neuroscience, and philosophy of science, before you attempt to discuss them?

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)

TecnoTut wrote: So if you wish to identify mental states with brain states, you will need more evidence than mere correlation.

No I don't. Because I am not making a claim of identity. It is you that are making the claim that they are **not** identical- without any evidence whatsoever, except for your heartfelt intuitions.

Absolute identity is a metaphysical conceit and has nothing to do with scientific knowledge. In science, all we can say is that based on all available evidence, there is no reason to assume that the cause for mind is anything other than exactly what we observe it to be- the brain. Of course outside of science one can make any unsubstantiated claim that suits one's intuitions, but as science has endlessly shown, "how it seems to you" is not necessarily "how it really is".

Invocations of the soul or other metaphysical properties or substances are entirely spurious and unwarranted- except of course to provide solace and comfort for human existential angst.

The fact is, based on all observable evidence and data (e.g. those links), your thoughts of President Bush are composed last week's potatoes. There is no evidence that they are anything more than very complicated arrangements of carbon atoms.

In science all we can ever find are "intimate causal relationships". It's only in metaphysics and religion that absolute appeals of certainty are made without any empirically observable basis of any sort.
By Probeman (John Donovan)

Why, I wonder, doesn't Techno Tut insist that computer programs and patterns of electrical activity in circuits (or magnetic domain orientations) aren't identical? Why isn't he claiming that we need to generate new physics to explain how information theory and electrical engineering are related?

It may well be the case that we'll need new physics to understand how the mind is implemented, although I don't think it's at all likely and there are no experimental results which require new physics to be explained. But there is absolutely no evidence that the human mind, or any other process for that matter, goes beyond information theory.
By Monosodium Glutamate

Probeman wrote:

No I don't. Because I am not making a claim of identity.

TecnoTut wrote:

Yes you are. Hence this statement: "There is no evidence that they [thoughts]are anything more than very complicated arrangements of carbon atoms."

Wrong again. I didn't say they are identical, I said there is no evidence to support your claim that they aren't identical. All the evidence we have suggests that they are identical, but science can never prove this with absolute certainty. In the COMPLETE absence of evidence to the contrary, and on much evidence based on "intimate causal relationships", we can only say that SO FAR AS WE CAN TELL, they are identical, just as we can only assume (so far as we can tell) that water is "merely" H₂O.

TecnoTut wrote:

Correct, but I don't merely rely on correlation for my position. You, on the other hand, do.

Merely? You rely merely on heartfelt intuition, while science relies on evidence from "intimate casual relationships". Which is what all science is based on and that includes such "mere" items as the germ theory of disease.

In fact, all success in science is based on observing such "intimate casual relationships." Now you can continue to delude yourself into whatever supernatural or metaphysical nonsense that makes you feel better, but the fact remains that you have no evidence for denying that your thoughts are complex arrangements of carbon atoms. All you have are your emotional intuitions that deep down inside says "There MUST be more to it than that!", and a considerable dose of ignorance in science I might add.

The problem with intuitions like these is similar to when trying to imagine deep geologic time- the human brain simply isn't equipped to make that intuitive leap. That's why creationists continue to insist that evolution has never been "observed" and just "doesn't make sense".

Your (and many others) inability to intuitively "grok" how complexity beyond imagination could produce such a variety of emergent behavior in organisms is simply not evidence of any sort.

TecnoTut wrote:

Now, you should also be aware that many atheists believe in a mind-matter distinction. The mind-body problem is not a dispute between atheists and theists. One can believe, e.g., that the mind's existence depends on the brain and body. No body, no mind. Where are the religious overtones of disembodied souls and spirits in that view?

Oh believe me- I know all about the spectrum of nonsense from new age quantum metaphysics to fundamentalist religion and it's all boils down to the same stone-age intuitions that all humans are born with, including Descartes, Plato, Aristotle. Scientists today aren't any smarter than these guys and they have no special powers- but they were born later- and in science, due to it's progressive nature, that's all it takes sometimes.

It also takes training, study and consideration of data based evidence- not philosophical "arguments" uninformed by science, to overcome these built in superstitious biases that served us well 100,000 years ago but simply aren't up to the task today.

Aristotle has already heard your stale metaphysical arguments- nothing new there. What would really blow his mind is learning how much progress science has made in connecting and explaining vast areas of ignorance about nature and human nature since his time.

By Probeman (John Donovan)

TecnoTut wrote:

But of course it's true that minds do not have physical properties, such as mass, size, shape, and charge. You even admitted that.

You know perfectly well that this is not an exhaustive list of physical properties, and that furthermore many things which are physical (indeed all physical processes) lack these properties. Who do you think you're fooling with this kind of argumentation?

TecnoTut wrote:

However, you try to define away mental entities by misusing the word "physical". So if we have something that does not have physical properties, then we have different ontological statuses: things that have physical properties and things that do not.

Nonsense. Even the definition of physical **you** gave, which stipulates that it has to do only with matter and energy, is an epistemological one, not metaphysical, since those terms are themselves defined by science, which defines them entirely in terms of observable phenomena. You cannot derive an ontological distinction between two things based on an epistemological difference. Indeed, one could imagine any number of metaphysical scenarios by which such an epistemological difference could occur under idealism, materialism, monism, or dualism. The ontological distinction you are claiming simply does not logically follow from the premises you are claiming to derive it from. Not that it matter, since you have yet to justify your claim that an epistemic distinction exists with anything more than appeals to what dictionaries claim "physical" means.

TecnoTut wrote:

Pulsating flesh and circulating blood in the brain are all brain processes. So going back original point, brain processes can in fact be seen, thus they're not ontologically private.

You know perfectly well that those are not the brain processes I am talking about. Furthermore, I have made the point quite clear in previous posts that the brain processes which I am claiming are consciousness, are neurological processes. What is the point of even stating this?

TecnoTut wrote:

Other processes cannot be seen, but that's because the electrons of neuronal electrical charges, e.g., are too small to see.

That is exactly the point! You have stated that since thoughts cannot be seen, they cannot possibly be brain processes, but you just admitted that the brain processes I have claimed they are *cannot be seen either*, so your entire argument is clearly refuted!

TecnoTut wrote:

Unlike neuronal activity, one inability to see another's mental states has nothing to do with the size of the mental state because mental properties do not have size.

Evidence? Or am I just supposed to take your word for it? You have previously argued that mental states cannot be brain processes because if we look into somebody's brain, we cannot see them. Do you now acknowledge that this argument is fallacious? What argument do you have now? Or is it your intention to just keep repeating, without justification, that mental states are invisible for different reasons, until I get tired of arguing with you about it?

TecnoTut wrote:

Justify which claim? That minds have no size and shape? Or that there's a difference between not being able to see something because it's too small and not being able to see something because it lacks size and shape?

No, your claim that mental states are not neurological processes. You have not offered any justification for this claim other than the absurd and obviously false argument that they can't be, because we can't see them.

TecnoTut wrote: Yes, there are several usages for the word "physical". However, none of them reflect your usage. Thus, you're misusing the term.

I just explained exactly which of the usages I am using, and why it is appropriate. You ignored it.

TecnoTut wrote:

I do not doubt your competence in your field of specialty. I'm just point out to you that you're misusing terms and ignoring distinctions with regard to this topic. And your fallacious appeal to authority doesn't impress anyone.

I have explained why I am not misusing the term, and you ignored my explanation. I have explained that I am not ignoring distinctions, but instead asking you to justify your claim that the distinctions are relevant. Again you have ignored my explanation. You also appear to have absolutely no idea what the appeal to authority fallacy is, which comes as no surprise given your prior inappropriate accusation of me using the fallacy of begging the question. It would appear that having a reasonable discussion with you is simply not possible.

By Death Monkey (Kevin Dolan)