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# The Importance of Physicalism and Some Relevant Theories in The Philosophy of Mind

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## **Abstract:**

This research paper discusses the philosophical concept of physicalism, which posits that everything that exists is ultimately physical. It begins by explaining Cartesian dualism, the idea that the mind and body are separate entities, and then presents arguments in favor of materialism, the view that only physical matter exists. It also outlines two main perspectives on materialism: metaphysical, which focuses on the nature of being, and the challenge of explaining mental states within a purely physical framework. The text then introduces and explains two specific theories: physicalism as advocated by logical positivists, and the identity theory, also known as reductive materialism.

## **Key- words:**

Cartesian dualism, materialism, physicalism, identity theory, consciousness, mind, body, philosophy of mind, science, psychology, neuroscience, reductive materialism, anomalous monism, mental states, brain states, language, logical positivism, unity of science.

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To understand the significance and implications of physicalism, we must begin with Cartesian dualism. Descartes spoke of two realms: the inner world and the outer physical world. In other words, he emphasized two mutually independent substances: mind and body. He argued that the essence of the body is extension, whereas the essence of the mind is thought. In *Meditations*, when analyzing the nature of the mind, he stated that the mind is a thinking thing, possessing the ability to doubt, believe, and perceive. In his own words:

*"What is a thing that thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels."*

What emerges from Descartes' statement is that he did not clearly distinguish between believing or understanding and feeling or experiencing. For him, even the sensation of pain seemed to be a form of thinking. However, Descartes himself was somewhat uneasy about this idea. He recognized that non-human animals also experience pain, yet it is difficult to assert that they possess a mind or a thinking substance.

In general, the main argument in favor of Cartesian dualism is that the phenomena we describe as *mental* share a universal characteristic—thought—which is absent in what we describe as *physical*. Similarly, the defining characteristic of physical bodies—extension—is not a feature of mentality. Therefore, mind and body must be considered two distinct substances, and one cannot be explained in terms of the other.

Needless to say, this dualism did not gain universal acceptance. In particular, materialist philosophers and scientists have raised numerous objections against it. Briefly, these objections can be summarized as follows:

Two arguments can be made in favor of materialism. Firstly, there's the principle of "Occam's Razor," which is based on simplicity. According to this principle, there's no benefit in increasing complexity with unnecessary additions. If one entity is sufficient to explain a phenomenon, rather than two, then it's preferable to accept the single entity; and that one should be physical matter. Because there's no doubt that physical matter exists, but it's uncertain whether there truly exists an additional spiritual entity called the mind. Secondly, physical matter can explain phenomena more effectively than the mind or spiritual entities. Take, for example, neuroscience. We've learned in detail from neuroscientists about the internal structure of the brain and the rules that govern and control it. We've also received explanations of how the brain controls our various behaviors. However, a definitive explanation of how the elusive, mysterious entity called the mind influences our behavior is not available. Therefore, priority should be given to physical existence, not the mind or any unsubstantiated mental entity. And this is how the foundation of materialism is built.

Materialism can be presented from two main perspectives. Firstly, from a metaphysical perspective, where the question of the nature of being or substance becomes paramount. And, needless to say, materialists identify physical matter as the only being or substance. But a question can be raised from another perspective. How should the various mental states, which are the subject of psychology, be understood? Are these mental states not true or real? In response, materialists generally argue that either mental states should be rejected as illusory and unnecessary, or they should be shown as transformations of physical states, or they should be considered as physical states themselves. This same argument has been presented in various ways. Some have emphasized the transformation of mental concepts into physical concepts, moving away from the metaphysical position of materialism or without engaging in any questions of theory. This is the essence of physicalism, advocated by logical positivists. Others have tried to show within the metaphysical position of materialism that mental states are actually brain states. Thus, we have the identity theory or reductive materialism. However, we also have a counter-theory against physicalism and the identity theory, which highlights the limitations of the physical realization of the mental and argues that, while adhering to the theoretical statements of materialism, the justification for this separation or duality between the mental and physical can be established. This is rule-based monism or the doctrine of eliminative materialism. Now, we will attempt to give a brief description of these theories.

As previously mentioned, the form of physicalism that developed under the hands of logical positivists does not accommodate theories; instead, it focuses on language—the language of science. In this perspective, the "Unity of Science" principle is emphasized, where physics (the discourse of physics) becomes the primary focus. Thus, Feigl states that the concepts and principles used to explain physical objects in the discourse of physics should serve as the foundation for all sciences, including psychology. In other words, the

language of all sciences must be translated into the language of physics. All sciences will be subsumed under physics. Carnap also expresses a similar idea, saying:

"Every sentence of psychology may be formulated in physical language... all sentences of psychology describe physical occurrences, namely, the physical behavior of humans and other animals. This is a sub-thesis of the general thesis of physicalism to the effect that physical language is a universal language, that is, a language into which every sentence may be translated."

Feigl, however, despite his unwavering belief in the discourse of physics, did not dismiss the significance of scientific or physicists' experiences, beliefs, and mental phenomena. He had doubts about how mental events or terms could be translated into the extensional language of physics because extensional language applies exclusively to physical objects. In the words of Joseph Margolis:

"The admission of psychological phenomena within the scope of science threatens to admit (mental) phenomena (so-called intentional phenomena) systematically recalcitrant to the extensionalist methodology of the physical sciences."

To overcome this dilemma, it is necessary to replace mental terms with appropriate terms so that the language of psychology can merge with the language of physics. Later, Feigl adopted this approach. Initially, he considered mental experiences to be true and real, which is why he faced the problem of how to translate psychological language into the language of physics. Later, in resolving this issue, he argued that if psychology were to be a true science, then mental terms should not be considered as references to actual entities; rather, they should be eliminated. This is because if mental phenomena or terms are regarded as purely mental and real, they cannot be brought under any fixed laws. As a result, psychology would not be included within the broader discourse of physics. Therefore, there is a need to replace mental terms with certain other appropriate concepts are used, as a result of which psychological mental concepts are included within the language of physics.

The above discussion can be summarized as follows. The core of physicalism is the "Unity of Science" program. In this program, physics – its discourse – is considered constant. The concepts and laws that the discourse of physics talks about are generally applied to understand the nature and behavior of the material world. But the physicalism or physics that physicalism speaks of has a broader scope. Psychology or other sciences are also included in this physical discourse. For example, mental concepts of psychology, instead of having their own character, are integrated or transformed into physical concepts. In this way, psychology comes under the purview of physics.

However, in the present time, the Anglo-American philosophical community has expressed doubts against the "Unity of Science" program. It has become clear to many that mental qualities have a unique characteristic, and this characteristic or distinctiveness cannot be captured by the methods of physical science. They have realized that our mental properties are not illusory, nor are they identical to physical properties. In Margolis's words, "having a thought or feeling a pain is not just the same phenomenon as being in a certain brain state."

In reality, there is serious doubt about how much a mental concept can be captured by a physical concept, how much mental language will come within the physical extensional language. Margolis rightly says that physicalists forget this simple truth: when we look inside ourselves, we can directly perceive the existence of our thoughts, feelings, and desires; and we use various 'mental idioms' to express those experiences. If

that is the case, if it is true that we are capable of giving introspective reports of our inner sensations, thought processes, or our direct internal experiences, then it will not be possible to call this mental stream illusory, and it will not be possible to rearrange the introspective report in any physical language. In fact, this physicalism, in Margolis's words, "threatens the existence of the very scientist or philosopher who advances his theory in threatening his real capacity to report his views."

We have found another theory about the mental state, the identity theory. This theory considers the physical entity to be the only truth. If there is anything other than the physical entity, then what we call the mental state does not have a separate existence – it actually reduces to the physical state of the brain. This identity between mental theory and physical theory is not logical; this identity is 'sensation', 'pain' and 'brain process' - the meaning of all these terms does not come from (meaning). In fact, the identity of sensation with brain state is a fact discovered through scientific inquiry. Just as physics has revealed that lightning is electrical discharge, similarly, scientists researching the brain have revealed the fact that 'sensation is a brain wave'. Smart and other prominent philosophers have spoken of this identity, which is fact-based or real, not merely logic-based.

An objection can be raised: if sensation is a brain wave, then knowing one means knowing the other. But an illiterate farmer knows about his sensation, his pain, and can easily talk about it, even though he doesn't know that his sensation, his feeling of pain, is actually a brain wave. Therefore, in Smart's words, '...the things we are talking about when we describe our sensations cannot be processed in the brain.'

Remembering the above statement of Smart and other philosophers, the answer to this objection can be given very easily. No mind-related term is synonymous with the term 'brain wave' - just as 'Vice President of America' and 'Chairman of the American Senate' do not mean the same thing. Yet, these two terms actually refer to the same person in reality. Similarly, when a common farmer speaks of his inner experience, it actually refers to a brain process. Logically, 'Vice President of America' does not mean 'Chairman of the American Senate', or 'lightning' does not mean 'electrical discharge'. Therefore, even knowing someone as the Vice President of America, we may not know that he is the Chairman of the American Senate. But the Vice President of America and the Chairman of the American Senate are actually the same person. Similarly, an illiterate farmer may not know that his experience of sensation is actually a brain process. Yet, these two are identical.

A significant aspect of the identity theory is the acceptance of only one reality: physical reality or the brain. As a result, one is freed from Cartesian dualism and its associated difficulties. But it cannot be said that the identity theory is completely flawless. In his article 'Could States Be Brain Processes', Shaffer very rightly speaks of the distance between mental states and brain states. A brain process occupies a specific physical space within the brain. But it cannot be said that a mental or conscious state occupies a specific space within the brain in that way. Secondly, brain waves can be publicly and objectively observed (publicly observable event). But our feeling of pain or thought process is entirely our private matter. I can only feel my own pain, not another's. No one else can touch my own pain. In response, Smart sometimes says even if research on the brain reaches such an advanced stage that I can know about someone else's pain by looking at their brain, it will never be false that Ram's experience of pain is Ram's direct experience—an experience that is completely personal to him. This personal nature of mental experience can never be captured by the impersonality of brain waves. Thirdly, learning from Kripke's theory of names and reference, we can say that no identity statement can be called contingent or factual like Smart does. Because, in Kripke's language, the terms of an identity statement are 'rigid designators'. Therefore, an identity statement is always necessarily true. 'Hitler is a dictator'—this thought or 'a specific type of neuron firing'—these terms are rigid designators. So, the identity statement formed by showing the identity between the thought of calling Hitler

a dictator and a specific type of neuron firing is necessarily true, not contingently true. Finally, even if it is accepted that extensive research has shown that every sensation is a specific brain wave, that detailed examination of mutual correlation is not sufficient to establish the identity of these two. A standard for finding out why they are identical, under what conditions they can be said to be identical, is also very important. Unfortunately, the identity theory has not shed adequate light on that standard.

From the discussion of physicalism and the identity theory, it is evident that there is a distinctiveness in the mental state or term, due to which it cannot be transformed into a physical state or term. This is particularly supported by Davidson's anomalous monism. This doctrine can be called both ontological monism and semantic dualism. Logical positivists do not accept any metaphysical theory, but in agreement with the identity theory, Davidson also says that the physical entity is the only truth. There is only one entity, and that is the physical entity. In this sense, he supports monism and materialism. But this does not mean that a mental event is a physical event or that it can be transformed into a physical event. In this sense, there is a difference between anomalous monism and the identity theory. In fact, although all events are accepted as physical events from a theoretical point of view, a distinction must be made between the physical and the mental from a linguistic point of view. Although there is no existence of mental states from a theoretical or metaphysical point of view, there is no way to deny that we speak of various mental states in our language. The events we refer to using mental vocabulary are mental events, and events referred to using only physical vocabulary when we call an event a physical event, that event is a physical event. In the vocabulary of Davidson, "An event is physical if it is describable in a physical vocabulary, mental if it is describable in mental terms... We may call those verbs mental that express propositional attitudes like believing, intending, describing, hoping, knowing... and so on."

From a linguistic perspective, when we describe events, we do so through extensional language. This means that the logical structure of language remains completely intact. The causally structured nature of physical events enables us to provide a precise explanation for why and how a particular event occurs. However, mental events do not fall within any such structure. In Davidson's words, "It is a feature of the mental that the attribution of mental phenomena must be responsible to the background of reasons, belief, and intentions of the individual."

This statement makes it clear that a person, when engaging in action, must have beliefs, desires, goals, intentions, or meanings behind them. When we attribute a belief, a desire, a goal, an intention, or a meaning to an agent, we necessarily operate within a system of concepts in part determined by the structure of beliefs and desires of the agent himself... we cannot escape this feature of the psychological; but this feature has no counterpart in the world of physics.

Therefore, mental events do not fall under strict psychological laws. That is why Davidson says, "Events do not fall under strict laws when described in psychological terms." This statement leads to an important conclusion. That is—

1. Mental events are not separate from physical events. According to Davidson:

(i) Mental events interact causally with physical events (the Principle of Causal Interaction);

(ii) Each event falls under some law (the Nomological Character of Causality);

(iii) But mental events cannot be determined by strict laws (the Anomalism of the Mental).

Clearly, the statement 'Anomalism of the Mental' contradicts the identity theory. However, there is a contradiction between (1) and (2) with (3). If (1) is true, then according to Davidson, mental events will be governed by physical laws (2). But if that's the case, then denying (3), i.e., psychophysical laws, becomes impossible. Therefore, there is some inconsistency in Davidson's tripartite statement. In other words, if mental events are identified as 'mental,' they will not come into nomological relations with any physical laws. If these distinct mental events have any causal role, they can easily be identified as extensional; and if they are extensional, they will easily be related to universal physical laws. There will be no point in saying that psychophysical laws are impossible. Therefore, either mental events will not be causally related as 'mental' (which Davidson did not accept), or psychophysical laws are not impossible (which Davidson will also not accept). Hence, Davidson's position is indeed somewhat confusing.

Of course, Davidson also has a completely logical argument. As mentioned earlier, he has shown that mental discourse takes place within the context of an individual's logic, beliefs, and intentions. Therefore, mental discourse is intensional; and because it is intensional, what is mental has no causal role; because causal relations are always extensional. Even if there is a causal role in the case of the mental, psychology cannot be methodologically placed on the same level as physics. Because a mental cause is intensional, i.e., if our beliefs and desires are the cause of physical activity, that causality cannot be established within immutable natural extensional laws; that causality must be established in a social and institutional context. For example, the beliefs, intentions, and attitudes behind the practice of Sati are rooted in a social structure. That is why mental language and physical language will never be the same.

## **Notes and Bibliography**

\* J. Margolis, *Philosophy of Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984). Margolis quotes from Descartes' *Meditations II*.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 14.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 14.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 10.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 20.”

Here's the English translation of the provided text:

Translation:

\* J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," article found in V. C. Chappell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Mind*, p. 164.

\* Donald Davidson, "Mental Events;" article found in Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 210.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 222.

\* Donald Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy" article printed in Jonathan Glover (ed.), *The Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 102.

\* *Ibid.*, p. 103.