

# Physicalism

Stoljar, Daniel, "Physicalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/physicalism/>>.

Physicalism is the thesis that everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on the physical. The thesis is usually intended as a metaphysical thesis, parallel to the thesis attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Thales, that everything is water, or the idealism of the 18th Century philosopher Berkeley, that everything is mental. The general idea is that the nature of the actual world (i.e. the universe and everything in it) conforms to a certain condition, the condition of being physical. Of course, physicalists don't deny that the world might contain many items that at first glance don't seem physical — items of a biological, or psychological, or moral, or social nature. But they insist nevertheless that at the end of the day such items are either physical or supervene on the physical.

## 1. Terminology

Physicalism is sometimes known as 'materialism'. Indeed, on one strand to contemporary usage, the terms 'physicalism' and 'materialism' are interchangeable. But the two terms have very different histories. The word 'materialism' is very old, but the word 'physicalism' was introduced into philosophy only in the 1930s by Otto Neurath (1931) and Rudolf Carnap (1959/1932), both of whom were key members of the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers, scientists and mathematicians active in Vienna prior to World War II. It is not clear that Neurath and Carnap understood physicalism in the same way, but one thesis often attributed to them (e.g. in Hempel 1949) is the linguistic thesis that every statement is synonymous with (i.e. is equivalent in meaning with) some physical statement. But materialism as traditionally construed is not a linguistic thesis at all; rather it is a metaphysical thesis in the sense that it tells us about the nature of the world. At least for the positivists, therefore, there was a clear reason for distinguishing physicalism (a linguistic thesis) from materialism (a metaphysical thesis). Moreover, this reason was compounded by the fact that, according to official positivist doctrine, metaphysics is nonsense. Since the 1930s, however, the positivist philosophy that under-girded this distinction has for the most part been rejected—for example, physicalism is not a linguistic thesis for contemporary philosophers—and this is one reason why the words 'materialism' and 'physicalism' are now often interpreted as interchangeable.

Some philosophers suggest that 'physicalism' is distinct from 'materialism' for a reason quite unrelated to the one emphasized by Neurath and Carnap. As the name suggests, materialists historically held that everything was matter — where matter was conceived as "an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist" (Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, par. 9). But physics itself has shown that not everything is matter in this sense; for example, forces such as gravity are physical but it is not clear that they are material in the traditional sense (Lange 1865, Dijksterhuis 1961, Yolton 1983). So it is tempting to use 'physicalism' to distance oneself from what seems a historically important but no longer scientifically relevant thesis of materialism, and related to this, to emphasize a connection to physics and the physical sciences. However, while physicalism is certainly unusual among metaphysical doctrines in being associated with a commitment both to the sciences and to a particular branch of science, namely physics, it is not clear that this is a good reason for calling it 'physicalism' rather than 'materialism.' For one thing, many contemporary physicalists do in fact use the word 'materialism' to describe their doctrine (e.g. Smart 1963). Moreover, while

'physicalism' is no doubt related to 'physics' it is also related to 'physical object' and this in turn is very closely connected with 'material object', and via that, with 'matter.'

## 2. A Framework for Discussion

In approaching the topic of physicalism, one may distinguish what I will call *the interpretation question* from *the truth question*. The interpretation question asks:

- What does it *mean* to say that everything is physical?

The truth question asks:

- Is it *true* to say that everything is physical?

There is obviously a sense in which the second question presupposes an answer to the first — you need to know what a statement means before you can ask whether it's true — and we will begin with the interpretation question.

The interpretation question itself divides into two sub-questions, which I will call *the completeness question* and *the condition question*. The completeness question asks:

- What does it mean to say that *everything* is physical?

In other words, the completeness question holds fixed the issue of what it means for something to satisfy the condition of being physical, and asks instead what it means for *everything* to satisfy that condition. Notice that a parallel question could be asked of Thales: assuming we know what condition you have to satisfy to be water, what does it mean to say that everything satisfies that condition?

The condition question asks:

- What does it mean to say that everything is *physical*?

In other words, the condition question holds fixed the issue of what it means for everything to satisfy some condition or other, and asks instead what *is* the condition, being physical, that everything satisfies. Notice again that a parallel question could be asked of Thales: assuming we know what it is for everything to satisfy some condition or other, what is the condition, being water, that according to Thales, everything satisfies?

## 3. Supervenience Physicalism as Minimal Physicalism

Physicalism is intended as a very general claim about the nature of the world, but by far the most discussion of physicalism in the literature has been in the philosophy of mind. The reason for this is that it is in philosophy of mind that we find the most plausible and compelling arguments that physicalism is false. Indeed, as we will see later on, arguments about qualia and consciousness are usually formulated as arguments for the conclusion that physicalism is false.

While the issue of physicalism is central to philosophy of mind, however, it is important also to be aware that supervenience physicalism is neutral on a good many of the questions that are pursued in philosophy of mind, and pursued elsewhere for that matter. If you read over the philosophy of mind

literature, you will often find people debating a number of different issues: whether there *are* mental states at all; what *sort* of thing mental states are; to what extent mental states are environmentally determined. Given the multifariousness of mental states, it is quite likely that the correct position will be some kind of combination of these positions. But this is a question of further inquiry that is irrelevant to physicalism itself. So physicalism itself leaves many debates in the philosophy of mind unanswered.

This point is sometimes expressed by saying that *supervenience physicalism is minimal physicalism* (Lewis 1983): it is intended to capture the minimal or core commitment of physicalism. Physicalists may differ from one another in many ways, but all of them must at least hold supervenience physicalism. (Notice that the idea that (1) captures the minimal commitment of physicalism is a distinct idea from that of a minimal physical duplicate which Jackson uses in his attempt to capture minimal physicalism.)

Two issues here require further comment. First, in some discussions in philosophy of mind, the term ‘physicalism’ is used to refer to the identity theory, the idea that mental states or properties are neurological states or properties (Block 1980). In this use of the term, one can reject physicalism by rejecting the identity theory — so by that standard a behaviorist or functionalist in philosophy of mind would not count as a physicalist. Obviously, this is a much more restricted use of the term than is being employed here.

Second, one might think that supervenience physicalism is inconsistent with eliminativism, the claim that psychological states do not exist, for the following reason. Suppose psychological states supervene on physical states. Doesn't that mean, contrary to eliminativism, that there must *be* some psychological states? The answer to this question is ‘no.’ For consider: the telephone on my desk has no psychological states whatsoever. Nevertheless it is still true (though, admittedly, a little odd) to say that a telephone which is identical to my telephone in all physical respects will be identical to it in all psychological respects. In the sense intended, therefore, one thing can be psychologically identical to another even when neither *has* any psychological states.