

*Physicalistic Functionalism and the Possessive Form of the First-Person Indexical*

“It has been clearly recognised by some that the fact of [first-person] indexical thought presents a special problem for physicalism.”<sup>1</sup> So Geoffrey Madell asserts in *Mind and Materialism*. But what is this special problem of which Madell speaks? It is the problem of accommodating first-person indexical thoughts: no matter how complete a physical description of the world may be, no part of such a description can ever be equivalent to a first-person assertion like

*I doubt that I have written a good paper*

or

*I like grilled sea scallops marinated in vodka and lime, with mango-lime-avocado salsa.*

In this essay, I will argue that, in an analogous way, a different fact—the fact of the *possessive* form of first-person indexical thought—presents a special problem for physicalistic theories of mind. In particular, I will argue that no matter how complete a physical description of any given mental state may be, it can never be equivalent to a first-person possessive assertion like

*My belief is that corn and fennel chowder with mussels, clams, and lemon grass is good*

or

*That brilliant idea was mine.*

The consequence is that no physicalistic theory of mind can tell us to whom (or what) each mental state belongs. This is an unhappy state of affairs, for it means that physicalistic theories of mind do not have the resources to account for the possessive form of the first-person indexical.

Before I begin, let me make a special note and define some terms. First, the special note: since the most prominent theory in philosophy of mind today is Physicalistic Functionalism (PF), I will limit my discussion to PF. The reader, however, will do well to bear in mind that, *mutatis mutandis*, the fact of the possessive form of first-person indexical thought presents a special problem for *any* physicalistic theory of mind. Second, the definitions: I will state what I mean by “PF,” “the physical,” “a physical description,” and “a recalcitrant fact.” By “PF,” I mean the theory of mind that holds that mental

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Madell, *Mind and Materialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), p. 103.

states are “real *internal* states of an organism with causal powers; for an organism to be in pain is for it to be in an internal state (e.g., a neurobiological state for humans) that is typically caused by tissue damage and that in turn typically causes winces, groans, and escape behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Such states, however, are not *identical* to physical states, for they are held to be irreducible. To be more precise, then, PF is a form of Realizationism called Physical Realizationism, which is

equivalent to the conjunction of physicalism with the functionalist conception of mental properties.... Functionalism takes mental properties [second-order properties] ... as functional properties, properties specified in terms of their roles as causal intermediaries between sensory inputs and behavioral outputs, and the physicalist form of functionalism takes physical [first-order] properties (behavioral, biological, physico-chemical, etc.) as the only potential occupants, or “realizers,” of these causal roles.<sup>3</sup>

This, of course, entails mind-body supervenience—according to which mental properties, which are functional or second-order properties, supervene on physical or first-order properties—as well as dependence, according to which mental properties are fixed by physical properties, but not vice versa.

By “physical,” I mean, roughly, that which is not “over and above” the physical. Thus, what is physical is either (a) the physical itself, (b) that which can be reduced to the physical, or (c) that which supervenes on the physical.<sup>4</sup> A *physical description*, then, is a description of (a) alone, (b) alone, (c) alone, or any combination of (a), (b), and (c). Finally, by “recalcitrant fact,” I mean a fact that resists incorporation into a theory and even provides evidence against a theory.

### 1. *The Background*

Both David H. Lund and Geoffrey Madell recognize John McTaggart and Bertrand Russell as those who lay the foundation for the development of the objection to physicalism from first-person indexical thought.<sup>5</sup> Russell, in particular, is identified as making and then applying a distinction between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description*.<sup>6</sup> The former is

<sup>2</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Keith Campbell, “Unit Properties, Relations, and Spatio-Temporal Naturalism,” *The Modern Schoolman* LXXIX (2002): 152-153.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. David H. Lund, *Perception, Mind, and Personal Identity* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 152-154, and Geoffrey Madell, *The Identity of the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), pp. 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> See Bertrand Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XI (1911): 108-128. An entire chapter is devoted to

something we have just in case anything of which we are aware is something “of which we are *directly* aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, for example, if we are indirect realists regarding perception, we have acquaintance with the sense data that make up the appearance of, say, an 8 oz. N.Y. Striploin Steak with Pont Neuf Potatoes, Grilled Asparagus, and a Lobster Butter. Knowledge by description, on the other hand, is something we have just in case what we are aware of is something of which we have indirect awareness. For example, our knowledge of the delicious entrée as a conglomeration of physical objects is not known directly; rather, it is known via some sort of description of it (e.g., “that which causes the sense-data”).

Russell observed that although we have “acquaintance with the contents of our minds,” it is hard to see how we could know the truth of our being acquainted with such content “unless we were acquainted with something which we call ‘I’.”<sup>8</sup> McTaggart noticed the potential in such an insight and developed an argument for it. The argument is as follows:

I can judge that I am aware of certain things—for example, of the relation of equality. I assert, then, the proposition “I am aware of equality.” This proposition, whether true or false, has certainly [*sic*] a meaning. And, since I know what the proposition means, I must know each constituent of it. I must therefore know “I.” Whatever is known must be known by acquaintance or by description. If, therefore, “I” cannot be known by description, it must be known by acquaintance, and I must be aware of it.<sup>9</sup>

The implications of this argument for physicalism have been appreciated by Lund and Madell. The latter, I believe, was the first of the pair to give full expression to his findings: if the *I* to which “I” (in some proposition of the form “I am aware of *x*”) refers is known, not by description, but by acquaintance, then it can never be the case that knowing a physical description of any particular person, however complete, means knowing that I am *that* person.<sup>10</sup> All of this, of course, rests on the assumption that no physical description of any particular person, however complete, is ever equivalent to a statement concerning *me* being that person. This, in turn, rests on the assumption that no physical description of any particular person, however complete, ever has a physical equivalent of the fact that *I* am that person. But such assumptions seem reasonable to hold,<sup>11</sup> and so the very fact

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this distinction in Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46; my emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.

<sup>9</sup> John McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Madell, *The Identity of the Self*, pp. 23-24, and Madell, *Mind and Materialism*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Madell, who expresses these assumptions in reverse order in *Mind and Materialism* (p. 103): “Let us envisage the most complete objective description of the world and

of first-person indexical thought seems to count as an insuperable objection to physicalism.

Though Lund and Madell were able to see the implications of all of this for PF, they did not elaborate on what they saw. Lund simply noted what I will attempt to show, namely, that

[W]hatever plausibility the various materialist attempts to account for the mental (e.g., that mental kinds are functional kinds, that the mental supervenes on the physical, or that it is the physical under another description) may seem to have when applied to mental states and events without regard to their subject, disappears when they are extended to accommodate the subject of experience.<sup>12</sup>

And Madell simply made an assertion to the effect that physicalistic theories of mind have no way of accommodating first-person perspectives. Given how minimal their written reaction to what they saw, a more perspicuous articulation of the unhappy consequence of PF is therefore in order.

## 2. *The Problem*

Let us be generous and assume that PF is true and that a complete, physical description of all of the objects we would presume to have mental states has been given—where such a description is a part of a complete, objective description of the physical world. Granting even PF, however, I argue that, as a theory of mind, it is impoverished. The reason is that it does not have the resources to account for the possessive form of first-person indexical thought. This problem is parasitic on the problem physicalism has with the non-possessive form of first-person indexical thought. If no complete, physical description of some particular person has a physical equivalent of the fact that *I* am that person, nor, accordingly, is equivalent to a statement concerning *me* being that person (e.g., “*I* am [this person named] Ed”), then no physical description of the realizers and its realized entities has a physical equivalent of the fact that such-and-such psychological states are *mine*, nor, accordingly, is equivalent to a statement concerning *me* as the possessor of those states. In other words, the Thomas-Nagelian feeling

that nowhere in the *description* of the state of a human body could there be any room for a physical equivalent of that fact that *I* (or any self), and not just that body, am the [possessor] of those states<sup>13</sup>

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everyone in it which it is possible to have.... However complete we make this description, ‘there remains one thing I cannot say in this fashion—namely, which of the various persons in the world I am’. No amount of information non-indexically expressed can be equivalent to the first person assertion, ‘I am G.M.’.”

<sup>12</sup> Lund, *Perception, Mind, and Personal Identity*, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Nagel, “Physicalism,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 354.

expresses something that is true.

The point I am making can be made more perspicuously if we look at the problem from what I will call the *de dicto* point of view, and then from what I will call the *de re* point of view. First, the *de dicto* point of view: consider the first-person assertion

(p) This is my mental state.

Ignoring the word “this” (an indexical itself that, like other token-reflexives, is “parasitic on the first-person”<sup>14</sup>) and considering only the word “my” (the possessive form of “I”), the problem for PF can be expressed in the form of a question: how can (p) be equivalent to a complete physical description of a second-order mental state that is realized by the physical state of a physical object? The answer is that, however complete the description is, it cannot: “No amount of information non-indexically expressed” can be equivalent to (p).<sup>15</sup> As Madell would say, a complete, physical description of a mental state is one thing; the assertion, “The mental state thus described is *my* mental state,” however, is something additional “and conveys more information.”<sup>16</sup> But if (p) cannot be equivalent to a physical description of a mental state, then, on the *de re* level, “it appears utterly mysterious that some arbitrary element[s] of [the] objective order”<sup>17</sup> should be the referent of (p), i.e., *my* mental state.

This provides a nice segue to the *de re* point of view. The referent that should be picked out by the physical description of a mental state that is realized by the physical state of a physical object is some second-order property that is dependent upon and supervenes on some first-order physical property. But what is the referent for (p)? *Which* second-order property is “this,” such that it is *mine*? It is of no use to say, “Why, *this* second-order property,” for such an answer either presupposes that it is *my* mental state, which is precisely that for which we want an account in the first place, or it appears entirely arbitrary that it should be *this* property and not some other property instead.

The upshot, then, is that the possessive form of first-person indexical thought is a recalcitrant fact for PF. But since PF “leaves out of account the essential subjectivity of psychological states,”<sup>18</sup> it is difficult to see what is so attractive about it.

### 3. *The Responses*

<sup>14</sup> Madell, *Mind and Materialism*, p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Nagel, “Physicalism,” p. 354.

Physicalistic Functionalists can offer numerous responses to the argument above. Given certain constraints, I will address only three.

One response is that PF was not meant to account for possessive forms of the first-person indexical; rather, it was meant to account for the mental in light of the physical. Thus, the criticism above is unmotivated.

By way of reply, it matters not what the *telos* of PF was; the fact is that it leaves one in a position in which one cannot identify the subject of experience, and that suffices to show that, as a theory, it is impoverished. Now, traditional substance dualisms—of the Cartesian or Thomistic varieties—as well as Emergent dualisms, *might* have the same problem, for it might be the case that a complete non-physical description of some particular ego, mental, or soulish substance can never have a non-physical equivalent of the fact that *I* am that ego and, therefore, the possessor of such-and-such mental states. *Prima facie*, however, such a problem does not exist, for the methodology of the traditional dualists is not characterized by working from the third person perspective (and, hence, descriptions) to the first but, rather, from the first to the third. The motivation for such a methodology has found expression in Nagel:

The feeling is that I (and hence any “I”) cannot be a mere physical object, because I possess my mental states: I am their *subject*, in a way in which no physical object can possibly be the subject of its attributes. I have a type of internality which physical things lack; so in addition to the connection which all my mental states do admittedly have with my body, they are also mine—that is, they have a particular *self* as subject, rather than merely being attributes of an object.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the *self*, held to be known by acquaintance, is the *starting point*; and a given individual can say that such-and-such mental states are *his* because they really belong to him.

At any rate, even if PF was not meant to account for possessive forms of the first-person indexical, I take it that it is normally assumed by physicalistic functionalists that some particular mental state for which they are attempting to provide an account is, as a *token* of some type of mental state, that which belongs to someone or something (e.g., an alien, a cat, or a computer). At the very least, it is assumed that once they have a way of accounting for mental states in general, they can account for the particular mental states *belonging* to each individual. (This assumption is a relatively safe one, especially because there are physicalistic functionalists who are physicalists attempting to tell some kind of Grand Story or provide a unified theory of everything within a completely naturalistic framework.) Of what use, after all, is an account of the mental if it leaves us to pick out arbitrarily, or leaves us clueless as to, the possessor of a given mental state? Thus, the physicalistic functionalist response itself seems unmotivated.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

The second and third responses available to the physicalistic functionalist attack the underlying assumptions of my criticism. “Whether a mental state *M* is *mine*,” he can say, “depends on whether *I* am the one who possesses *M*. So the issue boils down to one of identifying the ‘*I*’ that *has M*.” Thenceforth, he can attack the “*I*.” The first of these attacks is a Humean one, where, like Hume, he can claim that, “when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception”<sup>20</sup>; thus, there is no “*I*.” The proper response to this, it seems, is that the claim implies that *some* subject of experience exists, for *someone* stumbled on a perception of heat or cold, *someone* stumbled on a perception of light or shade, etc. Indeed, the implication seems to be that the subject of experience is the physicalistic functionalist himself, for even if he is unable to find himself in his *perceptions*, it seems apparent that he possesses a self-awareness—an awareness of the subject of his perceptions—that is independent of any introspective observations of such perceptions. Thus, there appears to be an “*I*” with whom the physicalistic functionalist is acquainted, even if it appears to be the case that he is observing only a cluster of perceptions (note, by the way, that this is not just any cluster of perceptions, but *his* perceptions).

The second attack on the “*I*” is not so much a frontal assault on the existence of the “*I*” but a reason for thinking that it can be known by some sort of physical description rather than by acquaintance. The physicalistic functionalist might attempt to describe the “*I*” in McTaggart’s “*I am aware of equality*” as, say, “The person who is aware of equality.” This, however, will not do, for it is not an *exclusive* description of “*I*” (unless the physicalistic functionalist is the only person who was ever aware of equality). Perhaps, then, “an exclusive description could be reached by going a step further. *I am not only aware of equality,*” the physicalistic functionalist might say, “*but I am also aware, by introspection, of this awareness of equality.*”<sup>21</sup> Thus,

(q) The person who is aware of this awareness of equality

is an exclusive description of “*I*.” But is it? McTaggart anticipated such a move and responded by noting that it could be an exclusive description of *the person to whom it is applied*; but even as an exclusive description, it does nothing to pinpoint the “*I*.” Who, after all, is this person? The person to whom the description

(r) The person who makes the judgment that he is aware of this awareness of equality

<sup>20</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 165 (1.4.6.3).

<sup>21</sup> McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence*, Vol. II, p. 63.

applies? But what is the reason for thinking that they are identical? The fact is that there appears to be no reason. Given only the descriptions (q) and (r), it does not seem possible to say to whom they apply. Thus, it does not seem reasonable to think that the "I" can be known by description rather than by acquaintance.

The foregoing is only a sample of the various responses available to physicalistic functionalists. The last two, in particular, are part of a cadre of attempts to undermine the foundations upon which my criticism is built. Regardless, I have argued that the replies above fail. The conclusion, therefore, remains the same: the possessive form of the first-person indexical poses a special problem for PF.

#### *4. Conclusion*

In the preceding, I argued that, even one grants provisional acceptance to PF, it has the unhappy consequence of leaving us in a position where we cannot identify the possessor of any given mental state. Thus, PF is an impoverished account.