

Comments on Barbara Montero's 'Russellian Physicalism'

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I am very sympathetic to the main point that I take Barbara to be making in her paper, viz., that there is a kind of physicalism, Russellian physicalism, that (a) is a possible version of physicalism and (b) deserves exploration. (In fact I myself have defended and explored a view like this before—see Stoljar 2001a, 2001b—but I certainly didn't think of the *name* 'Russellian physicalism.')

I also think that Russellian physicalism is better placed than some other versions to respond to arguments such as the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument. Indeed my own current view is that Russellian physicalism is *one* version of a strategy that is ultimately the correct way to deal with these arguments, a strategy I call the epistemic view (see Stoljar 2006). However, while Barbara and I agree on a lot, there are also places where we seem to see things differently. So I thought I would concentrate on these differences here, focusing on three points in particular:

- (a) The 'Via Negativa'.
- (b) Generalizing Russellian monism
- (c) Montero on the Hard Problem.

(a) *The Via Negativa*

Barbara defends what is sometimes called the 'Via Negativa' style of explanation of the physical: "the basic schism between physicalists and anti-physicalists" she writes, concerns "whether human beings have a special place in the world" (p.5). And human beings would have a special place, "if mental phenomena were fundamental" (p.5). I think there are two quite different ways to take remarks like this. On one interpretation, what is intended is a *definition* of the notion of a physical property something like this: *F* is physical property if and only if *F* is non-mental property. But there are many reasons to resist such a definition. Take, for example, vitalism. Vitalism isn't true, but it *might* have been true. (There is no contradiction in it for example.) So imagine a world in which plants and animals instantiate the key property associated with vitalism, viz., élan vital. It seems reasonable to say that in that case plants and animals instantiate a property that is non-physical, i.e. élan vital is not physical. And yet one should not say on this account that plants and animals

instantiate a mental property, i.e. *élan vital* is not mental. In short *élan vital* is neither mental nor physical. But the Via Negativa cannot accommodate that fact.

One might try to meet this objection by saying that what proponents of the Via Negativa intend is only *partial* definition along these lines: *F* is physical property only if *F* is non-mental property. Even so problems remain. As we have seen *élan vital* causes a problem because it is *neither* mental *nor* physical. But there might be properties that are *both* mental *and* physical. For example, take the identity theory that says that being in pain just is c-fibers firing. If we suppose that the identity theory is true, is the property of being in pain mental or physical? Both presumably; but this could not be true on the Via Negativa construed as a *definition* of what a physical property is, even a partial definition. For if a property is mental and physical, then, given the Via Negativa, it will be both mental and non-mental, which (of course) it can't be. Now obviously there are good questions about whether an identity theory along these lines is or could be true, but regardless of whether it is true, I don't think it should be ruled out simply because of a proposal about how to define the words in which it is stated.

One might try to weaken the proposal even further to something like this: *F* is a physical property only if: *if* it is a fundamental property then it is non-mental. Equivalently: if *F* is property that is both fundamental and physical, then it is non-mental. (The notion of a fundamental property is something like the one defended by David Lewis in a number of places (e.g. Lewis 1994).) This would avoid the problem about the identity theory because having c-fibers firing is presumably not a fundamental property. But the underlying problem persists. For example, imagine a world in which the fundamental properties were both mental and physical. That is a pretty farfetched possibility. Now, I am morally certain the actual world is not like this. Nevertheless, but it doesn't seem to me to be impossible, certainly not impossible as a matter of the definition of the words. And yet it *is* impossible if the Via Negativa is true.

For these reasons, then I am sceptical of Via Negativa if it is construed as a definition of the notion of a physical property. Nevertheless, something *is* right about it. For example, when we think of properties that would falsify physicalism we do naturally think of certain mental properties, e.g. the distinctive properties of ectoplasm or ESP. On the other hand, you don't have to try to capture this by defining the physical in terms of the non-mental. A better way to capture it, in my

view, is to say (adapting Barbara's words) that the basic schism between philosophers who call themselves 'physicalists' and those that call themselves 'non-physicalists' is *not* about physicalism at all; rather it about whether mental facts, such as the fact that my toe hurts, are fundamental in again something like Lewis's sense. Likewise, one could say that the objectionable conclusion of conceivability argument suitably generalized would be that such facts are fundamental. Now, the idea that mental facts are fundamental is certainly anathema to physicalism as traditionally defined. But whether it is anathema to physicalism as *contemporary* philosophers define it is harder to say: on some versions the answer is yes, on others the answer is no. However, and here is the main point, one can argue about whether mental facts are fundamental without having *any view at all* about how to define physicalism or the physical or anything else. Indeed, I myself am pretty sceptical that one can produce a version of physicalism that is both plausibly true and deserves the name, but so far as I can see this will have little impact on the conceivability argument because one can formulate that argument without appealing to physicalism. For what it is worth, whenever I have operated with the Via Negativa (which I have done in a number of places e.g. Stoljar 2006), I have generally taken that view about it.

(b) Generalizing Russellian Monism.

So much then for the Via Negativa; let me now turn to the issue of generalizing Russellian monism. Barbara doesn't say very much about how precisely it is that Russellian monist has the resources to answer the conceivability argument. I take it the main point comes out, though, when she says, right at the start of her paper that "when we conceive a fundamental physical world, we fail to conceive of its intrinsic properties (p.1)". As I understand it, the idea here is that the *first* premise of the conceivability argument is false. The first premise of the conceivability argument says I can conceive of world identical to the actual world in all physical respects but which lacks consciousness. If Russellian monism is true, this premise is false (or at any rate unpersuasive). The underlying reason is that conceiving (unlike, say, supposing) is epistemically demanding: I can conceive something about all physical respects only if I understand what these physical respects are. But if Russellian monism is true then (in an important sense) I don't, i.e., for I am ignorant of at least some of those respects. So, to put it a bit roughly, it is the ignorance predicted by

Russellian monism *and* the demanding nature of conceiving that combine to rob the conceivability argument of its force.

Now, I take it that the main move in Barbara's paper is in effect to say that this Russellian monist response to the conceivability argument is open to a *genuine* physicalist, that is, someone who is not simply a physicalist in letter but in spirit too. Setting aside the worries I just mentioned about how to define physicalism, I agree. However, I think Barbara has missed the more important point here. The more important point is that a response of this kind is open to *any* physicalist who takes it to be compatible with physicalism that we are ignorant of a certain type of relevant physical truth. Again: the reason the Russellian physicalist (or monist) has a response to the conceivability argument is that (a) conceiving is epistemically demanding and (b) Russellian physicalism says we are ignorant in relevant ways. Of course the Russellian goes on to say just what we are ignorant of, e.g., the intrinsic features of matter. But this further aspect of Russellianism is—as far as I can see—detachable from their basic response to the conceivability argument. Suppose I am ignorant of a type of physical respect that includes both intrinsic *and* non-intrinsic respects. I think in that case I would have just as good a response to the conceivability argument as the Russellian physicalist. In short, the loophole in the conceivability argument that Barbara is discussing is bigger not only than David Chalmers thinks, it is bigger than Barbara thinks too. Dave thinks the loophole could be exploited only by a Russellian monism, which he thinks is best understood as in spirit like dualism, even if in letter like physicalism. Barbara thinks the loophole could be exploited not only by that position, but *also* by Russellian Physicalism. I agree, but I think the loophole could be exploited by anybody who thinks we are ignorant of a type of truth or property, which is relevant to the nature of consciousness, i.e., by any physicalist who asserts what I have called elsewhere (Stoljar 2006) the ignorance hypothesis.

Of course one might try to reject this last idea by putting a lot of weight on the distinction between intrinsic properties and the rest. I won't go into this here except to say that it seems to me very implausible that the intrinsic/non-intrinsic distinction is going to bear that load in this context. But obviously that topic requires much more attention than I can give it now (see Stoljar 2006).

(c) *Montero on the Hard Problem*

The final topic I am going to talk about is Barbara's brief comments at the end on the hard problem. There she says that the Russellian physicalism has nothing to say about this problem. But she also says that the hard problem is the problem of "how it is possible for creatures like us to be conscious" (p.7). However, if this is the hard problem, then it is hard to see how Russellian physicalism is not relevant to it. In general, the form of words, 'How is it possible that p ?' only manages to formulate a question or problem if in there is an argument that not- p somewhere in the background. I take it, however, that the conceivability argument precisely *is* an argument of this kind, or at least could be converted into an argument of this kind if you supply the further assumption that physicalism (or something like it) is true for creatures like us. But as we have just seen, Russellian physicalism if true has the consequence that the conceivability argument is unpersuasive. In that sense, therefore, Russellian physicalism has a clear implication for the hard problem.

References

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