

LYNNE RUDDER BAKER

Saving Belief

A Critique of Physicalism



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To
Virginia Bennett Rudder
James Maclin Rudder

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PREFACE

This book is a critical examination of the dominant philosophical interpretation of cognitive science: physicalism. A physicalist holds either that nonintentional and nonsemantic sufficient conditions can be specified for intentional states like belief, desire, and intention, or that there really are no such states identified by content. The first approach is reductive; the second, eliminative.

Part I examines reductive positions, formulated by Jerry A. Fodor and others, that aim to provide nonintentional sufficient conditions for belief. With the aid of a series of thought experiments, I shall show (in Chapters Two, Three, and Four) the inadequacy of each such position, and then diagnose (in Chapter Five) the reason for the failure: Physicalists place incompatible constraints—one semantic and the other physical—on the concept of intentional content. Thus, I argue, no physicalistically acceptable notion of the content of a belief or other attitude will be forthcoming.

Part II examines eliminative positions, formulated by Stephen P. Stich, Paul M. Churchland, Patricia S. Churchland, Daniel C. Dennett, and others, that deny the existence of beliefs or other attitudes identified by content. In Chapter Six, I argue that the common-sense conception that invokes belief is not simply a theory subject to empirical disconfirmation, and in Chapter Seven, I argue that wholesale denial of the common-sense conception is self-defeating in various ways. After taking up Dennett's instrumentalistic construal of belief in Chapter Eight, I draw some modest conclusions in Chapter Nine. Prominent among these, I suggest that we may endorse naturalism without physicalism.

The upshot is that common-sense mentalistic and intentional notions need no foundation in physicalism. Their legitimacy is assured, not by any justification in nonintentional terms, but by their indispensable contribution to our cognitive enterprises.

This book is full of arguments, many of which raise hotly contested issues. Recognizing and even enjoying the controversial nature of the arguments, I have tried to make the book technically competent on the one hand, and lively and fun to read on the other. My hope is that many

PREFACE

of those who profoundly disagree with my conclusions will find the argument clear enough and fair enough to be worth engaging seriously, if only to sharpen their own views.

Lynne Rudder Baker
May 14, 1987

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Versions of arguments in Chapter Two come from “Just What Do We Have in Mind?” in *Studies in the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 25–48; in Chapter Three, from “A Farewell to Functionalism,” *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985), 1–13 (© 1985 by D. Reidel Publishing Company); in Chapters Four and Five, from “Content by Courtesy,” *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987), 197–213; in Chapters Six and Seven, from “Cognitive Suicide,” *Contents of Thought: Proceedings of the 1985 Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy*, ed. Robert H. Grimm and Daniel D. Merrill (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming); in Chapter Eight, from “Instrumental Intentionality,” *Philosophy of Science*, forthcoming. I am grateful to the editors of these publications for permission to reprint parts of the articles.

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SAVING BELIEF

• 1 •

COMMON SENSE AND PHYSICALISM

Psychology still awaits its Newton. Even so, many philosophers and others are confident that the human mind, in principle no more unruly than the rest of nature, is soon to be harnessed by science. The long history of success in explaining phenomena in one domain after another gives reason to think that nothing—not even the human mind—will long remain beyond the reach of scientific theory. Against this background, a certain urgency attends the question: What are the relations between emerging scientific concepts of the mind and the familiar, everyday concepts in terms of which we see ourselves and others as acting on beliefs, desires, and intentions?

In some of the areas within the purview of scientific psychology (for example, the discovery of how one learns a language or how one stores telephone numbers in long-term memory), there are no widely held pretheoretical views. In other areas, however, pretheoretical opinions are well entrenched (for example, the supposition that human beings sometimes act from reasons). The question of the relation between the deliverances of the science and pretheoretical views, then, is unavoidable, as it is with any science of some domain on which there are already established opinions.

To make the general question more manageable, I shall divide it: Will there be a science that incorporates concepts like those of belief, desire, and intention, and hence renders them scientifically respectable? If not, will such concepts be exposed as illegitimate? Will scientific psychology conflict with the ordinary framework for explaining behavior in terms of, say, beliefs and intentions?

Of course, the answers to these questions will depend in part on what scientific psychology ends up saying about the mind. Without trying to predict the actual course of science, I shall investigate versions of the dominant philosophical interpretation of psychology and their implications for what I call ‘the common-sense conception of the mental,’ a conception to be sketched shortly. What characterizes the dominant philosophical interpretation of psychology is a thoroughgoing commitment to physicalism.

CHAPTER ONE

PHYSICALISM

Physicalism, as I construe it, has two components, and rejection of either component is rejection of physicalism. Physicalism is the product of a claim about science together with a particular conception of science. The claim is that science is the exclusive arbiter of reality. This scientific realism is captured nicely by Wilfrid Sellars, who transforms the aphorism attributed to Protagoras to fit the current intellectual temper: “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.”¹ On this view, scientific knowledge is exhaustive.

The particular conception of science embedded in physicalism is that physically indistinguishable individuals with physically indistinguishable histories are to be assigned the same states. Applied to psychology, the physicalistic conception is that individuals in the same physical, functional, and dispositional states at least make the same contributions to their psychological states; and psychological states of such indistinguishable individuals in the same contexts must have the same truth conditions (or, more generally, satisfaction conditions). I shall use ‘physicalistic psychology’ to speak not of any particular psychological theory but of this physicalistic interpretation of psychology—an interpretation overwhelmingly endorsed, explicitly or implicitly, by philosophers concerned with cognitive science.

Physicalism has individualistic and nonindividualistic versions. I shall employ ‘individualism’ in the manner of Tyler Burge, who introduced the term in its current usage:

Individualism is a view about how kinds are correctly individuated, how their natures are fixed. . . . According to individualism about the mind, the mental natures of all a person’s or animal’s mental states (and events) are such that there is no necessary or deep individuating relation between the individual’s being in states of those kinds and the nature of the individual’s physical or social environments.²

¹ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in his *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 173.

² “Individualism and Psychology,” *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), 4. See also Burge’s “Individualism and the Mental,” in *Studies in Metaphysics*, ed. Peter A. French et al., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 73–122. Burge has been the foremost critic of individualism. Philosophers with quite different sympathies use ‘individualism’ in a sense that coincides with its usage in this book. For example, as Ned Block puts it, “Let us say that a propositional attitude or meaning ascription is individualistic if it is supervenient on the physical state of the individual’s body, where physical state is specified nonintentionally and independently of

Roughly, if psychological states are specified without presupposing anything about the character of the external environment, then the physicalism is individualistic; otherwise, it is not individualistic. Although other characterizations of individualism have been proposed, this one seems to have the greatest currency and to be the most intuitive.³

Thus, a physicalistic interpretation of psychology aims to provide nonintentional and nonsemantic sufficient conditions for psychological states, whether such conditions are construed individualistically or not. (I take the most important divide to be the one between the intentional/semantic and the nonintentional/nonsemantic, rather than that between the individualistic and the nonindividualistic.) The question for physicalists, then, is whether nonintentional and nonsemantic sufficient conditions can be specified for states with content, or representational states. As Jerry A. Fodor says, "The worry about representation is above all that the semantic (and/or the intentional) will prove permanently recalcitrant to integration in the natural order; for example, that the semantic/intentional properties of things will fail to supervene upon their physical properties."⁴ If this worry is not dispelled, then a physicalist will have to reject belief/desire psychology.

Physicalists are committed to the following as a condition of adequacy on a scientific psychology: Molecular identity must suffice for psychological identity. Again, on the individualistic construal, psychological identity is to be guaranteed by molecular identity of individuals considered in isolation from their environments; but on the nonindividualistic construal, psychological identity is to be guaranteed by molecular identity of individuals together with their environments.

This widely shared physicalism will also allow us to locate the various positions to be investigated with regard to a simple, general argument. Since, for the time being, I shall not question the physicalistic assumption that an adequate scientific psychology assigns the same

physical and social conditions obtaining outside the body." Ned Block, "Advertisement for a Semantics of Psychology," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 624.

³ Jerry A. Fodor has proposed distinguishing individualism, which he takes to individuate mental representations in terms of their causal powers, from methodological solipsism, which individuates mental representations without regard to semantic evaluation. See Fodor, *Psychosemantics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT/Bradford, 1987), ch. 2. The arguments in Chapters Four and Five, which apply to what I call 'nonindividualistic physicalism,' also apply to what Fodor calls 'individualism.' As Fodor uses 'individualism,' I am not sure that there is any room for a nonindividualistic physicalism.

⁴ Jerry A. Fodor, "Semantics, Wisconsin Style," *Synthese* 59 (1984), 232.

CHAPTER ONE

psychological states to molecular duplicates (at least in molecularly identical environments), it is appropriate to call this argument an ‘Argument from Physicalism.’

ARGUMENT FROM PHYSICALISM

- (1) Either physicalistic psychology will vindicate (in a sense to be specified) the common-sense conception of the mental, or the common-sense conception is radically mistaken.
- (2) Physicalistic psychology will fail to vindicate (in the relevant sense) the common-sense conception of the mental.

Therefore,

- (3) The common-sense conception of the mental is radically mistaken.

The first premise is simply a statement of physicalism. It is held, with a special qualification for Daniel C. Dennett, by both nonphilosophers and philosophers. For example, Stephen P. Stich endorses it explicitly when he says that either “folk psychology” will be “vindicated by scientific theory,” which he clearly construes physicalistically, or “[s]tates and processes spoken of in folk psychology are . . . mythical posits of a bad theory.”⁵

The second premise, on which much of the discussion here will focus, is a very general and vague prediction about the future of physicalistic psychology. The strongest sort of vindication of the common-sense conception would come from a theory whose generalizations apply to mental states by virtue of their contents; a minimal vindication would result even from a theory that held that, although common-sense concepts are incorrect, they are extensionally equivalent to correct ones.

So, physicalistic friends of content would hold (1) true but (2) and (3) false. Physicalists skeptical of the adequacy of any concept of content would hold (1) true and envisage either of two possibilities for (2): false if science minimally vindicates the common-sense conception; true otherwise. Either way, these physicalists voice suspicions that (3) is true. Yet another kind of physicalist would endorse (1), (2), and (3), but argue that the common-sense conception is to be retained for its heuristic value. The premise shared by all physicalists is (1): physicalism. It is this premise that will finally be called into question.

Since examination will reveal deep, apparently insuperable difficulties with all of these positions, we shall need an alternative to physicalism in both its reductive and its eliminative forms. There is a wide-

⁵ Stephen P. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT/Bradford, 1983), 9-10.

spread assumption that the only alternative to physicalism is a kind of unpalatable mysticism. But this is only a metaphysical bias that has blinded philosophers to the nonmystical, even mundane, alternative to either rendering the common-sense conception physicalistically acceptable or eliminating it altogether. As a result of the bias, the project of giving a naturalistic account of mind has been conflated with the distinct project of providing a basis for a physicalistic science of the mind. Yet the fact that both Donald Davidson and Ludwig Wittgenstein, in the course of their impeccably naturalistic investigations,⁶ raise doubts about the prospects for a physicalistic science of the mind suggests that naturalism does not require physicalism.⁷

WAYS TO REDUCE

The issue of theoretical reduction is a main topic in the philosophy of science. Although a kind of theoretical reduction will be considered in Chapter Six, the kinds of reduction most relevant to Part I are weaker forms that do not entail theoretical reduction. Nevertheless, let me pause for a word about theoretical reduction.

Theoretical reduction concerns a relation that may hold between two theories, called the reducing theory and the reduced theory. On the standard view, to put it extremely roughly, one theory reduces another if: (a) the reducing theory has predicates not contained in the reduced theory; (b) there are “bridge laws” connecting relevant terms in both theories; and (c) the reducing theory together with the bridge laws en-

⁶ See, for example, Donald Davidson, “Mental Events,” in *Experience and Theory*, ed. Lawrence Foster and J. W. Swanson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 79–101; “Thought and Talk,” in *Mind and Language*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 7–24; “Psychology as Philosophy,” in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 229–244. And see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), and *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vols. 1 and 2, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁷ Some physicalistic philosophers—for example, Hartry Field and Alexander Rosenberg—are explicit in their aim to develop positions consistent with their prior metaphysical commitments. Field sees a major task of philosophy to be to construct an account of belief and desire adequate to materialism. Rosenberg takes stringent theses of physicalism and empiricism, with little argument, as assumptions in his study of sociobiology and the social sciences. See Alexander Rosenberg, *Sociobiology and the Preemption of Social Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 209–210; Hartry H. Field, “Mental Representation,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. Ned Block (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 78. Although other philosophers are less explicit, we shall see the effects of their ontological commitments on their attempts to develop a science of the mind.