

A Defence of Speculative Metaphysics

Peter Ells

Metaphysics defined and criticised

John Cottingham's (2008, p. 68) definition of metaphysics is excellent:

Philosophical enquiry that goes beyond the particular sciences and asks very general questions about the nature of reality and the ultimate conceptual categories in terms of which we are to understand it

Criticisms of metaphysics boil down to the fact that metaphysical systems are, by definition, *non-empirical*: there is no observation or experiment that could decisively verify or falsify them. Ayer and Hume would claim that such systems were therefore meaningless.

Berkeley's Idealism

In Berkeley's system, the primary things that exist are *minds* or *souls*. Objects that we usually think of as "existing in the external spatio-temporal world", such as a football or a river, or a galaxy, or indeed the whole universe, also exist, but only as structured experiences within minds. The existence of all such objects is thus secondary.

Berkeley proposed that the Christian God – an all-powerful and beneficent mind – plants percepts (in a lawful manner) in the minds of individuals, so that they have logical and consistent experiences. God ensures the continued existence of the ball when locked away from human observation in a cupboard: it remains an idea in God's mind and thus continues to exist under Berkeley's definition.

Locke's concept of insentient matter was that of a substance that existed in an external spatio-temporal universe. My talk will discuss Berkeley's scathing critique of this concept.

Physicalism

Physicalism, in many variants, is by far the most popular metaphysical position today. Some of its most important theses, hugely compressed from Poland's book, are:

- Everything that exists in nature is dependent upon the physical domain
- In any part of the world, the physical facts determine all the facts
- Different branches of knowledge are organised hierarchically with physics at the foundation
- Causal closure: every physical event has a physical cause

Moreover, mind emerged late, in only an infinitesimal corner of the universe

Problems of physicalism

1. The mind-body problem. There is "something it is like" for us to see a rose: we have a qualitative experience of (say) yellow, (Nagel). **2. What do we mean by the term physical?** This is sometimes called *Hempel's Dilemma*: If we mean present day physics, then physicalism is trivially false; If we mean a (perhaps vastly different) future, completed physics then physicalism is hopelessly vague. **3. Updating Berkeley's attack on 'matter'.** How does an unobserved physical system differ from a mathematical model of it? (Ells).

Comparing metaphysical systems

Although metaphysical systems are not empirical, we may use the following criteria to help make reasoned judgments between them ...

- 1) Scope *The range and variety of facts explained by the system*
- 2) Not denying basic data E.g. "Time does not exist."
- 3) Plausibility *From within the system itself, considered in its entirety*
- 4) The minimum number of brute facts or miracles needed
- 5) Engagement with and consistency with current science
- 6) Lack of "promissory notes" *"Science, in the far future, and using far different methods, will solve this problem eventually."*
- 7) Elegance and simplicity
- 8) Clarity versus fudge

Comparison using these criteria

Berkeley's idealism comes out rather better than either qualia realist or non-realist versions of physicalism. The method of evaluation is subjective, and perhaps other people would score somewhat differently.

It is clear however that all three metaphysical systems are fatally flawed:

- Berkeley's idealism fails to engage with science
- In physicalism with qualia the emergence of experiences such as pain from the behaviour of matter is a miracle. The theory needs a monumental promissory note asserting that physics will one day be so vastly changed as to allow for this.
- Physicalism without qualia simply denies basic data

Conclusions (and opinions)

It is all but inevitable that each human being will possess a metaphysical system – and will act upon it. If we fail to research metaphysical systems then we are liable to assume a poor system by default, and be reluctant to give it up. Physicalism, for example, is fatally flawed. We have excellent, but not empirical, criteria for making reasoned judgements between such systems. Many novel and under-explored metaphysical systems await our investigation – some may prove to be superior to those presently known.

References

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