Book Review


Peter Carruthers’s The Nature of the Mind presents a sustained analysis and clearly argued critique of dualism. Its intended audience is an undergraduate introductory class in Philosophy of Mind and it succeeds in introducing many of the main issues in Philosophy of Mind in a clear and detailed fashion. The book is a significantly revised and improved version of his earlier Introducing Persons. As he remarks in the Preface, the earlier version of the book had a large and difficult section on Wittgenstein’s private language argument, which has been left out. There can be little doubt this helps an undergraduate audience. Another significant improvement is the clear and detailed outline of the overall argument of the book in the Introduction. In Introducing Persons, the reader could be three chapters into the text and still be unsure whether Carruthers was building up to a defense or a rejection of dualism. The Introduction in the new edition not only sets out the overall project of the book, but also gives a detailed account of how the argument progresses from chapter to chapter. It also has helpful and up to date Further Reading bibliographies at the end of each chapter.

Carruthers says that the main focus of the book is “the metaphysics of the self” and that its overall goal is to “bring the reader an appreciation of the main foundational issues and theories in contemporary philosophy of mind” (xii). On this count, I have some reservations regarding the tendentiousness of the text. That is, Carruthers is clearly concerned to paint as glowing a picture as he can of physicalism and I think this bias keeps the text from treating key controversies for physicalism as deeply as it should.

I want to begin with a brief overview of the book’s organization. I then want to discuss in some detail three issues. First, I want to give the reader an appreciation of Carruthers’s construction and deconstruction of dualism. Second, I wish to criticize his treatment of the problem of consciousness in relation to physicalism. And third, I want to express my frustration with his cursory treatment of the problem of freedom in relation to the tenability of physicalism.

Overview

Although Carruthers does not categorize it this way, the text breaks into two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-3) approaches the mind/body problem employing, what he calls, a “rationalist” methodology, attempting to “obtain substantial knowledge a priori (i.e., by reason alone)” (112). He develops what appears to be a compelling deductive argument for dualism and then knocks it down within the rationalist’s framework. The second part (Chapters 4-8) critiques such a rationalist approach to the mind
and provides a broad, although at times quite detailed, defense of empiricism, the belief “that the only legitimate source of real knowledge is experience, or empirical evidence” (55-56). This part culminates in a defense of physicalism, the view that “all of the states and processes involved in the human mind are at bottom, physical states and processes” (148). Let me turn now to what I see as a strength of the text, its sharp and sophisticated analysis of dualism.

Carruthers’s Arguments For and Against Dualism

In Chapter Two, Carruthers develops an interesting and difficult deductive argument for dualism, which is grounded in Descartes’ arguments for the non-physical nature of the soul. It starts from our ability to imagine ourselves as disembodied. As we can imagine our thoughts and experiences continuing separately from our physical being, it seems logically possible that thinking could occur without a physical body. It does not, however, seem logically possible that thinking might occur independently of the existence of a thinking thing. Thus, it seems logically possible that thinking things aren’t physical things.

The next step in the argument is to attempt to move from possibility to necessity. Carruthers argues that we might get there by adding a premise to the effect that all physical things are such that their physicality is a logically necessary attribute of them – is essential to them being physical. This premise can be made plausible by reflecting on the impossibility that a particular physical object might not have been physical and yet have existed as the very same particular thing. In contrast, it seemed possible that thinking things might continue to exist and yet not be physical. Thus, thinking things cannot be physical. Carruthers’s most developed version of the argument is much more rigorous and detailed than this. (I do wonder whether his attention to detail and clarity might not be too much for undergraduates in an introductory course, but I shall set this concern aside.) The version that I have presented is clear enough for us to see how he motivates the dualist position. Chapter Two ends with the reader feeling pretty good about the argument, but this doesn’t last long.

Chapter Three is driven by a question: What would fundamentally distinguish different disembodied souls from one another? With physical objects we have a clear criterion – spatial location. Two separate tables in a room are distinguishable because they occupy different spatial locations. As souls are essentially non-physical (remember how the argument for dualism relied on such a notion), such a criterion is clearly unavailable to the dualist. Carruthers shows that while a dualist can introduce criteria for the identity of a soul over time (interestingly, along neo-Lockean lines of psychological connectedness), this will not help in discriminating two individual souls at a time.

One might think that a criterion of individuation could be found in the different sets of conscious experiences that two souls have at a time. Nevertheless, it is logically possible to have two, ex hypothesi, different souls both having identical sets of experiences, in which case, the criterion that was to distinguish them fails and any commitment to their distinctness could only be viciously circular.

Soul individuation is an old problem for dualists. Nevertheless, Carruthers’s treatment of the subject gives it life. He does a good job of showing why such a criterion of individuation is necessary in order to take the dualist’s claims seriously and, thus, why this is such a large obstacle to taking dualism seriously. Nevertheless, while Carruthers successfully shows why dualism is problematic, he fails to address seriously the deep problems which exist for physicalism.
Carruthers’s treatment of the problem of consciousness for reductive physicalist theories of mind is brisk. I worry that his desire to make physicalism look as compelling as he can to new students to the subject keeps him from giving them an appreciation of how painfully difficult the mind/body problem really is. More specifically, Carruthers raises and dispatches Jackson’s famous Knowledge Argument in two pages. Jackson’s argument runs as follows: even if you know all of the physical facts about a person's mental life, there will still be some facts unknown to you. Consequently, a description couched in purely physical information must leave out some facts, and physicalism must be false. The most vivid of his thought experiments to support this argument involves Mary, a brilliant neuroscientist who knows all the physical information there is to know about normal human color perception. Mary has, however, learned all of this information from within the confines of a black and white room and from a black and white television monitor. Mary has never actually seen any colors. The question is: is there something that Mary doesn't know about the mental state of seeing green? Ex hypothesi, she knows all the physical information there is about normal human color perception, so the physicalist should say yes. Nevertheless, it seems intuitively obvious that there is something which Mary doesn't know about the mental state of seeing green, namely, what it is like to see green. This points to the conclusion that there is more to giving a complete account of mental states than can in principle be given by the hard physical sciences.

Carruthers responds with what is now a familiar physicalist maneuver, first employed by Brian Loar in his “Phenomenal States” (1990). To say that there is some knowledge that Mary is lacking is no refutation of the thesis that all facts are physical. Mary knows what seeing green is like, she just knows it under a different mode of presentation. Carruthers’s original contribution to this response is to point to the fact that it would be unreasonable to think that Mary should know the fact of what seeing green is like under all of its modes of presentation, as the set of such modes of presentation is infinite. Here’s his example: “the fact that a particular brain-cell fires can be represented by the sentence ‘The brain-cell exactly 1.11111 millimeters below this point in the skull is firing’ or by the sentence ‘The brain cell exactly such and such a distance from this point in the roof is firing,’ and so on, and so on” (175). The only alternative is that she must know it under some mode of presentation. This condition is satisfied, of course, as she knows it under its physical description.

But this response is inadequate. The thrust of Jackson’s thought experiment is that there is a different kind of knowledge that Mary lacks – qualitative knowledge. Its distinctive content calls for a fundamentally different kind of mode of presentation. That is, a mode of presentation that could never be ascertained from any of the physical modes of presentation she might know it under (let alone all the ones she does not know it under). Notice further that Mary would be able to infer any of those other physical modes of presentation (that she did not know) from the one that she did know (in conjunction with the rest of the physical information that she has at her disposal). Moreover, she would gain no fundamentally new information from these re-castings. On the other hand, she would learn some genuinely new information upon her first visual contact with healthy grass.

In his treatment of problems raised for physicalism by phenomenal states and concepts, Carruthers also glosses a newer, and, I contend, nebulous physicalist attempt to deal with Knowledge-type arguments. It stipulates that qualitative concepts belong to a class of concepts called “recognitional concepts.” This is to hold that there is no genuine content to phenomenal experience and that phenomenal concepts are just a bare dispositional capacity for recognizing various physical states of the brain. In this way, Mary can
again be seen as lacking no genuine information.

The notion of a recognitional concept is hard to get hold of. Although Carruthers treats recognitional concepts very quickly and sketchily, he presents them as if they were perfectly clear, uncontroversial, and ready to go in answering one of the most challenging objections to physicalism. If Carruthers is going to use them to portray physicalism as a very compelling theory, then they require significantly greater discussion and clarification. Interestingly, although Chalmers’s *The Conscious Mind* (1998) gets a reference in the Further Reading bibliography at the end of Chapter Eight, nothing about his argument against recognitional concepts is mentioned in the text itself.

**Carruthers, the Problem of Freedom, & Physicalism**

A second topic I find treated with insufficient care is Carruthers’s cursory mention of the problem of freedom in relation to the tenability of physicalism. Near the end of Chapter Eight, he briefly dispatches worries one might have regarding our belief in our freedom in relation to a commitment to physicalism. Specifically, he gives a thumbnail’s sketch of how recent compatibilist theories might deal with it. He gestures at a solution residing in something like Frankfurt’s hierarchical theory, whereby freedom consists in one’s second-order volitions determining one’s will. As has been noted by the extensive literature on this topic, Frankfurt’s model looks problematic precisely because it seems to lose a genuinely active agent. (See, for example, David Velleman’s discussion of causal theories of agency in his “What Happens When Someone Acts” (1992). The fact that the physicalist must ultimately explain human agency in the same way that he explains engine combustion makes the problem of freedom a persistent one for his world-view. And again, if Carruthers is going to raise such a large and controversial topic, then it deserves deeper treatment than he gives it.

A related point concerns his brief discussion of how reasons underlie and explain decisions. Carruthers says that he can see no answer to the question “what is it to take a decision for a reason, if that reason, did not (together with the thoughts, etc., surrounding it) cause the decision” (276). There is an extensive list of philosophers who argue that the concept of cause is inessential to rational explanation (e.g., Stoutland, Wiggins, Taylor (both Charles and Richard), and O’Connor), but they get no mention in the text or reference in the Further Reading bibliography.

New students to Philosophy of Mind always bring with them an inchoate commitment to dualism. I think Carruthers’s critique of dualism in the first part of *The Nature of the Mind* provides a valuable resource for getting them to see the deep problems that such a commitment brings with it. As I have expressed, I have my reservations about the second part of the text. Nevertheless, I think it could be taught with good effect, as long as it was used in concert with some counterbalancing works, such as those that I have mentioned in this review.

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