Book Review | *After Physicalism*

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I have to begin with a confession. Mind-body dualisms have not appeared attractive to me for a very long time. Moreover, I came away from reading *After Physicalism* with no change in my conviction that dualist views are not the way to go. On the other hand, most forms of physicalism are equally uncompelling, in my view. As I will explain below, both physicalist and dualist suffer from some shared unexamined assumptions rendering them deeply problematic.

All arguments of which I am aware supporting dualism in are *a priori* and those in *After Physicalism* are no exception. In his introduction to the volume, Benedikt Göcke illustrates this through his discussion of how important intuitions such as conceivability implies possibility are. “Arguments for dualism presuppose that conceivability broadly understood is a reliable guide to possibility,” and since “conceivability is an *a priori* affair,” arguments for dualism are immune to any empirical considerations (p. 22). The key issue, according to Göcke, is “the question whether we are beings of such a kind that their conceivings entail possibility. If we are, then it is hard to escape the truth of dualism, and if we are not, then it is doubtful whether philosophy as a whole is possible at all” (p. 22). Of course, only a particular brand of *a priori* metaphysics might be at stake, here, not “philosophy as a whole.” Those suspicious of *a priori* metaphysics likely would view Göcke’s dilemma as a *reductio* of *a priori* approaches to philosophical questions.

Göcke opens this anthology by noting that “Philosophy of mind is concerned with the one asking the question, not with objects surrounding the one asking the question” (p. 1). This
emphasis seems right to me. Much of the philosophy of mind literature treats mind–consciousness or any other mental phenomena–as a kind of object no different in kind from electrons, molecules and rocks. That is to say, mind is objectified as a thing that can be studied like any other physical object. More on this objectification in a moment as the dualists in this anthology tend to fall into this same sin.

In his introduction to the volume, Göcke (perhaps unintentionally) sets up a sharp dichotomy between dualism and a priori metaphysics, on the one hand, and physicalism/materialism and “empirical sciences as a method of philosophy” on the other (p. 12). This is an unfortunate way of carving up the landscape (Göcke, perhaps, realizes this by adding “often” as a qualifier to his claim about physicalism and an empirical sciences approach to philosophy). While it may be the case that many dualists are a priori metaphysicians, it is also the case that many materialists are a priori metaphysicians, too. Moreover, it is not the case that looking to the sciences to inform philosophical method necessarily leads to adopting physicalism.

**Brief Overview**

There are eleven essays in *After Physicalism*, only two of which are reprints (“Against Materialism” by Alvin Plantinga and “From Mental/Physical Identity to Substance Dualism” by Richard Swinburne).

To give a brief rundown of the action in this volume, in Uwe Meixner’s “Naturalness of Dualism” he points out that physicalism is not an implication of the sciences (this lack of implication should not be a surprise to most readers) and goes on to defend dualism by sketching proposed solutions to two problems raised against dualism: articulating causal relations between the nonphysical and the physical entities, and articulating intentional relations between nonphysical states and physical states. Meixner ends by describing—though not presenting compelling evidence for—three ways in which dualism is natural (none of which have much to do with naturalized metaphysics, naturalized epistemology and the like except for the third): (1) dualism is natural to those people who have not been steeped in philosophy; (2) dualism is culturally natural in the sense that historically most cultures have had dualist commitments; and (3) dualism is biologically natural in that it is a result of evolution.

In “Non-Cartesian Substance Dualism,” E. J. Lowe argues that human persons are neither Cartesian egos nor identical with their physical bodies. Instead, we are psychological substances capable of possessing physical states.
John Foster’s “Subjects of Mentality” distinguishes items of mentality from subjects of mentality and argues realism regarding the physical world commits us to the thesis that human subjects of mentality have wholly nonphysical natures. The implication is that human subjects of mentality have no physical properties (corporeality, location in physical space). Foster’s arguments, however, presupposes that human subjects of mentality are *sui generis* “radically different in nature from all that pertains to [their] character and life as” physical things (p. 85).

Being reprints, the essays by Plantinga and Swinburne already may be familiar to many readers, so I will skip a brief synopsis. I found William Hasker’s “Is Materialism Equivalent to Dualism?” to be the most interesting essay of the collection. He argues that the most plausible versions of materialism and dualism—emergentist materialism and emergentist dualism, respectively—are almost equivalent. This may not be so surprising as the latter was modeled on the former (p. 182), but both forms of emergence illustrate the possibilities for getting away from some of the traditional materialist-dualist categories.

A.D. Smith’s “Benign Physicalism” expresses a kind of epistemic and metaphysical pessimism about what can be known about the qualities of those entities described by scientific theories. In essence, this is because all our scientific concepts are supposedly functional concepts (a tendentious thesis), hence they give us no understanding of the nature of physical entities (a tendentious claim). Given this view, Smith argues that human conscious experiences could be the ultimate realizers of the causally and functionally specified physical entities of our theories. Nevertheless, such a role for our mental experiences would be contingently dependent because, depending on the causal structure of the world, it could be the case that the behavior of causally and functionally specified physical entities ultimately are realized by physical properties or mental experiences. However, Smith maintains, the former physicalism (by implication the latter dualism) is philosophically uninteresting because of its dependence on the contingent causal structure of the world (pp. 224-225). The judgment that such physicalism (or dualism) is uninteresting seems odd since it is the actual causal structure of the world that should be of interest to philosophers as well as scientists.

Howard Robinson’s “Qualia, Qualities, and Our Conception of the Physical World” also proved to be a very interesting essay. He argues that Frank Jackson’s knowledge argument actually shows that the physicalist is unable to account for our understanding of the physical world beyond purely abstract and mathematical notions. Physicalism is incapable of accounting for empirical qualities we experience in the same fashion that it is incapable of accounting for qualia such as red. Hence, scientific knowledge appears problematic on the
physicalist view because our experience of these empirical qualities is necessary to the sciences.

In “Groundwork for a Dualism of Indistinction,” Göcke deploys a possible worlds framework where possible worlds are constituted by individual essences. He argues that as a thesis about actual-world particulars, physicalism fails because the I is not a particular (it turns out that the I is neither identical to nor indistinct from the human person with which it is associated).

Stephen Priest elaborates a distinction between conditioned and unconditioned philosophy in “The Unconditioned Soul.” He argues that physicalist accounts cannot do justice to a person’s experience because ultimately we each are unbounded, unchanging and timeless in significant respects. No genuine arguments are given in support of these claims. Priest’s discussion is very similar to reports of meditative mystical experiences from Buddhist and Hindu traditions and is subject to the same subtleties regarding appraising their relevance to ontological issues of the self.

In “Beyond Dualism,” Thomas Schärtl discusses resurrection and proposes a model that offers an alternative to some materialist and dualist accounts of resurrection.

**Substantive Issues**

1. **Objectification**

As I mentioned earlier, physicalist accounts of the self, personhood, consciousness and the like tend to objectify their targets of analysis. Mind, to speak generically of these targets, is treated as being no different in kind from molecules, moles and mountains. Why is this physicalist tendency so pernicious?

Louis Dupré (1976, pp. 3-4) identified a form of “objectivism” that traces back to the pre-Socratic philosophers, a form of objectification focusing on “the physis, the intrinsic nature of things...the world as it is in itself rather than as it fleetingly impresses itself upon the perceiver’s momentary condition.” The focus was on the “outward,” where the “subject...seems to have meant little more than the window through which they saw the world.” This form of objectivism has been handed down through the centuries becoming a major force in early modern philosophy and subsequently in modern culture and the social sciences. On Dupré’s analysis, such objectification took on a kind of “analytic objectivity” yielding a “functional view” of humans, where persons are either skillful manipulators or the objects of manipulation.
Objectification is a stance toward things—including persons!—that abstracts away from so-called subject-related qualities (Bishop 2007, pp. 113-122; this already seems to stack the deck against any accounts taking subject-related qualities as serious keys to the reality of the mental such as the dualist accounts in After Physicalism). These qualities include most of the meanings of and relationships among things that show up within our ordinary experience, values, aims and concerns. In essence this stance separates the knowing subject from the flux of everyday experience so that knowers come to view all events—including their own experiences!—as separable, controllable elements of formal analysis.

There are a number of problems with objectification. First, this stance was only made possible by a number of cultural affordances that have everything to do with shifts in human ways of conceptualizing the world (e.g., Turner 1985; Taylor 1989, 2007). Since all forms of inquiry require some background assumptions, and the abstractions of objectification are no different, this is not the rigorously objective stance many take it to be (more on this below). Second, objectification involves excising the values and meanings making up the everyday lifeworld of our experience. We only engage in this kind of abstraction because of commitments and purposes we have, say for particular forms of inquiry. Since one of the things in question in debates about physicalism is the nature of mind, excising subject-related qualities such as meanings and values is question begging. Third, although objectification certainly has proved its worth in natural science inquiry, mental phenomena are quintessentially part of the human realm, where objectification has proven problematic to say the least. A key reason for objectification’s failure when applied to the understanding of the human condition is that it represents as much a moral as an epistemological ideal (e.g., Bernstein 1976 and 1983; Taylor 1985a, b; Slife and Williams 1995; Richardson, Fowers and Guignon 1999; Bishop 2007).

One way this fusion of moral and epistemological ideas comes about is through objectification’s gulf between knowing subject and thing-to-be-known. When seeking to understanding the properties of electrons, molecules and stars, this may be an appropriate stance to take. However, taking an objectified stance towards mind does more than just beg the question on physicalism. It also distorts the mental phenomena we are trying to understand by treating the self-interpreting beings engaged in mental phenomena as if they are no different in kind from electrons, molecules and stars (a value judgment if ever there was one!) It certainly is possible to investigate and describe the physical and chemical properties of a star without implying any judgments about whether it would have been better if the if formed in a different way or place. In contrast, when investigating and describing minds and mental phenomena, such judgments about what is good are essentially unavoidable given that values and value judgments are inescapable elements of our mental lives.
Under objectification, agents are conceived as being sharply distinct from the physical and social realms, and this allows agents to take on a largely instrumental relationship between self and world (Taylor 1985a, pp. 187-212; Slife and Williams, 1995). The agent is “in but not of” the world so to speak. Furthermore, if one assumes all events in the physical and mental realms flow as sequences of efficient causes and their effects, this meshes well with the conception of agency as mainly concerned with an individual’s manipulation of those causes to produce desired outcomes. This is to objectify all causes and effects as independent objects standing in causal relations to one another.

Hence, an objectifying stance means to “regard the world as it is independently of the meanings it might have for human subjects, or of how it figures in their experience” (Taylor 1989, p. 31). Charles Taylor calls this the punctual self (1995, p. 7), a self pictured as disengaged from the physical and social realms, where interactions between self and world are structured purely in terms of efficient causation. This is the kind of self that is ideally suited to exercising instrumental action in a world of efficient causes. The punctual self is disengaged in such a way that it is ideally free or unsubordinated, a kind of “sovereign self” (Dunne 1996, p. 139) able to manipulate these realms as it pleases. Any overlap between self and world, then, is seen as compromising not only the individual’s autonomy, but also her integrity, dignity and other values.

This profound aspiration to autonomy and separateness is certainly an epistemological ideal as expressed in objectification’s splitting of the knowing subject from all other objects, but clearly it is a moral ideal as well. It reflects and is reinforced by the intense liberationist or anti-authoritarian temper of modern Western culture, where “To be free in the modern sense is to be self-responsible, to rely on your own judgment, to find your purpose in yourself” (Taylor 1995, p. 7). This is what Michael Sandel calls the “unencumbered self” (1996, p.96) that rejects “any view that regards us as obligated to fulfill ends we have not chosen—ends given by nature or God, for example, or by our identities as members of families, peoples, cultures, or traditions” (p.12). The historian of psychology, Phillip Cushman (1990, p. 604) describes this as the “bounded, masterful self” that “is expected to function in a highly autonomous, isolated way” and “to be self-soothing, self-loving, and self-sufficient.” Unfortunately, there is evidence that such exaggerated pretensions to autonomy and uniqueness almost inevitably collapse into an “empty self,” whose characteristics of fragility, sense of emptiness, and proneness to fluctuation between feelings of worthlessness and grandiosity are often said to be the hallmarks of neurotic psychopathology.

Richard Bernstein (1976) shows how adherence to objectification modeled after natural science inquiry, though purportedly fostering “value-neutral, objective claims subject only to the criteria of public testing,” harbors “disguised ideology.” These “proposed theories
secrete values and reflect controversial ideological claims about what is right, good, and just” (1976, p. 31), reflecting a “total intellectual orientation” (1976, p. 51) anchored in a complete package of high Enlightenment ideals such as individualism, skepticism, instrumentalism, and emancipation. Construing mental states as physical states (or as realized by physical states) amenable to public testing and observation, and thus as subject-independent, is but one way such objectification takes place in physicalism.

An example of a disguised ideology that pervasively shapes much social and philosophical inquiry into human mind and behavior is liberal individualism (e.g., Taylor 1985a, b; Richardson, Fowers and Guignon 1999; Bishop 2007). This is a particular ethical vision or understanding of the nature of human action and the good life that defends individual autonomy and stresses “negative liberty”—what we are free from rather than what we are free for. Such a one-sided emphasis obscures the cultural embeddedness and lasting social ties endemic to human mental life and action. Moreover, it advocates thoroughgoing neutrality towards and distancing from all values as a way of promoting particular basic and laudable ends such as liberty, tolerance, individuality and human rights (substantial values all). At the same time, liberal individualism characterizes human action and motivation as exclusively self-interested; but this undermines our capacity to respect and cherish others. In this way, liberal individualism has a built-in instability that erodes our commitment to the admirable modern ideals of freedom and justice. Such disguised ideology is part and parcel of the seemingly innocent commitment to characterizing and studying mind and actions through objectification (Taylor 1985a, b; Bishop 2007). This is not so surprising when we consider that liberal individualism is the prevailing moral outlook in modern times, so it is bound to show up uncritically in the theorizing of those pretending to be “value-neutral” but very much, like all of us, creatures shaped by modern culture.

So the objectification of mind found in so much philosophy and the social sciences is inescapably value-laden or morally colored. How could it be otherwise? These are intellectual endeavors intended, in part, to make better practical, ethical, or existential sense of human life and living. These are matters about which we all care deeply, so we cannot escape some ethical commitments. However, we can critically assess them by teasing out their assumptions and testing them against experience and other points of view in critical dialogue—which is what we do anyway, in everyday life and moral or political debate.

2. Dualism and Objectification

Why go into all this background on objectification? Physicalism certainly is deeply enmeshed in objectifying mind; hence, it imports all the problems just outlined. Yet one does not have to read far in After Physicalism to find objectification taking place in dualist
approaches to mind. For example, take Lowe’s characterization of human persons as *psychological substances*:

More specifically, a person, in my view, is a substantial individual belonging to a natural kind which is governed by distinctively psychological laws, with the consequence that individuals of this kind possess persistence conditions which are likewise distinctively psychological in character (p. 49).

Lowe goes on to say that he is “perfectly ready to allow that psychological substances should possess material characteristics” including “physical states among their modes” (p. 50). While this move may get Lowe out of standard objections to Cartesian dualism, it does not affect in the least the objectification of the person or self that he shares with Descartes. To analyze human persons as a “natural kind...governed by distinctively psychological laws” is to fall into the objectification that comes from identifying natural kinds as subsumed under or governed by laws (e.g., Bernstein 1976; Bishop 2007). The modern subject-object split tracing at least back to Descartes is fully evident in Lowe.

One of the ways that the individualist ideals underlying objectification show up in Lowe’s account is in his sketch of what it means for a self to have a body—what is it to be the self’s body? For Lowe, the fact that the self’s physical characteristics supervene in some sense on a particular body is insufficient to make the body the self’s body. According to Lowe, what body is the self’s is a “matter of the self’s perceiving and acting ‘through’ that body,” where bodily actions and perceptions are directly subject to the self’s will (p. 54). Think in terms of Danto’s conception of basic actions. The particular psychological substance that is the self and its body are treated as a punctual self with a body that it can manipulate as it sees fit. This is as objectified an account as any physicalist’s. (There is a further issue in that Lowe’s criteria do not work for the many bodily parts are not subject to the self’s will such as hearts, kidneys and nerves. In what sense are those “my body” if they do not share an intimate connection with me via my will? Taken literally, Lowe’s criterion implies that only some parts of “my body” are my self’s body, namely only those where I am capable of basic actions via my will).

Lowe does have an interesting line of argument against the supervenience of thought on brain processes (pp. 61-66) that very much depends on historical conditions through which “persons create other persons” (p. 65). This is not due to any ontological changes in the brain that we can discern; rather, the change is in the ontology of society and social relationships. Though intriguing, his historical sketch of cultural development is quite out of date with the most recent anthropological and archeological work (e.g., fundamental intellectual and social transformations that have no discernible correspondence with brain
changes predate 35,000 years by tens of thousands; see Holden 2004; Balter 2010; Henshilwood et al. 2011). Be that as it may, Lowe’s argument that personhood is dependent on social development is in tension with his objectification of persons and social interactions demanded by his definition of persons as psychological substances.

I will be briefer with three more examples of objectification. A second instance is Foster’s discussion of what he characterizes as a weak version of physicalism, namely that

the putative corporeal subjects are assigned core natures that include a nonphysical component...along with the physical properties that he has as a biological organism, each human subject possesses, in his core nature, an additional nonphysical character which is what gives him the capacity to be a mental subject (pp. 91-92).

Unfortunately, his objection to this form of physicalism depends on objectifying the person along the same lines as a writing pen (pp. 92-3). I suspect the only way to genuinely make a case for or against any kind of moderate psycho-physical being is, first, to break out of objectifying such a being and, second, to consider the possibilities for such being without resorting to objectification (see below). Since the start of modern philosophy, however, it has been difficult to resist the siren call of objectification of mind and persons.

A third example of objectification is Swinburne’s definition of substance: “A substance is a thing (other than an event) which can (it is logically possible) exist independently of all other things of that kind (viz., all other substances) other than its parts. Thus, tables, planets, atoms, and humans are substances” (p.148). Humans are objectified things along with tables and planets. The punctual self is clearly on display, here, (that the tremendous dependencies humans have on other humans for their existence is overlooked in Swinburne’s classifying humans as substances is jaw dropping).

A final example is Göcke objectifying persons or individuals as objects with properties. Given his possible world analysis, “a possible world is nothing over and above a maximally consistent co-exemplification of individual essences” (p. 275). This includes human beings, persons, minds, or what have you, along with rocks, trees and planets. He goes on to argue that having a duplicate Benedikt Paul in another possible world “could be actual while I am not related to that world in any way. Someone else could live my life. Therefore, I am not identical with the human being Benedikt Paul” (p. 276). Again, the punctual self of objectification is evident.
3. Objectification and Cultural Ideals

I could cite more examples from this volume. What is most interesting about After Physicalism, is the extent to which these dualists share with physicalists a common set of assumptions and ideals centered around the punctual self and objectification. How would the contours of physicalist-antiphysicalist debates change if all parties were to drop out of this framework, leaving behind its subject-object split, its puntualizing of the self, its ideals of liberal individualism and instrumental agency?

To my knowledge, such an alternative has been little explored. Both physicalists and antiphysicalists struggle with what seems to be an intractable dilemma in understanding the relationship among mental and physical aspects of personhood and agency: If mind is too different from our physical bodies (e.g. as in Cartesian dualism), then the connection between the mental and the physical is mysterious. On the other hand, if mind is identified too closely with physical phenomena, then the psychological and moral phenomena we take to be important are reducible to underlying physical processes (e.g. neurophysiological and chemical interactions) and appear to be epiphenomenal at best. I suspect that our penchant for theoretical and philosophical theories that objectify mind and persons lies at the heart of this intractable dilemma.

All the authors of After Physicalism are concerned with what might be called the problem of the disappearance of the mental. By emphasizing the physical aspects of agency the mental appears to be squeezed out, leaving no room for the latter. If one is committed to physicalism and that all interactions are of efficient causal form, it seems that there is no place for anything mental. One example of a physicalist approach to mind will serve as an example.

In Mind in a Physical World, Jaegwon Kim proposed a functionalist solution as a response to this feared disappearance of the mental. Functionalism enters the picture in the following way. Mental properties are understood as functionalist properties in the sense that such properties are specified by the roles they play as “causal intermediaries between sensory inputs and behavioral outputs,” where, on a physicalist account, physical properties are the only possible candidates for causally efficacious properties (Kim 1998, p. 19). The typical example is that of pain. On this functionalist analysis, for someone to be in pain is for them to be in some internal state—caused by tissue damage, say—that typically causes winces, groans, whines and other characteristic pain behaviors. Being in pain is then a higher-order property: It is the property of being a property caused by appropriate nerve stimulation. For someone to have the property of being in pain is for them to have the appropriate property (such as tissue damage triggering appropriate nerve firing) in appropriate circumstances such that the effects typical of pain are caused.
Suppose you are a person who exhibits tremendous commitment, say as someone who spent several years dedicated to caring for your aged parents or who spends several hours each week working with inner city youth. Instead of focusing on your commitment, and the personal vision and character traits standing behind it, the physicalist-functionalist account would say that you are in an internal state characterized by particular neural activation patterns, physical receptors, and so forth, engaged in a consistent activity. Your commitment to care for your parents or serve inner city youth is a functional property that is fully specified by its physical realization.

Hence, the essence of functionalism is that the role or function a specific property plays in a given context specifies that property. On Kim’s account, it is the underlying physical base properties operating in chains of efficient causation that make it possible for what we call mental properties to exhibit these functional roles.

From their somewhat different points of view, the moves made by physicalists and dualists to recover mental agency gain some plausibility because they both surreptitiously presuppose an instrumental view of agency that appears to fit well within a physical world of efficient causal interactions. An instrumental view of agency flows directly from objectification (e.g., Kim’s analysis of pain or commitment as realized by underlying chains of efficient physical causation, or Lowe’s envisioning bodily actions and perceptions as directly subject to the self’s instrumental will). As Taylor has noted, the “ethic” and “epistemology” of objectification “calls for disengagement from the world and the body and the assumption of an instrumental stance towards them” (1989, p. 159). As Colin Gunton elaborates,

Disengagement means standing apart from each other and the world and treating the other as external, as mere object. The key is in the word instrumental: we use the other as an instrument, as the mere means for realizing our will, and not as in some way integral to our being. It has its heart in the technocratic attitude: the view that the world is there to do with exactly as we choose (1993, p. 14).

So objectification and the punctual self lead to disengagement from the world so that agents can only relate to it in an instrumental way, something with which we in the West are comfortable given our cultural individualism and hyper-concern to protect the rights and liberties of individuals at all costs. Hence, viewing agency as instrumental, in turn, gains plausibility by presupposing some worthwhile, meaningful ends directing such agency, and most often these ends are those of liberal individualism.
I want to suggest that the seemingly intractable problem of making room for mental agency in the world envisioned by physicalist and dualist philosophers stems, in part, from unexamined assumptions regarding moral ideals and human capacities associated with this instrumental view of action (which is part and parcel with objectification). These assumptions need serious reconsideration, but are rarely acknowledged or discussed among philosophers of mind.

On the instrumental view, agents are fully immersed in the efficient causal flow of events and processes, while, at the same time, being somehow able to turn onto this causal flow and manipulate it to determine the future course of such events and processes according to their preferences. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas (1973; 1991)–apparently never consulted by physicalist or dualist philosophers of mind–have propounded a famous ‘critique of instrumental reason’ which goes to the heart of the problems with this technocratic conception of agency.

According to Habermas, to a great extent modern society is built upon a damaging confusion of praxis with techne (roughly culturally meaningful activities and technical capacity respectively). This kind of society tends to collapse the cultural and moral dimensions of life into merely technical and instrumental considerations. As a result, according to Habermas (1973, p. 254), we imagine applying theory to practice chiefly as a matter of applying principles uncovered by empirical science in a manipulative or instrumental manner to produce desired results. This heavy emphasis on technical or instrumental action both reflects and encourages our modern emphasis on gaining control over natural and social processes to enhance human welfare and well-being. Doubtless this increased capacity for control has often benefitted us. But, in Habermas’ view, one of the key shortcomings of this elevation of techne over praxis is that, even as we grow in instrumental prowess, we progressively lose our ability to evaluate the worth of ends on any basis other than the sheer fact that they are preferred or desired. As a result, too many spheres of life are dominated by a calculating and instrumental viewpoint which discerns means-ends relationships, performs cost-benefit analyses, and seeks to maximize, as an end in itself, our control or mastery over events.

The critical theorist Max Horkheimer (1974/1947) explored the contradictions and deleterious consequences of this one-sided instrumental view of human agency. He argued that the modern outlook glorifying instrumental reason actually turns into its opposite or an “eclipse of reason.” Scientific ‘neutrality’ dictates that we concentrate on discerning law-like means-ends connections among events, which are supposedly ‘objective,’ and regard social and moral values as merely ‘subjective’ and irrelevant to scientific inquiry (as positivist philosophers of science recommended). But this seriously undermines our ability
to reason together about the inherent quality of our way of life and about what ends we might best seek. As the means of control and influence grow, life gets more organized and complicated at the same time that we lose the ability to set priorities and impose needed limits. In this way, critical theory illumines the sources of our tendency to pollute the environment, our fascination with power and control to the neglect of important values, and our stressful, overextended consumer lifestyles.

In contrast, most often, we cooperate with, deliberate with, contend with, or seek to influence one another as we hammer out shared cultural and ethical concerns. Humans often pursue activities and meanings not for their instrumental value in gaining control over events, but for what we take to be their intrinsic meaning or inherent worth. Even when we subordinate *praxis* to *techne* in a damaging way, we do so because of the significance, merit, or contributions to human welfare it procures for us. Some meanings of this sort always direct our instrumental activity. To conceive of human agency as fundamentally instrumental, then, tragically confuses quintessential and important human capacities with narrow technical prowess.

However, the congruence between the instrumental view and our cultural ideals runs deeper than merely its seeming affinity with a scientific or technological worldview. The dominant epistemological outlook of modern times is a ‘representational’ one according to which knowledge consists essentially in the correspondence of our beliefs to an external reality from which they must be sharply distinguished (clearly also part of the objectification “package”). Often this epistemological doctrine has seemed to support and be supported by the successes of natural science in modern times. That is no longer the case. Powerful critiques of positivism and new postempiricist views of the history and nature of scientific inquiry (such as Thomas Kuhn’s and Michael Polanyi’s) now stress its hermeneutical dimensions. Observation is considered to be dependent to some degree on theory and the confirmation or rejection of theories is to some degree conventional and influenced by particular values (Bernstein 1983). Still, the representational view seems to have done little damage in the past to deter progress in the natural sciences, and its picture of the knowing subject as a rather bloodless, detached observer of an independent and objective order of reality or fact continues to shape our outlook in many areas of modern culture, philosophy of mind being one of those.

The main reason for the persistence of the instrumental viewpoint is the profound aspiration to individuality and separateness entailed by this view of the knowing subject: a punctual self, as much a moral as an epistemological or scientific ideal (see above). It reflects the intense liberationist or anti-authoritarian temper of the modern era, which dictates that any overlap between self and world will compromise the individual’s integrity and dignity. It
has been suggested that this fact helps explain why the mainstream social and behavioral science typically advocates strictly value-neutral explanations or descriptions of human dynamics and has insisted on treating cultural and moral values as purely subjective (Slife and Williams 1995, p. 195; Richardson, Fowers and Guignon 1999; Bishop 2007). The motivation for this approach may be, in part, that important meanings and values be kept at a distance for fear they will compromise our autonomy and integrity.

This same aspiration to a punctual conception of self is presupposed by Kim’s functional account, which is carried out totally in individualist terms, emphasizing various mental states are actually internal neural states in an agent’s brain. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, this punctual self also underlies many dualist accounts in After Physicalism.

4. Beyond Objectification
If my diagnosis is right, physicalist and dualist objectifying views of mind tend to be heavily influenced by unacknowledged epistemological and ethical ideals. Here, I can only suggest some ideas that may prove helpful for getting around these dilemmas of mental agency and contribute to a more plausible conception of engaged agency. By framing the discussion in terms of engaged agency, I am, of course, implying that views heavily influenced by an instrumental notion of action, a punctual notion of the self and a representational epistemology are disengaged views of agency. No doubt many physicalists and dualists would object that they are attempting to understand agents as acting in the everyday world and that to attribute a disengaged stance to their views is terribly unfair. So the first thing we have to do is get clear about two different conceptions of engagement, or world shaping as Taylor calls it (Bishop 2007, pp. 23-25).

The first conception of engagement, or world shaping, is characterized by the way efficient causes impinge upon us due to our embodiment. For instance, at this moment you cannot see the wall behind you because the light refracted off its surface cannot reach your retinas. Your physical disposition and the physical properties of light are currently juxtaposed such that your embodiment strongly shapes your perception and, hence, your world and your engagement with it. By contrast, you are in a position to see the words on the screen. In this sense the disposition of your body shapes your perceptions. Call this a weak sense of embodiment or world shaping, where the characteristic feature is how your surroundings are related to your body in terms of efficient causation.

The second conception of engagement, or world shaping—I will refer to it as the strong sense—is qualitatively different. Consider an example from Taylor:
As I sit here and take in the scene before me, this has a complex structure. It is oriented vertically, some things are “up,” others are “down”; and also in depth, some are “near,” others “far.” Some objects “lie to hand,” others are “out of reach”; some constitute “unsurmountable obstacles” to movement, others are “easily displaced.” My present position doesn’t give me a “good purchase” on the scene; for that I would have to shift farther to the left. And so on (Taylor 1993, p. 218).

To say that persons are engaged in this strong sense means that understanding such an experience necessarily draws upon concepts only making sense against the background of the particular type of bodies persons have. The terms in quotes in the Taylor passage are understood only from the perspective of an embodied agent. Hence, to understand what it is to be “out of reach” requires being an agent with our bodily capacities. This is to say, that the very nature of experiencing things in the world as human beings is primarily constituted by our particular form of embodiment and not in the main by efficient causal relations.

For instance, to see your friend sad after hearing she did not get the job certainly makes use of efficient causation in the sense that photons refracting off your friend reach your retinas and sound waves from your friend reach membranes in your ear. However to interpret what has happened to her and its significance for her, as well as to know how to comfort her in this situation, derives from your embodied experience as a person feeling what is happening to her. Furthermore in order to comfort your friend requires your embodiment with the particular capacities of a human being (e.g., warm hug, soft and soothing speech, confident and encouraging manner, etc.).

To the extent that physicalist and dualist views of mind are engaged, they can only be considered so in the weak sense of engagement. But it is the strong sense of engagement—what we might call genuine world shaping—that is characteristic of humans. This sets us apart from other things like molecules, moles and mountains, which “engage” their surroundings through efficient causal relations only. And it is this strong sense of engagement, I suggest, that needs to be front and center of any conception of mind and agency.

A second suggestion takes its point of departure from this distinction between weak and strong forms of engagement. Part of the reason why physicalist and dualist approaches seem to struggle with mind and agency is their reliance upon what I will broadly term a mechanistic approach to mind. Physicalist approaches are influenced by much current work in the neural and cognitive sciences. There are two models or paradigms for the workings of the brain in such sciences. The first is the physics model, where the components of the brain are viewed as subject to various kinds of forces (physical, chemical, biological, etc.) and
these interactions produce the behaviors that are termed mental (Bishop 2007, pp. 199-200). The second is the computer model, where the components of the brain are viewed as information processors operating on information inputs and, in turn, producing specified outputs identified as mental behaviors (Bishop 2007, pp. 200-202).

Dualist theories also exhibit a mechanistic approach in that they tend to rely solely on weak world shaping and efficient causation in their objectification of minds and persons. Whether its Lowe’s psychological self as a law-governed punctual entity or Swinburne’s human classified as substances like tables and chairs, the main mode by which mind and action take place is in the form of efficient causation and instrumental action.

However, such objectifying approaches have a number of problems, two relevant ones that I will mention here. First, as noted earlier, such approaches are anything but objective as they incorporate a moral perspective displacing or ruling out other perspectives (e.g. Daston 1992; Bishop 2007). Second, and more devastating, such approaches leave out quintessential features of human agency, namely motives, purposes, the personal interpretations and viewpoints of people, character and contexts, to name but a few. Suppose I have made a promise to do something for a particularly shady character. As the time draws near for me to fulfill my promise, I find myself leaning against carrying it out because of the deep sense of shame I feel about the whole matter. In the end, though my character is such that I am normally reliable in carrying through on promises, I break it because of my overwhelming sense of shame. But the fact that I feel such shame is inexplicable on either physicalist or dualist objectifying accounts because shame is inextricably wrapped up with the way I conceive things in this society, the kinds of meanings shady characters in my society have (indeed, even what it means to be a shady character in the first place) as well as my sense of how I should respond to such people. Furthermore, my purposes for initially making the promise, whether noble or ignoble, are also bound up with such meanings and my goals and aspirations. These meanings, purposes and contexts, I suggest, need to take center place in our approach to understanding mind and agency.

A third suggestion is also connected with the first two. In essence, physicalist and dualist views, and indeed the objectifying impulse lying behind them, tend to reduce or displace narrative forms of explanation with mechanistic forms. Ultimately, the goal is to explain mind and action in terms of efficient causal mechanisms through a “scientific” account or otherwise (this is objectification par excellence). The pursuit of such accounts are, in part, founded in the same kinds of questionable moral underpinnings as I discussed above and, as such, should invite suspicion as to how much we should lean upon them. But it is also the case that mechanistic explanations completely ignore the narrative character of human
living (e.g., Guignon 1989; Bruner 1990; Dunne 1996; Richardson, Fowers and Guignon 1999; Bishop 2007; MacIntyre, 2007). We are what Joseph Dunne (1996) calls “storied” selves, a kind of temporal becoming that has the rough, changing unity of a narrative whose last chapter has yet to be written. Our being existentially and morally engaged in this process means that we come to appreciate the meaning of the stories we inhabit primarily by living them. We move forward by hammering out our convictions in risky and uncertain circumstances, including the unpredictable emotional adventures of human relationships—not, in the main, through more distanced or detached rational analysis (or through the relatively more bloodless business of calculating what are more or less efficient or effective instrumental actions and adjusting our behavior accordingly).

Furthermore, the narrative structure of our lives exhibits forms of final and formal causation. For example, human action always takes place against a background of explicit or implicit assumptions, values, commitments and practices deriving from our cultural-historical situation—cultural traditions, family upbringing, past experiences and so forth—which cannot always be articulated and often remain unclarified. Our actions are always channeled by this background (formal causation) as well as being shaped by our vision and understanding of our own future (final causation). However, this narrative structure is also dynamic: As we are engaged in the daily hammering out of life, the meanings this background and our vision of the future have for us are changed. There is a flow of interpretation from the past and the future (as envisioned by us) to the present and back again, so to speak, such that not only is the story of our lives unfinished, but it is also reinterpreted and adapted in the light of new realities. Our lives are lived more holistically, spanning across past, present and future, rather than atomistically in the now.

A narrative picture of human action, then, is simply more reflective of the sort of insights or understandings, be they illuminating or distorting, occurring in ordinary life. The understanding or accounts we arrive at rely only partially if at all on efficient causation, and characterize the human activities involved only peripherally in terms of more or less successful instrumental behaviors. Hence, from an ontological point of view, it simply makes no sense to base these narratives solely on genetic and neurophysiological mechanisms or to see them as mere products of evolutionary development (cf. O’Hear 1997; Bishop 2007). From this perspective, it is entirely implausible that coherent psychological and social narratives of the type we live everyday could arise from mere genetics, neurophysiology and evolutionary biology (Williams 1987; Bishop 2007, pp. 129-147; Nagel 2012, pp. 70-126).

Embracing narrative accounts certainly does not mean that efficient causation plays no role in mind and agency, or that more mechanistic accounts in no way illumine our questions on
these matters. Our practices of abstraction, idealization, experimentation, and so forth, give us insight into the causal workings of many processes. However, our best scientific theories and models are themselves creative, inventive interpretations of the world. Partly for that reason, mechanistic explanations both of the physical world and of mind find their meaning ultimately in a larger story that is historical, practical, and meaningful in character. There is much that various natural sciences can teach us about the condition of dyslexia, cancer, or the physics of athletic and artistic performances. And correlational studies surely have a place in the study of human agency and interactions, helping us detect enduring patterns or regularities that might otherwise go unrecognized, such as the relative prevalence of dyslexia in English speaking countries, or the positive relationships between women’s literacy, on the one hand, and their economic well-being and fertility rates on the other. But the role that such processes and patterns play in our lives, the meaning they have for us, and the nature and direction of our efforts to cope with or alter them, are determined by the place they come to occupy within unfolding individual and social understandings.

Several of the authors in After Physicalism point to ordinary life as being a sounder basis for theorizing than the sciences when it comes to understanding mind and action. Unfortunately, these authors mainly carry out this theorizing in a detached, abstracted way that exemplifies objectification (e.g., Swinburne and Göcke). By pursuing a more richly narrative approach to the lifeworld of human beings, they and their physicalist interlocutors likely will come to a better understanding of mind and agency than is presently available in the literature.

As a final suggestion, all approaches to the question of mind and its relationship to the physical world need an engaged philosophy (in contrast to the disengaged philosophy represented in After Physicalism). This means developing a hermeneutic ontology for human agency. According to hermeneutics, human understanding and action have a fundamentally dialogical, relational character. The quality of our experience and the shape of our practices flow from the interplay and mutual influence between present and past, interpreters and events, readers and texts, the self and others. We can distort these processes by dishonesty, defensiveness, or force, but done poorly or well, mutual influence and relationality remain basic in an ontological sense.

The basic idea is that we live in a historical and cultural context spanning across time from the past to the present and into the future. This context plays an important role in constituting the self that we presently are. From the beginning of our lives, our identities are shaped by the family, community and cultural traditions in which we are growing up. Yet from our earliest moments we are always engaged in these traditions and, at some level, are reinterpreting these traditions and, to some degree, reconstituting ourselves. This is a very
important sense in which our lives take on a dialogical or narrative character where the story of our lives is incomplete because it has yet to be fully written.

This implies that an engaged approach to understanding mind in the world must take into account the deeply relational character of persons, that persons are only possible in relationship with and dependence upon other persons as well as a physical world that provides an arena for action (Gunton 1993; Taylor 1989; MacIntyre 2001; Bishop 2007; Slife and Richardson 2008). The raw independence of the punctual self (e.g., persons as substances) would have to be set aside in favor of developing a view of what it means to be a person in a world of persons along with how that world might emerge over time. No human being is independent of other human beings. Furthermore, we are all historical beings shaped not only by our life histories but also by centuries of social and cultural development.

These four suggestions, I believe, will make room for a much fuller and open exploration of mind, the kinds of moral and prudential reasons lying behind the exercise of human agency, and our capacities. In addition, they will help us to further clarify the kinds of hidden moral dimensions lying behind various conceptions of mind and agency and, I think, move us a long way down the path of getting around the dilemmas currently facing many of the debates in the philosophy of mind.

Conclusion

On the whole, the essays and arguments in *After Physicalism* assume that the mind-body problem is independent of the physical, biological and social history of human beings. If I am right in what I have argued about the objectification that runs throughout so much of this volume, such assumptions of independence are not only false, but impede our ability to understand the actual nature of mind in our world. Moreover, coming to an understanding of mind in our world is as much about developing a positive ethical conception of human being in the world as it is about achieving epistemic clarity about human action. This is hard, challenging work (much harder and more challenging than contemporary physicalists and dualists realize), and we need more philosophers who will rise to the task of an engaged philosophy of mind.
References


