

Robert Kirk

The Conceptual Link from Physical to Mental.

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Non-reductive physicalists have not had it easy in their attempts to weave a position on how the mind is at one-and-the-same-time not physical but also not epiphenomenal, while sufficiently connected to matter but not in a way that reduces it. Their hope is to find a coherent version of physicalism that carves out just enough space for the mental as the center of autonomous volition. Robert Kirk has been contributing to this tradition and offers a possible and appealing way for the non-reductivist to have her cake and eat it, too. In his book *The Conceptual Link From Physical to Mental*, Kirk proposes ‘redescriptive physicalism’ as a way of situating the mind in a physical world. According to this account, there is ontologically nothing more than what can be specified by the narrow language of physics. If P is a true physical description of our world, then any description Q outside the narrow vocabulary of physics must simply count as a redescription of the reality specified by P. This is the redescriptive thesis, and Kirk claims that physicalism commits one to it: the view that P makes all Q truths true in virtue of the parts or aspects of what P specifies. Redescriptive physicalism also makes compulsory the acceptance of the logico-conceptual (l-c) entailment thesis, according to which P l-c entails “mental truths about the individuals whose existence is provided for by P” (21). In other words, it would be contradictory to claim that P is true and redescrptions of it false.

Kirk’s account, if right, offers an escape from the current morass of views about the minimal requirements of physicalism and the connection between the physical and mental. Primarily, it dispenses with talk of mental properties and their supervening relation to fundamental features of the world. However, it is not clear that Kirk actually saves the mind in the substantive way non-reductive physicalists believe is necessary to make the mental causally potent.

Kirk dedicates the bulk of the book to showing why redescriptive physicalism is superior to the numerous types of physicalism available in the market place. Some examples will be helpful in understanding how Kirk’s view is substantively different and, in his estimation, superior to various alternatives. In a somewhat schematic form, here are two useful examples Kirk offers:

(A) *Base description*: In a group of five trees, four stand at the corners of a square, the fifth at its center.

Pure redescription: There is a quincunx of trees.

Redescription: There is a quincunx of apple trees.

(B) *Base description*: There are black pixels at (123, 456), (124, 456), . . .

Pure redescription: The pixels form the image of a reclining cat.

Redescription: The pixels form the image of our cat Zoë (9-10).

There are several remarks to be made about these examples.

First, redescrptions could be of two possible sorts. Pure redescrptions ascribe nothing more to the item than what is specified by the base, where one synonymous concept replaces another as

example (A) shows. And yet pure redescrptions, as in the case of (B), are not identical with base descriptions since ‘reclining’ and ‘cat’ are neither synonymous with pixel language nor do they form part of the base’s conceptual scheme. Although analytic pure redescrptions are a species of non-nomologically necessary links, Kirk casts a far wider net of what is l-c entailed by the base. Conceptual replacements like (B) are legitimate because the rules of language allow the use of some expressions but not others to describe bits of the world, and these rules give words and sentences the meanings they have such that redescription of the same bit of reality provided for by P using different concepts is appropriate (23). Given the nature of language, it is contradictory to say that the base description is true while its redescription false, which is another way of saying that higher-level facts are l-c entailed by physical ones (106). Example (B) is an exemplar of precisely this point: the distribution and arrangement of pixels l-c entails that ‘reclining cat’ could not fail to apply to the base description. This holistic approach includes the full array of conceptual connections rather than limiting them to only stringent modal links.

Pure redescrptions are also conceptual stepping-stones that connect a subset base description with information beyond what the base provides. This is precisely the case in examples (A) and (B) where nothing about the base entails that the quincunx of trees are of the apple variety or that an arrangement of pixels are of a particular cat (18). While Kirk spends some time on this tripartite distinction, it is not clear why he needs anything beyond pure redescrptions since theoretically if P is a full description of the world, then all other redescrptions are necessarily entailed by P. In other words, if P is the base description for (A) and (B), then necessarily P entails that ‘there is a quincunx of apples trees’ and that a particular distribution of pixels forms ‘the image of our cat Zoë.’ It therefore appears that all redescrptions count as pure if the base description is not a subset of P.

Kirk goes out of his way to show that not only is redescrptive physicalism superior but also different from the a priori entailment touted by Chalmers and Jackson (Chapter 7), and the a posteriori physicalism advanced by the Block and Stalnaker crowd (Chapter 5-6). In terms of the former, Kirk claims that the a priori entailment thesis commits one to the l-c entailment thesis since both hold that knowledge of Q can be justified independent of experience from knowledge of P, particularly where Q-claims are pure redescrptions. However, it is not the case that the l-c entailment thesis entails a priori entailment given that psychological facts – phenomenal ones in particular – could not be inferred a priori from P even with a full understanding of all the relevant physical facts (85). To ascertain phenomenal/psychological truths, redescrptive physicalism must be a posteriori (89) but not in the sense advocated by the latter group of psycho-physical identity theorists. The reason is that redescrptive physicalism commits one to deep functionalism, where mental states have “functional relations with other features of the organism” (67). To the extent that physicalism is necessarily of the functional sort, it allows for the multiple realization thesis and the notion that narrowly physical states cannot be counted as a kind of functional state (82). This entails, according to Kirk, the falsity of not only type identities but also token ones.

Notably, redescrptive physicalism is ontologically deflationary in the sense that Kirk moves away *de re* accounts of the mind to *de dicto* connections between P and Q (25). Once we remove an ontologically distinct category, there is no longer a need for any ‘metaphysical adhesive’ to connect mental properties to the physical world. There is “no more to the existence of mental states than the existence of (certain kinds of) physical states” such that the analogy of glue to stick things to themselves is needless (*Ibid.*) Supervenience is therefore superfluous to this account. The only modal relation needed is the l-c entailment thesis, which connects conceptual, propositional items rather than distinct things in the world.

Under most functionalist accounts, having a mental property is having a second-order property that consists in having a first-order property that meets a specification. Functionalism is thereby not fictional about properties. And yet, while Kirk claims to endorse functionalism and a liberal view of properties that can be understood in an “ordinary, non-technical and colloquial way” (20), he also claims that non-reductive physicalism *does not* commit one to property dualism (140). His focus is to move away from the muddled metaphysical landscape of property dualism according to which reality is hierarchically structured with properties distinctive of each tier, with the mind appearing only at higher levels of the hierarchy.

The reason this matters is because Jaegwon Kim (1998, 2005) claims that causal overdetermination, the closure of the physical, and causal exclusion prevent us from conceiving of the mind as causally efficacious. But redescriptive physicalism, Kirk contends, can perfectly well deal with these criticisms by simply reimagining the causal landscape. Accordingly, “what the higher-level descriptions pick out need not be *identical* with what the lower-level descriptions pick out, and although [higher-level descriptions] are different from the latter, in that they are differently describable, they are not distinct in any sense” (158). In other words, Kirk wants to say that higher-level descriptions do explanatory work that cannot occur in purely physical or neurophysiological terms (160). However, this is not the same as reifying mental concepts to then claim that mental properties, as such, exist or are causal. So there can be a multiplicity of causal stories without regard to the criticisms Kim has mounted since there is “no more involved in the high-level cause than there is in the lower-level cause” (159). Given these commitments, it is not clear that Kirk saves mental causation. On the one hand, he escapes the criticisms associated with the causal inefficacy of mental properties by disposing of them and the associated supervenience problems; on the other, redescriptions, as such, are not the sorts of things that the non-reductive physicalist would champion as having actually made the mind causally potent.

Ana K. Diaz

Montana State University Billings