

Physicalism, Ectoplasm and Epiphenomenal Fairycakes

Supervenience-physicalism is sometimes expressed as the claim that if possible worlds are physical duplicates they are duplicates absolutely. Lewis argues that this claim is false, on the grounds that you might have two possible worlds that are physical duplicates but not duplicates *simpliciter* because one of them contains ‘ectoplasm’. Jackson reformulates supervenience-physicalism to escape this objection, and this paper will evaluate that reformulation. I will seek to show that while Jackson’s reformulation is coherent it is not necessarily one the physicalist should welcome.

§1 Introduction

The following claim (C1) is an expression of supervenience-physicalism: ‘If two possible worlds are physical duplicates then they will be duplicates *simpliciter*’. This claim would be false if there were two physically identical possible worlds that were not duplicates *simpliciter*, which would happen if at least one of them contained non-physical stuff such as ‘ectoplasm’. Jackson accepts that such counter-examples are possible and so tries to reformulate (C1) in such a way as to maintain supervenience-physicalism but allow for possible worlds containing non-physical stuff.

This paper will begin by explaining exactly what (C1) means by giving some background on supervenience-physicalism. We will then outline Lewis’ Ectoplasm Objection and evaluate Jackson’s reply to it. I will be seeking to show that while Jackson’s reformulation of (C1) successfully avoids the Ectoplasm Objection it does so by advocating a much weaker - and arguably less attractive - version of supervenience-physicalism.

§2 What is supervenience-physicalism?

We will begin by explaining exactly what (C1) involves, by giving some background on supervenience-physicalism. What exactly *is* physicalism? Jackson writes that it is the idea that some future physics will eventually be able to give us a correct and

complete picture of the world (Jackson, 1998, 6). The metaphysical shopping list of physicalism is thus very small - the only things that exist are those dubbed ‘physical’ (Jackson, 1994, 26). As Chalmers explains, this means that the idea behind physicalism is that ‘there is nothing over and above the physical’ (Chalmers, 1996, 41). There are different degrees of physicalism: *weak physicalism* holds that physicalism is contingently true (holding in the actual world but not in at least one other possible world) while *strong physicalism* holds that physicalism is necessarily true (holding in every possible world). Supervenience-physicalism is one way the physicalist might account for seemingly non-physical properties (e.g. mental properties like ‘consciousness’, or moral properties like ‘goodness’). Paull and Sider explain that supervenience-physicalism holds physical properties to be basic B-properties, which determine the higher-level mental or moral A-properties (Paull & Sider, 1992, 834). As the A-properties supervene on the B-properties there can be no change in A-properties without change in B-properties. Supervenience theses also come in several varieties: Blackburn distinguishes between *weak supervenience* where there is no possible world where some things are B and A but others are just B; and *strong supervenience* where necessarily if a thing is B then it is A (Blackburn, 1992, 182). Obviously in the former thesis the supervenience relation only holds within (and not across) possible worlds, while in the latter the relation holds everywhere. As (C1) claims that the contents of all possible worlds are determined by the physical it is an expression of strong supervenience and strong physicalism.

§3 Lewis and Jackson on ectoplasm

3.1 Lewis’ Ectoplasm Objection

Having explained (C1) in detail we will now outline Lewis’ Ectoplasm Objection to it. Lewis argues that (C1) is false, as two worlds could differ without differing physically *if* at least one of them was a world where physicalism was false and so contained non-physical stuff (Lewis, 1983, 362). Horgan suggests that non-physical stuff might be ectoplasm, Cartesian souls or the divine (Horgan, 1983, 34). Indeed, Stalnaker claims there could be wholly non-physical worlds inhabited by angels (Stalnaker, 1996, 231). It seems to me that Lewis’ Ectoplasm Objection is really made up of two smaller ones. Firstly, as Chalmers points out, there could be two physically

identical worlds that were not duplicates *simpliciter* as one has some ‘extra angels hovering in a non-physical realm, made of ectoplasm’ (Chalmers, 1996, 39). Secondly, there could be two purely non-physical worlds that would be physical duplicates (because neither contains any physical stuff) that were also not duplicates *simpliciter*, perhaps because they have ectoplasm-angels of different colours. Although both of these counter-examples seem bizarre, Haugeland writes that such worlds appear logically possible and Jackson agrees with him (Haugeland, 1982, 99). It seems then that (C1) is false, and if Jackson wishes to maintain supervenience-physicalism he will have to reformulate it.

3.2 Jackson’s response to the Ectoplasm Objection

So how does Jackson reformulate (C1) to reply to the Ectoplasm Objection? He begins by changing (C1) from a necessary truth to a contingent one and suggests (C2): ‘Any world that is a physical duplicate of our (the actual) world is identical *simpliciter* with our world’ (Jackson, 1994, 28). Note that while (C2) isn’t vulnerable to the second Ectoplasm Objection (we will assume that our world is not purely non-physical) it is still vulnerable to the first (as a physical duplicate of our world might also contain ectoplasm and so not be a duplicate *simpliciter*). In order to avoid the first Ectoplasm Objection Jackson tries to limit his physicalist-supervenience claim to worlds more nearly like ours, and suggests (C3): ‘Any world which is a minimal physical duplicate of our world is a duplicate *simpliciter* of our world’ (Jackson, 1994, 28). Exactly what (C3) means will be discussed below.

§4 Is Jackson’s reformulation of supervenience-physicalism successful?

Having outlined Jackson’s reply to the Ectoplasm Objection we will now evaluate it. Firstly we will examine the two issues inherent in his move from (C1) to (C2). The first issue is that he changes the supervenience-physicalist claim from being necessary to contingent. While this allows Jackson to maintain the strong supervenience of A-properties on B-properties it makes him a weak physicalist. Interestingly Lewis agrees that physicalism is *supposed* to be contingent: ‘a merit of our world that not all other worlds share’ (Lewis, 1983, 362). But this would mean that physicalism isn’t the full picture, it is admitting that no future physics will ever be able to explain everything

about different possible worlds. It seems odd to me that physicalists would give up this idea so easily. The second issue is that (C2) contains an assumption that (C1) didn't need to. (C1) asserts that physicalism is necessary, but (C2) only asserts that while there are non-physicalist possible worlds our world isn't one of them. But if non-physicalist worlds are possible why shouldn't our world be one such? If our world contained ectoplasm we couldn't know it. Jackson simply has to assume the actual world is physicalist.

Having identified two issues with Jackson's move from (C1) to (C2) we will now critically assess (C3), Jackson's final formulation of the supervenience-physicalist claim designed to escape the Ectoplasm Objection. In order to assess (C3) we need to establish exactly what a 'minimal physical duplicate' is. A 'duplicate *simpliciter*' is a duplicate in the absolute sense, a 'physical duplicate' is a duplicate of all the physical stuff (including the B-properties and the A-properties supervening on them), but what is a 'minimal physical duplicate'? Jackson compares it to implicit 'stop clauses' found in recipes e.g. when baking scones you are told to 'add flour and butter' but you are *not* told 'don't add dirt or frog-legs' (Jackson, 1994, 28). How is this to be understood? We will illustrate the point using an example: fairycakes. Let's imagine a fairycake recipe that requires sugar, butter, flour and eggs. We'll make two batches of fairycakes using all of those physical ingredients, but we'll add to the second batch a sprinkling of ectoplasm. These two batches are physical duplicates but they are not duplicates *simpliciter*: while the first batch are 'ordinary fairycakes' the latter contain extra, non-physical ingredients and are instead 'epiphenomenal fairycakes'. If Jackson's 'minimal physical duplicate' is a stop clause then it would tell us not to add any ingredients after '...flour and eggs'; it tells us not to add anything else including ectoplasm. If then you were 'baking' possible worlds the difference between a 'physical duplicate' and a 'minimal physical duplicate' is that with the former you might continue to add ingredients once you've exhausted the recipe, whereas with the latter you add only the ingredients specified. Jackson is saying that, since the only ingredients used in our world are physical, if we made a 'minimal physical duplicate' of our world then it would be identical. It seems to me that as long as our world is physicalist (C3) works: it retains strong supervenience of A-properties on B-properties but allows for worlds that are 'physical duplicates' but not 'minimal physical duplicates' of our world to have ectoplasm.

There are however two issues with (C3) worth pointing out. Firstly, there is an ambiguity in the term ‘minimal physical duplicate’. If Jackson means ‘only the ingredients used in the original’ then if we baked a duplicate batch of epiphenomenal fairycakes we would have a duplicate *simpliciter*, but if it means ‘only the physical ingredients used in the original’ then our duplicate batch would only contain the physical ingredients like sugar and butter – there would be no ectoplasm. Similarly, when we apply the former meaning to possible worlds a ‘baked’ duplicate of an ectoplasm world would result in a duplicate *simpliciter*, but when we apply the latter meaning our baked duplicate would only contain the physical stuff and would obviously not be a duplicate *simpliciter*. This ambiguity is important, because if Jackson intends the former meaning then (C3) is something even the non-physicalist could accept, as the theist or dualist would merely deny Jackson’s assumption that the world is physicalist while agreeing that a ‘minimal physical duplicate’ of our world would be a duplicate *simpliciter*, as both worlds would contain the physical stuff plus any gods or souls. Jackson could either accept this consequence (but if so it would seem distinctly odd that a supervenience-physicalist claim could be so hijacked by non-physicalism) or he could escape it by saying he intended the latter meaning, as that is obviously not one the non-physicalist would accept. The second issue with (C3) is simply that it contains the same issues as (C2): it’s still a weak physicalist position that relies on the assumption our world is physicalist.

§5 Conclusion

Having then evaluated Jackson’s reply to the Ectoplasm Objection we have seen that his reformulation of the physicalist-supervenience claim does escape it, although it tightens the physicalist net over possible worlds and I find it surprising he would give up strong physicalism so easily. Furthermore if interpreted a certain way Jackson’s formulation is one that could be acceptable to non-physicalists, and for an expression of supervenience-physicalism that would certainly be peculiar. Because of the possibility of such an interpretation I would imagine that Jackson would argue that a ‘minimal physical duplicate’ instructs us only to include the physical ingredients – meaning that a duplicate batch of our epiphenomenal fairycakes would only contain sugar, butter, eggs and flour with no hint of ectoplasm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blackburn, Simon (1992). *Spreading the Word*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, David (1996). *The Conscious Mind*. United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Haugeland, John (1982). "Weak Supervenience", *American Philosophical Quarterly* Volume 19, pp. 93-103.
- Horgan, Terence (1983). "Supervenience and Microphysics", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* Volume 63, pp. 29-43.
- Jackson, Frank (1994). "Armchair Metaphysics" in M. Michael & J. O'Leary-Hawthorne (eds.). *Philosophy of Mind*, pp.23-42. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Jackson, Frank (1998). *From Metaphysics to Ethics*. United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon (1993). *Supervenience and Mind*. United States of America: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, David (1983). "New Work for a Theory of Universals", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Volume 61, pp. 343-377.
- Paull, R. & Sider, Theodore (1992). "In Defence of Global Supervenience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Volume 52, pp. 833-854.
- Stalnaker, Robert (1996). "Varieties of Supervenience", *Nous* Volume 30, pp. 221-241.