
 MENTALISM VS. PHYSICALISM?

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Torin Alter and Yujin Nagasawa, eds. *Consciousness in the Physical World: Perspectives on Russellian Monism*. New York: Oxford U. P., 2015. Pp. x, 462. ISBN: 978-0-19-992735-7 (hb). US\$62.00.

In his autobiography, Bertrand Russell recalls the decreasing degrees of sympathy he felt with most people during his adolescence, especially outside the realm of politics. During these years, upon his grandmother's discovery of his interest in metaphysics, she thought an adequately reflective dismissal of his interests was "What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind." Russell notes: "At the fifteenth or sixteenth repetition of this remark, it ceased to amuse me" (*Auto*. I: 45). Yet the mind/matter dichotomy persisted as a subject of the utmost interest to Russell for the rest of his long life.

By his own account, up until 1912's *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell "had accepted matter as it appears in physics. But this left an uncomfortable gulf between physics and perception, or, in other language, between mind and matter" (*MPD*, p. 78). Later, in the early 1920s, Russell depicted the plight as one wherein "many psychologists, especially those of the behaviourist school, ... make psychology increasingly dependent on physiology and external observation, and tend to think of matter as something much more solid and indubitable than mind. Meanwhile the physicists, especially Einstein and other exponents of the theory of relativity, have been making 'matter' less and less material" (*AMi*, p. 5). Such paradoxical reflections prompted Russell to adopt the position of "neutral monism" according to which he forsook the mind/matter dichotomy and understood mind and matter, instead, as different ways of organizing and describing the same "stuff".

From this perspective, Russell noted, "As regards the world in general, both physical and mental, everything that we know of its intrinsic character is derived from the mental side, and almost everything we know of its causal laws is derived from the physical side" (*AMa*, p. 402). Unsurprisingly, the intrinsic character of the world physically and mentally, as well as its causal laws, abide to this day as areas still ripe for significant speculation.

Billed as being the "first book-length treatment" of Russellian monism, Torin Alter and Yujin Nagasawa are the editors of *Consciousness in the Physical World: Perspectives on Russellian Monism* (abbreviated "CPW"). The regard in which they hold Russellian monism is high. However, they argue that

Russellian monism “will not become a mature, complete account until a theory of (proto)phenomenal¹ composition that yields a plausible solution to the combination problem² is devised” (*CPW*, p. 447). Three philosophers they consider to have “arguably anticipated Russellian monism or aspects of the view” (p. 3) are Leibniz, Kant, and James. Relevant, brief excerpts from their works make up the beginning of this volume.

Also at the beginning of the volume are excerpts from Russell’s works. They feature his thought on the differences between neutral monism and both materialism and idealism, the knowability of mental events without inference versus the knowability of physical events only with respect to their space-time structure, how “the difference between mind and brain is not a difference of quality but a difference of arrangement”, his philosophy’s main points, and the stages of his philosophical development.

Leibniz had argued that perception “cannot be explained by mechanical reasons” and that we must seek its nature in the “simple substance”, which is not constituted by *extension alone*. For Kant, the “faculty of sensibility’s” origin abides too obscurely for us who cognize our minds via only “inner sense”, thereby dooming us to discover mere appearances, much as we long to comprehend things in themselves. Then, for James, the constitution of “higher” mental states cannot be explained simply as a sum of “lower” ones. He decries the “mind-stuff theory” as *unintelligible*, arguing instead that states of mind encompassing the knowledge of many things concurrently must exist in an “independent and integral” manner rather than as a compound of *psychic atoms*.

What the present reviewer finds striking about this book is the partiality of many of its contributors to views of a panpsychist³ sort that he, at least, would never have associated with Russellian monism. Confusingly, the editors of this

¹ “Protophenomenal” is that which “serves as a dependence base for the phenomenal” (Montero, *CPW*, p. 216). Thus, protophenomenal properties are properties “on which phenomenal properties would logically supervene” (Alter and Nagasawa, *CPW*, p. 436n.27), “properties that, though not themselves phenomenal, result in phenomenal properties when combined in certain ways” (p. 425). “Protophenomenal” properties are “nonphenomenal properties that together (perhaps also in combination with structural/dispositional properties) constitute consciousness” (p. 3) and are “by definition not phenomenal, so that means they must either be a species of neutral properties or a species of physical properties” (Kind, *CPW*, p. 411).

² The conceivability argument against physicalism is the argument that, as long as we can conceive of creatures “microphysically identical to us without consciousness”, consciousness is of a different order of being than the physical world.

³ Panpsychism is the view that “mind, or at any rate phenomenality, is everywhere.... Panpsychism seems to imply that there is something it is like to be a thermometer, a rock, and even an electron” (Alter and Nagasawa, *CPW*, pp. 432–3, although *cf.* 432n.21).

volume claim that “Russellian monism does not necessarily represent Russell’s view” (*CPW*, p. 424; see also pp. 6, 403), and that “Russellian monism would seem to be compatible with neutral monism, physicalism, dualism, and idealism” (p. 438). According to the contributors, “how best to understand Russell’s own view is a vexed one” (p. 403), and this collection of frequently very technical, difficult papers certainly provides a panoply of competing ways to see and ponder Russellian monism.

This diverse array of “Russellian Monisms”, Donovan Wishon points out, is due to Russell’s point that “we are ignorant of the intrinsic nature of all but that small corner of the physical world which constitutes our own conscious experience” (*CPW*, p. 107). Classifying Russell’s “Neutral Monism”, he would have us understand, is rendered all the more difficult by its evolution over approximately four decades. This well-researched, organized, and engaging chapter concisely lays out this development. A crucial result in Russell’s development, Wishon explains, is that the *neutrality* of Russell’s neutral monism becomes thoroughly *epistemic* in character. “Thus, by all appearances, what Russell leaves us with is a Neutral Monism with a greater affinity to Russellian Physicalism than any genuinely *neutral* monism, including his own previously held versions” (pp. 114–15).

Alyssa Ney sets out to clarify the motivations for the various forms of Russellian monism’s “constituent theses” and focuses on physical structuralism⁴ and the structure-grounding thesis.⁵ She does not consider any form of Russellian monism to afford a reason for seeing the physical characterization of the world as “in need of supplementation by further metaphysics” (*CPW*, p. 367). And yet she understands Russell’s monism as an alternative to physicalism rather than as a way of interpreting it, even though she understands physicalism as entailing “a commitment to physics and physics alone as a source of one’s fundamental metaphysical commitments” (p. 368).

“[Currently] unknown absolutely intrinsic properties” are what Derk Pereboom envisions as accounting for “both conventional microphysical properties and for phenomenal consciousness” (*CPW*, p. 319). He underscores what he considers a particular protophenomenal version of Russellian monism “in which the absolutely intrinsic properties are non-mental and sufficiently similar to paradigmatic properties of current physics to count as physical” (*ibid.*). The fragility of this view, he concedes, inheres in the minimal conception we have of such absolutely intrinsic properties.

⁴ Physical structuralism is “loosely” the claim that “physics describes its most fundamental features only relationally” (Ney, *CPW*, p. 350).

⁵ The structure-grounding thesis is the claim that there is “more to the world” than what can be discerned via the “relational characterization” of reality’s “fundamental features” (*ibid.*, p. 347), that is, via physical structuralism.

Finding a view that is neither materialist nor dualist is what interests Daniel Stoljar. He argues on behalf of Thomas Nagel's monism rather than Russell's and divides the structure and dynamics argument⁶ into assorted versions, arguing that no version of it is successful. Stoljar is sanguine about what he perceives as the structure and dynamics argument's failures because it precludes the validation of Russellian monism, thereby enabling Nagelian monism to be a more plausible rival and standard versions of materialism and dualism less plausible alternatives.

The question of why the immediate objects of introspective awareness "*appear to be* so radically different from anything that a knowledge of the physiology of the brain would lead one to expect" is the focus of Michael Lockwood. His explanation is that "The conscious observer views his or her own brain through the eyes, so to speak, of [a] ... preferred set of observables, much as the observer, in relativity, views the world through the eyes of his own frame of reference" (*CPW*, p. 157).

As for those contributors with more panpsychist propensities, Leopold Stubenberg sees fit to employ the phrase "Russellian monism" so capaciously as to include not just Russell's views but a "diverse family of views" united only by their being derived from a couple of Russell's theses. Noting that Russell believed "There is nothing in physics to prove that the physical world is radically different in character from the mental world" (*CPW*, p. 79), he cites as the "most frequently raised objection" to the type of neutral monism we find in Russell, that it is "really some sort of mental monism" (p. 69). The "Russellian monists" who did *not* follow Russell all the way, specifically, the panpsychists, he finds more interesting.

"Constitutive Russellian panpsychism" is what David J. Chalmers thinks is "perhaps the most important form of panpsychism, precisely because it is this form that promises to avoid the problems of physicalism and dualism and to serve as a Hegelian synthesis" (*CPW*, p. 255). In particular, he argues that this view avoids both the conceivability argument against physicalism and the causal argument against dualism.⁷ Another viable view on this front he considers is that "all phenomenal truths are grounded in protophenomenal truths" concerning "microphysical entities" (p. 261). Even these views, though, he refrains from deeming wholly satisfactory.

Barbara Gail Montero addresses the topic of Russellian monism *vis-à-vis* Chalmers' conceivability argument. Montero's contention is that there is not

⁶ The structure and dynamics argument is that "there are truths about consciousness that are not a priori deducible from truths solely about structure and dynamics" (*CPW*, p. 442).

⁷ The causal argument against dualism is the argument that "If every caused event has a full causal explanation in physical terms, every property causally relevant to the physical is itself grounded in physical properties" (Chalmers, *CPW*, p. 251).

only a “loophole” through which Russellian monism falls, which Chalmers acknowledges, but this loophole is “more significant than Chalmers indicates” (*CPW*, p. 210) in that there is a genre of Russellian monism falling through Chalmers’ loophole that is “fully physicalistic” (*ibid.*).

While advocating for a materialist version of neutral monism, Galen Strawson supports a sort that is panpsychist or “panexperientialist”⁸ (*CPW*, p. 166). Although disagreeing with Russell’s view that we cannot get any further than “structure-specifying” content when attempting to characterize the non-mental, he supports Russell’s point that claims to knowledge of experiential being and claims to knowledge of non-experiential being are asymmetric, however out of fashion this latter point may be. In the volume of space-time that the brain occupies, Strawson sees physics as finding an “in-substantial-seeming play of energy, an ethereally radiant vibrancy”—a *ghost in the machine*. The physical world generally is “already a bit of a ghost—as ghostly, in Russell’s view, ‘as anything in a spiritual séance’” (p. 193). Strawson associates his view with the likes of Eddington and Whitehead in deeming pure panpsychism/panexperientialism as “on balance the most plausible form of materialism.... Russell and James, for all their talk of ‘neutral monism’, are also open to panpsychism (if indeed the supposed neutrality of their fundamental stuff doesn’t collapse into a form of panpsychism)” (p. 202).

We need a shift from cause-and-effect relations across time to “modeling ladders of potentiality extended through levels of nature” according to Gregg Rosenberg (*CPW*, p. 231). With this approach, he thinks we have a “metaphysics of causality which can tie together physics, experience, and integrated information in a way which shows they are different perspectives on the same thing ...” (p. 244). Rosenberg considers his approach to render *panpsychism* and *emergentism*⁹ compatible, and his theory of causal significance endorses a “panpsychist version of Russellian Monism” with a heavy dose of Whitehead in its “specific form” (p. 242).

Philip Goff goes so far as to say that “pure physicalist worlds” are nothing short of “incoherent”, and that “physics does not provide us with an adequate

⁸ Panexperientialism is the view that “everything experiences, or is capable of experiencing” (attributed to David Skrbina at *CPW*, p. 64n.). “Panpsychism makes the stronger claim that everything has a mind” (Stubenberg, *CPW*, p. 64).

⁹ Emergentism holds that consciousness consists of “intrinsic attributes which are qualitatively distinct from any attributes either by the low-level constituents of physical reality, considered individually, or by any configurations of them that involve relatively small numbers of these constituents, or which have a relatively low level of organization or complexity. The idea is that, at a certain number/density/ complexity (or whatever) *threshold*, new qualities emerge which are different in kind from any that are present in sub-threshold phenomena involving these same constituents; and *pari passu* with the new qualities, new behavior also” (Lockwood, *CPW*, p. 151).

supervenience base for the phenomenal qualities we encounter in our experience" (*CPW*, p. 372). Discussing the merits of Russellian monism in general but the demerits of the "constitutive" sort espoused by Chalmers in particular, Goff opts, instead, for a Russellian monism of an "intelligible emergentist" sort.

Perhaps the most refreshingly demystifying, albeit deflationary, contribution to this volume is that of Amy Kind who sees Russellian monism as affirming that "At the fundamental level of reality there exist inscrutable properties of a single kind" (*CPW*, p. 404). And she observes that Russellian monism has been celebrated as "hot stuff" to whatever degree it might emancipate us from the "current gridlock" in the debate between dualism and physicalism (p. 402). But such an emancipation is more illusory than real. This is because, once we "clear away the clutter" (p. 418), we see that those people with proclivities to dualism will still insist the ultimate inscrutables are *phenomenal*; whereas those with propensities toward physicalism, will still contend that the ultimate inscrutables are *non-phenomenal* (p. 417). The elusiveness of such an elementary point, she argues, results directly from the very "proliferation of different views in the recent philosophical literature that have been classified as versions of Russellian monism" (p. 417).

The present reviewer has always been under the impression that the primary reason Bertrand Russell considered himself a neutral monist rather than a classical materialist was the discovery during his lifetime of the convertibility of matter into energy, and that, during his consequent neutral monism phase, he never so much as considered reckoning consciousness as anything but physical. Nor has it seemed to me that Russell would have had time for the view that all reality is in some sense *conscious*. I suppose this puts the present reviewer in the camp of what Chalmers classifies as the type-B physicalists, namely, those who "accept a deep epistemic gap between the physical and the phenomenal but deny a corresponding metaphysical gap" (*CPW*, p. 443).

Indeed, what do not seem to be sufficient factors in the reflections of many of this volume's contributors, especially those with a panpsychist orientation, are the great lengths to which Russell went to emphasize that "objects of sense ... are not mental" (*ML*, p. 132), as well as his determination to dissociate terms like "sensation" and "percept" from any genre of mentalism (*CPW*, p. 69). In any case, those with interests in a wide range of alternative opinions on Russellian monism, combined with a high tolerance for technical details, will find *Consciousness in the Physical World* a worthwhile read.

WORKS CITED

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