

# AN ONTOLOGICALLY LIBERATING SKEPTICISM?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I explore what I take to be the best hope for a physicalist ontology of mind from within the framework of a radical empiricism about both knowledge and thought. That best hope is related to the view that Chalmers calls panprotopsychism. In short, the argument is that a rather radical skepticism about the external world opens the door to what might strike some as odd ontological possibilities concerning the exemplification of phenomenal properties in the brain. The conclusion will be of small comfort to traditional physicalists and, as we shall see, it is in the end, probably misleading to characterize the view as a version of physicalism at all.

KEYWORDS: physicalism, mind, property dualism, radical empiricism, phenomenal properties

## 1. Epistemic and Intentionalist Foundationalism

Everyone is familiar with the classic regress argument for foundationalism in epistemology. The foundationalist argues, correctly I think, that there must be some truths we know directly (believe with noninferential justification) or we wouldn't be able to know any truths at all. I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> however, that just as we must end a potentially vicious epistemic regress by recognizing a distinction between inferential and noninferential justification, so also we must end a potentially vicious regress of thought by recognizing a parallel distinction between direct and indirect thought. Just as we can know some truths inferentially only if we can know other truths noninferentially, so also, we can think of some things indirectly through properties they have or relations they bear to other things only if we can think of other things (most notably at least some properties or relations) directly—only if we can think of them as they are intrinsically.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Fumerton, "Russelling Causal Theories of Reference," in *Rereading Russell*, eds. C. Wade Savage and C. Anthony Anderson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 108-118.

It is one thing to recognize in the abstract that both justification and thought have a foundationalist structure. It is another to give a plausible analysis of the distinction between both inferential and noninferential justification, and direct and indirect thought. I have argued in a number of places that Russell was right to identify noninferentially justified belief with belief accompanied by direct acquaintance with its truthmaker (and with the correspondence between thought and truthmaker). But more neutrally we can characterize foundational justification negatively. Foundational justification is noninferential justification—it is justification that is not inferential. And similarly one can provide a neutral characterization of direct thought. One's thought of  $x$  (for any  $x$ ) is direct when one doesn't think of  $x$  by means of thinking of something other than  $x$ .

Unless radical skepticism is true, most knowledge and justification is inferential. And, similarly, most of what we think of we think of only indirectly. I can think of Jack the Ripper, but I can think of that person only by means of thinking about various people who were murdered. And I can think of them, in turn, only by thinking about various reports I have read. The *radical* empiricist would argue, again correctly, I believe, that I can think of reports only by thinking of experiences of various kinds.

One could try to tighten the connection between foundational justification and foundational thought by including in the very *analysis* of both only those items with which we are directly acquainted. While tempting, I believe that would be a mistake. I can surely think of crimson red in its absence. And it may even be true that I can think of Hume's famous missing shade of blue even if I have *never* been directly acquainted with the property. An unabashed realist about universals could acknowledge both claims and still insist that direct thought is restricted to objects of direct acquaintance. When I think (directly) of that missing shade of blue, perhaps I find myself directly aware of the relevant universal. Alternatively, one could hold, as some empiricists probably did, that when I think of a phenomenal property, that property gets exemplified by something like a mental image, where again I am directly acquainted with the image and its properties. To decide ontological questions concerning the nature of properties would take us very far afield. I can't bring myself to believe that there are universals, let alone uninstantiated universals. Nor am I convinced that when I think of a phenomenal property in its absence that property is literally exemplified by something mental. For these reasons I am reluctant to bring direct acquaintance into the *analysis* of direct thought. At the same time I think that the radical empiricists were probably right, albeit only *contingently* right, in insisting that we succeed in thinking directly only about entities with which we have been

acquainted, or (to accommodate Hume's missing shade of blue) entities which are very similar to items with which we have been directly acquainted.<sup>2</sup>

My agreement with the radical empiricist on the causal connection between being an object with which I have been acquainted and being an object about which I can think directly is admittedly based on nothing other than my own apparent memory and introspection. I simply find that most of my own thought is indirect. The only time I'm confident that I can think of something directly is when I think of some property with which I seem to remember having been directly acquainted. Even when it comes to thought of ordinary physical objects, I think Berkeley was probably right in suggesting that I think of such things only through thinking of the *appearances* associated with them. That is not to say that one can reduce a physical object to its appearances (either in finite minds or the mind of a God). But as long as one has the concept of causation one can think of all sorts of things through their effects. Our thought of physical objects, I am convinced, just is the thought of that which has the capacity to play certain causal roles in affecting conscious beings.

I realize that many contemporary philosophers will regard the above comments as a kind of quaint reminder of a distant and discredited philosophical past. Many philosophers today accept some version of a direct theory of reference, and with it, a direct theory of thought. One idea, popularized by Kripke, is that one can convert a name (for either an individual or a kind) into a directly referring expression through the use of a reference-fixing definite description. While initially a view about language, its natural extension to thought suggests that we can think of the items referred to by directly referring expressions in an equally direct way. I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that the Kripkean revolution against Russellian conceptions of language and thought was deeply mistaken. I can't

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<sup>2</sup> The above idea was, of course, the cornerstone of radical empiricism and was, perhaps ironically, often treated as if it were some sort of necessary truth, knowable *a priori*. But Hume, the empiricist's empiricist, was in an extremely awkward position when it came to defending the claim that all simple ideas are 'copies' of prior impressions. After all, Hume unequivocally endorsed the view that there is no *a priori* restriction on what can cause what, and indeed, that there is no contradiction in the supposition that some things happen without a cause. Furthermore, he was officially skeptical about the legitimacy of inductive inference. So he could not consistently claim that past experience gives us good reason to believe that all ideas come from prior impressions. To be sure, despite his official skepticism, Hume would often reason inductively, but in the case of the cornerstone of his empiricism the inductive inference would have to be from his own case, and many would question an inductive inference from such a limited data base.

<sup>3</sup> Fumerton, "Russelling Causal Theories."

rehearse those arguments here, but I will note that to accommodate the datum that there are informative identity claims, the staunchest direct reference theorist will acknowledge that there must be *some* sense of meaning according to which even different ‘directly referring’ expressions with the same referent typically have different meaning. The slogan that meaning is reference, for *every* plausible sense of ‘meaning,’ isn’t even remotely plausible. Kripke<sup>4</sup> will puzzle from now until the end of time about Pierre and his respective beliefs about London and Londres and he won’t find a solution until he concedes that at the level of mind, Pierre’s thoughts about London were simply not the same as his thoughts about Londres.

In this paper I am primarily interested in examining the claim that radical empiricism about knowledge and thought is actually liberating when it comes to allowing for the possibility of a quasi-physicalist account of mental properties. In particular, as Russell,<sup>5</sup> Maxwell,<sup>6</sup> Chalmers,<sup>7</sup> and Stoljar<sup>8</sup> have argued, the best hope for avoiding property dualism *is* a kind of radical empiricism. The ‘physicalism’ in question, however is hardly the sort of view that will give any sort of comfort to most of those interested in reducing the mental to the physical. It is even misleading to characterize the view as one that *identifies* mental properties with physical properties.

## 2. Mind/Brain Identity Theories:

It is a datum that there are informative identity claims. The key to understanding informative identity claims is to recognize that distinction discussed above between direct and indirect thought. It is because we can think of individuals, properties, propositions, and facts, indirectly, that we can make informative

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<sup>4</sup> Saul Kripke, “A Puzzle about Belief,” in *Meaning and Use*, ed. Avishai Margalit (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 239-283.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Matter* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> Grover Maxwell, “Rigid Designators and Mind-Brain Identity,” in *Perception and Cognition. Issues in the Foundations of Psychology*, ed. C. Wade Savage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 365-405.

<sup>7</sup> David Chalmers, “Phenomenal Concepts and the Knowledge Argument,” in *There is Something About Mary*, eds. Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa and Daniel Stoljar (Cambridge: MIT, 2004), 269-298.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Stoljar, “Two Conceptions of the Physical,” in *There is Something About Mary*, 309-331.

discoveries concerning the intrinsic character of the objects of our thought.<sup>9</sup> I can indirectly think of the cause of X and indirectly think of the effect of Y only to discover through empirical investigation that the cause of X and the effect of Y is one and the same thing.

Initially, the virtual truism that there are informative identity claims seems to help the physicalist. From Descartes to Jackson, it was tempting to suppose that one could argue for at least property dualism by pointing out that knowledge of paradigmatic physical truths never yields knowledge of at least some paradigmatic psychological truths. Consider, for example, a variation on Jackson's<sup>10</sup> well-known thought experiment involving Mary. Mary suffers from color-deficient vision. She is black/white color blind (a real, but rare condition). The world looks to her as it does to us when we watch a black and white movie. In that condition she learns everything there is to know about the physical processes that occur in conscious beings. She knows everything there is to know about brain processes and the truth of functional descriptions of the states of organisms. But almost everyone agrees that she remains ignorant of what it is like to experience the world in color. Until she is finally cured of her extreme color-blindness, she doesn't know what it is like for something to look red. While some valiantly try to deny that Mary acquires relevantly new *propositional* knowledge<sup>11</sup> (aside from the trivial new knowledge that she herself finally has color experience), it seems almost obvious that when she acquires color vision, she comes to know for the first time that certain properties are exemplified. And with that knowledge, she is able to think *directly* (for the first time) of such properties as looking red.

Long before Jackson raised the objection, Smart considered and rejected it on the grounds that one can't disprove a physicalist account of what there is by recognizing that some *beliefs* about what there is seem distinct from paradigmatic

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<sup>9</sup> Not everyone will agree. See Brian Loar, "Phenomenal States (Revised)," in *There is Something About Mary*, 219-239.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Jackson, "What Mary Didn't Know," *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 291-295.

<sup>11</sup> There are those like David Lewis and Laurence Nemirow who claim that the new knowledge is best construed as an ability. Others, like Daniel Dennett, seem to deny that there is new knowledge at all. And still others, like Earl Conee, who claim that it is old knowledge with a new source. See David Lewis, "What Experience Teaches," *Proceedings of the Russellian Society* 13 (1988): 29-57, Laurence Nemirow, "Physicalism and the Cognitive Role of Acquaintance," in *Mind and Cognition: An Anthology*, ed. William G. Lycan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Daniel Dennett, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," in his *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little Brown, 1991), 398-406, and Earl Conee, "Phenomenal Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1994): 136-50.

beliefs about physical phenomena. Smart conceded that beliefs about sensation should not be identified with beliefs about brain states (or functional states, or dispositions to behave). He conceded that *propositions* about sensations are not identical with propositions describing brain states. But he argued that distinct beliefs and propositions can be made true by precisely the same reality. Put another way, distinct propositions can be reports of precisely the same reality<sup>12</sup>. While Smart's response may not have had all the bells and whistles that accompany current physicalist responses to the knowledge argument, it still seems that the general idea is the best hope for physicalists. One acknowledges that when Mary gains color vision she gains new representations in the form of new beliefs and knowledge, but these new representations are representations of the same physical reality that she knew in her color-deprived state.

So far, so good, for the physicalist. But if one accepts the idea introduced above that informative identity rests on the distinction between direct and indirect thought, one faces a now well-known objection to the identity theory. As Kripke argued<sup>13</sup>, we don't think of a state like pain (or like looking red) indirectly. We don't pick out such properties by thinking indirectly of whatever it is that exemplifies certain *other* properties. In the case of informative reductions, the item we are reducing is typically thought of indirectly. We think of (objective) heat as the cause of a certain sensation. We think of water (perhaps) as the stuff with a microstructure causally responsible for certain appearances. We simply don't think of pain or red appearances in terms of causal or functional roles.

But even if one accepts the above distinction between direct and indirect thought, and the diagnosis of informative identity that relies on that distinction, one has a potential response to the property dualist. It may be that our thought of paradigmatically mental properties is direct. But we haven't yet discussed the question of whether our thought of the paradigmatically *physical* properties with which the physicalist wants to identify mental properties is also direct. There is a considerable irony in the fact that the kind of radical empiricism favored by many property dualists is also the very view that leads naturally to the conclusion that we have only indirect thought of the intrinsic properties that characterize not only brain states, but physical objects in general.

The possibility we are now exploring is anathema to most self-proclaimed physicalists. More often than not, physicalists embrace their reductions because they are deeply suspicious of the properties introduced by the property dualist.

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<sup>12</sup> See J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959): 141-156.

<sup>13</sup> In Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Reductionists in general are moved to reduce in the *direction* of what they take to be epistemically and metaphysically unproblematic. So, for example, phenomenologists were confident that they understood and had unproblematic knowledge of the phenomenal and found highly problematic the suggestion that there is a material world radically different from the world of appearance with which they found themselves directly acquainted. By contrast, behaviorists thought they had a relatively unproblematic understanding and knowledge of the physical world, and found philosophically suspicious the 'hidden' world of mental phenomena that would make so problematic knowledge of other minds. So in the history of philosophy we find both phenomenologists who were bound and determined to reduce the physical to the mental, and also behaviorists who were bound and determined to reduce the mental to the physical.

When we try to understand how there can be informative identities between the mental and the physical by introducing the idea that we have only indirect thought of the physical, we have, in effect, conceded that it is the physical that is more problematic than the mental when it comes to our understanding of its intrinsic nature. And, as I suggested, this will be anathema to physicalists bound and determined to explain the world in terms of the presumed unproblematic category of the physical. The radical empiricist is convinced that the physicalist has things completely backward when it comes to both our understanding of and our knowledge of the physical. That understanding and knowledge, according to the classic empiricist, is parasitic upon our understanding and knowledge of subjective appearance. And if we are to find a defensible form of physicalism, we must do so from within the confines of a view that respects the phenomenological priority of the subjective.

### **3. Indirect Understanding of the Physical:**

Still, the very view that insists that our understanding and knowledge of the mental is more fundamental than our understanding and knowledge of the physical also seems to open the door to a physicalist world view that might find room for the mental. The crude idea is simple. The extreme empiricist should first insist that all thought of the physical is parasitic upon thought of the mental. To explain this view further it might be useful to remind ourselves of those properties of physical objects that were once widely viewed as secondary properties. Think of the sourness of a lemon. Now ask yourself whether that thought involves a thought of the familiar gustatory sensation we call tasting sour. It seemed to many utterly obvious that when we think of a lemon's being sour we are thinking about a certain sour taste sensation. But we also know that we can't identify a lemon's

being sour with its *actually* tasting a certain way to some subject. For one thing we can obviously make sense of a lemon's being sour even if no-one actually bites into the fruit and is caused to have the relevant sensation. Moreover, we all realize that something can be sour even if it doesn't affect us with the relevant sour taste sensation when we do bite into it. We understand that there are conditions that can interfere with the normal causal chain that leads from biting into the lemon to the sour taste sensation. If you have a bad enough cold, for example, and bite into a lemon you won't taste much of anything. So the classic secondary quality theorist turns to counterfactual conditionals to explain what it is for a lemon to be sour. A lemon is sour just insofar as it *would* produce in a normal person under normal conditions the sour taste sensation were the person to bite into the lemon. A great deal would need to be said before we had an analysis that could meet all potential objections, but the basic idea is both clear and plausible.

Again, these days, many philosophers are more likely to argue that the reference of 'sourness' is fixed by a definite description that denotes the properties of the lemon causally responsible for the sour taste sensation. The sourness of the lemon then gets identified with the microstructure playing a critical role in causing the sensation. The view is analogous to that held by functionalists who want to combine their functionalism with the view that the mental state functionally analyzed is identical with the realizer of the functional state. It seems to me, however, that the consistent functionalist shouldn't identify the mental state that receives the functional analysis with its realizer. The functionalist should want the property of being in pain to be the same property even as that which plays the functional role changes. Now I don't think that functionalist accounts of mental states have the slightest plausibility, but the secondary quality theorist can learn from the conceptual points made above. Different kinds of things can all be sour, and they can all be sour even if the underlying structure that causally grounds the disposition to taste a certain way under certain conditions is quite different in different sour things. If our goal is to find what is common to all those things in virtue of which they are sour, we shouldn't look to the ground of the disposition. It is the disposition to taste a certain way that constitutes the sourness. And even if I am mistaken about all this, I have also tried to convince you that the 'reference fixers' should allow that at the level of *thought* the critical thought of sourness is precisely that thought expressed by the subjunctive conditional.

So the basic idea, again, is that our thought of a thing's being sour just is the thought of the thing's having the power to produce a certain taste sensation under certain conditions. Most people understand perfectly what it is for something to



be sour even though they haven't got the slightest clue as to what properties of the thing (and us) play the relevant causal role in producing the familiar sour taste sensation. If one becomes convinced that the sourness of the lemon is only 'in' the lemon as the power to produce a sour taste sensation, it isn't hard to adopt the same analysis of other properties we attribute to objects. So the redness of the apple was thought by the radical empiricist to be nothing but the power the apple has to affect conscious beings with that familiar visual experience (the one color-deprived Mary never had). And Berkeley (through his spokesman Philonous) dragged poor Hylas from one property to another, getting Hylas to concede that his thought about sensible qualities always turned out to be a thought that critically involved a characteristic sensation that the object had the power to produce. The extreme view is that *all* properties of physical objects revealed to us through the senses are thought of by us as nothing but powers to produce sensations.

The view might be called the causal theory of objects.<sup>14</sup> It bears a close resemblance to the even more radical phenomenalism that sought to reduce all talk of physical objects to talk about the sensations a subject would have were the subject to have others. But it is critically different. The causal theory of objects doesn't deny that when we think about physical objects we are thinking (albeit indirectly) about mind-independent objects and their properties. But the view is that our understanding of objects and their mind-independent properties is thoroughly parasitic upon our understanding of phenomenal qualities. When we think and talk about physical objects and their properties we are always thinking about those objects and their properties in terms of the causal roles they can play in affecting our conscious life. The view has surfaced occasionally in the history of philosophy. It was Hylas's last ditch attempt to save materialism from Philonous's

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<sup>14</sup> It is critical that we distinguish the causal theory of objects from the causal theory of perception. The causal theorist of perception offers a highly plausible account of what it is for someone S to perceive a physical object O. The crude idea is that S perceives O when S has an experience that is caused in the right way by O. As always the problem of deviant causal chains presents no end of headaches for the causal theorist trying to revise the view so as to avoid counterexamples. But whatever form the analysis eventually takes, it is important to note that one can adopt a causal theory of perception while one leaves completely open the correct analysis of physical objects and their properties. The causal theory of objects is an analysis of what it is for a physical object with certain properties to exist.

relentless onslaught of objections. In the second of Berkeley's Three Dialogues, Hylas<sup>15</sup> finally suggests that we have only an indirect idea of matter:

I find myself affected with various ideas, whereof I know I am not the cause, neither are they the cause of themselves or of one another, or capable of subsisting by themselves, as being altogether inactive, fleeting, dependent beings. They have therefore some existence distinct from me and them: of which I pretend to know no more than that it is the cause of my ideas. And this thing, whatever it be, I call matter.

Although in the end, Hume is probably best thought of as a radical skeptic who despaired of not only knowing, but making intelligible, claims about a perceiver-independent physical world, he, like Hylas, toyed with the idea of allowing a *relative* idea of the external world. He says in Book I, Part II, Sec. VI of the *Treatise*<sup>16</sup>

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects.

In our terminology, Hume appears to be suggesting that we can form an indirect, but not a direct thought of physical objects and their properties. Again, in the *Enquiry*,<sup>17</sup> Hume alludes to a view like the one put forth by Hylas:

Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only an unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect that no skeptic will think it worth to contend against it.

The last sentence in the above quote strongly suggests that Hume didn't really think the suggestion under discussion could be employed in an effective defense of commonsense, but it is interesting that there is no real *argument* advanced by Hume to that effect.

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<sup>15</sup> George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), in George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works: Including the Works on Vision*, ed. M. R. Ayers (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 202.

<sup>16</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 68.

<sup>17</sup> David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (1777), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 155.

I'm not about to convince you here that the causal theory of objects is true. (I have tried to argue for such a view in "Old Analyses of The External World and New Philosophies of Language,"<sup>18</sup> in *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception*,<sup>19</sup> and in *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*<sup>20</sup>). To take the view seriously you would almost certainly need to feel the pressure of the skeptic's arguments. And to feel that pressure you would probably need to accept a very traditional form of foundationalism grounding foundational justification in direct awareness of facts. Here, I merely want to point out that the causal theory of objects is completely agnostic with respect to the intrinsic (nonrelational) properties of physical objects. Given that our only access in knowledge and thought to physical objects and their properties is through our thought about that which plays causal roles in producing phenomenal experience, we should be genuine skeptic's about the *intrinsic* character of the objects (if any) to which we succeed in referring.

That skepticism, of course, does not automatically translate into a skepticism concerning the external world. The view we are discussing leaves open the possibility that our beliefs about the external world are perfectly justified. When we believe that a given physical object exists, the content of our belief is exhausted by the postulation of an entity with properties that have the potential to play a causal role in our phenomenal life. Again, an analogy might be helpful. I have very little idea what is going on in my computer as it spell checks a document. I realize that that there are incredibly many changes taking place at an amazing speed, but I really don't know how the thing works in any sort of detail. But that doesn't stop me from believing, perhaps justifiably, that my computer is in the process of spellchecking a document. The content of my thought might make *indirect* reference to the inner workings of the computer but the descriptive content of the thought makes reference only to the input/output mechanism (whatever it is) that results in highlighted misspelled words. So also, on the extreme empiricism we have put forth above, we don't know anything about the intrinsic character of physical objects. Nor do we have any occasion to *think* about such things (outside of a philosophical context). The thought with which we are comfortable is thought that might best be characterized in the words of John

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Fumerton, "Old Analyses of The External World and New Philosophies of Language," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* VIII (1983): 507-523.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Fumerton, *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

Stuart Mill:<sup>21</sup> it is thought of a permanent possibility of sensation.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, the ordinary person would be taken aback at the suggestion that we neither think about directly, nor have any knowledge of, the intrinsic character of physical objects, but then the ordinary person wouldn't understand what we are taking about when use intrinsic character in this philosophically loaded sense.

Daniel Stoljar<sup>23</sup> makes what I think is essentially the same point when we characterizes two conceptions of the physical. Stoljar argues that we can think of the t-physical properties of an object, which he contrasts with the o-physical properties of the object. The o-properties are what I have been calling the intrinsic properties of the object. The t-properties of an object include its dispositional properties—its causal properties. When we conceptualize an object through its t-properties we are thinking of the object through our thought of its causal role in affecting the world in various ways. The radical empiricism described above essentially conceptualizes *all* of the physical properties discovered through the five senses as what Stoljar calls t-properties.

#### **4. An Ontologically Liberating Skepticism:**

This much is certain. We are directly and immediately aware of paradigmatically mental properties such as visual appearance and pain. Through that awareness we gain noninferential knowledge that such properties are exemplified. This knowledge is the best sort of knowledge imaginable. There is no surer place to start one's ontological commitments. The awareness that allows foundational knowledge of the existence of these properties also allows one to think directly about those properties. When one thinks of searing pain, one is not thinking of the property indirectly through some property it has. When one thinks of searing pain one is (typically) not thinking of it as that state, whatever it is, that results from damage to tissue and produces pain-healing behavior. One is not thinking about it as whatever it is that causes people to grimace. One is not (merely) thinking about the property that typically results from laying one's hand on a red

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<sup>21</sup> John Stuart Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889)

<sup>22</sup> Though Mill makes clear that his permanent possibilities of sensation are to be understood as the phenomenalist understands them. The permanent possibilities to which we refer here are the external objects thought about through their causal role.

<sup>23</sup> In Stoljar, "Two Conceptions of the Physical," first appeared in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, 2 (2001):253-8.

hot burner. Rather, one is thinking of the searing pain as the property it is (not through some property it has).

It is the physical world that is epistemologically and conceptually more problematic. We know the world of mind-independent, enduring objects only through the world of subjective and fleeting experience. Our thought isn't quite limited to such experience, but it is limited to thought that we have *through* thought of such experience. We can, as Berkeley, suggested imagine that we are thinking of a tree unperceived, but when we frame such a thought we are inevitably thinking of the way a tree looks.<sup>24</sup> That is not to say that the thought of the tree is nothing more than the thought of an appearance. It is rather to say that the thought of a tree is nothing more than the thought of that which has the capacity to produce various experiences (under a variety of conditions). Hume was *almost* right when he said:

Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive of any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor we have an idea but what is there produc'd.<sup>25</sup>

If Hume restricted his comment to what we can imagine *directly* he would have been correct (at least with respect to the idea of those things that exist contingently). But as we saw earlier, even Hume allowed for the possibility of a *relative* idea—an idea of something thought of only as that which stands in a relation to something else. And one of the most familiar sort of relative ideas is built on the relation of causation. We can think of something merely as the cause of something else. Again, we can't think of *everything* this way or we would never be able to give thought a beginning. But we can think of most things this way, and if a Humean position were correct, we would think of everything physical that way.

So how can any of this be of help to the physicalist? Well, we reached the point at which we were going to rest our property dualism on the critical

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<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Berkeley seemed to infer its mind-dependence from the fact that it was thought of. I have always wondered whether he wanted instead to remind us that in thinking of the tree unperceived we are still thinking of perceptions (ideas). Try Berkeley's thought experiment. Think of the Eiffel Tower, but don't think of how it would look, or feel, from some perspective. What are you doing?

<sup>25</sup> Hume, *A Treatise*, bk. 1, pt. 2, sec. 6, para. 8.

observation that our thought of paradigmatic occurrent mental states is direct. As a result, we were tempted to conclude that we could give neither a Russellian nor a Kripkean account of the informative nature of the claim that the mental states were identical with some physical states. But it is obvious that our radical empiricism opens the door again to informative identity claims because the thought of the *physical* is radically indirect. Why can't the mental property whose existence we are sure of and whose nature we understand completely be an intrinsic property exemplified by some part of the brain or by some process occurring in the brain?

There was an old objection to the mind-brain identity theory that went something like this. Take something paradigmatically mental—a yellow after image in the visual field say. Now look for it in the brain. Let's imagine that as Jones has his yellow after image we lop the top of his head off and start peering around at his brain. We use all of the instruments currently available and we let our imagination roam concerning a utopian scientific future in which we have still other instruments of detection yet to be designed. Does anyone in his right mind think that in this way we will come across the yellow after image? Does anyone in his right mind expect to discover something round and yellow in the brain of the person who has such an experience. Does anyone in his right mind think that one could figure out what experience the person was having *solely* through intensive examination of changes occurring in the brain? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding 'No.' That is precisely what Jackson and his many predecessors were trying to stress in expressing their misgivings about physicalism.

But if the radical empiricist is right, one shouldn't reach any dramatic conclusions about the intrinsic nature of brain states from any sort of *perceptual* observations we make of what's happening in a brain. After all, through sense experience, the empiricist argues, we are never directly aware of the intrinsic nature of *anything* physical, and that includes, of course, the brain and the physical changes occurring in that brain. When studied scientifically, the brain (like tables, trees, rocks, and everything else physical) is known to us through the experiential effects it has on us. And the brain (like tables, trees, rocks, and everything else physical) is *thought* of by us through our thought of those effects. Perceptual knowledge leaves open the intrinsic nature of brain states ---the nonrelational properties exemplification of which is involved in the occurrence of brain states. Again, we must be careful not to misunderstand the point. I am not here suggesting any sort of interesting skepticism concerning justified belief about

the occurrence of brain states.<sup>26</sup> In judging that the brain is in a certain state, I am judging that the brain is that state whatever it is that plays a causal role in affecting sentient beings in various ways. In judging that the brain is a certain state, I take no position on the intrinsic nature of that which plays the causal role.

But introspection is not perception. There is nothing to stop me from wondering whether the brain states I'm thinking about contain as constituents the very property exemplifications of which I am directly aware in introspection. To be sure the thought is initially a bit strange. But it might only seem strange because we tend to lapse into a crude epistemological direct realism when we think about perceptual knowledge. We think that if there is a yellowish expanse in the brain, we ought to become aware of it when we empirically investigate the brain. But if the radical empiricist is correct, we never become *directly* aware of *any* external things or intrinsic properties of those things *through perception*. In perceiving the external world we become directly aware of our own phenomenal properties—properties we take to have an external cause. So it is at least intelligible to suppose that we perceive someone's brain, we become directly aware of phenomenal properties that our own brain exemplifies.

To make the point vivid, we can imagine empirically investigating our own brain intent on discovering what is happening in our brains as we experience intense pain, or as we have a yellowish visual experience. Consider the latter. We introspect the phenomenal quality as we visually examine our brain (with or without the aid of instruments—it doesn't matter). Through perception we don't detect anything that looks yellow. What we are directly aware of are various shapes and colors—phenomenal properties. We take these to be indicators that various brain states are occurring. On the proposal we are considering, we are introspectively aware of yellowness while we are also introspectively aware of all sorts of other colors and shapes (the experiences produced as we visually perceive the brain). All of these phenomenal properties, we are supposing, are properties of brain states. We have postulated processes occurring in the brain that are causally responsible for the phenomenal states associated with visually perceiving the brain. Our judgment that those processes are occurring is agnostic with respect to the intrinsic character of the cause. But we are now speculating that the cause might include as a constituent something that exemplifies that very yellowness we are also introspectively aware of. The story seems to be perfectly intelligible.

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<sup>26</sup> I'm also not arguing that one won't encounter interesting skepticism down the road. Like most other philosophers who take skepticism seriously, I am here 'bracketing' the very real skeptical challenges that philosophers must meet in turning back external world skepticism.

But what precisely is supposed to be exemplifying all of these phenomenal properties? We can only guess. In order to answer this question we would need to reach some heavy-duty ontological conclusions about what sorts of things exemplify properties. If there are such things as substances or 'bare' particulars, then there is no reason why some particular or substance that is a constituent of the larger substance that is the brain might not exemplify a phenomenal property such as phenomenal yellowness. But substances aren't the only kinds of things that can exemplify properties. Both properties and states of affairs can exemplify properties. Perhaps then phenomenal yellow is a property of a property exemplified in the brain. Or, perhaps it is a property of the occurrence of some *state of affairs* that involves the exemplification of nonphenomenal properties. If one were going to be an agnostic in general about the nonrelational properties of physical objects and processes, one would be a fool to be all that confident about even the category of thing that might exemplify phenomenal properties.

### 5. Is This a Version of Physicalism?

I've described the above view as though it might be a view friendly to physicalism. But there is also a sense in which it is still a paradigmatic version of property dualism. One way to define property dualism is in terms of its rejection of various paradigmatic physicalist reductions of the mental to the physical. On the view outlined above, there is a sense in which properties like being appeared to in a certain way, or feeling pain do *not* get reduced to paradigmatic physical properties. The property of being in pain, for example, is not the having of a disposition to behave in a certain way. The property of being in pain is not the second order property of having a property that plays a causal role. The property of being in pain is not the property of one's brain being in a certain state. This last claim, however, requires a very subtle treatment.

On the extreme empiricism outlined above, the characteristics we attribute to brain states are *causally defined* characteristics. To describe the brain as being in a certain state is to describe the brain as having that property whatever it is that plays the critical causal role affecting perceivers. To be clear *it is not the causal role it plays in the conscious life of the person whose brain state it is*. It is the causal role that state plays in affecting the way in which normal people are appeared to perceptually as they observe the brain. Now attribution of a brain state to a person will involve a kind of indirect reference to whatever plays the causal role, but the characterization of the brain state is silent on what that property is. Put linguistically, when one ascribes to the brain a certain property, one will employ variables leaving open the question of what takes the value of the



variable. The view sketched above allows for the possibility that what takes the value of the variable either is a phenomenal property, contains a phenomenal property as a constituent, or exemplifies a phenomenal property. But we do not ascribe the phenomenal property to the brain when we characterize it as being in a certain state.

It might be useful to compare the view of physical object descriptions sketched above, with the (I believe mistaken) functionalist account of mental states. The functionalist *should* say that when we ascribe a mental state to a person we are asserting that the person is in that state whatever it is that plays a causal role. To say of a person that he is in pain, on this view, is to say something like that the person is in that state whatever it is that results from damage to the body and that in turn causes behavior conducive to the healing of that damage. The functionalist introduces the technical concept of a realizer of the functional state. The realizer of the functional state is that which plays the causal role. It can be different in different creatures. But if we want to allow that the property of being in pain will be the same property even if it is realized by different states of the organism, we should not identify being in pain with its realizer.

The philosopher who treats all ascriptions of properties to physical objects as secondary properties, as powers to affect sentient beings in certain ways, has a view about the ascription of properties to physical objects that is just like the view that the functionalist brings to ascription of mental properties. In describing that lemon as sour we are saying of the lemon that it has that property that has the capacity to play a critical causal role in producing that sour taste sensation. If we want to allow, as we should, that the physical realizer of the causal role in sour objects can change dramatically from sour object to sour object, then again, we don't want to identify the property of being sour with any of its realizers. In an ascription of properties to the brain we will again be able to distinguish the property of being in a certain brain state, from whatever property it is that plays the role of realizer. The characteristic of the brain state will be the causally defined property. It will not be the realizer of the causally defined property.

An even simpler analogy might be helpful. Let's consider different ways in which we might describe an object's color. In addition to saying of an object that it is blue, red, yellow, and so on, I can say of the object that it has my aunt's favorite color. In describing the object as having my aunt's favorite color, I am clearly not saying of the object that it is red, blue, yellow or any other specific color. All I assert is that it has whatever color it is that my aunt likes more than any other color. If my aunt's favorite color is blue, then I am still not saying of the object that it is blue when I say that it has my aunt's favorite color. Or at the very

least, we should view that as a highly misleading way of characterizing the content of my claim. The property of being my aunt's favorite color is a property that can't be exemplified in a world in which my aunt doesn't exist. The property of being blue can be exemplified in a world in which my aunt doesn't exist. Isn't there any sense in which if the definite description picks out blue, I am ascribing blueness to the object? Probably there is. We can certainly explain the sense in which blue 'realizes' the property of being my aunt's favorite color, and we can certainly say that when one ascribes a second-order property to an object one also ascribes the first order property that exemplifies the second-order property—this is a matter of terminological decision.

One might also suppose that the above discussion simply makes obvious that there is a scope ambiguity in the ascription of my aunt's favorite color to an object. The statement "The shirt has my aunt's favorite color" can be read in one of two ways: 1) There is a color property that my aunt likes more than any other color and the shirt has it; 2) The shirt has that property whatever it is that my aunt likes more than any other color. But I'm not sure that in the final analysis 1) can be read differently from 2). If you could use definite descriptions to secure reference, discard the reference-securing definite description after it does its work, and then do things with the referent (like predicate it of things), there would be the relevant ambiguity. But the anaphoric reference of 'it' in 1) seems to me to refer right back to the definite description. What makes 1) true is still the existential fact that my shirt has a color that my aunt likes more than any other color.

If the realizer of the physical property we ascribe to the brain is, includes, or exemplifies a phenomenal property, shall we say of that property that it is physical? It doesn't matter at this point. We have said what it is, and we have said what it is not. If phenomenal properties get picked out *indirectly* in the way we have described and you want to call them physical properties, go ahead. What is critical is that they be included in one's ontological inventory, and that we reject the *direction* of the physicalist's reductions. The existence of the phenomenal properties is known better and understood better than any of the scientifically understood physical properties on which the physicalist wants to model our knowledge and understanding of the phenomenal.