

In this paper I will discuss grounding physicalism, a newly popularized theory that contends the mental is metaphysically dependent on the physical as a solution to the mind-body problem.

My primary argument is that grounding physicalism is certainly not an absolute solution to the mind-body problem and does little to push physicalism forward. Using Alyssa Ney's modern theory of grounding physicalism, I will first explain what grounding relationships are, why they are relevant for the mind-body problem, and how they differ from other physicalist theories. Finally, I will argue that grounding physicalism does not address the most pressing questions regarding the mind-body problem and does not definitively disprove dualism.

Grounding Physicalism Explained

According to Ney, grounding is an irreflexive dependence relationship between entities, properties, or facts. That is, if Y is grounded in X, then Y is ontologically dependent on X and therefore cannot exist without X existing; grounding theorists often use clarifying language such as "Y exists in virtue of X existing" to make this relationship more explicit.

Ney applies grounding concepts to the mind-body problem by contending that mental states are grounded in physical ones. This is not to say that the physical is all there is (eliminativism) or that mental states can be reduced to physical states (reductive materialism), but that the mental is ontologically dependent on the physical. In effect, Ney suggests that metaphysical distinctness does not imply metaphysical independence. This dependence relationship is stronger than the dependence outlined in a similar physicalist theory, supervenience: the notion that "Y supervenes on X iff there can be no change in Y without a change in X." Grounding relations prove stronger in the sense that grounding entails supervenience, but not vice versa. For example, while physical laws supervene on everything, they are certainly not grounded in everything.

Against Grounding Physicalism

Though grounding physicalism adds new concepts to the mind-body discussion, it does not establish a particularly satisfactory solution. Even if grounding physicalism is true, it fails to provide insight into the explanatory gap. That is, even if consciousness is grounded, why and how does it arise in the first place? Why do I have the conscious experience of hearing jazz music to coincide with my biological auditory functions? Furthermore, grounding physicalism appears to shy away from questions regarding the nature of consciousness. If the mental is metaphysically distinct from the physical, then what distinct properties do mental phenomena have? These are integral questions; elucidation of the explanatory gap and nature of consciousness can provide the needed justification for a particular stance on the mind-body problem. Put differently, it is premature to conjecture this metaphysical relationship without a stance on what the mind is and an incomplete understanding of how the relationship arises.

In response to these glaring shortcomings, Ney acknowledges that grounding physicalism “leaves some open questions,” essentially arguing that grounding serves as a skeletal framework that can be built upon to get closer to an all-encompassing solution. If grounding theorists acknowledge that grounding physicalism does not adequately explain all of the questions regarding consciousness, then what exactly does it solve? According to Ney it may demonstrate the validity of physicalism. If the physical is necessary for the mental to exist, then certainly the mental is not independent. However, this argument is rather circular. Simply postulating that the physical grounds the mental to arrive at the conclusion that dualism is false does not move the needle; in fact, it appears to take a step back. Physicalist theories like materialism at least attempt to show, albeit unsuccessfully thus far, why the physical should be more fundamental while grounding appears to simply postulate it.

So what makes grounding theorists convinced that the physical grounds the mental? Perhaps intuition.¹ In her writing, Ney quotes Kit Fine’s justification for grounding: “What is required is that we somehow ground all of the facts which appear to presuppose the mental in terms of facts which do not presuppose their reality.” Given that everything we perceive to have consciousness “appears” to obtain it in virtue of complex neurological structures, it is not ludicrous to assume the validity of grounding physicalism. However, this intuition is far from definitive. Just as easily as a grounding theorist can posit grounding relationships, a panpsychist can posit that all physical things have mental qualia, thus negating the irreflexivity of grounding physicalism; panpsychism is the notion that mental phenomena are a fundamental feature of reality that is experienced by everything. Furthermore, these grounding intuitions are heavily influenced by our perception of the world (a posteriori). As Descartes has shown in his meditations, an a priori argument for dualism may be stronger than the like for physicalism. Intuitions, whether they be a priori or posteriori, can serve as a starting ground for further investigation; they are not solutions in and of themselves.

In conclusion, grounding physicalism certainly does not provide an incontrovertible solution to the mind-body problem and does not provide an encouraging foundation for doing so. While other stronger physicalist theories, if true, have avenues that could be taken to show their validity, it is unclear how grounding physicalism is better equipped to prove its own validity and address the explanatory gap.

¹ Intuition here is taken to mean something that “seems” or “appears” right