

Note. This is derived from a longer paper, which I was trying to revise, following correspondence with Leopold Stubenberg, in order to say more about neutral monism—until I realized that Russell’s stuff about neutral monism was simply too confusing (for me at least)]

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I want to talk about Russell, ‘the chameleon-like realist Bertrand Russell’, in the words of Mary Calkins, writing in 1925 ... that’s ‘Bertrand Russell (i.e., one of the Bertrand Russells)’ in the words of James Pratt in 1939.

I want to consider his solution to the so-called mind–body problem, in addition to making a few proposals of my own. I think it’s as much of a solution as we’ll ever have, and that it is indeed a solution. [Schlick came up with essentially the same solution.]

In his last philosophical book, Russell says ‘I have found ... that by analysing physics and perception the problem of the relation of mind and matter can be completely solved. It is true that nobody has accepted what seems to me the solution, but I believe and hope that this is only because my theory has not been understood’ ... ‘almost universally misunderstood’

He’s right about this, and it’s partly his fault. The main problem is a blur in his use of the word ‘physical’. A lot of what I’m going to say today is about use of words, and since we are as always in Otto Neurath’s ship, when doing philosophy, i.e. trying to rebuild the ship when we’re already sailing in it, I’m going to take it that I can use some of these words, relying on what I believe to be the common understanding of them, before I try to say in more detail what I mean by some of them.

The core of Russell’s view is already in place in his book *The Analysis of Mind*, published in 1921:

‘it is a wrong philosophy of matter which has caused many of the difficulties in the philosophy of mind—difficulties which a right philosophy of matter would cause to disappear’ (1921: 307).

The ‘main purpose’ of his theory of the external world (including his theory of perception and his theory of physics) is, he says a year later, ‘to fit our perceptions into a physical context, ... to show how they might ... become part of physics’ (1922: 478 [replying to C. A. Strong in *Mind*]).

I’m going to argue in the light of this that Russell is a materialist or physicalist, by which I mean a *serious* or *realistic* physicalist or materialist, by which I mean a physicalist or materialist who’s a full-on realist about *consciousness* or *experience*. I’ll repeat this: he’s a physicalist or materialist and an outright realist about ‘experiential what-it’s-likeness’, about what we call ‘qualia’.

I hope you don’t think that materialism or physicalism rules out realism about consciousness. The key thing about materialism in philosophy, historically speaking, has always been its claim that consciousness, full on consciousness, qualiality, if you like, is wholly material. That has always been the whole thrilling — or for some scary — point of it: *precisely the opposite of what some today think materialism is*. The word ‘materialism’ only started to be used in the consciousness doubting or denying

way in the second half of the nineteenth century. [not sure about dating]

Since then it has been used in two completely different ways. Classic terminological mess. [I should think many of you have been brought up using it in the doubt-or-denying way]

That's one point; here's another. The people who actually coined the term 'physicalism', i.e. members of the Vienna Circle, were all outright realists about consciousness or qualia. So it's unfortunate that the word 'physicalism' is now thought to name a position that involves doubt about or denial of the existence of real consciousness. [this story of how this happened is pretty hair-raising]

It's only terminology, you may say. The trouble is that terminology befuddles us all the time.

I think that the idea that being a physicalist or materialist is somehow associated with doubt or denial of consciousness is the great catastrophe of analytic philosophy in the last sixty years. One of the many ironies is that U. T. Place, who can be said to have started it all off, was an all-out realist about consciousness. He was, if you like, a 'qualia-freak', i.e. a sensible person. He was, as I like to say, a real identity theorist, not a fake identity theorist, like most of those who subsequently called themselves identity theorists. He was someone who thought that qualia, real qualia, were brain states, not someone who thought, to put it really very roughly, that qualia didn't really exist because they were — just — brain states.

*Oy weh.* But back to Russell and an objection. 'Russell can't be a physicalist so long as he remains a neutral monist; and he still considers himself a neutral monist at the end of his career. In his 1964 interview with Elizabeth Eames he says 'I am not conscious of any serious change in my philosophy since I adopted neutral monism' (Eames 1967: 510)

Reply. There's recently been a good debate about this, and I'm not the first to argue that Russell's claim to be a neutral monist is compatible with his being a physicalist. In fact, in that same interview, he tells Eames that 'he would describe himself as a materialist, if it were not for the fact that, since the concept of solid matter had disappeared from physics, the label 'materialist' had become ambiguous (1964: 510).

So: I'm going to claim that Russell's physicalism and neutral monism are compatible not only when physicalism is understood in a straight-up metaphysical way as the view that

[P1] everything that concretely exists is physical

but also when it is understood in its original and now forgotten Vienna-Circle sense—as the wholly non-metaphysical thesis which, to quote Russell, 'Carnap calls "physicalism", which maintains that

[P2] all science can be expressed in the language of physics' (1940: 93)

seem, in some combination, to be what Russell has principally in mind in 1944/5 or in 1964, when, while still claiming to be a neutral monist, he says that he could be called a materialist, or, 'better', in his own word, a 'physicalist'.

In 1944, for example, he writes that

[1] ‘I find myself in ontology increasingly materialistic’ (1944: 700).

A year later he remarks that

[2] ‘it would be better to substitute the word “physicalism” for the word “materialism”’,

and adds, with a turn of phrase that seems to fall somewhere between [P1] and [P2], that

[3] ‘I should define “physicalism” as the doctrine that [all] events are governed by the laws of physics’ (1945: 247):

[P3] [all] events are governed by the laws of physics.

He’s also unwavering in his view that

‘the knowledge conferred by physics is abstract and mathematical; it does not tell us anything about the intrinsic character of physical events. Physics does not entitle us to say that physical events differ from thoughts and feelings, nor yet that they do not differ’ (1945: 255)

So a genuine physicalist must be open to panpsychism—a point that David Lewis has also made: “a thesis that says [that] panpsychistic materialism ... is impossible ... is more than just materialism”.

Can one really be a panpsychist and materialist? Of course. Panpsychism is traditionally classified as a specifically materialist view. [check out the *OED*] This is another reason why it’s unfortunate that some still take the word ‘materialism’ to denote a view that doubts or denies the existence of real consciousness.

I’ll come back to this. I need first to note another use of the term ‘physicalism’—a strange and monstrous use which arises when two essentially divergent senses of the adjective ‘physical’ get blurred—smudged—together.

And before that, a declaration: I’d like to be able to say everything I have to say without talking at all about Russell’s ‘neutral monism’ and the two theoretical tropes with which it is most closely bound up—the idea that both ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ are (‘just’) ‘logical constructions or symbolic fictions’ (1915: 402), and the closely connected idea (found in James and others [e.g. [Heymans 1905](#)]) that mental events and physical events do not differ in being made of different stuff but only insofar as they can be brought under different kinds of laws, the laws of physics and the laws of psychology.

The scheme is more or less workable as he intends it, but attention to its details makes it hard to lay out his final position clearly. Or so I find [[in correspondence with Wishon and Stubenberg](#)]. I’ve found it better to talk simply in terms of different descriptions. And there is one particular problem with the scheme. Russell is a full-on outright realist about consciousness in the wide present-day sense of the term, and

holds that we know something fundamental and indubitable about the ultimate intrinsic nature of reality simply in having experiences. In this sense ‘mental events’ can’t be just symbolic fictions.

OK, so back to the word ‘physicalism’. We already have three definitions. I’m going to use the word to mean the first of them, the metaphysical view already introduced that

[P1] everything that concretely exists is physical.

That’s it. At one point Russell defines physicalism somewhat differently, and I’ll consider this later. I’ll propose that [P1] follows from his definition along with certain other things he says, so that he comes out as a physicalist on my terms as well as his own—insofar as they differ.

[P1] ought to be fairly safe as a definition of physicalism, straight-up metaphysical physicalism. So you might think. The trouble is that a considerable number of people today think that a further claim, which I call ‘physics-alism’—

[P4] the terms of physics can fully capture—express, convey, communicate, describe—the nature of everything that concretely exists

—is either the correct formulation of physicalism, or is at least an essential component of physicalism.<sup>1</sup> And although [P4] is screamingly false—I can’t think of anyone who has been more eloquent on this point than Russell—it seems to have become part of what many present-day philosophers *mean* when they speak of physicalism.<sup>2</sup>

Plainly, then, I’m not going to mean what many philosophers today seem to mean by ‘physicalism’—i.e. [P4], physics-alism.

I say it’s obviously false.<sup>3</sup> Forget Jackson’s Mary [cf. ‘The Mary-Go-Round’ GS 2019]: it’s enough to remember the passage from Russell that I just quoted, which was a commonplace a century ago:

‘the knowledge conferred by physics is abstract and mathematical; it does not tell us anything about the intrinsic [non-structural] character of physical events’.

I like to call this the silence of physics, following Russell. I’ve added ‘non-structural’ because Russell defines the word ‘intrinsic’ in such a way that structural features aren’t part of intrinsic character.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One may assume a ‘completed’ physics, where this is a theory of the same general type as we currently have.

<sup>2</sup> The story of how this came about is somewhat farcical; it has to do with a variety of misunderstandings of what the Vienna Circle and their successors understood by terms like ‘translate’, ‘meaning’, ‘equivalence of meaning’. It is perhaps the principal reason why the twentieth century is, philosophically speaking (and to date), the silliest of all the centuries. See xxx.

<sup>3</sup> According to all ordinary canons of description or communication. The qualification is prompted by awareness of the Vienna Circle’s intensely narrow understanding of communicability. See Strawson 2021: 000.

<sup>4</sup> [It’s a familiar point that you could know the whole of physics and not know anything about an indubitable real part of physical reality: what pain-experience or red-experience is like. ‘It is obvious’,

What about the much more modest claim that

[P5] everything that concretely exists has a *physics description*, a description in the terms of physics?

This may certainly be supposed to be part of physicalism, in addition to [P1]. It's a variant of [P2], and it's one good way to express the view which was originally called 'physicalism' by the Vienna Circle. Physics can plainly be supposed to be able to *refer* to everything that exists, if physicalism is true. It can also be said to *describe* everything that exists—in its own austere language (to say that there are 7 electrons in one atom, 8 in another, is already a description of how things are, true of nitrogen and oxygen).

Suppose it's true that pain is just C-fibre stimulation, and imagine the (neurological) C-fibre-stimulation description converted into the terms of physics. We can say that this is physics's description (or 'description') of pain. Does it tell us everything there is to know about pain? Obviously not. Physics is *about* qualities, but it doesn't have any terms that express their qualitative character. Schlick (1925) is very clear on this point, which is I think (I fear) likely to be misunderstood.

[?handout]

So Russell accepts [P5], as I do, and once again, it's central to what the word 'physicalism' was originally introduced to mean, around 1930, by Neurath and Carnap.

Why do I say 'a physics description', rather than saying, more conventionally, 'a physical description'? It's an attempt to keep things clear. Experience shows that the word 'physical' can't be freely used in this way in philosophy—it can't be coupled with the word 'description'—without causing theoretical chaos. I'll say more soon.

I don't expect to be heard, for two main reasons. The first is that the chaos-inducing use has long dominated philosophical writing. The second and perhaps most fundamental reason is that the use that induces chaos in philosophy is entirely innocent and useful in everyday talk, and seems for that reason unimpeachable—part of basic common sense.<sup>5</sup> It's only '*from the standpoint of philosophy*', as Russell says, that 'the distinction between physical and mental is superficial and unreal' (1927a: 402, my emphasis).

The simplest way to show that [P4] is false is to point out that it entails that consciousness doesn't exist. The trouble with this entailment is that we know that consciousness exists—as Russell agrees. It is in fact the only thing we know to exist with absolute certainty—as Russell agrees.

What do I mean by 'consciousness'? I'm *not* actually using the term in Russell's preferred way. I'm using it in the standard, wide, present-day way to mean absolutely any kind of feeling or sentience, any 'experiential what-it's-likeness' or 'qualiality' or

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as Russell, says, 'that a man who can see knows things which a blind man cannot know; but a blind man can know the whole of physics' (1927a: 389). [please don't tell me about Mary; remember that red-experience is a wholly physical phenomenon if physicalism—by which I mean real consciousness-affirming physicalism—is true. All the arguments against Jackson's Mary are directly question-begging]

<sup>5</sup> On this see e.g. Strawson 1994: 1–2, 55, Strawson 1999, Stoljar 2001. [MOVE]

‘phenomenality’, however primitive. What is this ‘experiential what-it’s-likeness’? Most people will understand what I mean, and I’ve nothing to offer to those who claim not to. I’ll call it W-consciousness, ‘W’ for ‘wide’.

Russell’s use of ‘consciousness’ is narrower. In his use, which was common in his time, ‘consciousness’ essentially implies the presence of cognition, intentionality, and memory, in addition to experiential what-it’s-likeness. I’ll call this N-consciousness, ‘N’ for ‘narrow’. For the most part the distinction won’t matter, but I will need it at one point.

So here we are, Russell and I. We’re both outright realists about consciousness, and we’re both physicalists. So of course we both think that *consciousness* is physical. We’re both *real* physicalists, in my terms. He makes many remarks of the following form:

we know nothing of the intrinsic quality of *physical* phenomena *except when they happen to be sensations*,

i.e. conscious phenomena (1927b: 154, my emphasis). He could hardly be more clear:

(1) conscious phenomena are physical phenomena.

(2) we know something of the intrinsic nature of the physical in having conscious experiences.

These two points are the beginning of wisdom for any genuine aspiring physicalist, and they lead straight to another point he makes repeatedly. Given that we know nothing of the intrinsic quality of physical phenomena except when they happen to be sensations, there is, he says,

no reason to be surprised that some are sensations, or to suppose that the others are totally unlike sensations (ibid.).

His position is unchanged in 1956:

we know nothing about the intrinsic quality of *physical* events *except when these are mental events that we directly experience* (1956: 153, my emphasis),

and since this is so

we cannot say either that the physical world outside our heads is different from the mental world or that it is not. (ibid.).<sup>6</sup>

Some sort of panpsychism, again, is squarely on the table. But this is not my main present concern.

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<sup>6</sup> [Only in the case of such ‘direct experience’ are we, in the words of Russell’s contemporary R. W. Sellars, ‘on the inside of nature’. Only then do we know something of the physical world’s intrinsic nature, something of it as it is in itself. In ‘consciousness alone are we on the inside of nature ... in consciousness we are literally on the inside of being in the case of our brains’ (Sellars 1927: 225, 1929: 486).]

Now for some more terminology. The word ‘stuff’ and the word ‘physical’. I use the word ‘stuff’ as an entirely general term for concrete existence, decoupled from all traditional metaphysical categorial distinctions. Quantum fields are stuff. Events—Russell’s preferred entities when doing metaphysics—are stuff. So too processes. All intrinsic qualities of stuff are themselves stuff, for they concretely exist. Stuff is whatever it is that the equations of physics hold true of. It’s whatever it is that gives the structural-relational features of reality that physics detects their concrete realization. It’s what Russell has in mind when he talks of ‘the stuff of the world’ (1927a: 388)). Stuff is not to be thought of as substance *if* substance is thought of as something that can be contrasted with something else that is concretely real but isn’t substance.

Now for the word ‘physical’, which I’ve been using freely, including in defining ‘physicalism’. I allowed myself to do so because we’re on Neurath’s ship. But what do I mean by it? There’s a lot to say: ‘the word “physical” is very ambiguous’, as Russell observes (1926: 75).

Here I’ll just say that by ‘physical’ I mean anything that is (i) real and concrete and is (ii) the subject matter of physics.<sup>7</sup>

As a physicalist I think that everything that falls under (i) also falls under (ii). I take ‘physical’ to be the name of single kind of fundamental stuff, and I take it that everything concretely real is wholly constituted of that stuff. My physicalism is therefore a substance monism or ‘stuff monism’.<sup>8</sup>

How does Russell define ‘physical’? In 1914 he says that ‘the word “physical”, in all preliminary discussions, is to be understood as meaning “what is dealt with by physics” ... *whatever [its] nature may prove to be*’.<sup>9</sup>

The words ‘whatever its nature’ are important. For Russell, to say that something is physical is not to say anything at all about what he calls its ‘intrinsic nature’, by which he means every aspect of its basic or intrinsic stuff nature that escapes physics description. Physics description is always mathematico-structural description. It obviously cannot capture ‘the intrinsic quality of physical phenomena ... when they happen to be sensations’.<sup>10</sup>

Let me repeat this: to say that something is physical *is not to offer any descriptive characterization of its intrinsic stuff-nature*, in Russell’s sense of ‘intrinsic’. And, crucially, it’s not to say that the something in question is non-mental or nonexperiential.

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<sup>7</sup> Conscious experience is the subject matter of physics although physics has nothing to say about it considered specifically as such. Note that (i) corresponds well to the meaning of the Greek word φύσις (*phusis*): i.e. (in effect) nature. [[37Compare Grover Maxwell: *the physical* is, very roughly, the subject matter of physics. By ‘subject matter’ I mean *not* the *theories, laws, principles*, etc., of physics, but rather what the theories and laws are about (1978: 366)]]

<sup>8</sup> As before, events count as ‘stuff’ in the largest sense, simply in being concretely real phenomena. Stuff monism is opposed to ‘thing monism’ (there is only one thing). I’ve always supposed that everyone agrees that stuff monism is built into the meaning of ‘physicalism’, but Barry Dainton may be someone who disagrees (Dainton 2022). For some discussion of the difficulties with the word ‘monism’ see Strawson 2003: §15.

<sup>9</sup> 1914: 150, my emphasis; compare 1915: 415, 1918: 253, 1922: 482. See also Maxwell: ‘*the physical* is, very roughly, the subject matter of physics. By ‘subject matter’ I mean *not* the *theories, laws, principles*, etc., of physics, but rather what the theories and laws are about’ (1978: 366).

<sup>10</sup> 1927b: 154. His use of ‘intrinsic’ is potentially misleading, since a thing’s structure may be said to be part of its intrinsic nature—consider a hydrogen atom.

So Russell and I both pump all descriptive meaning out of the word ‘physical’ as used in philosophy. It had to be done! I did this before I knew anything about Russell, but it’s not that big of a deal. Plenty of people saw this in the nineteenth century.

Russell’s ‘whatever [its] nature’ drops seamlessly into my definition: ‘physical’ names anything that is (i) real and concrete, *whatever its nature*, and is (ii) the subject matter, i.e. the actual concretely existing object or topic, of physics. It’s obvious that ‘physical’, defined in this strictly non-descriptive, purely referential (proper-name-like or natural-kind-term-like) way, can’t stand opposed to ‘mental’. It’s a completely neutral term. ‘The distinction between physical and mental’ is ‘from the standpoint of philosophy ... superficial and unreal’ (1927a: 402).

Once again: to say that something is physical is not to say that it’s not mental. And to say that something is mental is not to say that it’s not physical.<sup>11</sup> [People object that this undermines the standard terms of debate, which we can’t really do without. My reply is that this is the best thing about it!—the standard terms have locked us into a stalemate. But *very* hard to break out. See e.g. remark about Prince quotation on p. 352 of ‘Blockers and laughter’ paper]

Anyone who thinks that ‘physical’ entails ‘nonexperiential’ when used in philosophy, rather than everyday life, is lost. This point was made over and over again in philosophy, before Place and Smart started the tidal wave of misunderstanding in 1956 and 1959. [certainly not Place’s fault, since he was always, as he said, a ‘qualia freak’.]

*It is for this reason less than ideal* (to put it mildly) that Russell also continues in much of his writing to use ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ in the ordinary way as contrasting (indeed essentially opposed) terms! The reason he does so is that by ‘physical event’ he often means something different from

‘event that is “dealt with by physics ... whatever [its] nature may prove to be”’, where this is taken in a purely referential way.

He means instead (this is my characterization)

event considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that we ordinarily think of as physical or call “physical”; not only those characteristics that *physics* picks up on, but also, more generally, those characteristics that we talk of in *everyday* terms relating to shape, size, position, motion, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

So too, by ‘mental event’ or ‘psychical event’ he often means

event considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that we

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Drake in 1911: ‘Brains are made up of the same matter that makes up the rest of the universe. So ... consciousness is made up of the same stuff that makes up the rest of the world. *Whether we call that stuff psychic or material is a mere matter of convenience. There is no legitimate antithesis between the two terms* (1911: 35; Drake was C. A. Strong’s pupil at Columbia).

<sup>12</sup> This rendering of what he means deliberately avoids (as in §2) the natural but chaos-inducing phrase ‘physical description’. ‘Physics description’ is fine, and one could introduce a new adjective, ‘physics\*’; a physics\* description being *either* a physics description *or* an everyday description in what we ordinarily call physical terms, shape terms, size terms, and so on.



ordinarily think of as mental.

His settled position is that any such mental event, call it  $e_1$ , is also an event that is ‘dealt with by physics’, and is therefore a physical event, although, of course, it is not when dealt with by physics considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that we ordinarily think of as mental.

This is laborious. I’m going to restate it even more laboriously, in the hope of making things clear.

We have mental event  $e_1$ . Like all events,  $e_1$  is a physical event in the straight metaphysical or ontological sense of ‘physical’. I’ll say it’s an ‘O-physical’ event, ‘O’ for ‘ontological’. It’s ‘dealt with’ by physics when physics gives its account of the world. But it’s *not* a physical event in the ‘under a certain description’ sense of ‘physical’ when it’s being considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that we ordinarily think of as mental.

We may put this by saying that  $e_1$ , so considered, is not then a ‘D-physical’ event (‘D’ being short for ‘description’). It is instead a ‘D-mental’ event. This does not of course prevent it from also being a D-physical event—a physical event in the ‘under a certain description’ sense of ‘physical’—when it’s considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that physics picks up on. Nor of course does its being a D-mental event stop it from being an O-physical event, like all events.

Russell standardly puts the point by saying that mental (D-mental) and physical (D-physical) events fall under different causal laws, physical (D-physical) events under the laws of physics, mental (D-mental) events under the laws of psychology. Here, however, I’m avoiding talk of laws, as I said I would, and sticking to talking in terms of different descriptions.<sup>13</sup>

So: Russell’s overall use of the word ‘physical’ is unsatisfactory precisely to the extent that we need to distinguish between the two uses, the D use and the O use—in order to make full sense of it. Many use ‘physical’ in the same blurred way today—with disastrous consequences. I think that this equivocation in the use of ‘physical’ has been the main engine of the mind-body debate for at least the last sixty years.<sup>14</sup>

I’ve always stuck to the O use, the straight-up ontological use, ever since my book *Mental Reality*. Chomsky drew on the book in the 1990s in a graduate class at MIT which contained Daniel Stoljar, and I like to think that it helped to motivate Stoljar’s great 2001 article ‘Two Conceptions of the Physical’. Russell’s oscillation between the two different uses is I suspect the principal reason why he has as he says been ‘almost universally misunderstood’.

One more time. There is on the one hand

(1) the straight-up ontological, purely referential way of using ‘physical’: the physical (the O-physical) is the subject matter of physics whatever its intrinsic nature, i.e.

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<sup>13</sup> Leopold Stubenberg has pointed out to me that the D/M ambiguity also affects ‘what is dealt with’, in the quotation from Russell, and that Russell usually has the D sense principally in mind (see further §00). Here I favour the M sense—the purely referential ‘whatever its nature’ sense—for purposes of exposition. It doesn’t affect the validity of the argument.

<sup>14</sup> I endorse the strictly O-physical use of ‘physical’ in Strawson 1994 (p. 1)—I didn’t then know of Russell’s work—and consider the linguistic confusion on pp. 48–55, 58–9. There’s an excellent and well known analysis of it in Stoljar 2001. Note that ‘subject matter’ is also subject to the D/O equivocation.

everything that concretely exists, including of course all conscious goings-on—even when they're considered specifically as such, i.e. as conscious.

There is on the other hand

(2) the descriptive use just characterized: the physical (the D-physical) is the subject matter of physics *as described* in the terms of physics (or using everyday terms relating to shape, size, position, motion, and so on), and so *not* including conscious goings-on considered specifically as such.

Many still take it that to say that something is physical is to say that it's not conscious, not qualial. They take 'physical' to have a certain descriptive content, and they take part of this descriptive content—admittedly a merely negative part—to be 'not conscious'. This is certainly not Russell's position. He has no doubt that consciousness—e.g. sensation or perception—is wholly physical. He reiterates the point over and over again when stressing the extent of our ignorance of the intrinsic nature of the physical, for example in the passages I quoted earlier: 'sensations [are] physical phenomena' (1927b: 154); some 'physical events ... are mental events' (1956: 153).

These claims have nothing to do with so reductive physicalism, understood as having eliminativist implications. They don't say that the mental is somehow less than we thought. They say the opposite: they say that the physical is far more than we thought. Darwin said it in 1838. John Tyndall said it in 1874: we must 'radically change our notions of Matter' (1874: 523)

One way to express Russell's confusing dual use of 'physical' is to say that he retains the mental/physical distinction as a valid everyday descriptive-classificatory distinction (the distinction between D-mental and D-physical) even while he scraps it as a fundamental metaphysical distinction, leaving himself free to assert that he is a materialist or physicalist. I still haven't really got to this; I'm still defining terms, however loosely. I'll say more after first saying something about the word 'mental'.

I've been using the word 'mental', and quoting Russell using it. What do he and I mean by it? Most people take it that 'x is W-conscious' entails 'x is mental',

i.e. anything with 'experiential what-it's-likeness' *ipso facto* qualifies as mental.

I've almost always done so in my philosophical writings up to now. This is not, however, the way Russell uses 'mental'. He standardly takes it that

'x is mental' entails 'x is W-conscious',<sup>15</sup>

but he rejects the converse claim, i.e.

'x is W-conscious' entails 'x is mental'.

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<sup>15</sup> 'unconscious is a word to which it would be hopeless to attempt to attach any definite meaning' (1940: 50).

If a ‘bare’ or primitive feeling or sensation were to occur in isolation from everything else, it would by definition be W-conscious, conscious in the wide present-day sense, but it wouldn’t be N-conscious, conscious in the narrower cognitive sense. In fact it wouldn’t be a mental event at all in Russell’s sense. The distinction between wide and narrow senses of ‘conscious’ is mirrored by a distinction between wide and narrow sense of ‘mental’.

*Mind, mentality* is for Russell essentially cognitive, essentially intentional, essentially systematic. It essentially involves memory, which is necessary for recognition, conceptualization, and so on. It’s essentially more complex than mere sensation. “‘Mental’”, he says in 1927, ‘is a character, like “harmonious” or “discordant”, that cannot belong to a single entity in its own right, but only to a system of entities’; ‘mentality’ is not a matter of ‘the quality of single events’.<sup>16</sup> In practice, almost all actually occurring sensations are (qualify as) mental, but only because they’re caught up in systematic goings-on of this sort.

This use of ‘mind’ and ‘mental’ is not uncommon in Russell’s time; for twenty-first-century readers it’s another possible source of misunderstanding. I learnt to use ‘mental’ in the maximally inclusive way when I took up philosophy in the 1970s, but the more restricted use is attractive, and I’m going to follow Russell here and adopt it. One of its great advantages is that it allows one to say, plausibly, that all *mind* is a product of evolution, although *consciousness* isn’t. Consciousness (experiential what-it’s-likeness, W-consciousness) is something that had to be there already for mind as we know it to evolve. It had to be there already to be put to adaptive use, and so become mind.<sup>17</sup>

The last term I want to say something (more) about—as briefly as possible—is ‘neutral monism’. It’s generally agreed that it was in 1919 that Russell first embraced a position that he took to be importantly similar to the view that he had in 1913 called ‘neutral monism’ and rejected. He adopted ‘neutral monism’ as a name for his own position in 1921, and in 1964, forty-three years later, saw no reason to change it (Eames 1967). I suppose there’s a sense in which he can’t be wrong about this, for he himself introduced the name, and can presumably claim namer’s rights. That said, I think it’s a terrible name, to be avoided as far as possible.<sup>18</sup>

Amid all the confusion it has caused, one point seems particularly telling. The position Russell originally called ‘neutral monism’ in 1913 was among other things a form of extreme direct realism, indeed of so-called *naïve* realism, indeed of what one might call *demented* naïve realism. It also had various insidious links to phenomenalism (a view which is not I think traduced when it is said to be a form of idealism). And yet Russell himself had in 1913 already settled definitively into a view

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<sup>16</sup> 1927b: 209, 292. This is why sensations can qualify as fully neutral stuff: they’re not intrinsically mental in Russell’s terms. Schlick agrees; see e.g. Schlick 1925: 332.

<sup>17</sup> In Russell’s terms, of course, ‘*x* is conscious’ does entail ‘*x* is mental’. This is because he uses ‘conscious’ to mean ‘N-conscious’—essentially cognitive (see p. 000). He acknowledges the flexibility of ‘mental’ when he writes that ‘everything that we can directly observe of the physical world happens inside our heads, and consists of “mental” events *in at least one sense of the word “mental”*’ (1927b: 147–8, my emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> It seems a terrible name for almost every metaphysical view that it has been used to name, except perhaps for the position whose possibility is noted—with I think some favour—by Kant; see Kant 1781/7: A379–80, also A358–60, A391, B427–8.

about our knowledge of the ‘external world’ that most direct realists today would call ‘indirect realism’. So: he was certainly not a neutral monist on the terms of the view he originally called ‘neutral monism’.

Again, William James called himself a ‘radical empiricist’ and his pragmatism-suffused version of neutral monism was indeed radically empiricist, in the worst kind of way (fortunately, he moved on). Russell, by contrast, was never a *radical* empiricist, although he remained a good empiricist. He rightly never doubted the *intelligibility*, at least, of the idea of a something-we-know-not-what that is the cause of our experiences. Nor did he ever seriously doubt the *reality* of a something-we-know-not-what that is the cause of our experiences.

Given this vast difference, terminological confusion was guaranteed from the start. What Russell did, I propose, as time went on, [xxx] was to slowly work his neutral monism away from its muddled radical-empiricist epistemological grounding origins into a straightforwardly metaphysical thesis that could be consistently held by someone who was a [i] properly empiricist [ii] an indirect realist with [iii] what he called a ‘robust sense of reality’ (1919b: 170).

R. W. Sellars is exactly right, as so often, when he writes:

To return to Russell. I reject his term, neutral monism, because of its association with Machian empiricism. The real task is to redefine mind and to enlarge the conception of the physical world to include the fact of consciousness (1932: 413).

This was also Russell’s explicitly declared task. It’s the task of all serious philosophers of mind. It’s been shirked by an uncomfortably large number of analytic philosophers in the last sixty years (they’ve tried to jettison ‘the fact of consciousness’).

So much for terminology. It’s taken up most of my time. I *still* haven’t discussed Russell’s own definition of physicalism, but I now come, finally, to some quotations that offer direct support to the claim that Russell the self-styled neutral monist is a physicalist, both in the core sense and in the original Vienna-Circle sense.

Let me start again with numbered quotations. We already have

[1] ‘I find myself in ontology increasingly materialistic’ (1944: 700)

[2] ‘it would be better to substitute the word “physicalism” for the word “materialism”’ (1945: 247).

[3] ‘I should define “physicalism” as the doctrine that events are governed by the laws of physics’ (1945: 247).

We can add

[4] ‘in ontology I start by accepting the truth of physics’ (1944: 700)

Where does this get us? Well, events are the fundamental reals in Russell’s ontology. So we can deduce from [3] that he doesn’t think that there is any concrete reality that is not governed by the laws of physics. We can conclude that he thinks that

[P5] everything that concretely exists is governed by the laws of physics.

He also says

[5] ‘I should define an event as “physical” when it is the sort of event that is dealt with by physics’ (1945: 254),

and although there is the usual potential slipperiness in ‘physical’ and ‘what is dealt with’—the slipperiness between ‘O-physical’ and ‘D-physical’—it seems clear enough that here Russell means *D-physical*; just as he does when he says that

[6] ‘the physical is what is dealt with in physics’ (1945: 253).

The physical, in this use, is the D-physical: it’s concrete reality taken in a certain way, considered specifically in respect of those of its characteristics that physics picks up on. We can, nevertheless, conclude that he holds the all-out metaphysical view (my view) that

[P1] everything that concretely exists is physical

in which ‘physical’ means O-physical. After all, *all* events are dealt with by physics inasmuch as they are governed by the laws of physics ([P3]), on Russell’s view, and therefore all have a physical (D-physical) description.<sup>19</sup> [[[P1] also follows if we give ‘what’ in [6] an O-physical reading. ]] Physics deals with sensations—and all conscious and mental goings-on—just as much as with anything else there may be:

[7] ‘Physics ... is concerned with particulars of just the same sort as those which psychology considers under the name of sensations’ (1921: 301).

What is a sensation? Well, whatever else it is, it is, considered from the point of view of physics

[8] ‘A sensation is merely one link in a chain of physical causation’ (1927b: 156).

What is a mind, what is mind?

[9] ‘Mind is merely a cross-section in a stream of physical causation’ (1927b: 156).

These seem to be clear O-physical uses of ‘physical’ and it’s worth putting them next to another unequivocally D-physical use (alongside an unequivocally D-mental use):

[10] ‘I repeat that I mean by “mental” events the kind of events that someone can

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<sup>19</sup> [P1] also follows if we give ‘what’ in [6] an O-physical reading.

perceive,<sup>20</sup> and by “physical” events the sort of events that are dealt with in physics’ (1945: 255).

The D/O clash is clear. But it is also clear what Russell is saying.<sup>21</sup> The great error here would be to understand the ‘merely’ in [8] and [9] as carrying any suggestion that sensation and mind are not (really) a matter of W-consciousness.

We can put the point in terms supplied by Russell’s use of the *mind–matter* distinction. To take it as a physicalist that everything is physical is not to privilege matter over mind in any way; it’s to remain entirely neutral. ‘Physical’, in this (O-physical) use, is just the name of the neutral stuff. The core thesis is simply that all events are subject to the laws of physics—*physics*, no less: the subject that, precisely, according to Russell, tells us absolutely nothing about the intrinsic (non-structural) nature of reality, and is *ipso facto*—*a fortiori*—entirely neutral with respect to any characterization of its intrinsic reality as being either essentially a matter of mind or essentially a matter of matter. On the point Russell would have no quarrel with Haldane in 1932:

It is quite unimportant whether we call our ultimate reality matter, electric charge,  $\psi$ -waves, mind-stuff, neutral stuff, or what not, provided that it obeys laws which can, in principle, be formulated mathematically (1932: 169)

or 1940

when I say that I am a materialist ... I do not mean that consciousness does not exist, or has a lesser reality (whatever that means) than matter’ (1940: 27).

[by now you must think I’ve said everything ten times over! But there’s been so much disagreement that I’m going to offer a further summary of Russell’s position. So

(i) Events are ontologically fundamental.

(ii) All events are subject to the laws of physics (so all events have a D-physical description).

(iii) In that core sense everything is correctly said to be physical, whatever else may or may not be said of it.

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<sup>20</sup> The occurrence of ‘perceive’ in this quotation is a typical example of Russell’s unorthodox use of the word, along with the word ‘see’, which he comments on here: ‘I come finally to a statement of mine which profoundly shocks Mr. [Ernest] Nagel, as it has shocked various other philosophers; I mean the statement that, when a physiologist looks at another man’s brain, what he sees is in his own brain and not in the other man’s. I have not so far found any philosopher who knew what I meant by this statement’ (1944: 705). It’s easy to see what he xxx means, but ‘unfortunately, he spoke of “seeing the brain” and found that few tried to understand him’ (R. W. Sellars 1949: 100). Exactly so; they didn’t try, and thought they could score a point.

<sup>21</sup> Speaking of matter in a review of C. D. Broad’s *The Mind and its Place in Nature*, Russell says that he ‘mean[s] by “matter” that which satisfies the equations of physics’ (1926: 75). This seems to be an O-physical use, since he takes it that all mental phenomena satisfy the equations of physics. But it might be thought to have a D-physical tinge.

(iv) W-consciousness ('experiential what-it's-likeness') is a certainly known part of the intrinsic nature of at least some physical events; not only those that Russell calls 'sensations', but also and equally those he later calls 'percepts', occurrences whose 'experiential what-it's-likeness' is typically (perhaps always) far more than 'merely sensory' (it's the experiential what-it's-likeness of seeing, for example, *tables* and *chairs* grasped as such).<sup>22</sup>

Russell is also clear on the point that

(v) some sort of panpsychism may be true,

although, as a good sceptic, he never endorses it.

This last claim shouldn't be controversial. The panpsychism in question is not a panpsychism of *mind*, in Russell's (intelligence-and-cognition-implying) sense of the term. Russell rightly takes that to be wildly implausible: 'there is', he says, no evidence of anything *mental* except in a tiny fragment of space-time' (1959: 16, my emphasis). It's a panpsychism of W-consciousness, similar to the panpsychism of late James, Eddington, Drake, Peirce, Stout, Prince, Lady Welby, C. A. Strong, and many others at that time [[Clifford, Romanes]]. Russell is clear that W-consciousness—some kind of feeling or sentience, 'experiential what-it's-likeness', 'qualiality'—might be everywhere. It certainly can't be ruled out, and it's strongly favoured by what Russell calls 'the principle of continuity', which, though not logically necessary, has been found increasingly fruitful in science' [xxx] (1922: 483),<sup>23</sup> and for which Russell has a deep, correct, and lifelong respect; tempered by his equally correct and lifelong insistence on the radical uncertainty to which we are subject when we go beyond the immediately given data in making inferences about the nature of reality.

To [roman] (i)–(v), then, we may add

(vi) It is possible that W-consciousness is part (even perhaps all) of the intrinsic nature of all physical events.

On this point we should simply remain sceptical—admit that we do not and cannot know. We should also, however, be clear, Russell says, that

(vii) 'if there is *any* intellectual difficulty in supposing that the physical world is intrinsically quite unlike that of percepts, this is a reason for supposing that there is not this complete unlikeness' (1927a: 264; my emphasis),

and there is of course a colossal intellectual difficulty in this supposition: the

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<sup>22</sup> The word 'percept' has many uses; for Russell 'percepts are ... part of the matter of the percipient's brain' (1927a: 382)—they're not tables and chairs.

<sup>23</sup> Russell adds a parenthesis: 'Continuity here is not to be understood in a strict sense, but only in an approximate sense. In its strict sense it is incompatible with the theory of quanta, and very likely false.'

traditional mind–body problem in all its shabby glory!<sup>24</sup> We have, then, a reason—a weighty reason—for thinking that the intrinsic nature of the physical is fundamentally akin to the nature we know in having experience.

Russell makes the general point many times over several decades. Once we adopt his position, he says,

we no longer have to contend with what used to seem mysterious in the causal theory of perception: a series of light-waves or sound-waves or what not suddenly producing a mental event apparently totally different from themselves in character. As to intrinsic character, we do not know enough about it in the physical world to have a right to say that it is very different from that of percepts (1927a: 400)

and we have reason to think that it is not.

The events that happen in our minds are part of the course of nature, and we do not know that the events which happen elsewhere are of a totally different kind (1927b: 311)

‘Matter’ ... is known only as regards certain very abstract characteristics, which might quite well belong to a manifold of mental events, but might also belong to a different manifold (1927a: 215).

This, I think, is a solution to the mind–body problem insofar as it can be solved. There’s no mystery of consciousness. If there’s one thing whose general nature we truly know, it’s consciousness; and there’s certainly no hard problem of getting from the nonexperiential to the experiential.

[xxx] Lots of people have seen this, on and off, over the years. Priestley saw it. Kant saw it in his own way, and the neo-Kantians stressed it in the nineteenth century. Lange put it as well as anybody in 1865. So did Helmholtz, and Riehl in 1887. We have no good reason to suppose that we know anything about the nature of the brain in doing physics and neuroscience that gives us good reason to think it mysterious that conscious experience is brain activity, or that conscious experience can’t be physical.

Lange: The eye, with which we believe we see, is itself only a product of our ideas; and when we find that our visual images are produced by the structure of the eye, we must never forget that the eye too with its arrangements, the optic nerve with the brain and all the structures which we may yet discover there as causes of conscious experience, are only ideas’ (1865-75: 3.224)

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<sup>24</sup> One way to express the difficulty used to be to say that one encounters a ‘solution of continuity’ when one considers the relation between mind and matter, where this (rather puzzlingly) means an utter failure of *continuity of being* (see e.g. Stout 1899: 47: ‘when we come to the direct connexion between a nervous process and a correlated conscious process, we find a complete solution of continuity. The two processes have no common factor’). Russell uses the expression when, replying to C. A. Strong, he says that there is on his view ‘no solution of continuity in passing from what I perceive’—here he means his experiences considered as mental occurrences—‘to the outside particulars dealt with by physics’ (1922: 483).



—appearances of something whose intrinsic stuff nature we do not know *except* [Russell again] in knowing the intrinsic nature of experience in having it as we do.

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