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Essay 1: Against Methodological Physicalism

In Daniel Stoljar's entry "Physicalism" in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, he presents a methodological concern with physicalism as argued by Noam Chomsky in his book *New horizons in the study of language and mind*. (2000) Stoljar describes, in brief, the premises that Chomsky lays out and the stance that he takes, that the physicalist project is fundamentally, methodologically unequipped for the study of consciousness. Instead, Chomsky argues in favor of methodological naturalism: i.e., the same methods of investigation as those used by the natural sciences. While there are weak points in Chomsky's argument as described by Stoljar, he fails to include certain key points Chomsky makes in his chapter "Naturalism and dualism in the study of language and mind," and the counterargument to Chomsky's critique is fundamentally flawed in its negative approach to scientific progress—an approach Chomsky specifically addresses.

Stoljar summarizes Chomsky's argument as being against the physicalist project—that it is either misleading or illegitimate. According to Stoljar, Chomsky states that physicalism is misleading because it purports to be distinct from the natural sciences, yet physicalists accept methodological naturalism and the resulting scientific discoveries. If the physicalist project is not scientific in nature, and the naturalistic (i.e., scientific) project is not philosophical in nature, problems arise.

For the sake of simplicity, in this section I am going to refer to Stoljar's paraphrasing of Chomsky as just "Chomsky." However, as I will address later, Stoljar leaves out some core components of Chomsky's argument. From the standpoint of methodological naturalists, the investigation into "the mental" (Chomsky's general term for consciousness, cognition, or anything else typically relating to the mind, without entailing a metaphysical divide) should be pursued by the same methods as the rest of the sciences—this approach being methodological naturalism. Because the rational approach to understanding the world is that of methodological naturalism, it follows that it is rational to pursue an understanding of consciousness through the same means. Chomsky's second point is that the physicalist project differs significantly from the naturalistic project. The naturalistic project is not in the realm of metaphysics—which the physicalist project often is—although it does continue to push the boundaries of what aspects of the mental science can hope to explain. Nor is naturalism particularly entwined with philosophy, while physicalism is "central to analytic philosophy."

Chomsky's criticism is regarding the split between the physicalist project and the naturalistic project. First, that the physicalist project is ill-defined, and second, that despite being separate from naturalists, physicalists "endorse methodological naturalism." So, if there is no real distinction between the two, it would be misleading to consider physicalism in the realm of metaphysics and philosophy rather than science. Thus, the dilemma: if physicalism is identical to naturalism, then we have misconstrued it entirely, and if it is not, it is illegitimate. Stoljar ends the section describing Chomsky's argument:

In sum, Chomsky's criticism is best understood as a kind of dilemma. The physicalist project is either identical to the naturalistic project or it is not. If it is identical, then the language and concepts that shape the project are potentially extremely misleading; but if it is not identical, then there are a number of ways in which it is illegitimate. (Stoljar, 2001)

I will begin by evaluating Stoljar's presentation of Chomsky's argument as summarized above, before reconsidering it in the context of Chomsky's own writing.

I believe Chomsky (via Stoljar) presents a reasonable argument against physicalism and for methodological naturalism, although Chomsky's own writing presents a much stronger case, including a point directly against the counterargument Stoljar takes. Stoljar agrees with the initial points Chomsky makes, contending primarily with the final point on physicalism's illegitimacy. I, like Stoljar, accept that methodological naturalism regarding the study of consciousness is rational. I also agree with both authors that the physicalist project is ill-defined, both in its ultimate goal (which Stoljar does go on to define) and in its distinction from the natural sciences. I will investigate more closely the second criticism Chomsky makes—the same one that Stoljar takes up in his counter argument—as it is presented by Stoljar.

Neither Stoljar nor Chomsky, as described by Stoljar, make a particularly strong case surrounding the messiness of the blurred lines between physicalism and methodological naturalism. Stoljar writes, continuing to summarize Chomsky's argument, "Second, it is hard to see how this sort of project could recommend itself to physicalists themselves — such a project seems to be a departure from methodological naturalism but most physicalists endorse methodological naturalism as a matter of fact." (2001) I would not find this argument from Chomsky convincing. For one, endorsing one approach doesn't entail disavowing alternative approaches. Philosophical arguments rely to some degree on objective facts as provided by science; we know that there exist subatomic particles, relations of energy and matter. I would hope that most philosophers of science are not opposed to methodological naturalism regarding the mental, as in, neuroscientific and typical psychological research. If Stoljar means Chomsky is saying that physicalists recognize methodological naturalism as the means to an end of explaining consciousness once and for all, and yet are still inserting themselves and their physicalist methods into the conversation around consciousness, there is still much to be said about the merits of philosophical debate regardless of its efficient advancement of the sciences. That is, there is still a place for physicalists to continue developing physicalist arguments that depart from methodological naturalism, even if those paths are winding and at times lead to dead ends. The problem arises when physicalists begin to make definitive statements about the science of the mind. While this appears to conflict with Chomsky, I believe he is more amenable to this position than Stoljar would make it seem.

I will now turn to the ways in which Stoljar has, in my eyes, mischaracterized aspects of Chomsky's argument. To begin, I will address Stoljar's response—counterargument— to Chomsky, then, I will present portions of Chomsky's own writing and my own arguments as a rebuttal. Stoljar's response to Chomsky is that the physicalist project is concerned with the limits of the

naturalistic project with respect to consciousness. However, it isn't necessary to exclude the natural sciences outright from philosophical considerations in order to have meaningful debate or discussion—it is not productive in the study of mind, from the naturalistic or physicalist side, to state that one can definitively do what the other cannot. Stoljar states that the naturalistic project will not succeed ultimately in its pursuit to explain or describe consciousness because it cannot fundamentally address qualia or phenomenological experience. While I will not be presenting an argument for or against the naturalistic project, to describe the goal of the physicalist project in terms of negatives—what science cannot or will not do—restricts the study of consciousness. Philosophers do not need to be doing something that science cannot do in practical terms, if philosophical discussions can be productive or knowledge generating in different ways.

Stoljar does not present Chomsky's argument as strongly as he could have, leading to the weak point which both Stoljar and I contend with. By reducing his point to methodological naturalism in favor of physicalism, nuances in Chomsky's argument are lost. For instance, Stoljar brings up Thomas Nagel to support his counter to Chomsky's argument. In *New horizons in the study of language and mind*, (2000) the same book Stoljar cites at the beginning of his summary in which Chomsky's argument against physicalism is found, Chomsky addresses Nagel at length. Stoljar uses Nagel to say that the naturalistic project will only result in an objective picture of the world, and that this will not account for qualia or subjective experience. Chomsky does include an argument regarding this, that ethnographic studies—following naturalism—can branch across the variety of human experiences. His core qualm with physicalism is that the focus on the link between particular material concepts and human behaviors—one which is not yet understood, but which he argues can be—is not a productive one. Physicalism is indeed prescriptive rather than descriptive, purporting to make empirical claims about the nature of mental realities despite fundamentally departing from the sciences. Stoljar, by making a negative argument against methodological naturalism, perpetuates this problem. The most beneficial relationship between science and philosophy is not one of imposing limits.

I acknowledge my biases towards methodological naturalism as a student of psychology and neuroscience. However, my concerns with physicalism arise not when they take scientific evidence as premises but when physicalist conclusions make claims that they are unequipped to prove with the philosophical toolset. The strength of philosophy is not in its ability to make objective statements; this is the very gap supposedly left by naturalistic methods that physicalists can fill. Chomsky's argument for methodological naturalism is a practical one. His desire to pursue scientific methods is largely in order to best describe the mechanisms of language, not to say that naturalism alone can provide a complete picture of the world. When claims are made about the limits of science, often on the basis of little empirical evidence, they are frequently disproven. This is in fact a point Chomsky makes against Nagel, (2000, pp. 87-88) although this paper does not have space to explore it.

Either the dualist project is true, in which case there is an assumption that science of observable physics/concretely existing objects will never truly explain the mind, or, the physicalist project is true, in which case the mind is nothing more than the sum of its physical

parts. In either case, the argument arrives at a largely uninteresting conclusion regarding the continued study or philosophy of consciousness.

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Stoljar summarizes Chomsky's argument as being against the physicalist project—that it is either misleading or illegitimate. Physicalism is misleading because it purports to be distinct from the natural sciences, yet physicalists accept methodological naturalism and the resulting scientific discoveries. If the physicalist project is not scientific in nature, and the naturalistic (i.e., scientific) project is not philosophical in nature, problems arise.

For the sake of simplicity, in this section I am going to refer to Stoljar's paraphrasing of Chomsky as just "Chomsky." However, as I will address later, Stoljar leaves out some core components of Chomsky's argument. From the standpoint of naturalists, the investigation into "the mental" (Chomsky's general term for consciousness, cognition, or anything else typically relating to the mind, without entailing a metaphysical divide) should be pursued by the same methods as the rest of the sciences—this approach being methodological naturalism. Because the rational approach to understanding the world is that of methodological naturalism, it follows that it is rational to pursue an understanding of consciousness through the same means. Chomsky's second point is that the physicalist project differs significantly from the naturalistic project. The naturalistic project is not in the realm of metaphysics—which the physicalist project often is—although it does continue to push the boundaries of what aspects of the mental science can hope to explain. Nor is naturalism particularly entwined with philosophy, while physicalism is "central to analytic philosophy."

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I believe Chomsky (via Stoljar) presents a reasonable argument against physicalism and for methodological naturalism, whether or not it closes the door to the physicalist project entirely. I accept that methodological naturalism regarding the study of consciousness is rational. I also agree that the physicalist project is ill-defined, both in its ultimate goal (which Stoljar does go on to define) and in its distinction from the natural sciences. I will investigate more closely the second criticism Chomsky makes, as presented by Stoljar: "Second, it is hard to see how this sort of project could recommend itself to physicalists *themselves* — such a project seems to be a departure from methodological naturalism but most physicalists endorse methodological naturalism as a matter of fact." On its face, this very nearly disavows philosophy of mind entirely. A contemporary philosopher will rarely flat-out disagree with science or naturalistic methods, given that arguments about the world have to take certain things as objective fact.

Stoljar's response to Chomsky is that the physicalist project is concerned with the *limits* of the naturalistic project with respect to consciousness. However, it isn't necessary to exclude the natural sciences outright from philosophical considerations in order to have meaningful debate or discussion. Stoljar says naturalistic project won't succeed bc qualia inaccessible by naturalistic but why not just talk about the nature of qualia??

I believe that Stoljar presents Chomsky's argument as weaker than it is.

I. Intro

II. Chomsky according to Stoljar

III. Assessing Chomsky

- a) As presented by stoljar
 - i) Stoljar's summary of Chomsky makes it sound like phil isn't important for science but that's a) not true and b) he doesn't think that
- b) Expanding by incl. Chomsky's extra args

IV. Stoljar response to Chomsky

- a) What he says
- b) Assessment: bruh
 - i) Stoljar argument: physicalism is about the nature of the project and its potential limits- why would you want to frame physicalism as the limits of the naturalistic project?

IDK IF INCLUDE BC IS THIS THE DIRECITON I WANT??

I believe there are several components Stoljar did not include that are worth considering to fully address his argument. First, Stoljar begins his counterargument by bringing up Thomas Nagel, but does not mention that Chomsky spends a considerable amount of time with Nagel's ideas. I will not delve fully into Nagel's argument against physicalism—I will just note that he defines the mental in terms of consciousness, and the physical as “that which can be described in nonmental terms.” (87) It is not entirely fair to base portions of my argument on neuroscience research which did not exist in 2000 or 2001, when Stoljar and Chomsky were writing these papers, which was already nearly a decade after Nagel. However, when Nagel identifies consciousness as the defining characteristic of mental phenomena, which can not be reduced to physical terms, it provides an opportunity to not only confirm Chomsky's point but as a basis for further discussion of Hempel's dilemma. Now, we are able to reconstruct from brain imaging (which captures the physical and nothing more) a person's mental content.

Consider Nagel's notions “capable of description by physical science” and “described by physics.” What do they mean? [...] True, a branch of science not then unified with physics could provide much illumination in terms of its own theoretical constructs, as of much else; but the same is true today of some of the domain of the mental (in my sense).

Why are these accounts less “physical” than chemistry was a century ago? (88)

Hempel's dilemma here can be applied in an equivalent way to neuroscience. Contemporary neuroscience and psychology are incomplete; how could we base an argument on a theoretically complete future neuroscience? The argument for methodological naturalism here is clear: why try to arrive at a conclusion which is ultimately baseless or unverifiable when you could instead pursue productive, descriptive, experimental methods, which will result in a stronger foundation for future researchers to reliably build upon (here we could come to the replication crisis, but I'm not taking ownership for the fault of the industry).