

Stoljar, Baltimore, and Strawson on Physicalism

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1. Introduction

In his book *Physicalism*, Daniel Stoljar argues that “physicalism has no formulation on which it is both true and deserving of the name” (2010, 9).¹ However, Joseph Baltimore (2013) argues that “Stoljar fails to show, concerning versions of physicalism for which he grants the possibility of being true, that none of them is deserving of the name” (Ibid., 127). More specifically, Baltimore thinks that Stoljar has failed to eliminate theory-based physicalism of the kind that defines physical properties in terms of the statements of *actual physical theories* (e.g., modern physics.) He directs his criticism at Stoljar’s discussion of a hypothetical ‘twin-physics’ world in which everything is like it is in the actual world except for the fact that the fundamental properties of physics (e.g., mass, spin, and charge) turn out to be quite different. Stoljar argues that while physicalism as we normally understand it would be true in the twin-physics world, it would be false according to actual physical theories since, *ex hypothesi*, the fundamental physical properties in that world are not the ones found in the actual world. Therefore, he argues that theory-based physicalism is untenable since it is false in a scenario in which it should be true according to our intuitions about physicalism.² Baltimore, however, argues that this need not be the case: if panpsychism³ were true in the twin-physics world, physicalism as we normally understand it would be false in that world. Furthermore, he argues that Stoljar faces a dilemma in setting up his twin-physics world, given his later criticism of the *via negativa*⁴ strategy for formulating physicalism. Stoljar ultimately rejects the *via negativa* strategy, but seems to have already employed it implicitly in his twin-physics world. Baltimore argues that Stoljar cannot have it both ways.

I argue that Baltimore’s criticism of Stoljar’s twin-physics world is both wrong, insofar as I think panpsychism can be intuitively construed as a form of physicalism; and right, insofar as it’s true that Stoljar can’t have it both ways in regards to his treatment of *via negativa*. In the case of the former, I consider Strawson’s (2008) argument to the effect that “real physicalism” actually entails panpsychism. In the case of the latter, I argue, as does Stoljar, that *via negativa* is a bad strategy for formulating the thesis of physicalism. More controversially, however, I briefly argue that *via negativa* is at the heart of all widely held formulations of physicalism albeit implicitly. In that sense,

I think Stoljar is actually correct in thinking that there is no version of physicalism that is both true and substantive (i.e., non-trivially true.)

Preliminary to my argument, I will explicate Stoljar's general characterization for the thesis of physicalism, and then consider what he calls "starting point physicalism" which he draws from our intuitions about ordinary physical objects. After which, I explain his "method of cases" and how it is used in his rejection of starting point physicalism. I then consider Stoljar's rejection of actual theory-based physicalism based on his twin-physics world thought experiment. Next, I consider Baltimore's two primary objections to Stoljar's argument which include the case of panpsychism and an inconsistency in Stoljar's treatment of *via negativa*. At this point, I argue for my aforementioned thesis by first considering Strawson's argument that panpsychism actually entails "real physicalism," and then adopting Stoljar's argument that *via negativa* is a bad strategy for formulating the thesis of physicalism. Finally, I offer a somewhat speculative argument to the effect that the *via negativa* strategy is at the heart of all widely held versions of physicalism (albeit implicitly).

2. General thesis of physicalism

Stoljar begins by looking for a general characterization of physicalism to serve as a template for the different formulations of the thesis he wishes to consider. He begins his discussion with a broad definition of physicalism as the thesis that "everything is physical" (2010, 28). From this starting point, Stoljar carefully expounds upon and refines the general thesis of physicalism guided by our general intuitions for that thesis.

First, Stoljar argues that "everything is physical" is obviously too broad since philosophers intuitively exclude certain classes of things from the thesis of physicalism. For instance, "the U.S. Supreme Court" and "the number two" are certainly real things in the world, however, one wouldn't ordinarily think of them as physical objects. Therefore, we must restrict the thesis of physicalism to some things but not others.

Second, Stoljar consequently restricts the thesis to *properties* of objects. He argues that the contemporary opponents of physicalism are generally property dualists as opposed to substance dualists. Traditional substance dualists, like Descartes, thought that the mind and the body are two distinct substances. However, talk of substances has generally been rejected in favor of speaking of the properties (i.e., qualities or characteristics) of objects.

Third, Stoljar restricts the characterization of physicalism to *instantiated* properties since some philosophers speak of the existence of uninstantiated properties (e.g., being a unicorn.) Although there may be uninstantiated non-physical properties in the world (like the property of being a ghost), physicalism is strictly a thesis about actually instantiated properties (like the property of being a human). Nonetheless, Stoljar argues that another

qualification is necessary. For instance, the “U.S. Supreme Court” is a particular thing that instantiates the property of having “the power to prescribe rules of procedure to be followed by lower courts” (2010, 33-34). However, most philosophers would not count “a power to prescribe rules” as a physical property.

Fourth, Stoljar argues that the needed qualification can be found in saying that every instantiated property is ultimately *necessitated* by physical properties (2010, 36-28). Although, *everything* is not physical, all the properties of things are either physical themselves or necessitated by physical properties. Thus, although “a power to prescribe rules” is not a physical property itself, such a property must ultimately be necessitated by physical properties.

Therefore, Stoljar arrives at the following general characterization for the thesis of physicalism: “Physicalism is true if and only if every instantiated property is either physical or else is necessitated by some instantiated physical property” (2010, 37). Which, given the above considerations, he abbreviates to “every property is necessitated by a physical property” (Ibid., 43). As Stoljar frames it, the question then becomes one of defining “physical property” within that thesis. As such, he considers various definitions for “physical property” which each logically entail a specific version of physicalism given the above characterization.

3. Starting point physicalism

Stoljar thinks that the concept of a “physical property” is best understood as a cluster concept given the variety of ways philosophers have conceived of physical properties. He then “rather baldly” offers up some “of the elements that might legitimately be included in the cluster concept for physical properties,” which he then incorporates into what he calls the “Starting Point View” (2010, 56):

- F* is a physical property if and only if
- (a) *F* is one of the distinctive properties of [intuitively] physical objects [the Object criterion]; and
 - (b) *F* is expressed by a predicate of a physical theory [Theory]; and
 - (c) *F* is objective [Objective]; and
 - (d) *F* is a property we could come to know about through the methods of science [Method]; and
 - (e) *F* is not one of the distinctive properties of souls, ectoplasm, ESP, etc. [Contrast.] (p. 57)

Stoljar explains these criteria as follows. The (a) criterion ties physical properties to ordinary physical objects like “washing machines and rocks” (Ibid., 64). Thus, we intuitively think that the ordinary physical objects we encounter on a daily basis have physical properties. The (b) criterion ties

physical properties to the widely held intuition that, given physicalism, physical properties are best described by physical theories (paradigmatically physics.) That is, physical properties are, or should be, described by the true statements of physical theories. The (c) criterion defines physical properties as being objective in the sense of being knowable inter-subjectively “from more than one point of view” (Ibid., 56). The (d) criterion then ties that objective knowledge to the methods of the natural sciences which is consistent with the (b) criterion. Finally, the (e) criterion intuitively excludes the distinctive properties of those things which are most obviously non-physical (e.g., ghosts and poltergeists.)

As such, given the Starting Point View for physical properties, Stoljar formulates the thesis for “starting point physicalism” as: “Physicalism is true if and only if every instantiated property is necessitated by some instantiated starting point physical property” (Ibid., 57).

Stoljar then proceeds to evaluate starting point physicalism by a “method of cases” which is essential to his argument.

4. Method of cases and possible worlds

Stoljar’s “method of cases” evaluates each specific formulation of physicalism against a variety of case scenarios or possible worlds⁵ (2010, 57). For each possible world, he asks two questions: (1) *Is the formulation of physicalism under consideration true in that world?* and (2) *Is physicalism, as we normally understand it, true in that world?* According to Stoljar, so long as the answers to these questions are always the same (whether both true or both false) we have confirmation for that formulation of physicalism. However, insofar as the answers to these questions come apart, the candidate version of physicalism is disconfirmed. In other words, Stoljar is looking for a formulation of physicalism that is neither “true at possible worlds where no version of physicalism should be true,” nor “false at possible worlds where no version of physicalism should be false” (2010, 90). If these criteria are not met, then the formulation given is not “deserving of the name” *physicalism* (2010, 90). Given this methodology, Stoljar constructs three possible worlds as test cases for starting point physicalism. It is upon the last of these, the modern physics world, that he rejects starting point physicalism.

The *modern physics world* is one in which “every property is necessitated by properties distinctive of things postulated by modern physics” (2010, 62). That is, in the modern physics world, every property is a property described by modern physics or entailed by such properties. Most philosophers would consider this the intuitive paradigm, or starting point, for physicalism as we normally understand it. That is, many think that our world just is the modern physics world. However, Stoljar argues that the modern physics world is actually the paradigm case against “starting point physicalism.” This is

because modern physics posits that fundamental entities (e.g., fields, quantum wave-functions, and super-strings) have properties that are clearly *not* distinctive of intuitively physical objects (e.g., washing machines and rocks). Therefore, by his method of cases, Stoljar argues: (1) physicalism, as we normally understand it, is intuitively *true* in the modern physics world given philosophers' general intuitions about physicalism, however, (2) starting point physicalism is *false* in the modern physics world given that contemporary physics postulates properties which are anything but intuitive. Therefore, Stoljar concludes, starting point physicalism fails the method of cases, but this is just the beginning.

5. Actual theory-based physicalism

Given the failure of starting point physicalism, Stoljar considers the project of "liberalizing" the Starting Point View such that "it does not have the result that, because of developments in science itself, the thesis is false" (2010, 70). He argues that the problem with starting point physicalism is its reliance on our intuitive notion of ordinary physical objects which ultimately conflicts with modern-day physics. Therefore, Stoljar suggests getting rid of the previously considered (a) *object* criterion: viz., the requirement that physical properties be distinctive of intuitively physical objects. Furthermore, he rather quickly discards the (c) *objectivity* and (d) *method* criteria simply saying that they "have [only] a procedural or epistemic quality to them" (Ibid., 72). Moreover, Stoljar (quite prophetically) discards the (e) *contrast* criterion – namely, the exclusion of "the distinctive properties of souls, ectoplasm, ESP, etc." – saying this criterion "is obviously privative, that is, it tells you something about what the physical is *not* rather than about what it is" (Ibid., 72). Consequently, we are left with only the (b) *theory* criterion: that is, the requirement that physical properties be expressed by the predicates of a physical theory.

This essentially moves the previous emphasis on our intuitive notion of *physical object*, in starting point physicalism, to the notion of *physical theory*, in the liberalized version. Accordingly, Stoljar calls the liberalized version the "Theory View" on physical properties, which entails to the following theory-based formulation of physicalism: "Physicalism is true if and only if every instantiated property is necessitated by some instantiated theory-based physical property" (Ibid., 71). By way of clarification, Stoljar offers an "admittedly simple-minded" characterization of physical theory as any "theory that a scientist advances in the course of trying to explain or describe ordinary physical objects, their distinctive properties, their constitution and behavior, and so on" (Ibid., 73). Physical theories *just are* the theories that actual physical scientists come up with. However, Stoljar also distinguishes between two different formulations of theory-based physicalism. The "actualist" formulation of theory-based physicalism (which I am calling *actual theory-*

based physicalism) ties physical theories to the actual world by claiming, “Every instantiated property is entailed by some instantiated physical property, where a physical property is a property expressed by a physical theory true in the actual world” (Ibid., 76). While the “possibilist” formulation of theory-based physicalism ties physical theories to “some world or other” (Ibid., 75). The distinction between the actualist and possibilist versions of physicalism is an important one, however, we are only concerned with actual theory-based physicalism. Stoljar’s twin-physics world thought experiment and Baltimore’s critique specifically target actual theory-based physicalism.

6. Stoljar’s twin-physics world

Stoljar argues that actual theory-based physicalism fails the method of cases when evaluated in a *twin-physics world*. The twin-physics world is an adaptation of Putnam’s (1975) well-known twin-earth thought experiment in which he argues for semantic externalism. This is how Stoljar sets out his version: “This is a possible world or twin-earth at which every property is necessitated by twin-mass, twin-charge, and twin-spin. The properties instantiated at this world duplicate whatever properties are instantiated at the actual world, insofar as this is possible” (2010, 77). The twin-physics world is just like our own, however, the fundamental physical properties described by *twin-physics* turn out to be quite different than they are in the actual world. That is, while mass, charge, and spin are (we are assuming) fundamental physical properties in the actual world; twin-mass, twin-charge, and twin-spin are fundamental physical properties in the twin-physics world. Therefore, by hypothesis, the fundamental properties in the twin-physics world are not the fundamental properties postulated by actual physical theories. Moreover, by hypothesis, it is also true that all the properties in the twin-physics world are physical properties, or necessitated by such properties, in that world. This perfectly meets Stoljar’s general characterization of physicalism. However, actual-theory based physicalism must be false in the twin-physics world since the fundamental physical properties are different there. Therefore, Stoljar claims “while physicalism [as we normally understand it] is true at the twin-physics world... actual theory physicalism is not true at the twin-physics world” (Ibid., 78). That is, actual theory-based physicalism turns out to be true in a scenario (the twin physics world) where it should be false; therefore, actual theory-based physicalism fails the method of cases and is undeserving of the name. However, Baltimore challenges this conclusion.

7. Baltimore’s objections

Baltimore argues that Stoljar has failed to show that actual theory-based physicalism could *never* be both true and deserving of the name. More specifically, he claims that Stoljar has failed to restrict the fundamental properties in the twin-physics world in such a way that physicalism *must be*

intuitively true in that world. Baltimore argues, “For instance, if twin-charge is a conscious property, then the twin-physics world is not a possible world at which physicalism, as we normally understand it, is true” (2013, 131). That is to say, Stoljar has only specified that twin-properties are “of a quite different character” than they are in the actual world (2010, 77). However, some panpsychists argue that the fundamental entities postulated by physics can have conscious properties. Furthermore, philosophers seem to universally agree that panpsychism is *not* a formulation of physicalism as we normally understand it. Therefore, if we assume panpsychism is true in the twin-physics world, then both physicalism, as we normally understand it, and actual theory-based physicalism would be *false* in the twin-physics world. In which case, Baltimore argues, actual theory-based physicalism would survive Stoljar’s method of cases.⁶

Nevertheless, Baltimore suggests that Stoljar seems to have one further restriction in mind that could in fact rule-out the possibility of panpsychism in the twin-physics world. Stoljar says of fundamental twin-properties that he is “not imagining here that the properties in question are spiritual or mental or conform to any paradigm we have of a non-physical property” (2010, 77). Baltimore suggests that insofar as conscious properties are paradigmatically non-physical properties, according to this passage, twin-properties could not be conscious properties in the twin-physics world (thus ruling out panpsychism). However, Baltimore argues that Stoljar cannot simply “help himself” to this sort of negative restriction on fundamental properties in the twin-physics world, given his later rejection of the *via negativa* strategy for formulating physicalism (2013, 132). Stoljar subsequently argues that while it is true that one can attempt to define something in terms of *what it is not* (*via negativa*), “this is not a good way of explaining what a thing is” for, amongst other things, this can lead to an “indefinite” regress of exclusions (2010, 87-88).⁷ However, it appears that Stoljar is using this very strategy when he suggests that fundamental twin-properties cannot be “spiritual or mental or conform to any paradigm we have of a non-physical property” (*Ibid.*, 77). According to Baltimore, this is obviously inconsistent and Stoljar can’t have it both ways.

8. Strawsonian real physicalism

This is what is both wrong and right with Baltimore’s argument against Stoljar’s twin-physics world. First, I *do not* think the conceivability of panpsychism clearly shows that physicalism as we normally understand it, would be false in the twin-physics world. This is because I don’t think panpsychism is necessarily inconsistent with physicalism as we intuitively understand it. Second, I *do* think that Baltimore is right to point out the conceptual inconsistency between the twin-physics world and Stoljar’s later criticism of *via negativa*. That is to say, I think Stoljar makes an implicit use

of *via negativa* in his thought experiment, but later argues *via negativa* should never be used in this way. Moreover, I think there is a much broader point to be made in terms of critiquing *via negativa* as a strategy for formulating physicalism. I contend that the *via negativa* strategy is inevitably used, either explicitly or implicitly, in all the widely held formulations of physicalism. Moreover, I agree with Stoljar when he says that *via negativa* is a bad strategy for formulating physicalism; thus, I ultimately agree with his thesis that there is no formulation of physicalism that is both true and substantive.

Baltimore assumes, as many do, that panpsychism is inconsistent with physicalism as we normally understand it. What is more, he thinks that the burden of proof is on Stoljar to offer a *clear* intuition that physicalism, as we normally understand it, must be true in the twin-physics world (2013, 132). However, I disagree insofar as I think one can just as reasonably have a *clear* intuition that panpsychism is consistent with physicalism. For example, Galen Strawson (2008) makes a case for what he calls “real physicalism” which he not only thinks is consistent with panpsychism, but actually entails panpsychism. Strawson does, however, have a peculiar notion of physicalism in mind when he speaks of “real physicalism.” He says, for instance, “You’re certainly not a realistic physicalist, you’re not a real physicalist, if you deny the existence of the phenomenon whose existence is more certain than the existence of anything else: experience, “consciousness”, conscious experience...” (2008, 53). This signifies Strawson’s “consciousness first” approach to the philosophy of mind which is typically associated with those who are generally antithetical to physicalism.⁸ That being said, Strawson distinguishes “real physicalism” from the more popular (ersatz) version, which he calls *physics*-alism: “the view – the faith – that the nature or essence of all concrete reality can in principle be fully captured in the terms of *physics*” (Ibid., 54).

Now, you might think that Strawson’s “real physicalism” is not physicalism proper, and so it has no bearing on formulating the thesis of physicalism in Stoljar’s sense. However, I think Strawson is arguing that our pre-theoretical intuitions about physicalism are better understood in terms of “real physicalism” than *physics*-alism. In that sense, “real physicalism” is the *real* thing after all, and that’s what we should be talking about in formulating the thesis of physicalism. More specifically, Strawson takes physicalism to be the “view that every real, concrete phenomenon in the universe is...physical” (2008, 53). And, he characterizes panpsychism as “the view that the existence of every real concrete thing involves experiential being, even if it also involves non-experiential being” (Ibid., 57). Consequently, Strawson thinks that every concrete particular in the universe has conscious (i.e., experiential) properties. Now, he also thinks that concrete things are non-abstract spatiotemporally located particulars, which, in my mind, makes them physical objects (Ibid., 53).⁹ Therefore, according to Strawson and my

way of understanding him: if physicalism is true, then panpsychism is true and is a substantive formulation of physicalism as we normally *should* understand it. Nonetheless, you might still think Strawson's interpretation of physicalism is implausible. However, for one thing, in order to question Baltimore, we need only establish that panpsychism *might* be intuitively construed as consistent with physicalism. For another thing, if you still disagree, the stronger objection comes in the analysis of the *via negativa* strategy.

9. Physicalism via negativa

I've argued that Baltimore fails to make his case against Stoljar regarding the counter-example of panpsychism being true in the twin-physics world, nonetheless, I think he's right about Stoljar's being inconsistent in his use of the *via negativa* strategy. Moreover, I think the *via negativa* strategy is at the heart of the matter when it comes to formulating the thesis of physicalism. Specifically, I think some version of *via negativa* is exploited (either explicitly or implicitly) in all the widely held formulations of physicalism, and I agree with Stoljar when he argues that *via negativa* is a really bad strategy for formulating the thesis of physicalism. By way of examples of both explicit and implicit uses of *via negativa*, we need look no further than Stoljar's original construal of starting point physicalism, and his subsequent liberalization project of the same.

In the case of starting point physicalism, Stoljar's (e) *contrast* criterion for the Starting Point View, viz., the exclusion of "the distinctive properties of souls, ectoplasm, ESP, etc." is clearly an *explicit* use of *via negativa* (2010, 57). In fact, Stoljar all but acknowledges this fact when he later says that the (e) criterion "is obviously privative, that is, it tells you something about what the physical is *not* rather than about what it is" (Ibid., 72). Of course, starting point physicalism is also characterized by the (a)-(d) criteria, so you might think that Stoljar can simply remove the (e) criterion. However, with a little reflection, I think it's obvious that it's the (e) criterion that's doing the heavy lifting for starting point physicalism. To see that this is so, simply try removing it. That is, without the (e) criterion, "souls, ectoplasm, ESP" and numerous other "spooky" things are going to be consistent with starting point physicalism since, in principle, we haven't been given a reason to think that such things (if they exist) couldn't meet the (a)-(d) criteria. Yet, no self-respecting proponent of physicalism (at least, in the *physics*-alist sense) would accept this conclusion. Which is just to say that starting point physicalism, without *via negativa*, cannot be physicalism as we normally understand it. Therefore, the (a)-(d) criteria are simply insufficient for the thesis of physicalism.

In the case of the liberalization project, Stoljar's twin-physics world involves (or at least needs) an *implicit* use of *via negativa*. This is inconsistent

with Stoljar's later rejection of *via negativa* on the grounds that defining something solely in terms of *what it's not* is a bad strategy. Moreover, I think that this kind of *implicit* introduction of *via negativa* can be found in all of the other widely held formulations of physicalism that might be substantive (i.e., non-trivially true.) I won't make a full argument for this point here, since it would require a much more lengthy analysis of each of the widely held formulations of physicalism. Nonetheless, I think I can offer strong support for this thesis by briefly examining the two general categories of approaches to formulating the thesis of physicalism: the *a posteriori* approach, and the *a priori* approach. I believe these two categories essentially encapsulate all of the current and widely held formulations of physicalism.

The *a posteriori* approach to the formulation of physicalism ties the thesis of physicalism to the empirical facts of either current or future/idealized physics. Stoljar's actual theory-based physicalism is just such an approach, and one which Strawson would derisively call *physics-alism*. The most well known argument against the currentist approach (which ties physicalism to current/actual physics) is that it makes the thesis of physicalism come out false. This is because modern physics rests on both general relativity and quantum field theory which are known to be inconsistent. Given this, and other problems, I think that the proponents of the *a posteriori* approach are inevitably led to positing some *a priori* restriction in their formulation of physicalism. That is, I think that an *a posteriori* approach cannot by-itself be sufficient for the thesis of physicalism.¹⁰ Ultimately, for any sort of success, an element of the *a priori* approach must be brought in to bolster the argument. In which case, this would lead the *a posteriori* approach into the problems I will now identify for the *a priori* approach.

The *a priori* approach to the formulation of physicalism ties the thesis of physicalism to our pre-scientific intuitions about the differences between mentality and physicality. The *via negativa* is one such strategy in that it ties physicalism to our pre-theoretical intuitions about *what is not* physical. But, that's a bad strategy. Other examples of the *a priori* approach include what I call the *attitudinal* and *pragmatic* approaches. The attitudinal approach takes physicalism to be a kind of all-embracing naturalistic or scientific attitude towards the world. Alyssa Ney adopts an attitudinal approach, arguing that, "One is a physicalist in so far as one is disposed to believe in all and only those entities which (current) physics says exists. This understanding of physicalism... is not the type of thing to be true, false, or trivial" (2008, 1038). On the other hand, the pragmatic approach takes a kind of utilitarian view to formulating physicalism, taking the thesis to be no more than a tool in framing otherwise important philosophical debates. Philip Goff offers an example of the pragmatic approach when he says that in defining physicalism "we are either trying to track how philosophers happen to have used the term...or we are trying to shape a definition which is useful for practitioners of philosophy"

(Forthcoming, Chapter 3). Nevertheless, I think that all of these *a priori* approaches ultimately appeal to *via negativa* insofar as they might possibly offer a substantive formulation of physicalism.

When it comes to the attitudinal approach, I can't see how an attitude in-and-of-itself can result in a substantive metaphysical thesis. The success of the natural sciences may be *the* most remarkable occurrence in the history of mankind. Nonetheless, a naturalistic attitude is merely a way of looking at the world as opposed to a positive metaphysical account of the world. There may be some general reason to take on a particular attitude toward the world, but the thesis of physicalism requires a sound argument. That is, insofar as the attitudinal approach simply applies the name "physicalism" to a particular naturalistic attitude, it is trivial in the sense that most philosophers use that term. And, insofar as the attitudinal approach might be substantive, I think the proponents must appeal, albeit implicitly, to the *via negativa* strategy.

When it comes to the pragmatic approach, insofar as physicalism is a mere rhetorical starting point for other debates, the thesis in-and-of-itself is not supported. Again, I can't see how practical considerations in-and-of-themselves can result in a substantive metaphysical thesis. There may be some general reason to employ the thesis of physicalism to get a philosophical debate going, but the thesis itself requires a sound argument. That is, insofar as the pragmatic approach simply uses the thesis of physicalism as a rhetorical device, it is trivial in the sense that most philosophers understand that thesis. And, insofar as the pragmatic approach might be substantive, I think the proponents must appeal, albeit implicitly, to the *via negativa* strategy.

Consequently, I think that both the *a priori* and *a posteriori* approaches to the formulation of physicalism ultimately come down to our pre-theoretical intuitions about what is *not* physical (or what *is* non-physical.) Those in the attitudinal camp eventually bring in a pre-theoretical notion of what "spooky" things (like ghosts and poltergeists) the natural sciences should *not* contemplate. However, I think there's no independent reason to think that the natural sciences must necessarily exclude ghosts and poltergeists in future discoveries. Those in the pragmatic camp eventually bring in a pre-theoretical notion of what "spooky" things their future hypotheses should *not* contemplate. However, I think there's no independent reason to think that philosophy should necessarily exclude ghosts and poltergeists in any future theory.

This is only the sketch of an argument to the effect that all the widely held versions of the thesis of physicalism ultimately, albeit implicitly, rely on the *via negativa* strategy. Nonetheless, this result is consistent with Stoljar's thesis, at least, for the widely held versions of physicalism. If all versions of physicalism ultimately rely on the *via negativa* strategy, then, at best, they are all trivially true. That is, if one first excludes all the non-physical properties

from the thesis of physicalism, *via negativa*, then the world is made up of only physical properties. In which case, physicalism would be true, but uninteresting.

10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Stoljar's argument for the thesis that there is no version of physicalism that is "both true and deserving of the name" is invalid. I began by explicating Stoljar's general characterization of the thesis of physicalism, and then considered his Starting Point View for the conception of physical properties. After which, I looked at Stoljar's methodology of cases and briefly considered the possible world upon which he argues against starting point physicalism. I then considered his liberalization of the Start Point View which culminates in the Theory View for the conception of physical properties. At which point, I introduced Stoljar's twin-physics world thought experiment which he uses to discredit actual theory-based physicalism. By contrast, I then considered Baltimore's criticism of the twin-physics world thought experiment based on the conceivability of panpsychism being true in that world. Baltimore argues from the intuition that panpsychism is inconsistent with physicalism, however, I have argued that this need not be the case. Nonetheless, I have agreed with Baltimore that Stoljar is inconsistent in his implicitly using the *via negativa* strategy in the twin-physics world, but then later rejecting that same strategy.

More significantly, I've offered the beginnings of an argument to the effect that all widely held versions of physicalism rely on the *via negativa* strategy albeit implicitly. I have briefly argued that *a posteriori* strategies for defining physicalism are generally invalid unless supplemented by some *a priori* considerations. However, I have also argued that *a priori* strategies for defining physicalism ultimately rely on the invalidated *via negativa* strategy. Therefore, I think that all the widely held versions of physicalism rely on an unsound strategy. For this reason, I actually agree with Stoljar's conclusion that, at present, there are no substantively true versions of the thesis of physicalism.¹¹

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¹ Physicalism is very roughly the thesis that “everything is physical” (Stoljar 2010, 2). This will be expounded upon shortly.

² This is according to Stoljar’s ‘method of cases’ which will be explained later in this paper.

³ Panpsychism is roughly the view that mental properties are fundamental properties. For instance, some panpsychists argue that subatomic particles can have *conscious properties*.

⁴ The *via negativa* strategy is an attempt to define physicalism in terms of *what it is not* as opposed to what it is. This will be discussed later in this paper.

⁵ A *possible world* can be understood as a hypothetical scenario for the entire world or universe. More specifically, a possible world may be understood as what our world (i.e., the *actual world*) *might have been like* in a very broad sense.

⁶ Stoljar’s defenders might at this point argue that either panpsychism is obviously false, or that we needn’t deal with *every* possible formulation of physicalism in the twin-physics world. First, though it is counterintuitive, I don’t think that panpsychism is obviously false. Second, notice that Stoljar’s skeptical thesis is quite strong in saying that there is *no* formulation of physicalism (whatsoever) that is both true and substantive.

⁷ For example, Stoljar argues, if one says a dog is not a cat, since a hamster is not a cat, one must say that a dog is neither a cat nor a hamster. However, a donkey is neither a cat nor a hamster, so one must say that a dog is neither a cat, nor a hamster, nor a donkey, etc. (2010, 87-88).

⁸ I borrow the moniker “consciousness first” from Philip Goff (manuscript, Chapter 1). He contrasts the “consciousness first” approach with the “brain first” approach which begins the dialectic on consciousness from the point of view of the natural sciences.

⁹ I am, of course, thinking of physical objects as more than just “washing machines and rocks.”

¹⁰ These are broad strokes towards a fuller argument. At this point, the typical move for the proponent of an *a posteriori* approach is to suggest that we tie the thesis of physicalism to future/idealized physics. But then, it’s unclear what future physics will actually postulate. If we agree with Strawson, a future physicist might well discover subatomic particles which have conscious-experiential properties.

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