Thomas Nagel’s paper, ‘Physicalism’ has earned a lot of attention. In the paper Nagel expounds the doctrine he calls physicalism which is understood to be another name for the Identity Theory. It is the thesis that “a person, with all his psychological attributes, is nothing over and above his body with all its physical attributes.” Identity theories can be classified first of all on the basis of the terms of the relation that is claimed to exist and secondly on the nature of the relation. Nagel thinks that his version of the theory is an improvement over other versions on both these points. He makes some changes in what is frequently taken to be the mental term of the relation and introduces the concept of theoretical identity as the relation holding between mental and physical states. Both these changes amount to weakenings of the basic claim of the Identity Theory. He makes them in order to avoid some of the objections frequently levelled against the Identity Theory but I shall argue that Nagel’s account fails on both points.

In regard to the first, Nagel says that rather than identifying sensations, etc., with brain processes he proposes to identify a person’s having a sensation with his body’s being in a physical state or undergoing a physical process. He specifies the terms of the identity in this way to avoid having to identify “a sensation or a thought with anything physical, and this disposes of numerous objections”. To say, however, that the psychological term of the relation is a person’s having a sensation and the physical term is the person’s body undergoing a physical process is merely to say that the terms of the identity are mental and physical states. I am assuming here that states are to be analyzed as the exemplification of property by a subject because this is the analysis that I would offer and the one that Nagel seems to have in mind. If this is what states are, then Nagel’s move can be seen to have little significance. In order for states to be identical, the constituents of the states must be identical. The sensa-
tion and the brain process are constituents of the mental state of a person feeling pain and the physical state of his body undergoing the physical process respectively. Hence, for the states to be identical, not only must the person be identical with his body but the sensation feeling pain must be identical with the physical process. It was in an attempt to avoid this and the objections to it that Nagel chose to identify a person’s having a sensation with his body’s undergoing a physical process. So his move fails.

The relation that Nagel claims to exist between mental and physical states is not what he calls a strict identity. The examples he gives of strict identities are ‘Shakespeare is identical with the author of Hamlet’ of ‘the war between World War I and the Korean War is identical with the events that produced the division of Germany’. In these identity statements what is being asserted is that there is one thing which is described by two different expressions. So Nagel’s intent would seem to be that mental and physical descriptions are not descriptions of a single thing. Rather, the relation that exists between mental and physical events is ‘theoretical identity’. The nature of this relation is not made perfectly clear. However, we are told that the crucial point for the establishment of the theoretical identity of two events is their common possession of causal and conditional attributes. It must be the case that the same statements about their causes and effects, what would happen if they did or did not continue, etc., are true of both events. For events that are not strictly identical the common possession of causal and conditional attributes is established by the discovery of general laws between them. It is not necessary that events which are theoretically identical have all their properties in common. The condition for the theoretical identity of two events is that all the attributes that are independently ascribable to one event be independently ascribable to the other event. Attributes that are independently ascribable to a certain event are those the ascription of which to that event does not rest solely on its strict identity with some other event to which the attributes are independently ascribable.

Nagel maintains that this condition is met by the events of water boiling and molecules behaving in a certain way but I do not think that this can be maintained without begging the question. If x is a cause of y, being caused by x would be a causal attribute of y. A causal attribute of the water boiling is being caused by the increase in the water’s temperature. A causal attribute of the behaviour of the molecules is being caused by the