
David Papineau’s fifth book, *Thinking About Consciousness*, is on the philosophy of mind. Papineau is a materialist. The book contains much of the argument and counter-argument of a kind one would thus expect. However, Papineau holds that materialism tends to be undermined by the fact that ‘[c]onsciousness is widely regarded as an intractable mystery’ (p. 1). He argues that it seems mysterious ‘not because of any hidden essence, but because we humans think about it in a special way’ (dust cover). The book ‘analyses this special mode of thought’ (dust cover) to demystify the concept, remove the appearance of intractability, and thereby bolster materialism; hence the title. There are seven chapters, which I will go through in turn shortly, an important appendix, a six-page bibliography, and a four-page index.

The book will be of most interest to philosophers. Psychologists, cognitive scientists and perhaps some in artificial intelligence will find sections of interest, especially Chapters 4 and 7. It is very well written indeed. The text is direct and to the point, without being prosaic. It is a polished performance and covers considerable ground with precision and insight. There is a good deal of ‘sign-posting’ of what is to come, which is on the whole most helpful. On rare occasions it is perhaps a tad overdone; on p. 55, for example, there are no fewer than five separate promises of things to come.

Papineau takes the ‘basic puzzle’ to be to ‘reconcile the causal efficacy of mental states with their subjectivity’ (p. 2). Perhaps it is, but there is also the more general puzzle of how we are to understand the nature of subjective mental states when our entire world seems to consist of non-subjective physical stuff. The puzzle would remain even if mental states were not (or are not) causally efficacious, for introspection compels us to accept that they are real and yet their subjectivity cannot be explained in terms of, seems not to be even touched by, the known physical concepts.

Chapter 1, ‘The Case for Materialism’, lays out ‘the canonical argument for materialism’ (p. 17), which Papineau calls ‘the causal argument’; namely (pp. 17–18):

1. Conscious mental occurrences have physical effects.
2. All physical effects are fully caused by physical prior histories.
3. The physical effects of conscious causes are not always overdetermined by distinct causes.

He concludes that ‘[m]aterialism now follows’ (p. 18), and that ‘conscious causes must be identical to physical causes’ (pp. 18–19). Causation is in turn teased out in terms of properties so that ‘each conscious property must be identical with some physical property’ (p. 20).
Papineau uses this argument to examine different positions in the philosophy of mind, locating how and where they are inconsistent with this argument. Epiphenomenalism, for example, violates (1) but, unlike Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, keeps ‘mind and matter in step’ by allowing ‘causal influences “upwards” from brain to mind, while denying any “downward” causation from mind to brain’ (p. 22).

Functionalism too, with its higher-order physical properties, ‘could well be held to deny [(1)]’ (p. 29) since, taking the causal argument at face value, it ‘promises to establish that conscious properties are identical with strictly physical properties, which is just what functionalism is designed to avoid’ (p. 29). However, Papineau soon defuses the matter concluding that for his purposes in the book ‘it will not matter too much whether conscious properties are identified with strictly physical or with physically realized higher properties’ (p. 36).

Papineau asks why it is that ‘materialism has become really popular only in the last 50 years or so’ (p. 46). His answer is that the causal argument has become available to us only since empirical considerations have established (2), which he calls ‘the completeness of physics’, and that ‘a scientific consensus on [it] was reached only in the middle of the twentieth century’ (p. 255). He presents a history of this completeness, from Descartes, Leibniz, and Newton through to the mid-20th century, as an appendix. (It is an excellent and lively read, and is more or less independent of the main text.) Therein he argues (pp. 233–234) that many of the post-1950s arguments for materialism, such as from J. J. C. Smart, David Lewis, David Armstrong, and Donald Davidson, implicitly appealed to the then recently established completeness of physics, even though their arguments were not explicitly of a causal nature. Hence the recent popularity of materialism is not as ‘[s]ceptics sometimes suggest … a matter of passing fashion’ (p. 9).

Papineau also defends (3), explaining that to reject it is ‘to accept that the physical effects of mental causes are always overdetermined by distinct causes’ (p. 27). As he explains, (1) and (2) alone suggest that some physical effects (our behaviour) have two different, separately adequate, causes – one mental and one physical. For example, the effect of drinking is separately caused both by feeling thirsty and by having (certain) physical, neural activity. Although Papineau grants that some effects are thus overdetermined, (3) rules out that they all are. He briefly defends (3) concluding that ‘we have good reason to uphold [it] and none to deny it’ (p. 28).

In Chapter 2, ‘Conceptual Dualism’, Papineau reminds us that he is a materialist about conscious properties, and asserts that he is ‘a sort of a dualist about the concepts we use to refer to these properties’ (p. 47). He holds that there are, crucially, two different ways we have of thinking about conscious properties – phenomenal concepts, and (perhaps a little misleadingly since they pertain to conscious properties) material concepts.