

The Physicalist Worldview as Neurotic Ego-Defense Mechanism

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Abstract

The physicalist worldview is often portrayed as a dispassionate interpretation of reality motivated purely by observable facts. In this article, ideas of both depth and social psychology are used to show that this portrayal may not be accurate. Physicalism—whether it ultimately turns out to be philosophically correct or not—is hypothesized to be partly motivated by the neurotic endeavor to project onto the world attributes that help one avoid confronting unacknowledged aspects of one’s own inner life. Moreover, contrary to what most people assume, physicalism creates an opportunity for the intellectual elites who develop and promote it to maintain a sense of meaning in their own lives through fluid compensation. However, because this compensatory strategy does not apply to a large segment of society, it creates a schism—with corresponding tensions—that may help explain the contemporary conflict between neo-atheism and religious belief.

Keywords

physicalism, depth psychology, psychological defense, compensatory control theory, Meaning Maintenance Model

Introduction

A worldview is a narrative in terms of which we relate to ourselves and reality at large. It is a kind of cultural operating system that gives us tentative answers to foundational questions such as “What are we?” “What is the nature of reality?” “What is the purpose of life?” and so on (Kastrup, 2014). Although many different worldviews vie for dominance today, the academically endorsed physicalist narrative defines the mainstream, despite its many difficulties (Kastrup, 2014, 2015; Nagel, 2012). This reigning worldview posits that physical entities outside consciousness are the building blocks of reality. Consciousness, in turn, is supposedly an epiphenomenon or emergent property of certain complex arrangements of these entities. As such, under physicalism, consciousness must be reducible to physical arrangements outside and independent of experience (Stoljar, 2016).

Physicalism is often portrayed as a worldview that, in contrast to, for example, religion or spirituality, is based solely on objective facts. The present article, however, hypothesizes that the formative principles and motivations underpinning the physicalist narrative—whether it ultimately turns out to be philosophically correct or not—are partly subjective, reflecting neurotic ego-defense maneuvers meant, as described by Vaillant (1992), to “protect the individual from painful emotions, ideas, and drives” (p. 3). This becomes clear when one lifts core concepts of depth psychology to the social and cultural spheres. However, as a mostly clinical approach, depth psychology requires some elaboration before being applied at a theoretical level.

The modern understanding of depth psychology can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the works of Frederic Myers, Pierre Janet, William James, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung (Kelly et al., 2009). Its foundational inference is that the human psyche comprises two main parts a conscious and an “unconscious” segment. The conscious segment of the psyche comprises experiences a person has introspective access to and can report. According to the analytical school of depth psychology, the “ego” is defined as the experiential center of this segment (von Franz, 1964, p. 161), and it is in this specific sense that I use the word “ego” throughout the present article. In contrast, the so-called “unconscious” segment of the psyche comprises mental contents the person has no introspective access to and cannot report. Nonetheless, depth psychologists assert that “unconscious” mental contents can, and do, influence the person’s manifest thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Because the ability to report an experience is a metacognitive capacity on top of the experience itself (Schooler, 2002), a more rigorous articulation of the difference between the conscious and “unconscious” segments of the psyche is this: Conscious mental contents are those a person *both* experiences *and* knows that he or she experiences them. “Unconscious” mental contents, on the other hand,

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are those the person either does not experience or does not know *that* he or she experiences them (Kastrup, 2014, pp. 104-110). In other words, conscious mental contents fall within the field of self-reflection and, therefore, can be reported, whereas “unconscious” mental contents escape this field and, therefore, cannot be reported. Indeed, the existence of mental contents that are experienced but cannot be reported—even to oneself—is now well established in neuroscience, which has prompted the emergence of so-called “no-report paradigms” (Tsuchiya, Wilke, Frässle, & Lamme, 2015).

However, as clinical psychologists can only gauge consciousness based on what their patients report, anything outside the field of self-reflection is indistinguishable from true unconsciousness. This explains the somewhat inaccurate terminology choice of the founders of depth psychology.

Some critics have questioned the existence of an “unconscious” segment of the psyche on philosophical grounds (Stannard, 1980, pp. 51-81). However, recent empirical results in neuroscience show the presence of broad cognitive activity that individuals cannot report, but which nonetheless causally conditions the individuals’ manifest thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (Augusto, 2010; Eagleman, 2011; Westen, 1999). Recent neuroimaging studies of the psychedelic state have also corroborated the depth-psychological view that ego suppression—in the form of reduction of neural activity in the brain’s default mode network—brings otherwise “unconscious” mental contents into awareness (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012; Carhart-Harris et al., 2016; Palhano-Fontes et al., 2015).

On the basis of these empirical results, the core idea of depth psychology—that is, that a segment of the psyche that escapes self-reflective introspection can causally condition our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—cannot be dismissed. And because cultural narratives are the compound result of an aggregation of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals, depth-psychological insights are valid starting points for an analysis of the psychological underpinnings of our culture’s mainstream worldview.

In the “Ego Protection Through Projection” and “Egoic Control” sections, I review ways in which the physicalist narrative can give us permission to avoid confronting unwanted affects in the “unconscious” segment of our psyche. In “The Question of Meaning” section, I elaborate on how physicalism can conceivably even nurture its proponents’ sense of meaning in life. This latter section is based on theories of social psychology, rather than depth psychology, but it still leverages the notion of an “unconscious”: In hypothesizing that physicalism is an expression of fluid compensation, it presupposes that cognitive processes outside the field of self-reflection influence the feelings, thoughts, and opinions subjects express. Finally, the “Conclusion” section briefly sums up the key ideas defended in this article.

Ego Protection Through Projection

According to depth psychology, a neurosis is the expression of an inner psychic conflict caused by the ego’s refusal to acknowledge, confront, and ultimately integrate unwanted affects rising from the “unconscious” (Jung, 2014, p. 137). To keep these affects at bay, the ego uses a variety of defense mechanisms, among which denial, distortion, dissociation, repression, and so on (Vaillant, 1992). A particularly common defense mechanism is *projection* (Vaillant, 1992), whereby one circumvents the need to confront ego-threatening forces within oneself by ascribing the corresponding attributes to the outer environment. As such, projections can be said to partly hijack and manipulate one’s worldview in an attempt to prevent short-term suffering. My hypothesis is that, through projection, the physicalist worldview gives us permission to avoid confronting some of what we find disagreeable within ourselves. This can be achieved in a variety of subtle ways.

For instance, we all have a sense of our own existence and identity. Lucid introspection reveals that the root of this sense is our consciousness—our capacity to be subjects of experience. After all, if we were not conscious, what could we know of ourselves? How could we even assert our own existence? Being conscious is what it means to *be* us. In an important sense—perhaps even the *only* important sense—we are first and foremost consciousness itself, the rest of our self-image arising afterward, as thoughts and images constructed *in* consciousness.

From this perspective, the physicalist narrative’s attempt to reduce consciousness to physical entities outside subjectivity is counterintuitive, for it divorces the alleged nature of consciousness from our felt sense of identity. We do not *feel* as though we were a bunch of physical particles bouncing around inside our skull. Instead, we feel that we are the subjective “space” wherein our experiences unfold, including our ideas about physical particles. Hence, there is a sense in which the physicalist narrative can be said to *project* the felt essence of ourselves onto something distinctly other. According to it, we are not really “here,” grounded in our subjective sense of being, but somewhere “over there,” in an abstract world fundamentally beyond the felt concreteness of our inner lives. As such, the physicalist narrative entails an *emptying out* of what it means to be us, a kind of secular kenosis. “I am no ghost, just a shell,” laments the art character Annlee (Huyghe & Parreno, 2003, p. 35), whose predicament is that of many of us in contemporary society.

The kenosis entailed by the physicalist narrative can exonerate its proponents from responsibility for their choices and actions. Consider this passage by Sam Harris (2012), “Did I consciously choose coffee over tea? No. *The choice was made for me by events in my brain* that I . . . could not inspect or influence” (pp. 7-8, emphasis added). The projection of responsibility here is clear and the corresponding release described by Harris (2012) himself: “Losing a belief

in free will has not made me fatalistic—in fact, *it has increased my feelings of freedom*. My hopes, fears, and neuroses seem *less personal*” (p. 46, emphasis added). Indeed, under the ethos of such a worldview, there is no concrete reason for guilt or regret, for we allegedly are not what we experience ourselves to be. We are not responsible for what happens *here* because we are not—and have never been—really *here*. We are not ghosts in the machine but ghosts *conjured up by* the machine. In a significant sense, we do not really exist.

As a matter of fact, some proponents of the physicalist narrative go as far as to deny that consciousness exists. “Consciousness doesn’t happen. It’s a mistaken construct.” These words of neuroscientist Michael Graziano (2016) should give anyone pause for thought. Here we have consciousness—whatever it may intrinsically be—denying that consciousness exists. Philosopher Daniel Dennett (1991) also claimed that consciousness is an illusion, a claim that seems to immediately contradict itself. After all, where do illusions occur if not in consciousness? By appealing to metaphysical abstractions fundamentally beyond experience, such denials of our felt selves achieve a form of deliverance somewhat analogous to religious absolution. Surprisingly, as we will later see, they even help restore a sense of meaningfulness in life, following what I will call “ontological trauma.”

The structure of these denials is fairly clear: First, consciousness weaves the conceptual notion that certain aspects of its own dynamics somehow exist outside itself; then, it projects its own essence onto these aspects. The corresponding dislocation of identity is apparent—and its neurotic character easy to grasp—with an analogy: Imagine a painter who, having painted a self-portrait, points at it and declares himself to *be* the portrait. This, in essence, is what physicalists do, whether it is philosophically justifiable or not. Their consciousness conceptualizes self-portraits within itself. Sometimes these self-portraits take the form of electrical impulses and neurotransmitter releases in the brain (Koch, 2004). Other times, they take the shape of quantum transitions or potentials (Tarlaci & Pregolato, 2015). Whatever the case, their consciousness always points to a conceptual entity it creates within itself and then declares itself to *be* this entity. It dismisses its own primary, first-person point of view in favor of an abstract third-person perspective. Consider Dennett’s (1991) words: “The way to answer these ‘first-person point of view’ stumpers is to *ignore the first-person point of view* and examine what can be learned from the third-person point of view” (p. 336, emphasis added). The contempt for the *subject* of experience—the primary datum of existence and one’s own felt identity—is palpable here; the kenosis nearly total.

The physicalist narrative may also give us permission to carve out and dismiss—again through the kenosis of projection—the most difficult aspects of our inner lives: our felt emotions. According to it, the feeling of an emotion is the

internal perception of an “action program” triggered by certain stimuli (Damasio, 2011). Although the action program itself is important insofar as it helps us survive and reproduce, the accompanying feeling of emotion is, in a sense, a mere side effect of the program’s execution. For instance, the sight of another human being facing a predicament is a stimulus that triggers actions meant to help the victim and, consequently, increase the social cachet of the action taker. The *feeling* of compassion, in turn, is supposedly nothing but the inner perception of this evolutionarily useful reactive schema (Immordino-Yang, McColl, Damasio, & Damasio, 2009); it allegedly has no primary or fundamental significance. Under such a narrative, it is easier to go into denial about our emotional lives when the going gets tough. We feel justified to dismiss or repress our traumas and demons, avoiding the often painful work of psychological integration. The physicalist narrative provides a foundation for rationalizing the choice of living an unexamined, superficial life. To a person desperate to avoid the specter of immediate and pungent suffering, the benefits of this stance may seem to far outweigh its potential long-term implications.

Surprisingly, the physicalist narrative can even offer us reassurance about death. According to it, there is literally nothing to fear about death itself, because it is allegedly the end of all experience, including the experiences of fear and pain. All of our problems and suffering are guaranteed to end at that point. The great and scary *unknown* of the experiential realm beyond physical existence vanishes in one fell swoop; the greatest angst of humankind is conquered. The psychological allure of this idea is powerful, yet most people do not seem to ever stop to consider it. We have come to take for granted the comforts that our mainstream worldview grants us.

To sum it up, by denying our felt sense of existence and identity, the physicalist narrative creates an opportunity to clear the ego of ultimate responsibility. By denying the fundamental reality of emotions, it creates an opportunity to protect the ego from a confrontation with far more powerful forces. And by projecting our ontological essence onto ephemeral arrangements of matter, it creates an opportunity to protect the ego from what has historically been the greatest angst of humankind: the experiential unknown of the after-death state.

Egoic Control

It has been shown that religiosity can reflect a form of compensatory control (Kay, Gaucher, McGregor, & Nash, 2010): By believing that transcendent forces aligned with one’s convictions govern the world, the ego avoids the anxiety associated with its own inability to overcome uncertainty. This way, religiosity creates an opportunity for control *by proxy*: Although the ego cannot determine the course of nature, an external agency far superior to it is believed to do so in a way consistent with the ego’s preferences. The ego’s need to avoid anxiety by exerting control is thus *indirectly* fulfilled.

Going beyond religiosity, the physicalist narrative enables a sense of *direct* egoic control over nature. Indeed, a recent empirical study has shown that “believing that science is or will prospectively grant . . . mastery of nature imbues individuals with the belief that they are in control of their lives” (Stavrova, Ehlebracht, & Fetchenhauer, 2016, p. 234). Of course, by associating itself with science—in a philosophically questionable move that is nonetheless widely accepted—the physicalist narrative has become the enabler and ontological foundation of this belief. And because *direct* control—the notion that one can personally steer or at least predict what is going to happen—is known to be a key contributor to mental well-being (Langer & Rodin, 1976; Luck, Pearson, Maddem, & Hewett, 1999), it stands to reason that the allure of physicalism in this regard could potentially be even stronger than that of religious control-by-proxy.

The opportunity for direct control offered by the physicalist narrative goes as far as conquering death itself: If consciousness is just an epiphenomenon or emergent property of physical arrangements outside experience, it becomes conceivable that, through smart engineering, we could create means to upload our consciousness into more durable substrates such as silicon computers (Kurzweil, 2005). Some physicalists even offer detailed roadmaps for achieving this (Sandberg & Boström, 2008). The possibility of eternal life thus seems to open up, provided that consciousness can be instantiated in a computer by programming the computer with the patterns of information flow found in a person’s brain.

This, however, is premised on the notion that a simulation of a mental phenomenon is equivalent, *in essence*, to the phenomenon itself. There are many compelling arguments against this notion in philosophy of mind, the most well known of which is perhaps John Searle’s (2004). To gain some intuition about what these arguments generally entail, consider this: Do we have any reason to believe that, by performing a perfectly accurate simulation of kidney function in a computer, the computer will begin urinating on its desk? Clearly not. There is an essential difference between a computer simulation and the phenomenon it simulates; they are not the same thing, no matter how accurate the simulation. Yet, those hoping to “upload consciousness” under the physicalist narrative seem to become so engrossed in abstraction that they lose touch with basic intuitions of plausibility. Their neurosis is, in this sense, comparable with religious dogmatism.

Although both the religious and physicalist narratives create an opportunity for conquering death, the Promethean door to immortality opened by physicalism invests the *ego*—not deities—with the power to control transcendence through technology. This is seductively more direct, its only weakness—from a psychological standpoint—being that it is promissory: At present, nobody has ever managed to upload consciousness. Yet, some popular physicalist authors argue that consciousness uploading may be achievable *still in our own lifetime* (Kurzweil, 2005; Sandberg & Boström, 2008), which actualizes the potential allure of their worldview.

As seen in the “Ego Protection Through Projection” section and this section, the implications of the physicalist narrative consistently help protect and invest the ego with authority. This is not to say that physicalism is entirely motivated by neurotic ego-defense maneuvers, for there is a philosophical argument behind it that cannot be dismissed. Nonetheless, the question is whether it is plausible that physicalism’s significant ego-defense potential has *not* been, to some degree, an unexamined motivation for its development, promotion, and adoption.

The Question of Meaning

Meaning—in the sense of significance and purpose—is probably the greatest asset any human being can possess. Psychotherapist Victor Frankl (1991), who practiced and led groups while detained in a concentration camp during World War II, asserted that the *will-to-meaning* is the most dominant human drive, in contrast to Nietzsche’s will-to-power and Freud’s will-to-pleasure. Meaning is so powerful that, as Jung remarked (1995), it “makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything” (p. 373). Philip K. Dick’s alter ego Horselover Fat, in the novel *Valis*, embodies the essence of this drive: “Fat had no concept of enjoyment; he understood only meaning,” wrote Dick (2001, p. 92). Like Fat, many of us see meaning as a higher value than power or pleasure. Our motivation to live rests in there being meaning in our lives. Today, we need meaning more than ever, for as Paul Tillich (1952) lucidly observed, the greatest anxieties of our culture are precisely those of *doubt* and *meaninglessness*.

And here is where an argument is often made for the impartiality of physicalism: as a worldview that, by turning the universe into a mechanical contraption fueled by mere chance, drains the meaning out of life, it cannot possibly be a neurotic ego-defense mechanism—or so the argument goes. Instead, the physicalist narrative must represent a courageous admission by “tough people who face the bleak facts” (Watts, 1989, p. 65). It must embody an objective assessment of reality, not an emotional, irrational wish-fulfillment maneuver akin to religion. Compelling as it may seem at first, this argument fails careful scrutiny, for its premise is false.

Indeed, according to the Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM) of social psychology (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006)—which is perhaps better seen in the context of a broader theory of psychological defense (Hart, 2013)—we can derive a sense of meaning from four different sources: self-esteem, closure, belonging, and symbolic immortality. In other words, we can find meaning in life through (a) cultivating a feeling of personal worth, (b) resolving doubts and ambiguities, (c) being part of something bigger and longer lasting than ourselves, and (d) leaving something of significance behind—such as professional achievements—in the form of which we can “live on” after physical death. A society’s mainstream cultural narrative conditions how meaning can be derived from each of these four sources.

The key idea behind the MMM is that of *fluid compensation* as an ego-defense mechanism: If one of the four sources of meaning is threatened, an individual will tend to automatically compensate by seeking extra meaning from the other three sources. For instance, threats to self-esteem may cause the individual to reaffirm his or her model of reality, thereby bolstering closure.

As Van Tongeren and Green (2010) have shown, a transcendent source of meaning, such as religion, plays the same role in fluid compensation as the other four sources. For instance, individuals tend to reaffirm their religious beliefs following disruption to their meaning system, in an effort to protect the latter. Van Tongeren's and Green's experiments have not only empirically substantiated the MMM, they have also shown that even *subliminal* threats to meaning trigger fluid compensation, strongly indicating that the "unconscious" is integral to the process.

With this as background, my suggestion is that the physicalist narrative, in addition to being a rational hypothesis for making sense of the world, may be an expression of fluid compensation by intellectual elites. In other words, instead of a threat to meaning, the physicalist narrative may actually reflect an attempt by these elites to protect and restore their sense of meaning through bolstering closure, self-esteem, and symbolic immortality. The disruption that may have originally led to this compensatory move occurred around the mid- to late 19th century.

Indeed, it was at that time that we lost our ability to spontaneously relate to religious myths without linear intellectual scrutiny. "With Descartes and Kant, the philosophical relation between Christian belief and human rationality had grown ever more attenuated. By the late nineteenth century, with few exceptions, that relation was effectively absent," wrote Tarnas (2010, p. 311). The myths that had hitherto offered us meaning through the promise of *literal* immortality and metaphysical teleology became untenable. Taylor (2007), who richly chronicled this historical transition, characterized the corresponding loss of meaning rather broadly and generally as "a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanting world, a sense of it as flat, empty" (p. 302). He even hinted at fluid compensation when speaking of "a multiform search for something within, or beyond [the world], which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence" (Taylor, 2007, p. 302).

While acknowledging that this generalized malaise was the matrix of what followed, I submit that a more specific, forceful, and *personal* threat to meaning was necessary to mobilize the extraordinary level of academic and intellectual endorsement amassed by physicalism. After all—as Taylor himself described through what he called "the nova effect"—the malaise, in and by itself, fostered not only physicalism but also an explosion of myriad other worldviews.

I hypothesize that a profound and disturbing change in the intellectual elites' understanding of the nature of *their own being*—that is, an ontological trauma—was the specific,

forceful, and personal trigger that helped congeal the physicalist narrative. Having lost religion, the elites were left with the prospect of physical deterioration without the path to transcendence previously offered by an immortal soul. Hence, they were forced to face the inexorability of their own approaching death. And as we know from Terror Management Theory, mortality salience is a formidable threat to meaning (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997) empirically shown to motivate investment in palliative worldviews (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). Ontological trauma may have thus triggered fluid compensation and ultimately led to the intellectual elites' championing of the physicalist narrative.

Indeed, many studies have shown that mortality salience leads to a heightened need for *closure* (Landau et al., 2004). This is fluid compensation in action. Notice also that the physicalist narrative is humanity's most significant attempt yet to achieve *closure* in our worldview. As multibillion dollar experiments like the Large Hadron Collider—whose primary purpose is to "close" the Standard Model of particle physics, with no immediate practical applications—illustrate, physicalism embodies an unprecedented effort to produce a causally complete, unambiguous model of reality. Nothing else in millennia of preceding history has come anywhere near it. I suggest that this is not coincidental: The physicalist narrative may reflect the elites' ego's attempt to regain, through heightened *closure*, the meaning it lost along with religion. Moreover, other modalities of fluid compensation may be at play here as well: By distinguishing themselves as a segment of society uniquely capable to understand facts and concepts beyond the cognitive capacity of others, the scientists and academics who promote the physicalist narrative stand to gain in self-esteem. The cosmological scope of the scientific work they produce and leave behind upon their deaths can also be seen as a boost to symbolic immortality. Finally, recall Tillich's observation: *Doubt* and *meaninglessness* anxiety dominate our culture's mind-set. Is it humanly plausible that our mainstream narrative would have evolved to tackle only doubt and leave meaninglessness anxiety unaddressed?

All in all, the physicalist narrative does not necessarily represent a net loss of meaning for the intellectual elites who produced and continue to promote it. The transcendent meaning lost along with religion may be compensated for by an increase in closure, self-esteem, and symbolic immortality. Unfortunately, however, this compensatory strategy cannot work for most ordinary people: The men and women on the streets do not have enough grasp of contemporary scientific theories to experience an increase in their sense of closure. Neither do they gain in self-esteem, because they are not part of the distinguished elites. Finally, insofar as ordinary people do not produce scientific work of their own, no particular gain in symbolic immortality is to be expected either.

In conclusion, the physicalist narrative may serve the egoic meaning needs of the intellectual elites who develop

and promote it, but constitutes a significant threat to the sense of meaning of the average person on the streets. Perhaps for this reason, a large segment of society seeks meaning through alternative ontologies considered outdated and untenable by the intellectual elites, such as religious dualism (Heflick, Goldenberg, Hart, & Kamp, 2015). This creates a schism—with corresponding tensions—between different segments of society, which may help explain the contemporary conflict between neo-atheism and religious belief.

Conclusion

The physicalist narrative, in contrast to the way it is normally portrayed, may not be dispassionate. It may be partly driven by the neurotic endeavor to project onto the world attributes that help us avoid confronting unacknowledged aspects of our own inner lives. Moreover, contrary to what most people assume, physicalism creates an opportunity for the intellectual elites who develop and promote it to maintain a sense of meaning in their own lives through fluid compensation. However, because this compensatory strategy does not apply to a large segment of society, it creates a schism—with corresponding tensions—that may help explain the contemporary conflict between neo-atheism and religious belief.

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