This seminar is about a cluster of issues at the intersection of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and perhaps science itself. The central questions that organize the course are something like this: when and how do smaller things—objects, events, properties—come together to make bigger things? What is the causal status of the things thus created? What is the relationship between the aggregates and their parts, or between properties and laws at intuitively ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ levels? Clearly, any one of those topics could be the sole focus of a seminar; the point of this course is to put them all on the table at the same time, and to look at some literature from different areas of philosophy.

There is also a metaphilosophical issue—or at least an issue about contemporary philosophical methods—that we want to raise. The revival of metaphysics in analytic philosophy in the 1950’s and 1960’s had as one of its central themes an issue—the mind-body problem—of concern both to philosophers of science and to philosophers more centrally in the philosophical mainstream, and this was a source of important cross-fertilization between philosophical subdisciplines. It’s plausible to think that this cross-fertilization needs to go further and to extend beyond the philosophy of mind. For example, much important work in the 1970’s-1990’s in philosophy of biological taxonomy seems to have been done with almost no reference to the relevant mainstream literature on reference, natural kinds, etc. Similarly, the analytic metaphysics literature on aggregate phenomena has not yet been closely tied to the philosophy of biology literature on species or the philosophy of chemistry literature on molecules and chemical substances. Would our work in philosophy of science and mainstream metaphysics be significantly improved if cross-fertilization were enhanced and, if it would, how might this be done?

More specifically, questions we will address include the following.

• What is physicalism? What does ‘physical’ mean? What is the relationship between physicalism and various type/token identity theories? Do different motivations naturally link up with slightly different understandings of the view? And what positive evidence is there for its truth?

• Is the putative multiple realizability of certain putative higher-level properties better taken as a reason for thinking that the higher-level properties do not reduce to lower-level ones, or as a reason for thinking that the higher-level properties are no more than putative? Or is the right lesson something else altogether?

• What are the concerns about mental causation, especially the ‘exclusion problem’? Is this a good argument for either physicalism or reductive physicalism? How similar are the issues that arise in other areas, particularly philosophy of biology and metaethics?

• Under what conditions, if any, do several objects compose a single one? What is composition? How are composite objects individuated? Do they have modal properties, are any of them ‘scattered’, etc.? Does it matter that metaphysicians seem to spend most of their time thinking about artifacts?

• In discussing evidence for or against physicalism we deploy lots of epistemological notions: explanation, simplicity, projectibility, unification,… In what ways might those notions be usefully clarified? How might resources from recent analytic epistemology and philosophy of science help?
Readings:
...will be made available electronically on Blackboard.

Requirements:
1. A short presentation, consisting of a) brief summary of the main or most interesting themes and arguments of one or two of the assigned papers, b) some questions for discussion, both clarificatory and substantive. We suggest that members of the seminar consider working together on these presentations, so that on at any given meeting two (or perhaps three) people will lead off our discussion by providing summaries and questions, either individually or jointly.
2. A term paper in two drafts, the first due 4/15 and the second due 5/15.

Contact:
Karen: 322 Goldwin Smith
kb383@cornell.edu
Dick: 326 Goldwin Smith
rnb1@cornell.edu

Tentative Schedule of Topics

Topics, order, and assigned readings are all subject to change

Part 1: Characterizing the (alleged) phenomena
1/22 Preliminary readings: Some recent-ish history of physicalism (since ~1950)
Carnap, Unity of Science (excerpts)
Smart, “Sensations and Brain Processes”
E. Nagel, “Wholes, Sums, and Organic Unities”
T. Nagel, “Physicalism”

1/29 More on physicalism
Jackson, excerpt from From Metaphysics to Ethics (1998)
Melynk, chapters 1 and 2 of A Physicalist Manifesto (if you’re feeling ambitious)

We’re planning on covering a lot of ground quickly rather than looking at any particular readings in detail. But here are some further optional suggestions.
Hellman and Thompson, “Physicalism: Ontology, Determination, and Reduction” (1975)
Crane and Mellor, “There is no Question of Physicalism” (1990)
Stoljar, “Two Conceptions of the Physical” (2001)
Wilson, “Supervenience-Based Characterizations of Physicalism”
Shoemaker, Physical Realization
Witmer, “Realization, Higher Order Properties, and Explanatory Import” (ms)

2/5 Multiple realization and the status of the special sciences
Fodor, “Special Sciences, or The Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis” (1974)
Kim, “Multiple Realization and the Metaphysics of Reduction” (1993)
2/12  

Other big things


Merricks, “Precis of *Objects and Persons*,” (2003), or chapter 3 of the book (2001)

Sider, “van Inwagen and the Possibility of Gunk” (1993—roughly 4 pages)

Ross Cameron, “The Contingency of Composition” (2007)

Bennett, “Zombies Everywhere!” (ms—roughly 4 pages)

Optional:

Markosian, “Brutal Composition” (1998)

Hudson, “Philosophy Compass: Simples and Gunk”

Schaffer, “Is there a Fundamental Level?”

Part 2: Challenges to the reality/causal efficacy/whatever of (some?) aggregates

2.1 Challenges related to overdetermination/causal exclusion


Yablo, “Mental Causation” (1992)

Shoemaker, “Realization and Mental Causation” (2001)


Bennett, “Why the Exclusion Problem Seems Intractable, and How, Just Maybe, to Tract It” (2003) [or “Exclusion Again” (forthcoming), which is a somewhat less detailed follow-up piece]

Further optional reading available upon request. But as a historical note, here is what I believe to be the start of it all:

Malcolm, “The Conceivability of Mechanism” (1968)


2.2 Other challenges to the causal efficacy of the ‘higher-level’

excerpt from Block, “Can the Mind Change the World?” (1990)


Bennett, “Philosophy Compass: Mental Causation,” (2007) especially §6 and 7

2.3 Similar issues in metaethics


Sturgeon, “Critical Study of Gibbard *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*” (to about page 17)

Sturgeon, “Non-moral Explanations” (pages 1-9, §1)

2.4 Challenges to “metaphysical realism” about “nonfundamental” things, properties...

Putnam, “Why There Isn't a Ready Made World” (1983)

Boyd, “Truth through Thick and Thin” (2001)
Part 3: Evidence for physicalism?
3.1 The role of a priori, a posteriori, philosophical, scientific considerations?
Block and Stalnaker. “Conceptual Analysis and the Explanatory Gap” (1999), pages 1-30 only (i.e., up to section 10, “The two dimensional framework.”)

More to be added: Other readings suggested by our seminar’s consideration of the literature on reduction, causal exclusion, etc.

Part 4: Insights from/applications to other cases.
4.1 The metaphysics of the smallest aggregates philosophers ordinarily write about: atoms and molecules
Weisberg, Michael. “Water is not H$_2$O” (ms)

4.2 The metaphysics of species
Wilson, Robert; Matthew Barker and Ingo Brigandt. in press. “When Traditional Essentialism Fails: Biological Natural Kinds.” Philosophical Topics.

4.3 Aggregate causal powers in evolutionary biology