**Review of Erik Banks: *Realistic Empiricism* (2014)**

Erik C. Banks

*The Realistic Empiricism of Mach, James, and Russell: Neutral Monism Reconceived*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 217 pp., $99.95 (hbk) $28.95 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-107-07386-9

Reviewed by Mostyn Jones

Erik Banks does several things in this slender yet substantial book on realistic empiricism (aka neutral monism). First, he encapsulates the main ideas of this tradition. While he goes into greater depth on some of these ideas than other introductions do, these pages are still accessible to nonspecialists. Second, he traces the the history of this tradition through the Austrian scientist, Ernst Mach, the American psychologist, William James, the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, and others. These four chapters are a valuable source for readers seeking to understand neutral monism in depth. Third, he develops his own version of neutral monism to deal with problems in the philosophies of mind and science. Most of my commentary will pertain to his own theory, which has some similar roots to my own.

Banks does a masterful job in the first two tasks above. He has now published two books and numerous papers on this subject matter. His accounts of the tenets and history of neutral monism are illuminating and well written. While the book contains lots of jargon and covers lots of philosophical topics, these terms and issues are well explained, and difficult ideas are made clear with diagrams. The success of book’s third task – developing and applying neutral monism to philosophical problems – largely depends on each reader’s view of neutral monism. But even critics, such as myself, must admit that Banks does an admirable job here of explaining and defending himself against criticisms. Most of my criticisms will come later in this review.

At the very start, Banks gives a clear, comprehensive overview of neutral monism’s basic ideas in just 29 pages. He explains that realistic empiricism is comprised of the predominant, empiricist versions of neutral monism. Neutral monism says that mental and physical entities are constructed from elements which are neither mental nor physical, but neutral. But in realistic empiricism these elements are construed in terms of what’s *empirically* given (or continuous with the empirically given) – and in a *realist* manner where these elements exist independently of minds. For example, elements can have raw sensory qualities of colors, pains, etc. – yet these elements exist independently of minds or egos, and in this particular sense aren’t mental. These elements are manifested as mental events by being functionally assembled through psychological principles of sensory images, memories, etc., while they’re manifested as neural events by being functionally assembled through neurophysiological principles. In these ways, the mental and physical are manifestations of the same neutral fabric (pp. 3-9).

Neutral monism thus offers an umbrella framework for the natural sciences that deals with physics and psychology under the same roof. The viability of this umbrella rests on its ability to avoid existing problems in physics and psychology (pp. 21ff., 37). Banks shows this as soon as he starts his historical accounts – with Mach. By arguing for a single, neutral fabric to the universe, Mach tries to do justice to the mental and physical, while avoiding the familiar problems in dualism, physicalism and idealism. He also tries to debunk mechanistic, pictorial visions of physics (pp. 39ff., 52ff.) with a deeper “law of energy changes” in which neural elements are construed as dynamic forces (powers). Intriguingly, this resembles the energy changes of subsequent quantum mechanics in some ways.

All this is interesting. But Banks seems rather uncritical of Mach when it comes to the “introjection” problem (pp. 78ff.). This problem arises when, for example, I say that the green leaf I see is an image in my brain. Mach thinks this introjection of images into brains is absurd, for there’s nothing green in my brain. The most I can do is use a mirror to look at my brain while I also look at the leaf. But then I see the green alongside my brain, not inside my brain. Banks notes that this problem doesn’t arise in neutral monism, for in this monism the image and brain are functionally related instead of being related as inside/outside. Also the image and brain are manifestations of the same neutral elements instead of being bifurcated into radically different things. My objection here is that introjection isn’t problematic for theories that actually explain how images can exist in brains without being perceived there (see below). These theories also explain why images are privately experienced – something neutral monists rarely address.

Banks turns next to James. What is neutral for James is “pure experience”, e.g., a raw, unconceptualized red patch. It’s the common constituent of both minds and bodies in their respective functional organizations. It’s shared between perceivers and the bodies they perceive by simultaneously being part of both their functional organizations. In this direct-realist theory of perception, physical objects are directly known by a perceiver by being part of the perceiver’s mind. The object is perceived exactly as it is, without any image between the object and perceiver, as in indirect-realist theories (pp. 91f.). But Banks notes that perceptual objects aren’t just these raw sensations, for objects also have different spatial perspectives, for example. To properly account for these, Banks reconstructs James’ theory by building on Kant’s account of how the intellect connects images into external objects (pp. 95ff.). This reconstruction seems plausible. But the dismissal of indirect realism seems a bit cursory in my view (see below).

Banks’ historical account ends with Russell’s theory (see esp. pp. 128-41). It’s especially important because Banks later builds upon it. Russell’s neutral elements (“event particulars”) are arranged into sensations and physical objects by psychological and physical laws, respectively. Elements are manifested in this way through their causal interactions with observers. Objects are the sum of their effects on these observers, and these effects are bound together by the laws of causal perspectives. These perspectives involve the four-dimensional space-time of physics and the sensory manifold of psychology. Non-Russellians may find these pages to be the most obscure in the book, yet they’re still very much worth reading.

Russell further says (pp. 135f.) that physics describes the abstract mathematical skeleton of objects, but says little about their intrinsic character, which grounds these abstractions in the concrete world. This intrinsic character of neutral elements could conceivably be like the concrete qualities in our perception. A full account of the world, including psychology, will include this concrete material that physical entities are grounded in. These points are among the most influential legacies of neutral monism – but as we’ll see, they’ve been reworked by others to offer alternatives to neutral monism.

Banks ends by refining neutral monism to deal with problems in the philosophies of mind and science, notably the mind-body problem and the problem of extension. I’ll just address the former, for it’s more interesting to me, and it may be the chapter that’s most open to challenges.

In dealing with the mind-body problem, Banks adopts Russell’s view that natural events have intrinsic qualities. But Banks expands this view with his own enhanced, a posteriori physicalism (p. 142). Here mental and physical events in brains are manifestations of the same neutral powers, yet they’re manifested differently. For mental events are macro-manifestations of the powers while physical events are micro-manifestations, and the same macro-event can be realized in different micro-events. Since these two manifestations differ in these ways, they can’t be deduced from each other a priori, instead their relationship is discovered experimentally (pp. 146ff.). This a posteriori physicalism is defended against criticisms involving epiphenomenalism, overdetermination and the causal closure of the physical.

Banks says (pp. 162f.) that his view isn’t compositional, nor emergentist. The reason his view isn’t compositional is that mental events arise completely at macro-levels – they aren’t already present at micro-levels in some primitive protoexperiential form which is then assembled into fully formed mental events at macro-levels. The reason his view isn’t emergentist is that mental events don’t emerge from physical events that are non-mental. Instead both mental and physical events are manifestations of functional complexes of neutral events.

Banks ends the chapter by criticizing other neo-Russellian views, starting with Chalmers’ type-F monism. It tends toward panpsychism, where our sensations are assembled out of lower-level experiences or protexperiences. Banks notes that this faces the well-known combination problem of how this assembly works. So he feels that his own view is much more likely (p. 167). Panpsychists could reply that while their view can’t be proven (as Banks notes on p. 153 when mentioning Lockwood), nonetheless much progress has been made in defusing the combination problem (e.g., Seager, 2010; Shani, 2010), so it’s actually a viable alternative to neutral monism.

Banks also addresses Strawson’s argument that it’s unintelligible for experience to emerge from what isn’t experiential. Strawson concludes that matter must instead be experiential down to its lowest levels in a panpsychist fashion. But Banks rejects what he sees as Strawson’s underlying compositional assumption here that “there is nothing in the whole or configuration that is not in the parts” (p. 168). Banks doesn’t feel threated by this assumption, for he instead thinks experience are manifestations of neutral elements in macro-configurations.

However, as I read Strawson (2006: §3), his point isn’t that there’s nothing in the whole that isn’t in the parts. In fact, he admits that life forms can intelligibly emerge in virtue of self-replicating abilities in molecules that aren’t themselves alive. Strawson’s key point is instead that this *“in virtue of”* relation is lacking when experience pops into existence from nonexperience. So the latter is sheer magic where *anything goes* – the concrete could even emerge from the abstract. Emergentists have long admitted that they can’t explain how experience pops into existence from matter lacking experience. Strawson just stresses the intelligibility problem here.

Admittedly, not everyone is convinced by Strawson’s argument. Yet many authors, including myself, are impressed by it. So I feel that Banks, and all neutral monists, face a familar dilemma that hinges on whether or not neutral elements possess experiences such as raw experiences of pain or color:

(1) If neutral elements don’t possess experience, then it’s hard to see how experiences can be manifestations of elements, for this involves experiences popping into existence from what isn’t experiential. This is basically Strawson’s point above.

(2) If neutral elements do possess qualia, then the elements seem to be mental instead of neutral, and neutral monism seems to be mental monism. Banks may reply that neutral elements aren’t mental, for even though they may have pains, colors, etc., these qualities don’t have minds or egos to impart mentality to them (see pp. 9, 90). But this reply seems problematic, for these pains are still very much mental in that they’re still qualia – whether or not they belong to minds.

But I don’t want to sound too negative, for I like a lot of what Banks says, and I feel that the challenges to his view may be less than to other views. For example, his view seems more sensible than traditional physicalist or idealist reductions, and it’s more economical than traditional dualism while avoiding its causal problems.

Yet there may be a theory that has this same virtue of avoiding mind-body problems – but without relying on a neutral entity. It comes from another neo-Russellian, namely, Herbert Feigl.

Feigl (1958) said that science deals with objects as perceived quite indirectly via reflected light, instruments, eyes, etc. It’s silent about the underlying nature of matter behind what the outer senses show. So there’s nothing to stop us from treating the hidden nature of brain matter as conscious. Feigl thus replaces direct realism with indirect realism. He also rejects any neutral third entity that generates mental events – he instead simply treats brain matter as conscious behind what’s perceived of it. Feigl subsequently treated all matter as experiential down to its simplest levels. Others showed how these simple “micro” experiences could be unified by firing neurons so as to form our familiar, fully conscious “macro” experiences (e.g., headaches).

This mind-body identity theory thus explains how qualia can exist in brains without being perceivable in brains. It also explains why pains are private. They’re experienced privately instead of being publicly accessible because they’re hidden behind what’s publicly observed of brains by reflected light.

This theory avoids the perennial problems in other theories. For example, traditional dualism is avoided because our pains physically exist in our brains. Associated dualist views such as epiphenomenalism and emergentism are also avoided.

This physicalism also avoids reductionism, for consciousness isn’t reduced to the perceivable and more fundamental entities of neuroscience. Consciousness is instead fundamental itself – it exists at fundamental levels. Also consciousness isn’t identified with neuroscience’s perceivable entities, but with their hidden, underlying nature. While it’s arguably unintelligible to reduce consciousness (which isn’t perceivable in brains) to perceivable brain events, this criticism doesn’t work against Feigl’s identification of consciousness with the underlying nature of brains. For we can’t know what brains are like behind what’s perceived of them. Various papers by Maxwell, Stoljar, Chalmers, etc. argue that this type of physicalism defuses conceivability, knowledge and explanatory arguments.

Feigl’s theory avoids problems in the other theories of mind too. It’s arguably simpler and clearer than neutral monism in that it avoids positing a questionable third entity. While Feigl faces the combination problem, much progress has been made in defusing it, as already noted.

To conclude, this book is a valuable source for readers seeking to understand neutral monism – either at an introductory level or at a fuller, historical level. It is also a very timely book, given the swelling interest in Russellian monism recently. Banks’ own neutral monism avoids basic problems in standard theories of mind. While it may incur a problem of its own (the dilemma above) this may well be less troublesome than these other problems. Banks makes important contributions to neutral monism which will be of real interest to both philosophers of mind and philosophers of science.

References

Feigl, H. (1958) “The Mental and the Physical,” *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science* II:370-97.

Seager, W. (2010) “Panpsychism, Aggregation and Combinatorial Infusion”, *Mind & Matter* 8;2,167-84.

Shani, I. (2010) “Mind Stuffed with Red Herrings,” *Acta Analytica* 25:4,413-434.

Stubenberg, L. (2010) “Neutral Monism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* (ed) E. Zalta.