

Philsoc Student Essay Prize – Michaelmas 2014: Second Prize

Why is the causal exclusion argument a problem for anomalous monism?

By Stephen Berry

Jaegwon Kim argues against non-reductive materialism and states that a physicalist must accept either reductionism or eliminativism. Anomalous Monism (AM), being a non-reductive physicalist theory, is one of the theories of mind in the firing line.

In his paper *The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism* Kim sets out what can be called the causal exclusion argument against AM. In summary he argues that if physical effects have sufficient physical causes, and no physical effects have two distinct causes - physical and mental - there cannot be any irreducible mental causes. Hence mental causes must either be reducible to physical causes by bridge laws (type identity), or else there are no mental causes.

Prior to considering the argument I shall set out Donald Davidson's AM theory. It is monist theory, where token mental events are identical with token physical events but are not reducible to physical types.

Anomalous Monism

In his paper *Mental Events*, Davidson sets out three principles for AM:

1. The principle of causal interaction - some mental events causally interact with some physical events
2. The principle that where there is causality, there is a law
3. The principle that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained - this is the anomalism principle, which denies there are strict laws regarding mental events

These principles appear to be contradictory. The first states that mental events can cause or be caused by physical events. The second states that where there is causality there is a strict law. But the third states that mental events cannot be predicted or explained, hence are not subject to strict laws.

Davidson does not believe the principles to be contradictory. To understand why we need to consider some more of Davidson's thought:

- Events are spatiotemporal particulars that could be wholly physical with no mental properties, such as a volcano erupting, or could have both physical and mental properties, such as my writing this essay. But there could not be an event that lacks any physical properties.
- Mental properties supervene on physical properties. Identical physical states would result in identical mental states, but identical mental states could hold for different physical states. So, for instance, I could have the same belief that 'I am in this room' at different times, but in each case the physical state would be slightly different.

- There is an important distinction between causation, where one event causes another, and causal explanation, whereby we explain why one event causes another. Explanation is dependent upon how events are described, whereas causation is dependent upon the ontology of events.
- Our causal explanations of events are based on observations of instances of causation between token events, and we look for similarities that are causes and effects. By doing so we are able to predict and explain events.

The crux of AM is that we can explain any particular event in many different ways. Some particular events can be explained using physical or mental predicates. My typing this sentence can be explained with physical predicates regarding neurons, muscles etc, or by mental predicates regarding desires and intentions. The physical predicates are subject to strict laws (such as the conservation of energy), but this is not case for the mental predicates. Therefore there can be two types of explanation for events: causal laws (nomological explanations) and mental states (reason explanations).

Kim's argument

Kim notes that, according to Davidson, there are no purely psychological laws, and no laws connecting psychological events. Davidson denies that a nomological reduction of the mental to the physical is possible because there are no bridge laws to correlate the two. Therefore any causal relation involving a mental event must instantiate a physical law, which means it must have a physical description, and thus must be a physical event. So in Davidson's universe all events are physical, and some are also mental. The events are spatiotemporal particulars with a network of causal relations. Kim states 'what role does mentality play, on Davidson's account of anomalous monism, in shaping this structure. The answer: None whatsoever.'

It seems that mental properties are excluded from any causal effect, since it is the physical properties and physical laws that alone are involved in causation. Kim asserts that mental properties could be redistributed over events in any way, or even eliminated, with no effect. Furthermore, to suppose that altering an event's mental properties would alter its physical properties is to suppose that psychophysical anomalism (the third principle) is false.

AM therefore allows mental properties no causal role, and what has no causal role has no explanatory role. As such AM is essentially a form of eliminativism. Although it allows mentality to exist, it gives it no useful work. For Kim, this highlights the importance of properties, for it is in terms of properties and their inter-relations that we make sense of concepts such as causality, law, and explanation.

A response to Kim

Davidson does not accept that mental events have no causal interaction with physical events, or that AM leads to eliminativism or epiphenomenalism. Going back to the crux of his argument, that it is events that are part of the causal scheme of things, not properties, and that physical properties provide nomological explanations and mental properties reason explanations, a supporter of AM can argue that Kim is missing the point.

Consider a green apple and a red apple, each falling from a tree. Clearly only physical properties are involved, and each event can be explained by way of physical causes. The physical causes in each case are identical, even though the events are different because of the different colours (actually as spatiotemporal particulars all such events are different). But the property of colour is irrelevant to the cause of the event of an apple falling. But to claim that mental properties do not matter in the same way, because other physical properties are all that is required to explain an event, is not true. Suppose I am given the choice of a red or green apple, and suppose I choose the red one because that is my preference. This event can be described in physical terms with no reference to mental properties, but this does not explain my choice. My choice must be explained by mental properties. Kim's argument, that mental events can be redistributed without effect, is clearly wrong - the mental event could not have been me choosing a green apple, but actually reaching out and taking the red apple. The mental aspect of the event of choosing a red apple is necessary to explain the event of my taking a red apple; without mental events it is not possible to make certain physical events intelligible.

Davidson does not need the mental properties to be causal *per se* - it is the event itself which is causal. The event has physical and mental properties (or perhaps they could be better referred to as predicates), but were it lacking the mental properties it would not be the event that it is.

A further problem

Having perhaps seen off the causal exclusion argument, though not to everyone's satisfaction, there is though a further problem with the causal closure of the physical domain. Davidson's second principle, that where there is causality there is a law, refers to the physical domain, and means that there cannot be distinct irreducible non-physical causes of physical phenomena.

But he assumes this without providing an argument, and so he is assuming that mental events are physical events. Therefore he is begging the question for the monist argument. And without proving the monist argument, he cannot assume the causal closure of the physical domain, nor the nomological character of causation. The result is that anomalous monism is unproven.

Bibliography

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