Second Prize

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

by **Miles Fender**

If we wish to avoid the reductive physicalist accounts of the mind that either dispense with mental states altogether (Churchland 1981), or else relegate them to nothing more than the steam whistle of the locomotive (Huxley 1874), then we must adopt and defend some view that can plausibly separate *mind* from *machine* without denying the (apparent) laws of nature. So as not to be forced into the metaphysically troubling Cartesian view that mind and body are different *substances*, we must therefore embark on a project that attempts to describe a non-reductive physicalism capable of preserving mental causation. In doing so however, we do not easily escape the specter of causal interaction: how exactly is it that the mental causally interacts with the physical? In this essay I will expand on the severity of this problem, and in particular how it presents an objection to anomalous monism. I will subsequently offer a potential path to resolution and briefly suggest why the argument cannot simply be waved away by the ardent epiphenomenalist.

Anomalous monism attempts to reconcile an 'inconsistent triad' whereby it seems clear - yet contradictory - that a) some mental events causally interact with physical events; that b) causality requires strict laws; and that c) there are no psycho-physical laws (Davidson 1970). The tension is resolved by submitting that the mental does indeed supervene on the physical (that is to say, that any change in the physical properties of an event necessarily change its mental properties), but that causal relationships are best described not by the physical *properties* of events, but by the *events themselves*. Thus, we explain the cause of my reaching for a sip of coffee not merely in terms of the firing of a particular set of neurons resulting in the motion of my hand toward the cup and subsequently to my lips, but more strongly in terms of my *desire* to take a sip of coffee. Regardless of how we choose to describe the ultimate causal chain (either physically or mentally), we must at least concede that at any time during the process of the motion of my hand, my *belief* that I've had quite enough coffee for one day could prevent the completion of this particular physical event.

A significant objection to this account is raised in the so-called *causal exclusion* argument. In its simplest formulation, the objection observes that every event has a sufficient physical cause (Kim 1996). Put another way, if causal relationships do indeed require strict laws (which Davidson does not deny), then my taking a sip of coffee (or not) is sufficiently explained in purely physical terms, and to suggest that an additional mental cause is required would be to submit to overdetermination. The mental cause could be removed from the equation and the end result would still be the same. In other words, for any given event, what additional work is there for the mental to perform if its physical properties alone are causally sufficient?

At first glance, this objection seems compelling. However, there is an important but subtle distinction in terms that allows for a way to deflect it. Recall that, on Davidson's account, causal relationships depend not on the properties of an event but on the event itself.

Let us consider an example.

Suppose that Alice is lost in a foreign city, trying to walk back to her hotel after an evening meal. She thinks that she is walking in roughly the right direction, but the streets are unfamiliar and there is no-one around to ask for guidance. She reaches the end of a street at which she can either turn left or right. Neither direction looks any more appealing than the other, but she is fairly sure that turning around will only take her further away from her destination. She needs to decide which way to turn.

At that moment and for no particular reason (in much the same manner as a catchy advertising jingle) Alice thinks about her favorite movie: the 1983 Tom Cruise flick 'All The Right Moves.' This, thinks Alice, is as good a sign as any and so she decides to turn right. Thankfully (though not of course inevitably) she arrives at her hotel just a few minutes later.

Now consider the same situation, except that upon glancing in each direction and in the absence of any other useful thoughts inexplicably popping into her head, Alice simply flips a coin. Heads left, tails right. It comes up tails and she turns right, also reaching her hotel without incident.

In each case, what would we say *caused* Alice to turn right? In the second case, it seems straightforward to argue the point in numerous ways. We could say that the cause was probabilistic; that there was an exactly 50/50 chance of Alice turning left or right based on the result of the coin flip. Or we could say that Alice's decision to flip the coin was causal, since the coin necessarily would have sent her either left or right. Or we could argue on purely physical grounds: that the force of the flip and the effects of gravity and wind resistance caused the coin to come down tails, the observation of which caused certain neurons to fire in Alice's brain which caused her to turn right. Defenders of mental causation might certainly insist that Alice's *decision*, or even her *idea* to flip a coin in the first place was the causal event, but the position of the reductive physicalist would be easily defendable: after all, if the coin had come up heads, Alice would have turned left, and we should therefore accept that the effective cause was the final resting position of the coin, a state of affairs that has a purely physical description.

The first case however seems less easily argued. There was no obvious physical cause of that particular movie popping into Alice's head at that moment. What's more, even if the reductive physicalist were to insist that the effective cause was a token physical brain state instantiating a particular memory, such an event seems either a) probabilistic, or b) at the end of such an obscure and convoluted causal chain that it *might as well* be indeterminate. In either case, it certainly does not appear to be the kind of event that is governed by a strict law. Some other movie, such as 'My Left Foot', or the Bonnie Tyler song lyrics 'Turn around, bright eyes' might equally have popped into Alice's head and been just as causally efficacious. We also require that Alice was sufficiently superstitious to take such a mental occurrence as a 'sign' that could be sensibly followed.[1] To insist that the effective cause was purely a case of the instantiation of a particular physical state seems obstinately skeptical; we could continue the chain forever and simply claim that the ultimate cause of Alice's action was the physical creation of the universe. Perhaps so, but we have to put a stake in the ground somewhere.[2]

At this point, the epiphenomenalist in the room is no doubt raising a hand and pressing the objection: since we concede that causal mental states must have physical descriptions, we are arguing from an ill-advised position in front of Occam's vigorously waving Razor. But to such an objection, we need only repeat the arguments. What caused Alice to turn right? What caused me to resist reaching for my coffee? What caused me to defend anomalous monism in the first place? To deny the causal efficacy of mental states seems to be to abandon the phenomena; to reduce all events to their constituent physical properties alone is to misrepresent how we think about the world. Where agency and intentionality is involved, we cannot effectively describe events merely in terms of their physical state.

---

1 Perhaps if Alice had been a reductive physicalist, she would have been unable to accept any such 'supernatural' sign as sufficient reason to turn and would still be standing there to this day.

2 One could begin to argue at this point that the identification of such a physical causal chain requires certain *beliefs* about the world; beliefs that are perhaps best described in mental rather than physical terms. Partially at the risk of the accusation of circularity, but primarily at the risk of word count, such an argument is postponed for another time.

The explanatory power of anomalous monism therefore lies not, perhaps, in its scientific rigor, but in the way it describes our experience of the world. It may not be proven, and it may not be provable, but it nevertheless seems arguable that causal exclusion - while admittedly a serious problem - is not an obvious defeater.

1,459 words

REFERENCES

Churchland, P. M. 1981. *Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes.* In *Philosophy of Mind* Oxford: Chalmers

Davidson, D. 1970. *Mental Events.* In *Philosophy of Mind* Oxford: Chalmers

Huxley, T. H. 1874. *Method and Results: Essays by Thomas H. Huxley.* New York: D. Appleton and Company

Kim, J. 1996. *The Philosophy of Mind.* Cambridge Mass.