Monism and Anomalousness: do they stand up? by Bob Stone

Davidson's view of the mind-body relationship is, very briefly, that any mental event is a physical event. When we describe such events in physical terms, we subsume them under strict (nomological) physical laws, so that they follow causally one from another. It is in virtue of being physical events, subject to those physical laws, that mental events are treated by us as proceeding causally; but there are no such strict laws governing them *seen as mental events*, only rather imprecise 'laws' which he calls 'anomalous'. The theory is many-layered and wide-ranging, but I want to discuss one aspect of each half, the monism and the anomalousness.

1. Monism

Davidson's view puts him in the 'token identity' camp; he claims not that a certain *type* of mental event is identical to some *type* of physical event, but that – on *a priori* grounds, arising from the causal interaction we see between the physical and the mental (1970: 208-215) – any *particular* mental event is the same event as some physical event.

Kripke's general argument against token identity – which explicitly includes Davidson's view (Kripke 144, note 73) – assumes the principle he has already demonstrated (97-105), namely that, if two things rigidly designated are identical, then they are necessarily so. If we pick out (rigidly designate) a particular mental event (e.g. my deciding to stand) and a particular physical event (e.g. the simultaneous activity of neurons in my brain), then, if they are the same event, they must be necessarily identical. But, says Kripke (147-8), this means that any essential property of one must be an essential property of the other, as they are the same thing; so the particular configuration of neurons in my brain is an essential feature of my deciding to stand. This seems intuitively wrong: my deciding could surely have been correlated with some quite different physical event and yet still have been my deciding.

This argument seems to lose its force against *events* (Davidson's focus, 1970: 207 ff), as opposed to objects. When we talk about a particular object – e.g. the present Queen – we are happy to accept that most of what she does or has become is contingent; things might have gone differently, she might never have become queen, but she would still be the same person. The only really essential property she has is that she emerged from the parents (or at least the sperm and egg) from which she emerged; if we imagine that she did not, we would not be imagining the same person (Kripke 110-113). So, like most objects, she has a limited number of essential properties that persist through time, and a host of contingent properties that she acquires and may lose at different times. Yet the case of events seems different. A particular event occurs at one time only. If event E had been different in any way from what it is, it would not be event E. Returning to my deciding to stand, every feature of that one-off event is an essential feature of it, including the neural activity in my brain. Maybe on another occasion I might decide to stand with quite different things going on in my brain; but that would be a different event. So I do not believe that we need to share Kripke's worry about the intuitive truth of 'multiple realisation' as applied to token identity of events.

2. Anomalousness

First, let me express a worry about Davidson's focus on 'events' – which incidentally, if justified, would invalidate the previous paragraph's defence against Kripke! If someone were to attempt to describe, say, one hour of my life, there are two kinds of story they might tell:

1. An alien observer, with total knowledge of the laws of nature, but with no experience of the way humans think, would observe my behaviour from a purely physical angle – a sequence of

movements, including the activity of all the nerves and cells in my body. He should be able to work out strict laws which enabled him to predict exactly what I would do next.

2. A human psychologist would observe my behaviour, using the 'intentional stance' (Dennett 76), i.e. describing my ordinary behaviour and interpreting it as part of my character as a (mildly) rational person. She could do this only because she herself, unlike the alien, understands thoughts, desires, intentions etc. She might be able to work out a system of psychological laws which enabled her to predict with some accuracy how I was going to behave from moment to moment.

Now Story 1 might indeed be read as a series of events, or at least an unfolding sequence of new states of the physical elements that constitute me. But Story 2 could not be read like that. The intentional stance is not a description of the stream of consciousness that flows through my mind, even though bits of that might form part of the story; reference would have to be made to all kinds of non-occurrent mental facts. For example, if I saw an ice-cream van, hesitated a little, then fumbled in my pocket, finally walked to the van and rather shame-facedly bought an ice-cream, the story would have to include various background facts – e.g. my memory of enjoying ice-creams in the past, my belief that ice-creams are not especially good for you. And many such background factors in my behaviour would not even be known to me.

To link up stories 1 and 2 would not be to link a series of physical events with a series of mental events (a series of examples of $p^1 = m^1$), because such things as my beliefs and memories are not events at all. I assume that a memory or belief, if described neurologically, would be a state of the neural system, formed sometime in the past, which causes neurons to behave somewhat differently in the here and now from the way they would have behaved otherwise. So I do not believe that the relation between the mental and the physical can be described in terms of a number of equivalent events; they are two connected narratives, which include events, states, dispositions, and no doubt many other things. Each will have its own network of causation, which can be worked out by experience. Davidson would be more accurate if he were to say, not that mental events can cause things because they are identical with causally efficacious physical events, but that the mental (or intentional) story must have a causal structure because it is identical to the physical story, which has the causal structure familiar to physics.

What is there to prevent observer 2 from using all her experience to work out a nomologically strict system of causation, such that my behaviour was 100% predictable in purely mental terms? After all, if she believes that my behaviour is entirely describable in terms of physical stuff, it must be, at least in principle, predictable – or partly random, if the physical world has an element of randomness. The reason she will not succeed seems to me not some matter of principle, or a difference in the language game we play when using the intentional stance, still less some conceptual difference between reasons and causes: after all, Davidson himself, though treating the realm of reasons as having a more explanatory and logical rather than causal structure, does insist that acted-on reasons must be seen as causes (1963: 11). The reason is that, without the neurological observations, the psychologist observing my behaviour simply does not have all the data. Suppose she has all the data from my past history, including not only my conscious beliefs and intentions but also my hidden motivations, together with certain strict-sounding laws – e.g. that anyone who wants X with intensity Y, and has enough money, will certainly walk to van Z to buy it. And suppose she can calculate how that law meshes with other laws, e.g. that anyone who believes that X is bad for his health and desires good health with

intensity Y+1 will walk the other way. Yet, not knowing the state of my brain, she cannot know whether I will suffer a stroke before I reach the van, or whether the onset of dementia will make me forget what ice-creams taste like. By restricting herself to only a portion of the data, she cannot expect to benefit from fully nomological laws with which to predict my behaviour. That ignorance, I think, is really all that 'anomalousness' consists of.

The alien observer, by contrast, relying on purely physical data and laws, will know not only all my past history but also the state of my brain and all the cells and nerves in my body; knowing *all* the data, he will get his prediction right. That raises the question of whether the 'intentional stance' story, of which he has no knowledge, has any causal significance at all, especially if it is 'supervenient' on the physical, as Davidson suggests. But that is the stuff of another essay!

References

Davidson, Donald (1963): 'Actions, Reasons and Causes', in *Essays on Actions and Events*, pages 3-19, OUP 2001
Davidson, Donald (1970): 'Mental Events', in *Essays on Actions and Events*, pages 207-227, OUP 2001
Dennett, Daniel C: *Consciousness Explained*, Penguin 1991
Kripke, Saul: *Naming and Necessity*, Blackwell 1980