

Reading for 29 Jan 2020 – “Rivals to interactionism”

Occasionalism (Malebranche and others)

Mind and body do not causally interact. In general, nothing in the natural universe causally interacts with anything else, because nothing in the natural universe has any causal power in the first place. Only God has causal power. But because he exercises his causal power according to general laws, it may look like natural things are causally interacting with each other. But bodies never affect other bodies, thoughts in a mind never affect other thoughts in that mind, and mind and body never affect each other.

- Does my air conditioning cool down my car interior? No, God cools down my car interior whenever I turn on my air conditioning.
- Does my lamp light up my room? No, God lights up my room whenever I turn on my lamp.
- Does poison ivy cause a rash on my skin? No, God causes a rash on my skin whenever I touch poison ivy.
- Does the rash on my skin cause an itching sensation in my mind? No, God causes the itching sensation in my mind whenever I have a rash on my skin.
- Does my decision to scratch my leg cause my arm to reach down and scratch my leg? No, God causes my arm to do that whenever I make that decision.
- Does my decision to think about geometry cause thoughts of geometry to occur in my mind? No, God causes those thoughts of geometry whenever I make that decision.

Why would anyone accept occasionalism? A few reasons:

- A cause is supposed to *make* its effect happen. If a cause occurs, then it's *impossible* for the effect not to occur. But there's only one thing capable of *necessitating* an effect: God's all-powerful will. So things in nature are not true causes. Only God's will is a true cause.
- Nothing can exist in the first place without God *creating* it. And likewise, nothing can continue to exist without God *conserving* it in existence. But there is no real difference between creation and conservation. So for any sequence of events in nature, God is in effect creating every single instant one after the other. That means God is fully causally responsible for everything that happens.
- If the physical world and the bodies that make it up are nothing more than three-dimensional spatial 'extension', then the physical world has no causal power. After all, mere space isn't capable of causing anything.

- To attribute causal power to created things in nature is tantamount to pagan nature-worship. We must give all the glory to God and attribute causal power to Him alone.

Problems with occasionalism:

- It flies in the face of common sense. It says all apparent causal processes in nature are only pseudo-causal.
- It makes the natural universe depend upon “perpetual miracles” or a “*deus ex machina*” for its operation.
- It puts God on the hook when it comes to the problem of evil: e.g. all natural disasters are the direct product of God's will.
- It seems to take away human free will, because nothing I do is actually caused by me.
- It seems to take away everything in nature's status as a genuine substance, because everything in nature is directly operated by God.

Dual-aspect theory (Spinoza)

The universe and everything in it can be understood by us either as mental or as physical (i.e. under the attribute of Thought or under the attribute of Extension). This means that any causal process in nature can be understood either as a mental process of *ideas affecting other ideas*, or as a physical process of *bodies affecting other bodies*. Both ways of understanding nature (mental or physical) are equally legitimate. But they are fundamentally distinct from each other and not to be mixed together: mind-body interactionists are in error when they say that something mental can affect something physical, or vice versa. Is there any mind-body union at all? Yes: when a sequence of ideas occurs in my mind, not only can that exact same process be understood as a sequence of physical changes occurring in my body, but also those ideas in my mind are ideas *of* those physical changes in my body. Indeed, my mind is in fact a complex idea *of* my body. This is why, in order to explain what makes human *minds* so special, one must examine human *bodies* and what makes them so special.

Why would anyone accept dual-aspect theory?

- Spinoza has a painfully detailed geometry-style proof that is supposed to demonstrate his entire metaphysical and ethical system.
- Dual-aspect theory can agree with Cartesian dualism that thought and extension are fundamentally distinct from each other. But it can also agree with materialism that mind and body are in a sense one and the same thing.

- There is no mysterious interaction between the physical and the mental. Causal processes never ‘cross over’ from one attribute to another.

Problems with dual-aspect theory:

- It leads to the baffling conclusion that everything in nature can be understood mentally: e.g., rivers flowing through valleys can be understood as (complex collections of) ideas affecting other ideas. This is a form of *panpsychism*: everything in nature has a mind.
- If thought and extension are distinct, and yet they are both ways of understanding the exact same thing, does that make them a merely *subjective* way of representing reality to ourselves? Or, if they’re *objectively* accurate ways of describing reality, then how can they both be accurate while being fundamentally distinct?
- How can the human mind be an idea *of* the human body when most people throughout history have understood little to nothing about the workings of their body? In what sense can mind-body union be put in terms of the body being the *object* of the mind?

Pre-established harmony (Leibniz)

Mind and body do not causally interact. In general, nothing in the natural universe causally interacts with anything else, because each individual substance exercises its own causal power only internally, on itself. God has created each substance with its own unique pre-programmed causal power that it puts into operation throughout its life (e.g. a wind-up toy). It may look like things are interacting with each other, but that’s only because God has programmed each substance to behave in a way that harmonizes with everything else (e.g. clocks that perfectly correspond with each other without ever interacting). So when a Frisbee hits my shin, and I feel a painful sensation, the shin damage doesn’t cause the pain. Instead, my body was pre-programmed to have shin damage at that time, and (independently) my mind was pre-programmed to have a painful sensation in the very next instant.

Why would anyone accept pre-established harmony?

- A substance isn’t supposed to be like the yellowness of a banana, existing only in the banana and never on its own. Rather, a substance is supposed to be self-sufficient and depend only on itself (or, strictly speaking, on itself and God). So it had better have its own causal power, and it had better *not* be dependent on any other substance.

- A true substance must be indivisible and simple, and it’s impossible to explain how one simple substance could be affected by another simple substance.
- This view avoids any mysterious interaction between the physical and the mental. What happens in a body can be explained mechanically, and what happens in a mind can be explained in a different or at least more sophisticated way.

Problems with pre-established harmony:

- It flies in the face of common sense. In general, it says all apparent causal interaction in nature is only pseudo-causal. And in particular, it says that nothing my body does is due to the feelings, thoughts, and decisions in my mind, and also that nothing that happens in my body has any impact on my mind.
- It seems to take away human free will, since everything we do was pre-programmed in us long ago (when we were first created).

Anne Conway’s monism of degree: There is no such thing as Cartesian matter (a “dead mass”); everything has some degree of life/spirituality. Very gross and dense matter has a very low degree, but blood has a higher degree, the human soul has a much higher degree, and God has an infinitely high degree. The difference between spirit and body is not a difference between two distinct kinds of substance (dualism); it is only a matter of degree involving one kind of substance (monism). Spirits have some of the features attributed to bodies: e.g., extension, divisibility and impenetrability (in greater or lesser degrees). Spirits and bodies do interact, via the mediation of other spirits/bodies possessing an intermediate degree of life/spirituality.

David Hume’s skeptical critique of causal necessity: Everyone can agree that events in the natural world fall into regular and predictable patterns. The deeper metaphysical question is about what has the causal power (e.g., things in nature? God?) and how that power is being exercised (e.g., interaction? only on oneself?). But we have no clear idea of this alleged causal power. After all, our ideas are derived from observation and experience, and there is no way to observe any ‘causal power’ in nature or even in our own minds. The nebulous idea we have is the mere product of *a feeling of anticipation in our mind* (which results from sheer repetition, as we observe the same things occurring again and again), a feeling which we project onto the things in nature as if they had some sort of metaphysical ‘necessary connection’ with each other. At the end of the day, this is all there is to our idea of causal power (patterns, predictions, and a projected feeling of anticipation), and the big metaphysical questions don’t make any real sense.