DUALISM & FUNCTIONALISM | Lent 2019 | Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416)
http://msteenhagen.github.io/teaching/2019dua/

Lecture 2: **Mental Causation**

Karen Bennett, 'Mental Causation', *Philosophy Compass*, 2, no. 2 (2007): 316-337.

What is the problem of mental causation?

A dualistic picture conceives of the mind as radically different from the body. Mental phenomena are not physical phenomena, but have their distinctive form of being (thinking, consciousness, intentionality). But then, how can mind and body interact? The problem was put to Descartes by Elisabeth of the Palatinate in 1643.

> I admit that it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede the capacity to move a body and to be moved by it to an immaterial thing.

The interaction seems to be two-way: mental-to-physical and physical-to-mental. Problems arise either way. How can a non-physical phenomenon act on something physical? How can a physical phenomenon act on something non-physical? It is not obvious what gives rise to this puzzle.

Is it because the mind is peculiar?

Perhaps there is something peculiar about mental phenomena as such. Can thinking about something, or perceiving something, ever be enough to bring about a change in the physical world?

This of course depends on what you count as thinking. Willing certainly seems effective, and this does seem to be a mental process. And we also use mental dispositions (such as beliefs) to explain bodily actions. We say that Lara got up and left *because she thought* the fire alarm was not a test. Moreover, even mental phenomena that do not seem to have physical effects (such as perceptual experience) do seem often to be brought about by physical events—they are effects of physical phenomena. Think of seeing an apple. If this is a mental event, it seems that it is somehow brought about by a physical event: the light's reflecting off the apple into your eyes.

So the mind doesn't seem causally peculiar.

Does causation pose a problem?

What assumptions are we making about causation? Do these give rise to the problem?

> For it appears that all determination of movement is produced by the pushing of the thing being moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the qualification and figure of the surface of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. (Elisabeth of the Palatinate, 1643)

Elisabeth of the Palatinate assumes that causation is a physical process of pushing or pulling, e.g. some transfer of energy. This requires some form of physical contact. Of course that rules out mental causation (if the mental is not physical).

But should we really accept this picture of causation? More common theories of causation see cause-effect relations as some sort of abstract regularity relations between events or facts:

1. Causation is a nomological (lawlike) connection between events or facts:
   A causes B only if it is a law that A and B are linked (Mackie)
2. Causation is a counterfactual dependence between events:
   A causes B iff B depends on A by a chain of counterfactual dependence (Lewis)
3. Causation is a probabilistic dependence between facts:
   A causes B iff A makes B more probable than B would have been without A (Mellor)

None of these theories constrains what kind of entities (i.e. mental or physical) causes and effects (As and Bs) must be. So also causation doesn't seem to prevent mind-body interaction.

What about the physical world?

The heart of the problem of mental causation lies with assumptions about the physical world.

Descartes identified the physical world as simply the extended substance. His background motivation for doing so was to allow physical events to be described exhaustively and adequately by the exact sciences (he thought geometry; but it's better to say physics). All changes in the extended substance can be described exhaustively and adequately by the exact sciences.

If we accept Descartes's metaphysics, then every physical event must have come about in a way that can be explained purely in physical terms: it must have been caused by some other physical event.

To be sure, philosophers have moved away from the details of Descartes's metaphysics. In particular, many now reject that mind and body are fundamentally distinct (though see Farkas, *The Subject's Point of View*, 2008). Yet many still hold onto Descartes's characterisation of the physical world. A central assumption still is that every physical event has a physical explanation.

The assumption that every physical event has a physical explanation is is known as the "causal closure" of the physical world:

> **Causal closure of the physical:**
> Every physical event has a sufficient physical cause.

This means that what happens in the physical world will always have some physical causes which were enough to bring what happened about. Only if the physical is causally closed can all physical events be described exhaustively and adequately by the exact sciences. Conversely, without the assumption there may be more to nature than science can explain, and this idea is at odds with the modern scientific worldview. So the mind-body problem arises because of the modern scientific worldview that Descartes himself promoted. Let's look at this in more detail.

A mind-body problem

If we accept that the physical world is causally closed, then it becomes hard to see how the mental events can genuinely cause physical ones. This is because mental events cannot really make a difference to the course of the physical world if the physical world is causally closed. If we assume that genuine causation does not admit of symmetrical overdetermination (cf. Lewis), then no mental events can be causes of physical events.

We can present the problem of mental causation as an inconsistent triad:

1. Mental events are not physical events
2. The physical world is causally closed
3. Mental events have physical effects

Jaegwon Kim has developed this line of argument in more detail (he calls it the 'exclusion problem', and adds extra premises to make the commitment against overdetermination explicit). Bennet's article in *Philosophy Compass* (2007, 2:2) gives a valuable overview of the discussion.

Epiphenomenalism

But what about physical events causing mental ones? We can see that there is an asymmetry here: although it is common to assume that the physical is causally closed, it is not common to assume that the mental is causally closed (though Anton Wilhelm Amo, and more recently John McDowell do seem to make this assumption). Why would one think that all mental events admit of a sufficient explanation in mental terms?

If we accept that the physical world is causally closed, but reject that the mental world is causally closed, then epiphenomenalism about the mental becomes almost inevitable. Epiphenomenalism about the mental can be defined as the view that mental events can be caused by physical events, but can have no effects upon any physical events.