Part 1a, Paper 1 Metaphysics | Lent 2017

Mind and Matter

Lecture 2: Mental Causation

1. What is the problem of mental causation?

A dualistic picture conceives 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 if they differ in this way?

> "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." (Elisabeth of Bohemia, 1643)

Interaction is two-way: mental-to-physical and physical-to-mental. There seems to be a problem either way, but where does the problem arise?

2. Is it because the mind is peculiar?

Perhaps there's something peculiar about thinking, consciousness, or intentionality. Can thinking about something, or perceiving something, ever be enough to bring about a change in the physical world? That of course depends on what you count as thinking. Willing certainly seems effective. Moreover, though consciousness as such might not have physical effects, it certainly seems itself brought about by physical events.

It might be something about immateriality. If something is immaterial, doesn't that mean it must be outside space and time? In that case, it's hard to see how it could effect spatiotemporal changes. But that's too quick. Why can't my thoughts be located where I am? Mental properties are properties of people. Events, processes, states, etc. all can be assigned places and times, without being material.

3. Does causation pose a problem?

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

Perhaps we assume that causation is a physical process of pushing or pulling, e.g. some transfer of energy. Of course that would rule out mental causation (if the mental is not physical). This would indeed be a big problem; the only plausible way to defend mental causation would then be to give up the distinctness of the mental.

But should we really accept this picture of causation? More common theories of causation see it as some sort of abstract regularity relation:

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

None of these theories constrains what kind of entities (i.e. mental or physical) causes and effects (As and Bs) must be.

4. What about the physical world?

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

Descartes identified that world as nothing more than the extended substance, in order to allow its motions to be described exhaustively and adequately by the science of physics (he thought, wrongly, geometry). If he was right, 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' metaphysics. Yet many still hold onto this general principle about the physical world. The central assumption is that every physical event has a physical explanation. Everything that happens in the physical world has physical causes which are enough to bring it about.

This is known as the "causal closure" of the physical world.

5. A mind-body problem

If we accept that the physical world is causally closured, then it becomes hard to see how the mental events can genuinely cause physical ones. At best there is room for a correlation between mental events and physical events, the mental ones can't ever really make any difference to the course of the physical world. (But what about physical events causing mental ones?)

To save mental causation, what should we do? Revise our picture of the physical world? Or should we instead admit that mental phenomena are physical phenomena after all?

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