

## Mind and Matter

### Lecture 3: The identity theory and physicalism

#### 1. The problem of mental causation as an argument for materialism

The problem of mental causation is serious. 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.

The following three claims seem incompatible:

1. There is mental causation of physical effects
2. Every physical effect has a physical cause which is enough to bring it about
3. Mental and physical causes do not overdetermine their effects

Are these claims really incompatible? Not if you are willing to give up dualism. You can keep all three so long as you maintain that mental causes are identical with physical causes. So the problem of mental causation can form the basis of an argument for a *materialist* theory of the mind.

#### 2. Against dualism

This argument for materialism in effect rejects the dualist doctrine that mind and body (or mind and brain) are distinct. This is more than just the rejection of substance dualism: i.e. the claim that mind and matter are distinct substances. Other dualist options (e.g. property dualism) are undermined as well.

The overarching dualism is just the dualism of mental and physical causes. Substance dualism is irrelevant at this stage in the argument.

#### 3. The identity theory

The materialist solution to the problem of mental causation is to identify mental and physical causes: they are one and the same thing. This is not the view that mental and physical causes are correlated: you cannot correlate something with itself.

The identity theory comes in two forms, depending on what kind of entities you think causes are.

If you think causes are events (unrepeatable, dated particulars) then you will have an identity theory of events. This is sometimes called a 'token identity theory': it identifies mental and physical particulars. See Davidson, 1970 'Mental Events'.

If on the other hand you think causes are properties (general characteristics of things, like weights or colours), then you will have an identity theory of properties. This is sometimes called a ‘type identity theory’: identifies mental and physical properties. See Lewis, 1970 ‘An Argument for the Identity Theory’, or Smart, 1959 ‘Sensations and Brain Processes’.

The identity theory does not say there is no such thing as the mind, or mental phenomena. On the contrary, since it makes an identity claim about the mind, it presupposes that the mind exists. Compare: saying ‘water = H<sub>2</sub>O’ does not deny the existence of water; rather it presupposes its existence.

Another way to put this point is to say that the identity theory is a *reductive* view of the mental, not an *eliminative* view. It does not eliminate the mind, it says what the mind really is.

#### 4. Physicalism and the actual world

The identity theory is a materialist view about the mind. It identifies the mind with something material. But you can also have a materialist view of reality. Materialism or physicalism in general is the view that everything is determined by the physical: the way things are is completely determined by the way things are physically. In the now popular formulation developed by David Lewis and Frank Jackson: physicalism is the view that any world which is a minimal physical duplicate of this world is a duplicate in every respect (‘a duplicate simpliciter’).

Suppose an omnipotent being wanted to create this world, just as it is; what would she have to do? Physicalism says: all she would have to do would be to create the world’s physical nature. Everything else would ‘come for free’.

Although physicalism claims the metaphysically necessary determination of the mental by the physical, it is nonetheless a contingent thesis. It makes a claim about our world, and not about every possible world.

Contrast this with an even stronger view which says: Any two possible worlds which are physically identical are identical simpliciter. This would not allow ‘dualist’ possible worlds, where there are extra mental things undetermined by the physical things. Most physicalists believe that dualism is only contingently false.

Physicalism makes reference to the actual world: it’s a fact about our world that given the way things are physically, things could not be otherwise in any other respect. This way of expressing physicalism is neutral on whether physicalism is a reductive thesis. What matters is that fixing the physical fixes everything, not that all entities are identical with physical entities.