

# Defending Dualism?

PHIL451



# Readings

## **Primary:**

Sophie Gibb, 'Defending Dualism'

## **Optional:**

Buckareff & Hawkins, 'Emergent mental properties are not just double-preventers'

# Introduction

Where is Gibb going with her attack of the causal argument for physicalism and, specifically, the thesis of Completeness?

You guessed it: interactionist dualism!

# Introduction

Gibb nevertheless wishes to distance herself from “standard” dualist positions (e.g., that of Descartes). Standard dualists depict psychophysical causation in terms of the nonphysical production of physical events.

Since the standard dualist view seems to require energy transfer between the nonphysical cause and the physical effect, standard dualists predict to find a “gap” in a physical causal chain whenever nonphysical states affect physical events. And, Gibb notes, there is a dearth of empirical evidence for such causal gaps.

To accommodate this, Gibb rejects the assumption that nonphysical states affect physical behaviour via any transfer of energy. While nonphysical mental states are causally relevant to behaviour, their causal role is not to cause events via energy transfer. Mental causation is not a matter of “pushes and pulls”. Further, mental causation will be invisible to third-personal scientific observation.

# A terminological note about the notion of ‘Completeness’

In her ‘Conservation Laws’ paper, Gibb was concerned to *challenge* a notion of Completeness according to which every physical event possesses a fully sufficient physical causal explanation (i.e., one invoking only antecedent physical states, events, and processes).

In her ‘Defending Dualism’ paper, Gibb appears to grant a *narrower* notion of Completeness according to which the only energy (and forces and momentum) contributing to the causation of physical events are *physical*. (In the terminology of the Conservation Laws paper, this maps approximately onto the thesis of Energy).

- One of Gibb’s central aims in ‘Defending Dualism’ to show that dualists can consistently embrace the latter version of Completeness without inviting systematic causal overdetermination.

# Some useful background on the metaphysics of causation and double prevention

To develop her position, Gibb turns to work on the metaphysics of causation, and specifically the phenomenon of ‘double prevention’. Here is a classic example:

Double Prevention. Suzy and Billy have grown up, just in time to get involved in World War III. Suzy is piloting a bomber on a mission to blow up an enemy target, and Billy is piloting a fighter as her lone escort. Along comes an enemy fighter plane, piloted by Enemy. Sharp-eyed Billy spots Enemy, zooms in, pulls the trigger, and Enemy’s plane goes down in flames. Suzy’s mission is undisturbed, and the bombing takes place as planned. If Billy hadn’t pulled the trigger, Enemy would have eluded him and shot down Suzy, and the bombing would not have happened. (from Hall ‘Two Concepts of Causation’)

# Some useful background on the metaphysics of causation and double prevention

Gibb's example:

“To give an example of double prevention, a barrier is positioned in front of a porcelain vase to protect it. The barrier is wired up to an explosive device. Pressing the device's button will cause the barrier to explode. A rock is thrown at the vase. Provided that the device's button is not pressed, the barrier will prevent the rock from coming into contact with the vase. But, by pressing the device's button one destroys the barrier, enabling the rock to hit, and hence break, the vase. The pressing of the button is a ‘double preventer’ event. The barrier would have prevented the rock from breaking the vase, but by pressing the device's button the barrier is prevented from preventing the rock breaking the vase.” (p. 141)

# Some useful background on the metaphysics of causation and double prevention

Part of the interest that philosophers of causation have seen in double prevention cases comes from the strong intuition that a double preventor is not *the cause* of the event whose prevention it prevents. After all, it wasn't Billy who blew up the enemy target but Suzy. Accordingly, it has sometimes been seen as providing an objection to theories of causation (e.g., counterfactual theories) that imply the opposing verdict (i.e., that the double preventor is the cause of the event).

At the same time, many philosophers have wanted to claim that a double preventor should figure *somewhere* in a causal explanation of the event under discussion. After all, we would be missing a crucial element of the causal story about why the bombing of the enemy target occurred if no mention at all was made of the double preventor: intuitively, Billy's act of pulling the trigger *made a difference* to the explosion of the enemy target (i.e., the event we are explaining.)



# Some useful background on the metaphysics of causation and double prevention

Philosophers have offered various strategies for resolving the apparent tension between these clashing intuitions about the causal status of double prevention cases.

One way to do so is to say that double preventors have a distinctive causal status with respect to the event whose prevention they prevent. While double preventors are not causes of the target event, they *enable* its causation. They are ‘causal enablers’ (Gibb, p. 140).

This is the position Gibb adopts. In particular, she holds a “powers theory” of causation according to which causation of an event consists in the “mutual manifestation of reciprocal disposition partners”. As Gibb observes, the powers theory generates the verdict that a double preventor does not cause the event whose prevention it prevents but remains causally relevant insofar as it enable the event’s causation.

# Gibb's positive proposal: Nonphysical double preventors (or causal enablers)

Gibb proposes to conceptualize mental events as double preventors (and so as causal enablers). In doing so, she claims, we can reconcile the absence of causal gaps in the physical causal chains that we observe when subjects intentionally act with the mental events that rationalize the behaviour (e.g., intentions) being fundamentally or irreducibly nonphysical.

Although the observed physical sequence of events exclusively involves the transfer of physical energy, a complete explanation of the resulting behaviour requires that we recognize nonphysical mental events that *enable* the observed physical process to occur.

# Gibb's positive proposal: Nonphysical double preventors (or causal enablers)

**Question:** what is Gibb's argument for the claim that intentional behaviour requires positing something fundamentally nonphysical?

**Answer (from what I can tell):** physical principles, on their own, are inadequate to explain a salient feature of intentional behaviour: the non-coincidental convergence of a complex and varied set of physical processes upon a single organized and coherent pattern of bodily movement – namely, behaviour congruent with the subject's intention (see pp. 138-9).

**Follow up question:** How convincing is this argument?

# Gibb's positive proposal: Nonphysical double preventors (or causal enablers)

Gibb's picture appears to be this. A subject's desires stand in a mutually suppressive or inhibitory relationship to each other. Each desire competes with other desires to determine how the subject's body will move. The strongest desire prevents competing desires from preventing the more strongly desired behaviour from occurring. In this way, the strongest desire serves as a double preventor of the subject's actual behaviour.

# Gibb's positive proposal: Nonphysical double preventors (or causal enablers)

By enabling the physical causation of the desired behaviour, nonphysical mental states affect *which* physical causal pathways are realized without producing those events or transferring any energy to them. They serve merely to *constrain* or *structure* which among many alternative behavioural pathways materialize.

# Gibb's positive proposal: Nonphysical double preventors (or causal enablers)

Note: it is a little unclear if, on Gibb's view, one of the prevented desires would have prevented the actual behavioural sequence through some transfer of energy from the (nonphysical) desire to physical brain states.

One possibility is that it would have prevented the actual causal sequence simply by preventing the actually dominant desire from achieving its dominant position in the motivational competition. The causal role of the winning desire is to stave off incompatible motivational tendencies, thereby enabling only the desired behavioural sequence/pathway to be physically caused.

# Questions for Gibb

- Is this a plausible general description of how desires influence behaviour? Does it intuitively capture all mental events?
- In what sense has Gibb *defended* dualism? There are two ways one might defend a view: one might defend it from a certain objection that has been raised to it, or one might argue that we should accept the view as the best motivated of the available accounts. Which of these do you think best captures Gibb's intentions?
- Does Gibb's solution successfully solve the problem of mental causation?
  - o Potentially relevant: Bennett's critical discussion of the dualist option of adopting a 'dependence' theory of causation. Gibb's double prevention model of mental causation seems to fall within the intended scope of Bennett's critique.
- Suppose you like Gibb's account of mental causation as double prevention (or structuring causation). What justifies regarding the mental event as non-physical? Could a physicalist reply that Gibb has simply described a global or system level of the brain, or perhaps that there is a certain physical subsystem responsible for behavioural coordination?