

The Causal Exclusion Argument(s)

PHIL451 – Philosophy of Mind

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Readings

Primary

- → David Papineau, "The Case for Materialism"
- → William Seager, *Theories of Consciousness*, pp. 13-17

Optional:

 \rightarrow Jaegwon Kim, excerpt from *Physicalism*, or Something Near Enough

The causal argument/causal exclusion argument

- The "causal argument" that David Papineau mounts in his "The Case for Materialism" is a powerful argument.
- In fact, Papineau's argument is *so* powerful that, when combined with some other plausible-seeming claims, it seems to generate a serious challenge to all but the most extreme forms of physicalism. In particular, according to some philosophers, the causal argument decisively refutes not only various forms of dualism but also non-reductive physicalism.
- If these philosophers are right, then Papineau's argument is, in fact, an argument for reductive physicalism.

Preliminary clarifications

- There are two broad ways one might invoke the causal efficacy of the mental to attack a given metaphysical account of the mind (cf. Bennett 2008):
- attempt to show that mental events are inherently unsuited to do causal work.
 - Analogy: being unemployed because one is unqualified to do a certain job.
- attempt to show that mental events have no causal work to do.
 - Analogy: being unemployed because, although qualified for a job, there being no job openings.
- An example of the first type of challenge: Elisabeth of Bohemia's objection to Descartes that that it is unintelligible how, if Substance Dualism is true, mental and physical events could ever interact.
- Even if challenges of the first sort can be answered, a challenge of the second sort might still be mounted. The challenges we are considering today fall in this *second* category.

Papineau's rests his causal argument for physicalism on three plausible-seeming claims:

- <u>Efficacy</u>: Mental events sometimes sufficiently cause physical events (and do so in virtue of their mental properties.)
- <u>Completeness (a.k.a. Causal Closure of the Physical)</u>: Every physical event has a fully sufficient physical cause.
- <u>No Systematic Overdetermination</u>: The physical effects of mental causes are not systematically causally 'overdetermined' i.e., they do not systematically have more than one fully sufficient cause.
- Exclusion: No effect has more than one sufficient cause unless it is causally overdetermined.
- → Efficacy is premise (1) in Papineau's argument; Completeness is his premise (2); and No Systematic Overdetermination is his premise (3). Papineau doesn't explicitly include Exclusion, but it is arguably an implicit premise. Other authors especially Karen Bennett have found it important to include Exclusion. To prepare the way for our discussion of Bennett's work, it will be helpful to include it from the start.

To grasp why Papineau (along with many others) find each claim plausible, it helps to consider what we would seem to be committing ourselves to were we deny them:

- To reject Efficacy is to reject a plausible-seeming metaphysical thesis called 'Alexander's dictum': that 'to be is to have causal powers'. It would also render the appearance of intentional agency illusory.
- To reject <u>Completeness</u> is (many believe) to reject the laws of physics specifically, laws governing the conservation of matter and energy (the conservation laws).
- To reject No Systematic Overdetermination is to treat every case of mental-to-physical causation on the model of death by firing-squad: i.e., of a person who is shot to death by multiple simultaneous bullets to their vital organs (each of which was causally sufficient for his death). Overdetermination cases seem possible. But the idea that they occur systematically and pervasively (e.g., every time you intentionally act) has struck many as extremely implausible.
- To reject Exclusion is to deny that an event's having more than one sufficient cause is, by itself, sufficient for its being causally overdetermined. It is not immediately obvious what such a case could be.

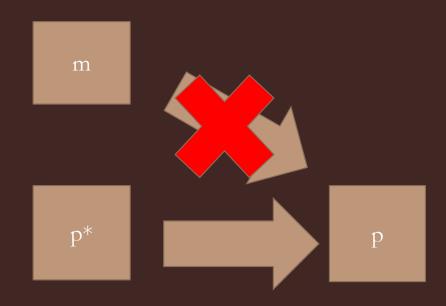
So, Efficacy, Completeness, No Systematic Overdetermination, and Exclusion all seem plausible. But what exactly are we to conclude?

Unfortunately, Papineau isn't as explicit as one might have hoped about what he thinks follows. One way of developing his argument is as rejecting:

<u>Distinctness</u>: Mental properties are distinct from physical properties.

Taking events to be the instantiation of a property by an object at a time, we might attempt to reconstruct Papineau's argument as follows:

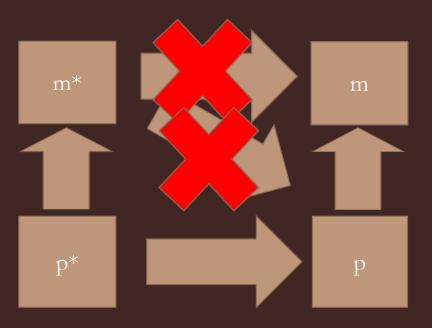
- 1. Suppose, as is possible if Efficacy is true, that mental event m (the instantiation of mental property M) is a sufficient cause of physical event p (the instantiation of physical property P).
- 2. By Completeness, physical event, p, has a sufficient physical cause, physical event p* (the instantiation of physical property P*).
- 3. Suppose, as is possible (and very probable) if No Systematic Overdetermination is true, that p is not causally overdetermined.
- 4. Thus, by Exclusion, p does not have more than one sufficient cause (from 3).
- 5. Suppose (for reductio) that Distinctness is true: that $M \neq P^*$, and so, that $m \neq p^*$.
- 6. Thus, p has more than one sufficient cause: m and p* (from 1, 2, 5).
- 7. Thus, Distinctness is false: $M = P^*$, and so $m = p^*$ (4, 6, contradiction).



- → Papineau seems to flirt with this line of reasoning. However, he also seems to recoil from it (see §1.7 of "The Case for Materialism"). This is because he sees that, by denying Distinctness, he would be embracing reductive physicalism, which would make trouble for the alleged multiple realizability of the mental.
- → Papineau is sufficiently attracted to non-reductive physicalism to have reservations about following his own argument to its logical conclusion. Apart from being confident that he has established a physicalist position, he waffles about exactly what position to accept.

- The pressure Papineau feels to reject Distinctness, but then to back away from doing so, illustrates what Jaegwon Kim calls "Descartes's Revenge". According to Kim, the same considerations that have led many philosophers to reject dualism in favour of physicalism should also lead them to reject the currently most popular version of physicalism: nonreductive physicalism. In Kim's hands, the causal exclusion argument becomes an argument for an extreme form of reductive physicalism (e.g., type-identity theory).
- → Kim also goes further than Papineau in arguing that nonreductive physicalists cannot even allow the possibility of mental-to-mental interaction!

A Kimean twist



However, Papineau also hints at another option: uphold Distinctness but reject Exclusion. Unfortunately, his remarks here are cryptic, and he offers us little indication of what this would involve. Next time, we will see a sophisticated attempt to execute this maneuver and, thereby, to vindicate nonreductive physicalism.