

Anomalous monism

Monism is the view that there is just one kind of substance – it opposes dualism. Anomalous monism holds that the only substance is physical substance. It is a theory developed by Donald Davidson (“Mental events”) to solve a puzzle about mental causation, and was the origin of token identity theory.

THE INCONSISTENT TRIAD

Davidson starts with three statements, each of which he believes is true, but which taken together create an apparent contradiction.

1. Principle of Causal Interaction (PCI): Mental events interact causally with physical events, e.g. my decisions cause movements of my body.
2. Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality (PNCC): Every instance of causality must be underwritten by a (strict deterministic) causal law. Where two events are related as cause and effect, there is a law which underwrites the causal relation between them.
3. Anomalism of the Mental (AM): There are no (strict deterministic) laws enabling prediction and explanation of mental events.

If we take 1 and 2 together, they imply that there must be causal laws relating mental events and physical events, but 3 denies this. If we take 2 and 3 together, they imply that mental and physical events do not interact causally, while 1 says they do. If we take 1 and 3 together, they imply that not all causal relations are underwritten by causal laws, which contradicts 2.

The premises of anomalous monism

Before we look at how Davidson resolves the contradiction, why should we accept the three statements? We should accept 1 as intuitive. Surely my beliefs, desires, decisions and so on make a difference to what I do; but this involves movements of my body. Some mental events can cause physical events.

2 offers a theory of causation that is very widely, but not universally, accepted by philosophers. Causation involves the idea of regularity – the same cause will operate in the same way on different occasions. If a pipe bursts in the kitchen (cause), the kitchen floor gets wet (effect). If, on another occasion, a pipe bursts in the kitchen, but the floor stays dry, we don’t just say ‘Oh well’. We insist that there must be a difference between the two occasions, because we hold the view that the same cause operates in the same way. If the effect was different, then something about the cause must have been different. (For example, the house was below freezing, so the water in the pipe was ice and stayed where it was.) Davidson says, and many philosophers agree, that the idea of regularity needs to be formalized by talking about causal laws.

Why accept 3? First, we should note that at present, there are no (strict deterministic) causal laws involving mental states. (In fact, Davidson is not concerned with sensations,

which might have causal laws relating to sense organs, but with beliefs, desires, emotions, and so on.) The best we have are rules of thumb. For instance, if someone is thirsty and believes that is a glass of water in front of them, they will often drink it, but not always. Muslims during Ramadan abstain from food and drink during daylight hours. Someone with dropsy knows it is bad for them to drink too much. And so on.

Second, Davidson argues there cannot be causal laws involving mental states. We attribute mental states on the basis of rational interpretation. For example, if I know that you believe that doing philosophy is fun, and you believe that this book is about philosophy, I can infer that you believe reading this book is fun. I don't, for example, have to check your brain to see if I'm right. Attributions of beliefs are normative; they are based on logical rules about what beliefs a person should rationally have. Now if there was a law-like connection between these beliefs and brain states, then I could infer the existence of a certain brain state in the same way, and I would not have to confirm my inference by checking your brain state. But this is not how the physical sciences work. Attributions of physical states are not normative. When we make a rational inference in science, we need to check the result independently. If there were laws connecting mental events and states to physical ones, then we wouldn't need this independent check. Mental-physical laws would upset the way we do science.

THE SOLUTION

Davidson solves the apparent contradiction between 1, 2 and 3 by using token identity theory and some tricky ideas in metaphysics:

1. Any occurrence of a mental event is also the occurrence of a physical event. There is just one event that occurs, which can be described as mental (we can refer to it using mental vocabulary, e.g. a thought, a decision) or as physical (we can refer to it using physical vocabulary, e.g. a brain event).
2. Causation is a relation between events. Causation involves things happening – one thing happens (the cause) and another thing follows (the effect). 'Things happening' picks out events.
3. Causal laws relate two events only under certain descriptions. For example, if you take out a compass and hold it still, the needle will point towards the North Pole. It is a causal law that compass needles will point north. The North Pole is where polar bears live. So the needle points towards where polar bears live. But this is not a law. (We could move all the polar bears. It would then be false that the needle points towards where polar bears live.)

Davidson's solution is this: mental events that cause physical events fall under a causal law, but only when the mental event is described as a physical event. Only under a physical description does the event fall under a causal law. Described as a mental event, it does not fall under any causal law. In this way, 1, 2, and 3 can all be true. So, for example, making a decision to drink causes you to reach out your arm for the glass. There is no law relating these two events as described. However, making the decision is (token) identical to some event in your brain, and there is a causal law that relates that brain event to your reaching out your arm.

THE THREAT OF EPIPHENOMENALISM

'Epiphenomenalism' is the claim that the mind is 'causally inert', i.e. mental states, events and properties have no effects. The mind is an 'epiphenomenon', a by-product of some process, presumably in the brain. According to epiphenomenalism, everything that we do and say is the effect of physical processes and events, not mental ones.

Anomalous monism is often accused of not solving the challenge of epiphenomenalism. To make the objection, philosophers rephrased Davidson's argument, in terms of properties. Davidson talks of us being able to describe events using mental or physical vocabulary. We can put this another way (goes the objection):

1. An event is the occurrence of a property (or number of properties) at an instant. Token identity theory says that the event in which a mental property occurs (e.g. making a decision) is the same event as one in which a physical property occurs (e.g. some brain event). So every mental event is the occurrence of both a mental and a physical property.
2. Causal laws are relations between properties. The compass needle settles to point north – the law picks out a geographical property (actually, one based on magnetism). It does not pick out an ethological one (about the location of a species).
3. Events cause their effects in virtue of certain properties and not others. When we explain the occurrence of the effect, we appeal to the law. The needle points the direction it does because that is where (magnetic) north is (not because it is where polar bears live). Or again, if a brick breaks a window, this isn't because the brick is red, it is because the brick is solid and travelling fast.

The objection: Is it because of its physical properties or because of its mental properties that a mental event causes its effects? The anomalism of the mental means that no laws connect mental properties and physical properties. If laws pick out the causally relevant properties, the ones we use in causal explanation, then it is the physical properties of the mental event, not its mental properties, that explain the effects it has. For example, because there is a law that relates my reaching out my arm to an event in my brain, but no law that relates it to my decision, we should say that the fact that the brain event was also a decision is irrelevant. This is epiphenomenalism.

Davidson's reply to this objection is to reject the reinterpretation of his argument in terms of properties. It is a mistake to say that causes have their effects in virtue of some properties but not others. It remains true that one event causes another no matter how the two events are described. But only using certain descriptions of the events do they fall under a causal law. This is all we should say.

But we can press the objection. As the examples show, we need to distinguish causally relevant properties from ones that aren't relevant, and we do this in our explanations all the time. Why would some explanations be better than others if it wasn't because events have their effects in virtue of some of their properties and not others?