

Mind and Matter

Lecture 2 The problem of mental causation

1. Mental causation

Things in the mind are caused by things in the physical world. Your perceptual experiences etc. are caused by things in your environment, or things going on in your body (e.g. pains are often caused by damage to bodily tissue). This is physical-to-mental causation.

Mental causation is when mental things (mental states, events, processes, properties etc.) have effects in the physical world. For example, your thirst (an experience) causes you to go to the fridge and get a drink. Much of our understanding of the mind relies on the idea that there is mental causation.

It is generally believed that there is a philosophical problem about mental causation. What is the nature of this problem? It could be (i) something about causation, or (ii) something about the mental, or (iii) something about the physical. Which is it?

2. Does the problem come from something about causation?

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

First, we should not assume at the outset that causation is something physical: e.g. that it consists in the flow of energy. If it is, and the mental is not physical, then there can be no mental causation (unless there is 'mental energy', but this is a desperate remedy). This assumption makes short work of our problem; maybe it is correct, but we should not assume it at the outset. Note, however, that if it is true, then the only plausible way to defend mental causation is to say that the mental is physical.

Standard approaches to causation see it as consisting in (i) nomological (lawlike) connection between events or facts: A caused B only if it is a law that A and B are linked; (ii) counterfactual dependence (Lewis): A caused B iff B depends on A by a chain of counterfactual dependence; (iii) probabilistic dependence (Mellor): A caused B iff A makes B more probable than it would have been without A.

But none of these three theories presupposes about what kind of entities (i.e. mental or physical) these causes and effects (As and Bs) must be.

3. Does the problem come from something about the mental?

Sometimes it is said that the problem of mental causation derives from the fact that our idea of the mental is the idea of something immaterial and therefore non-spatial, and that it is hard to understand how a spatial thing could interact with a non-spatial thing. This was the objection posed to Descartes by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia.

This is indeed hard to understand; but why should we agree that the mental is something non-spatial? What is wrong with saying that my thoughts are located where I am? Mental properties are properties of people; why can they not have as much location as other (intrinsic) properties of people? My weight is located where I am; so why can't my thoughts be located where I am?

There seems nothing about the mental as such which stops it from having causal efficacy.

4. Does the problem come from something about the physical?

The problem of mental causation actually derives from assumptions which we make about the physical world, and how to render the manifest fact of mental causation compatible with these assumptions.

The central assumption is that everything that happens in the physical world (every physical effect) has physical causes which are enough to bring it about.

This is known as **the causal closure of the physical**.

NB This is not supposed to be an *a priori* philosophical truth, but an empirical claim about the world in which we live, discovered by physical science. It is a claim about causation, not about explanation. It's not the claim that physics can explain everything, but that every physical effect has a physical cause which is enough to bring it about.

5. The problem

If this causal closure claim is true, then how can there be any room for mental causation? The following three claims seem incompatible:

- (A) There is mental causation of physical effects
- (B) Every physical effect has a physical cause which is enough to bring it about
- (C) Mental and physical causes do not overdetermine their effects

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