

Mind and Matter

Lecture 3: Materialism and dualism

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

The problem we have been discussing is that 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

Are these claims really incompatible? Materialists say no: they say 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. Dualism

This argument for materialism, then, in effect rejects the dualist doctrine that mind and body (or mind and brain) are distinct. But this is more than just the rejection of substance dualism: i.e. the claim that mind and matter are distinct substances. You can reject substance dualism and still think that mental causes and physical causes of actions are distinct.

The dualism in question, then, is dualism of mental and physical causes. Substance dualism is irrelevant at this stage in the argument.

3. The identity theory

So the materialist solution to the problem of mental causation is to *identify* mental and physical causes: they are one and the same thing. NB 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, 'Mental Events'.

If on the other hand you think causes are properties (general characteristics of things, like weights or colours e.g.), then you will have an identity theory of properties. This is sometimes called a 'type identity theory': identifies mental and physical properties. See Lewis, 'An Argument for the Identity Theory', or Smart, '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 = H₂O' 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. Materialism or physicalism in general

The identity theory is a materialist view about the mind, but you can also have a materialist view of the whole of reality. Materialism or physicalism in general is the view that everything is determined by the physical. Or: 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').

The image: suppose God wanted to create this world, just as it is; what would he have to do? Physicalism says: all he would have to do would be to create the world's physical nature. Everything else would 'come for free'.

Although this physicalist thesis is a thesis about the *metaphysically necessary determination* of the mental by the physical, it is nonetheless a contingent thesis. That is, it is a thesis that makes a claim about *our* world, and not about *every* possible world. It does not say: any two possible worlds which are physically identical are identical simpliciter. This does not allow 'dualist' possible worlds where there are extra mental things undetermined by the physical things. Yet most physicalists believe that dualism is only contingently false. So the thesis 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.

Note too that 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.

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