

## REPLY TO CHILD

by

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In 'The Mental Causation Debate' (1995), I pointed out the parallel between the premises in some traditional arguments for physicalism and the assumptions which give rise to the problem of mental causation. I argued that the dominant contemporary version of physicalism finds mental causation problematic because it accepts the main premises of the traditional arguments, but rejects their conclusion: the identification of mental with physical causes. Moreover, the orthodox way of responding to this problem (which I call the 'constitution view') implicitly rejects an assumption hidden in the original argument for physicalism: the assumption that mental and physical causation are the same kind of relation ('homogeneity'). The conclusion of my paper was that if you reject homogeneity, then there is no obvious need for an account of the relation between mental and physical properties.

William Child challenges this conclusion on two grounds. First, he challenges the idea that the constitution view has no motivation once homogeneity is denied. And second, he claims that the constitution theory's solution to the mental causation problem is preferable to one of the non-physicalist solutions I describe in section 9 of my 1995 paper. I shall take each point in turn.

Child's first point is that the constitution view can be seen as a way of explaining how the denial of an identity theory of mental and physical causes is consistent with the completeness of physics and the denial of overdetermination. He proposes two ways of construing this sort of argument for the constitution view. The first argument does not assume homogeneity, but rather, in explaining why it is that mental and physical causes do not overdetermine their effects, it constructs a theory which delivers the consequence that homogeneity is false. The second argument says

that even if we start off with a rejection of homogeneity, we still need to explain why overdetermination is false, and the constitution view is the best explanation of this.

I agree with Child that the constitution view should not argue from the premise that homogeneity is true, to a conclusion which denies homogeneity. But I did not present the argument for the constitution view in this way. That is, I did not say that the constitution view presents its own motivation in terms of the rejection of homogeneity. I said that the arguments for the identity theories must assume homogeneity. I did not discuss distinct arguments for the constitution view, since it seemed to me that the view is normally defended on the basis of a general commitment to physicalism, plus a recoil from the identity theory, rather than on the basis of a specific argument for constitution. My claim was then that given the need to avoid both the identity theory and overdetermination, the best way to make sense of the constitution view's solutions to the mental causation problem is to see it as rejecting homogeneity.

Since Child seems to agree with this last claim, the question which divides us is whether denying homogeneity removes any motivation for the constitution view. Child thinks that it does not. The essence of his objection is that 'even if we started with the assertion that mental and physical causation are not homogeneous, we would still need to say something about the relation between mental and physical causes to make intelligible the fact that effects are not overdetermined by mental and physical causes'. And the point of the constitution view is to make this intelligible.

The situation Child asks us to envisage is one where it seems that a mental cause produces a certain effect E, and a distinct physical cause produces E, but there is no commitment to the idea that the causes produce E in the same sense. And this situation is supposed to create apparent overdetermination, to be resolved by the postulation of a constitution relation between the mental and the physical cause.

How should we make sense of the idea of two distinct causes ‘producing’ the same effect in different senses? And if we can make sense of it, would the situation described be an apparently problematic case of overdetermination? I shall argue that we cannot make sense of this idea independently of the specific theories of mental causation advanced in this context; and that once we look at the issue in this light, there is no further problem of overdetermination for the constitution view to resolve.

In the context of contemporary theories of causation, the question of whether mental and physical causation are homogeneous is not one which would necessarily occur to someone independently of thinking about this particular problem of mental causation. Why should someone worry about whether these kinds of causation are distinct, prior to any consideration of whether mental causation is compatible with physicalism? Someone might have a thesis about physical causation—for instance, that it is the transfer of energy—and then worry about how there can be mental causation, given this view. Or someone might think, with Papineau (1993), that all physical effects have their chances fixed by prior physical causes, and then worry about what role the mental can play in fixing the chances of physical effects. Aside from these sorts of considerations, it is hard to see why anyone should raise the question of homogeneity.

So to understand what it really means to deny homogeneity, we would need to look at the specific accounts of mental causation which rely on its denial: Jackson and Pettit’s (1988) account of mental causes as programming for their effects; Dretske’s (1988) account of mental causes as structuring causes rather than triggering causes; Kim’s (1993) theory of supervenient causation; and Yablo’s (1992) account of mental causation. I will take it then, that this is the sort of thing one means by denying homogeneity. My aim here is not to dispute the coherence of these accounts, but to

raise the following question. Suppose we had one of these accounts in mind when denying homogeneity—would the worry about overdetermination still arise?

As Child says, a genuine case of overdetermination of a physical effect by a mental and a physical cause, is a case where the following counterfactuals are true:

(M) If the mental cause had not occurred, then the physical effect would still have occurred;

(P) If the physical cause had not occurred, then the physical effect would still have occurred.

The guiding idea of the accounts of mental causation just mentioned is that the ‘higher-level’ mental cause ensures (e.g. by structuring or programming mental causation) the occurrence of the physical effect by ensuring that some physical effect or other brings about (e.g. by process or triggering physical causation) the physical effect. So on this kind of view, (P) is true: the closest worlds where the particular physical cause does not occur are worlds where the effect still occurs, because the mental cause would have ‘ensured’ that some other physical cause would step in and do its job.

But (M) is false, on these views of mental causation. For once we have accepted the two-causation picture of mental and physical causation, it just isn’t true that if the mental cause had been absent, the physical effect would still have occurred. The whole point of the two-causation picture is to explain the sense in which ‘higher-level’ properties make it the case that some ‘lower-level’ property will produce the effect. For example: Jackson and Pettit (1990, p.114) consider an explanation of why a piece of uranium emitted radiation over a certain period in terms of the fact that some of its atoms were decaying. Their account of this explanation is that the piece of uranium’s property of having some of its atoms decaying ‘programmes for’ the emission of radiation. The existence of this property means

that there would be a suitably efficacious property available, perhaps that involving such and such particular atoms, perhaps one involving others. And so the property was causally relevant to the radiation, under a perfectly ordinary sense of relevance, though it was not efficacious. (1990 p.114)

If the higher-level explanation is indispensable, as Jackson and Pettit argue it often is, then the lower level property will not produce the effect unless the higher-order property also programmes for the effect. On this view, then, it is obvious that the closest worlds where the programming cause does not exist will therefore be ones where the lower-level efficacious property does not exist. So (M) is false and there is no problem of overdetermination.<sup>1</sup>

I disagree with Child, then, that one can formulate a genuine worry about overdetermination even if one has denied homogeneity, since to make real sense of denying homogeneity, one has to have some account of the ways in which the distinct kinds of causation are distinct. But once such an account is in place, overdetermination will not be an issue. I conclude, against Child, that homogeneity is essential to formulating the worry about overdetermination.

Child may respond here that this concedes one of his critical points: that it is only in the context of a constitution view that one has a motive for denying homogeneity. So, he may say, one cannot just assert the denial of homogeneity without bringing to bear the theory which supports this denial: this would be to ‘detach the conclusion [the denial of homogeneity] from the theory [the constitution view]’.

But there are two kinds of theory under discussion: the theory of causation, and the constitution view. And what the discussion above reveals is that the question of how to spell out the denial of homogeneity is distinct from the question of

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<sup>1</sup>Here I have illustrated my point using Jackson and Pettit’s account, for simplicity of exposition. But it would be a simple matter to show how the point applies to Dretkse’s, Kim’s and Yablo’s accounts too.

constitution. For consider: one could accept the distinction between two kinds of causation even if one were not a physicalist of any kind at all. A parallelist dualist might think that mental causation was one kind of thing, physical causation another. And someone could, I suppose, accept the idea that the mental is constituted by the physical even if they accept homogeneity (though they would probably be forced into accepting epiphenomenalism about mental properties).

My original claim was not over whether there is any motive for denying homogeneity. Although I would accept homogeneity myself, I think that its denial is a live option. My claim was rather about whether there is any motive for the idea that the mental is constituted by the physical once homogeneity is denied (and presumably, once some theory such as programming, structuring or supervenient causation is accepted in its place).<sup>2</sup> Of course, many theories of mental causation are also theories of constitution (Yablo 1992 is a case in point). But this does not mean that the issues are not distinct.

Putting the question of motivation to one side, I now turn to Child's second criticism of my paper. The burden of this criticism is that the constitution view can be seen as offering the best explanation of why certain effects are not overdetermined by mental and physical causes. But this defence will work only if there are no better explanations available. This is why Child argues in section 4 of his paper that the non-physicalist view I described in my paper compares unfavourably to the constitution view.

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<sup>2</sup>Perhaps Child's conflation of these two distinct ideas is revealed when he talks about 'the constitution view, *with its account of mental causation* as supervenient causation' (my emphasis). My present point is that the constitution view is one thing, the account of mental causation another. Similarly, Child claims that to make my criticism stick, I need to explain how homogeneity is denied 'in advance of having any account, like the constitution view, that gives us a way of understanding how mental and physical causation are different relations' (my emphasis). I agree that to understand how homogeneity might be denied, we need to have some account of this. But the relevant account will be an account of causation, not of constitution.

The non-physicalist alternative solves the problem of overdetermination not by denying homogeneity, but by saying that the mental and physical causes are linked by psychophysical law. Child's criticism of this alternative is that, unlike the constitution view, it can provide no account of why this law is true: it must accept that the law is barely true. 'And there is no good reason to take a law as barely true if an account of why it obtains is actually available.'

But a defender of the non-physicalist alternative is not obliged to say that there is nothing more to say about why these laws hold. The claim that there are psychophysical laws is supposed to be an empirical speculation, albeit one which has some support in our own experience of the mind (see Crane and Mellor 1990). But nothing in this claim rules out the possibility that there are other laws which give some explanation of why these laws hold. There is no need for the non-physicalist to take a stand on this issue merely by making the claim about psychophysical laws.<sup>3</sup>

Child may say that to say that to explain the holding of psychophysical laws in terms of other laws will not satisfy a defender of the constitution view. For statements of these laws will—like any law-statements—be contingent, and the fact that the laws hold, and their relations to the psychophysical laws, may well be 'brute'. What the constitution view requires is a more illuminating account of how mental and physical properties are related. But what justification can be provided for this requirement? After all, we cannot expect the truth of every law-statement to be explicable in terms of the truth of some other statement: Child himself accepts that some law-statements will be barely true. What a priori reasons are there for thinking that we know, prior to any empirical investigation, which kinds of laws these will be? Neither Child nor any defender of the constitution view has provided such a reason.

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<sup>3</sup>Child himself would reject the claim that the existence of psychophysical laws is an empirical issue (see his 1994, chapter 2). But this question is orthogonal to the dispute between the constitution view and me.

My two responses to Child have something in common. Both responses express scepticism about the extent to which we need a distinctively metaphysical account—like ‘constitution’—of the relation between mind and body, once considerations about dualism or overdetermination are out of the picture. On this way of looking at things, the non-physicalist alternative is metaphysically cautious: within the naturalistic context of contemporary discussions of physicalism, it should be an open empirical question which laws apply to the mind, and therefore it should be an open question whether certain psychophysical laws are barely true. Given the adequacy of my first response to Child, his objection to the non-physicalist alternative appears to amount to a metaphysical objection to ‘brute’ nomic correlations involving mental properties. But without some further motivation for the constitution view, physicalists are not entitled to this objection.

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