

A Structure for Mental Causation

June 9, 2009

The core of the mental causation problem is that there appears to be more than one candidate for what makes the effect of a mental event happen. The physical cause has the best possible credentials for making the effect happen, and so counts as the only cause.

Kim's versions of the argument against mental causation depend on his Exclusion Principle: "No single event can have more than one sufficient cause occurring at any given time" (Kim, 2005, 42). The physical cause is sufficient for the effect, and it's the best candidate, so the Exclusion Principle says that it is the only cause.

Would a mental cause and a physical cause be *more than one* sufficient cause? The argument that they would be is that mental properties are not identical to physical properties. (This is supposed to follow from non-reductivism, which is supposed to be the crucial issue.) But the argument is invalid. For there to be more than one sufficient cause, the causes have to be distinct. In this case that means that the mental properties would have to be distinct from physical properties. Two properties are distinct iff independent—an instance of either can exist without being an instance of the other. But distinctness doesn't follow from non-identity (Sanford (2005) gives a general treatment). Given supervenience, mental properties are not independent of physical properties, since if something has one of the supervenience base physical properties, it will have the supervening property as well.

This suggests a structure—call it "the overlap structure"—for a class of solutions to the mental causation problem: let mental properties be not identical to physical properties, but not distinct from them either.

Several theories from the recent literature instantiate the overlap structure: the mental property/physical property relation is a determinable/determinate relation (Yablo, 1992); the causal powers of higher-level properties are constituted by the causal powers of lower-level

properties (Pereboom, 2002); the causal powers of multiply-realized properties are the intersection of the causal powers of their realizers (Clapp, 2001); multiply-realized properties are the union of their realizers (Lewis, 1983).

This paper explores instantiating the overlap structure with an ontology of dispositions. Heil (2005) uses the mental causation argument to justify the idea that there are no “levels” of dispositions. Suppose by contrast that two dispositions can be non-identical *and also* not fully distinct. The resulting picture has an analogue of levels, although the levels aren’t fully distinct. It permits there to be genuinely mental dispositions, and a solution to the mental causation problem that preserves the idea that the mental is as causally real as the physical.

The paper ends by looking for further constraints on acceptable accounts that instantiate the overlap structure. One class of such constraints derives from the fact that supervenience isn’t sufficient for causation. For example, Dowe (2000) proposes a conserved quantity view of causation. On this view an overlapping disposition can be a cause only if the higher-level interaction also conserves a quantity. The overlap structure then requires the higher-level and lower-level quantities to overlap as well.

References

- Clapp, L. (2001). Disjunctive properties: Multiple realizations. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 98(3):111–36.
- Dowe, P. (2000). *Physical Causation*. Cambridge Studies in Probability, Induction, and Decision Theory. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Heil, J. (2005). Dispositions. *Synthese*, 144:343–356.
- Kim, J. (2005). *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lewis, D. (1983). New work for a theory of universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61(4):343–377.
- Pereboom, D. (2002). Robust nonreductive materialism. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 99(10):499–531.
- Sanford, D. (2005). Distinctness and non-identity. *Analysis*, 65(4):269–74.
- Yablo, S. (1992). Mental causation. *The Philosophical Review*, 101(2):245–280.