

LSU PHIL 4941 / Spring 2016 / John Protevi

<http://www.protevi.com/john/PhilMind>

Classroom use only.

Davidson, "Mental Events" (1970): 116-125 in Chalmers collection.

MOTIVATING QUESTION: how to reconcile resistance to capture by physical laws of mental events with the causal role of mental events in the physical world? That is, we are not worried about autonomy (self-giving of law) of mental events but anomaly (failure to fall under a law).

Note that Davidson is using the now-normal English sense of "anomaly" as "outside law," but that this is drawn from a false etymology. The Greek word *nomos* = "law" so that "autonomy" = "self - law" and by extension "anomaly" looks like it comes from "a - nomos." But the Greek *anomalous* = an - homalos or "uneven" (*homos* = same, as in homonym). But that's fine as long as we remember the English sense of the English word "anomaly" as "outside law."

THREE PRINCIPLES

1. *Causal Interaction*: (CI) some mental events interact causally with physical events
2. *Nomological Character of Causality*: (NCC) cause and effect events related by strict laws
3. *Anomalism of the Mental*: (AM) no strict laws for prediction and explanation of mental events

THE PARADOX

Accepting all three seems to imply inconsistency: the first two principles, taken together, imply there are laws for mental events, but the third denies this.

SOLUTION TO THE PARADOX

Explain away the contradiction as only apparent.

FORECAST OF THE PAPER

1. Version of identity theory allowing reconciliation of the three principles
2. Argument against strict psychophysical (PP) laws (this would entail AM)
3. From no PP laws, and CI and NCC, we can infer truth of a version of identity theory which identifies some mental events with physical events

[Side note: "intension" = content of a concept; "extension" = those objects which falls under the concept. So, intension of "table" = "furniture for supporting objects" and extension of "table" = all the work tables, dinner tables, card tables, etc.]

1. DAVIDSON'S VERSION OF IDENTITY THEORY

Mental events are identical with physical events. Events are unrepeatable, dated, individual occurrences.

Four ways to relate mental and physical events:

(1) *nomological monism*, which says there are strict correlating laws, and that the correlated entities are identical (type identity)

(2) *nomological dualism*, which holds that there are strict correlating laws, but that the correlated entities are not identical (parallelism, interactionism, and epiphenomenalism)

(3) *anomalous dualism*, which holds there are no laws correlating the mental and the physical, and that the substances are ontologically distinct (Cartesian dualism)

(4) *anomalous monism*, which allows only one class of entities (all events are physical, but some have both physical AND mental descriptions), but denies the possibility of definitional and nomological reduction (no psychophysical laws).

Anomalous monism: all events are physical, but not all events are mental; that is, mental phenomena cannot be given purely physical explanations. Mental characteristics are supervenient on physical characteristics: you cannot have two events that are exactly similar physically but have different mental characteristics. This does not entail reducibility through law or definition.

Same event can be referred to under more than one description, e.g., Place's example of lightning: a visual description ("there's a flash!") and a scientific description ("electricity"). Davidson will want us to consider cases in which there is a physical description and a mental description.

Events that are causally related must be related under some strict law, and laws are linguistic, so they can relate events only as those events are given under specific descriptions. (So you can have physical laws, but no psychophysical laws; you cannot reduce, by law, a mental event to its physical cause.)

2. AGAINST PSYCHOPHYSICAL LAWS

While mental and physical events are identical —one event under two descriptions — there may not be a strict law relating the mentally described event to the physically described event. That is, no strict psychophysical laws. There are only strict physical laws.

Denial of strict psychophysical laws sees the mental as constrained by principles of rationality that do not apply to physical descriptions. In making sense of other people, we have to assume their rationality: we decode according to a theory that "finds him consistent, a believer of truths, and a lover of the good." We'll never find a single theory to do all that, but we can find acceptable compromises.

But we are going to be subject to the indeterminacy of translation when we are describing the propositional attitudes of others: everything depends on context but you needn't ever stop adding in additional dimensions of context. Nonetheless you can muddle through, in practice.

3. INFERRING A VERSION OF IDENTITY THEORY AS TRUE FROM OUR 3 PRINCIPLES

We cannot explain mental events as a class from physical laws, though we can explain a particular mental event if we know to which physical event it is identical. But useful explanation of mental events goes by way of other mental events – they did X for reason Y. Anomalism of the mental is a condition for autonomy or self-rule.