

**Philosophy of Mind and Metaphysics**  
**Lecture XIII: Mental Causation/Consciousness**

Tim Black  
California State University, Northridge  
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I. MENTAL CAUSATION

- a. **THE QUESTION: How is it possible for the mind to cause a change in a material body?**
  
- b. **THREE KINDS OF MENTAL CAUSATION**
  - i. **PHYSICAL-TO-MENTAL: Events in the physical realm—e.g., dropping a bowling ball on one's toe—cause events in the mental realm—e.g., a severe pain.**
  
  - ii. **MENTAL-TO-MENTAL: Events (or states) in the mental realm—e.g., one's belief that the earth is round—cause other events (or other states) in the mental realm—e.g., one's belief that no ship will fall off the edge of the earth.**
  
  - iii. **MENTAL-TO-PHYSICAL: Events in the mental realm—e.g., one's desire for a glass of milk—cause events in the physical realm—e.g., getting out of bed and walking downstairs to the kitchen.**
  
- c. **PROBLEM #1 FOR MENTAL-TO-PHYSICAL MENTAL CAUSATION: If this is a genuine brand of causation—that is, if the mental has causal influence over the physical—then there must be causal laws connecting mental phenomena with physical phenomena (i.e., causal laws that govern the mental's interaction with the physical). But *are* there such laws?**
  - i. **NO (Donald Davidson's *anomalous monism*)**
    - 1. “[T]he ascription of intentional states, like beliefs and desires, is regulated by certain *principles of rationality*, principles to ensure that the total set of such states ascribed to a subject will be as rational and coherent as possible” (p. 135).
    - 2. But “the physical domain is subject to no such requirement; as Davidson says, the principle of rationality and coherence has “no echo” in physical theory” (p. 136).
    - 3. Suppose, however, that there are laws connecting beliefs with brain states. In this case, “we could attribute beliefs to a subject, *one by one*, independently of the constraints of the rationality principle” (p. 136).

4. It follows that “neurophysiology would preempt the rationality principle, and the practice of belief attribution would no longer need to be regulated by the rationality principle” (p. 136).
5. “If, therefore, belief is to retain its identity and integrity as a mental phenomenon, its attribution must be regulated by the rationality principle and hence cannot be connected by law to a physical substrate” (p. 136). This is *psychophysical anomalism*, the claim that there are no psychophysical laws, no laws connecting mental phenomena with physical phenomena.

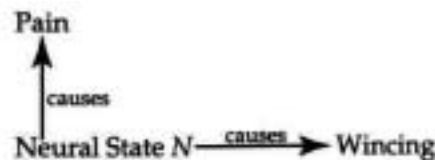
Does this mean that there’s no mental-to-physical mental causation? *No*. When Davidson “says that there are no psychophysical laws, what [he] says is that there are no laws connecting mental *kinds* with physical *kinds*. So what follows is only that *if mental event m causes physical event p, the kinds, C and E, under which m and p respectively fall and that are connected by law, must both be physical kinds. In particular, C, under which mental event m falls, cannot be a mental kind or description; it must be a physical one. This means that m is a physical event!*” (p. 137). This is clearly a physicalist claim and therefore a *monistic* claim (according to which there is just one substance). Hence, Davidson’s view can be characterized as *anomalous monism*.

ii. YES

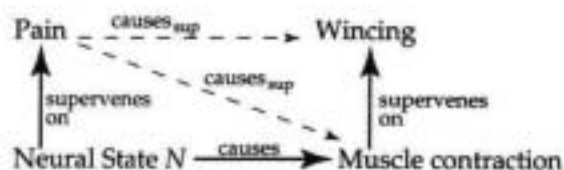
1. Davidson supposes that psychophysical laws must be *strict laws*, that is, “exceptionless, explicitly articulated laws that form a closed and comprehensive theory, like the fundamental laws of physics” (p. 143). It’s only when we conceive of laws in this way that we find no psychophysical laws. For psychophysical laws might instead be *ceteris paribus laws*, that is, “rough-and-ready generalizations tacitly qualified by escape clauses (“ceteris paribus” ...) and apparently immune to falsification by isolated negative instances” (p. 143). It very well could be, then, that there are psychophysical laws, where those laws turn out to be *ceteris paribus* laws rather than strict laws.
- d. PROBLEM #2 FOR MENTAL-TO-PHYSICAL MENTAL CAUSATION: “Is there ... a way of bringing the mental close enough to the physical so that the causal closure principle is not violated and yet not fully into it, so that the dreaded reductionism is avoided?” (p. 148).

- i. **THE CAUSAL CLOSURE PRINCIPLE:** “[N]o causal chain involving a physical event will ever cross the boundary of the physical into the nonphysical: If  $x$  is a physical event and  $y$  is a cause or effect of  $x$ , then  $y$ , too, must be a physical event” (p. 147).
- ii. “If the causal closure of the physical domain is to be respected, it seems *prima facie* that mental causation must be ruled out—unless mental events and properties are somehow brought into the physical domain. But if they are part of the physical domain, doesn’t that mean that they *are* physical properties and events? If so, that would be reductionism pure and simple. But this is a prospect that most philosophers, including many physicalists, find uncomfortable...” (p. 148).
- iii. **RESPONSES**

- 1. **EPIPHENOMENALISM:** Every mental event is caused by a physical event in the brain, but mental events have no power to cause other events, either mental or physical. According to epiphenomenalists, this makes a place for mental events in the causal order of things without violating the causal closure principle or forcing us toward reductionism.



- 2. **SUPERVENIENT CAUSATION:** According to this approach, pain’s claim to be a cause of wincing (for example) consists in pain’s claim to supervene on some neural state,  $N$ , where  $N$  causes a certain physiological event on which the wincing supervenes. “More generally, [supervenient causation] takes causal processes at the microlevel as fundamental and considers causal processes at the macrolevel as dependent, or supervenient, on those at the microlevel” (p. 151). Here again, according to supervenience theorists, this makes a place for mental events in the causal order of things without violating the causal closure principle or forcing us toward reductionism.



3. **REDUCTIONISM:** The reductionist identifies pain with neural state *N*, saving causal closure by giving up on anti-reductionism.



## II. CONSCIOUSNESS

### a. ASPECTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- i. **QUALIA:** “Sensory mental events and states, like seeing a red ripe tomato, smelling gasoline, experiencing a shooting pain in the arm, and the like, have distinctive “phenomenal” (or “phenomenological”) characters, that is, felt or sensed qualities, by means of which they are usually identified as sensations of a certain type. It has become customary to refer to these sensory qualities of mental states as “raw feels” or “qualia”” (p. 157).
  - ii. **PRIVACY:** “[O]ne has a special epistemic access to one’s own current conscious states; we seem to be “immediately aware,” as Descartes said, of our own feelings, thoughts, and perceptions and enjoy a special sort of first-person authority with regard to them” (p. 160).
  - iii. **FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW:** “First, ... for any conscious state there is a subject whose state it is and ... the content of consciousness consists in how things look or appear to that subject. Second, there is the idea that for each conscious state there is a unique subject, a single person, whose consciousness it is...” (pp. 162-3).
- b. **CONSCIOUSNESS AS INNER AWARENESS:** “[C]onsciousness is a kind of inner awareness—that is, awareness of one’s own mental states. The model is that of a kind of internal scanner or monitoring device that keeps tabs on the internal goings-on of a system” (p. 164). There are two versions of this view:
- i. *Armstrong’s version*, according to which one is in a conscious state only if one perceives or is aware of the state of one’s own mind. On this view, being in pain counts as a conscious state only if one is aware of being in that state.
  - ii. *Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness*, according to which a state is a conscious state only if there is a (higher-order) thought

that one is in that state. According to this view, then, being in pain counts as a conscious state only if one is having the thought that one is in that state.

c. DOES CONSCIOUSNESS SUPERVENE ON PHYSICAL PROPERTIES?

i. A negative response to this question is provided by those who are convinced by inverted qualia arguments or by absent qualia arguments.

1. **INVERTED QUALIA:** “It is perfectly conceivable that there are worlds just like ours in all physical respects but in which people, when looking at the things we look at, experience colors that are complementary to the colors we experience” (p. 170).

2. **ABSENT QUALIA:** It seems perfectly conceivable that there are worlds just like ours in all physical respects but in which people, when looking at the things we look at, experience nothing at all.

d. **THE PROBLEM OF QUALIA:** “What is commonly referred to as “the problem of qualia” is that of giving an account of qualia that is consistent with the basic tenets of physicalism—that is, giving a physicalistically acceptable account of qualia” (p. 172). The physicalist has two options here:

i. **ACCEPT A WEAKER FORM OF SUPERVENIENCE:** “[O]ur physicalist might concede that qualia do not supervene on physical/biological processes with metaphysical necessity, but they do so with a weaker form of necessity, that is, nomological necessity” (p. 172).

1.  $p$  is metaphysically necessary IFF  $p$  cannot be false (or, IFF there is no possible world in which  $p$  is false).

2.  $p$  is nomologically necessary IFF  $p$  cannot be false when the physical laws are as they are (or, IFF there is no world in which (a) the physical laws are as they are in the actual world, and (b)  $p$  is false).

ii. **ARGUE THAT QUALIA DO NOT EXIST:** Qualia nihilism is the view that qualia do not exist. There are two versions of qualia nihilism:

1. **THEORETICAL QUALIA NIHILISM:** Qualia have no role in explaining and predicting behavior. “Qualia are subjective and not intersubjectively accessible, and this makes their direct scientific study impossible. Moreover, unlike the observable theoretical posits of physical sciences, the

**intrinsic features of qualia do not seem to have any observably testable consequences; for as far as behavior goes, just what qualia a subject is experiencing seems to make no difference” (p. 178).**

- 2. PHILOSOPHICAL QUALIA NIHILISM: “Proponents of this position argue that there “really” are no such things as qualia and that a close analysis of the concept of a quale will show qualia to be merely a piece of philosophical invention” (p. 179).**