Mental Causation and the Physical World: A Moorean-Reidian Approach

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Abstract. Many people accept the completeness thesis, which says that the physical world is causally complete, that every physical event that has cause has a physical cause. However, this leads to well-known problems of mental causation, problems that may require us to give up on mental causation if we are to go on accepting the completeness thesis. I argue that, if we do indeed face such a dilemma between the completeness thesis and mental causation, what we should give up on is the completeness thesis, since mental causation has a much stronger epistemic status.

> …when theory is repugnant to fact, it is easy to see which ought to yield.
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> —Thomas Reid[1]

Many philosophers have given theories of mind, but few have asked what specific data a theory of mind needs to accommodate in order to be successful. What follows is an attempt to lay out an approach to the mind-body problem that treats mental causation as just such a datum.[2] A secondary aim of this paper is to call into question the thesis that the physical world is causally complete.

Consider the following two propositions: (1) Every physical event that has a cause has a physical event as its cause; and (2) Mental events cause some physical events. Now, (1) is a version of what I shall term *the Completeness of the Physical*, the thesis that the physical world is a complete causal system, every event of which can be traced back to other (physical) events within that system.[3] The problems of mental causation arising

I thank Tyler Burge, Jon Ellis, Matt Frise, John Heil, Frank Jackson, Jaegwon Kim, Kaija Mortenson, and Ernest Sosa for comments and discussion that lead to improvements in this paper.

[1] *Active Powers*, Essay 1, Ch. 1.

[2] My approach is very sympathetic to the approaches taken in Baker (1993), Burge (1993), and McGinn (1989).

[3] Don't confuse this with the stronger thesis, which says that every physical event that has a cause has a physical event *and only a physical event* as its cause. We might call this the *Closure* of the Physical. The difference is that the Completeness of the Physical allows that a physical event may be over-determined in that it may have a non-physical cause *as well as* a physical cause. The Closure of the Physical, on the other

from (1) and (2) will vary depending on our additional premises. But since the details of these problems are widely discussed,[4] I only want to invite the reader to engage in a philosophical exercise: Suppose the problems of mental causation arising from the Completeness of the Physical are intractable. Suppose, in other words, that all the premises we could plausibly add to (1) would, when so added, nonetheless entail the denial of (2). How should we respond to such a puzzle as this? My proposal: relinquish (1), because (2) enjoys a much stronger epistemic status.[5]

This proposal is motivated by the Moorean response to skepticism of the external world. Consider the following two propositions: (3) The skeptical thesis is true; and (4) I know I have a body. Let the skeptical thesis be some epistemological principle that entails the denial of (4). What is the Moorean response? It is: Treat the skeptic's conclusion as a *reductio ad absurdum* of one or more of her premises. In the case of (3) and (4), then, one might say, "I am more certain that I have a body than I am of (3). Indeed, I am so much more certain of my body that, if (3) entails that I do not have a body, this leads me to deny (3)." Thus, to reverse a phrase from Stewart Cohen, one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*.[6, 7]

The general lesson here is that *an argument will fail if the denial of its conclusion is more obvious than one or more of its premises*. An ancient argument concludes that Achilles can't overtake a tortoise in a foot race. To this, it is sensible to say that more

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hand, disallows non-physical events to enter into the causal transaction at all. (These terms and ideas are sometimes conflated in the literature.)

[4] For further discussion, see Kim (1998), Ch. 2; Heil (2003); Heil & Robb (2008).

[5] If this seems to you like a boring proposal, if you are muttering under your breath "but who was going to give up on mental causation anyways?", I bring to your attention that certain eminent thinkers have been very sympathetic to epiphenomenalism, e. g., Huxley (1894); Chalmers (2003), pp. 127-9; Kim (1993); and Jackson (1981) (though Jackson has seen the light and now repents of epiphenomenalism).

[6] Cohen (1999).

[7] For more on the Moorean response to skepticism, see Moore (0000), especially pp. 119-27, and the Introduction to DeRose & Warfield (1999).

obvious than any of the premises of this argument is the fact that Achilles *can* overtake a tortoise. If certain premises suggest otherwise, it is a refutation of those premises.

Let us be Moorean about the problem of mental causation: *That mental causation occurs is more obvious than any premise that leads to the contrary. If a certain theory of mind cannot accommodate mental causation, so much the worse for that theory.*[8]

Now, Thomas Nagel has remarked that to take the Moorean response to skepticism is only "to turn one's back on the gap [between our beliefs and our evidence] and announce that one is now on the other side."[9] But there is more than this going on in the Moorean response, as is illuminated by the following passage from Thomas Reid (some hundred-and-fifty years before Moore):

> The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? …Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception? — they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?[10]

This is a rich passage, but I want to highlight the following of its suggestions: At the heart of skepticism lies a very high estimation of our theorizing capacity. Likewise, the force of the Moorean response is to call into question why it is we would esteem our theorizing capacity with such greater confidence than we do our perceptual capacities. This, *contra* Nagel, is an important point. One's confidence in a belief reveals, in large, her confidence in the cognitive processes underlying that belief.

Thus, when we supplement the Moorean approach with this Reidian insight, we get a two part strategy for the problem of mental causation: first, assert that the occurance

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[8] To the list of obvious data about consciousness, I would add other things, like qualia and intentionality, and suggest a Moorean approach to them as well. In this sense, my approach might also be called "particularist". Cf. Sosa (0000).
[9] Nagel (1986), p. 69n.
[10] *Inquiry*, Ch. 6, section 20.

of mental causation is more obvious than the premises that imply its denial; second, if the epephenomenalist (or whoever) is obstinate, ask why he would be more confident in his ability to judge the truth of his premises than he is in his ability to judge that his believing causes his saying.

But remember our philosophical exercise. We were supposing that the Completeness of the Physical, with whatever premises we could plausibly add, does indeed entail the denial of mental causation. On the Moorean-Reidian approach, then, what we must ask is whether the Completeness of the Physical is more obvious than mental causation. I take it that everyone does find mental causation to be very obvious: It—or at least its appearance—is under our noses every moment of waking life. You purchase a coffee because you feel tired. You pay the woman because you believe she is the cashier. You sit at the far table because you desire to be left alone.

In that case, it is time to talk about the Completeness of the Physical, which seems to enjoy a zealous fan-base. It functions as an (almost assumed) premise in a well-known argument from David Lewis.[11] Hartry Field opens an essay with the sentence, "I take it as beyond serious doubt that there is an important sense in which all facts depend on physical facts and all good causal explanations depend on physical explanations."[12] David Armstrong remarks, "…the philosopher makes the way smooth for a first order doctrine, which, true or false, is a doctrine of first importance: a purely physicalist view of man."[13]

Brave words. But when it comes to the Completeness of the Physical, the amount of enthusiasm in its favor stands in astonishing inverse relation to the amount of

[11] Lewis (1966).
[12] Field (1992), p. 272.
[13] Armstrong, (1981), p. 00.

argument in its favor. For, (1) is either known through intuition or through argument. I cannot see how anyone could claim to know (1) through intuition alone, because I cannot see how anyone could think his metaphysical abilities apt enough to immediately and spontaneously apprehend the truth of (1). Our metaphysical abilities, like all our cognitive abilities, are reliable only within a limited range. I know that it is possible for this table to be moved two feet to the left, but do I know that it is possible for a three-inch-thick sheet of iron to be transparent to visible light?[14] *Perhaps* the latter is possible. But it would be odd for me to have a very firm belief either way.

Then what *arguments* stand in favor of (1)? Well, I know of no close piece of reasoning with (1) as its conclusion. But what *is* cited—and often—is some loose consideration according to which the Completeness of the Physical bears some important relation to science. But the trouble is that any attempt to state this consideration with exactness renders it false or irrelevant. For instance, according to Andrew Melnyk, the Completeness of the Physical "is supported by current physics which has investigated ever so many physical events but which knows of none for the explanation of which it is *necessary* to invoke non-physical causes."[15] But so what? Perhaps there *is* no physical event such that it is *necessary* to explain it in terms of a non-physical cause. This equates to saying that, for every physical event that has a cause, it is *possible* to explain it in terms of a physical cause. But it doesn't follow for a one sweet minute that every physical event that has a cause *does indeed* have a physical cause. (Compare the argument: *x* is possible; therefore, *x*.) Then consider some comments from John Searle. After remarking with rhetorical force that atomic and evolutionary theory make it

[14] I owe this example to Van Inwagen (1995b), p. 12.
[15] Melnyk (2003), p. 78. Emphasis is his.

impossible for us to take seriously the existence of God or the afterlife, he observes that "anyone who has had even a modicum of 'scientific' education after about 1920 should find nothing at all contentious or controversial in what I have just said."[16] Somehow, we are supposed to "just see" that physics and biology tell the whole story. Call this the get-with-the-program argument. Of course, it has the unfortunate implication that Francis Collins, a believer in God, who was one of the main researchers to crack the human genome, did not have even a modicum of scientific education; indeed, that Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Michael Behe, and Bas van Fraassen, for instance, did not have even a modicum of scientific education. Counterexamples like this could be boringly multiplied.

But surely the Completeness of the Physical has more to say for itself than that! Indeed, one of the most common concerns behind the Completeness of the Physical is that somehow it is methodologically indispensable for the activity of science. I have two things to say here.[17] First, one can accept that a certain thesis is methodologically useful for scientific activity without asserting that thesis to be true. To deny this involves a major assumption of scientific realism, one which, at best, requires argument.[18] Along these lines, it is often mentioned in passing that the Completeness of the Physical should be accepted on account of its "simplicity". But I will remind the reader that how we are to measure simplicity, and how simplicity is related to truth, is *very* unclear.[19] It will not do to just cite the "simplicity" of the Completeness of the Physical without giving some content to the notion of simplicity. Second, what is methodologically useful in one

[16] Searle (1992), p. 93. Of course, a believer in God has no problem accepting evolutionary and atomic theory (not necessarily, at least). He just accepts *more* than what those theories say. For more discussion here, I recommend Van Inwagen (1995a) and Sober (0000).
[17] Though there is more to say, no doubt. See Plantinga (1997).
[18] Cf. Van Fraassen (1981), especially Ch. 4, §4.
[19] Cf. Sober (2001).

domain of inquiry may not be so useful in another. We don't, I hope, fire finches through the particle accelerator. *Perhaps* the Completeness of the Physical is a useful assumption for the study of the quantum world. That doesn't entail that it is useful for the study of human consciousness.

Not only does the Completeness of the Physical have little in its favor. It has positive problems as well. One problem arises from the fact that it is very difficult to define "the physical".[20] Perhaps the physical is whatever science postulates. But history makes it likely that future science will not postulate what we do now. Then perhaps the physical is whatever *future* science will postulate. But that doesn't give any content to the notion of the physical: We know what theories our grandchildren will endorse perhaps no better than we know what food they will eat for breakfast. Then perhaps the physical is whatever is located within time and space. But some religious believers hold that the Devil has occasionally appeared within time and space. So we must have meant whatever is *permanently* located within time and space. But according to some schools of physics, this would entail that electrons aren't physical. Then perhaps the physical is whatever consists in the fundamental particles of physics. But gravitational fields, properties, and relations….

What I mean to bring out here is that the concept of the physical is vague. Of course, this alone isn't a problem. Most of our concepts are vague, and provided we have clear cases and clear counter cases, we can use vague concepts just fine—*in most contexts*. We do have such clear cases and counter cases when it comes to the physical: archangels aren't, archipelagos are. This means we can use the concept of the physical just fine—*in most contexts*. But in certain philosophical contexts, especially in

[20] Cf. van Fraassen (1996); (2002), pp.50-7; and Stroud (1987).

discussions of the mind-body problem, we need a concept sharp enough to cut with. So much sweat has gone into trying to decide whether mental events are physical, when "the physical" is not nearly neat enough to resolve such fringe cases. Indeed, what we have is the following dilemma: Either we leave "the physical" vague and therefore not useful in discussions of the mind-body problem, or we give it content in such a way that it either includes what we were sure to be non-physical or excludes what we were sure to be physical.

Moreover, while there is nothing necessarily wrong with vagueness, the concept of the physical is so vague it isn't clear it has *any* content. The concept of goodness is vague. But whether we are speaking of courage under fire or mercy to the poor, we at least see a common thread. When, however, it comes to the concept of the physical, we are supposed to include under its heading electrons, elephants, black holes, magnetic fields, and—some would say—consciousness. It's hard to see any thread connecting these things. I mean, there's vague and there's *vague*.

I have offered one point against the Completeness of the Physical, namely, its lack of content. I have also considered some of the main concerns and arguments behind the Completeness of the Physical, and found them unpersuasive; or, at least, not persuasive enough to overturn mental causation. (Remember, we are pretending there is a dilemma between mental causation and the Completeness of the Physical.) And if I have argued cogently, we may help ourselves to this conclusion: If there is a genuine dilemma between the Completeness of the Physical and mental causation, then we should relinquish the Completeness of the Physical, because mental causation enjoys a much stronger epistemic status. (Notice I do not assert there *is* such a dilemma. I only

recommend a response in the event that such a dilemma turns out to be what we are facing. People will divide over whether the dilemma is genuine, of course. Some will say Yes, others No, and still others that it is an open question. What is sure is that any answer requires argument at this point.)

I will end by discussing three objections.

One: "You take it that everyone finds mental causation to be obvious. But *whom* do you have in mind exactly? Your mother? Your baseball team? Have you taken a head count at the last APA meeting? *I* don't find it obvious, at least, not with the same force that *you*, Mr. Ballard, seem to find it obvious. My intuitions about mental causation are weak enough that they could be overturned if some theory of mind inconsistent with them seemed plausible enough. Is it, in that case, my intuitions against yours?"

First of all, really? I am incapable of believing that anyone actually doesn't find mental causation to be an extremely salient feature of experience. Second, I want to know why the objector is so fond of his ability to assess remote metaphysical propositions and so disparaging of his ability to assess a feature of his experience which, every moment he is not dreaming or comatose, is so stark and pervasive. (Speech about "intuitions" can be exchanged for speech about our cognitive abilities, and that way progress lies.) Third, perhaps a theory *will* turn up that is persuasive enough to overturn mental causation (though I doubt it). I have only argued that the Completeness of the Physical is not such a theory.

Two: "Take the Copernican cosmology. It entails that the sun does not move. But from our vantage point it seems obvious that the sun *does* move. On your 'Moorean-Reidian approach', shall we treat this as a refutation of the Copernican cosmology?"[21]

No, we shan't. The Completeness of the Physical shouldn't overturn mental causation, because the Completeness of the Physical is, as I have argued, much less obvious than mental causation. But the Copernican cosmology is *not* much less obvious than the thesis that the sun moves, not, at least, once you have learned how the Copernican cosmology works. Rather, the Copernican cosmology is a well-established scientific doctrine. If the Completeness of the Physical was as well-established as the Copernican cosmology, then it may well have the force to overturn mental causation. But at this point it doesn't.

Three: "But why be so closed off to epiphenomenalism? While the Copernican cosmology entails that the sun doesn't move, it goes on to explain why it would *appear* to move from our vantage point. Why can't epipheneomenalism likewise explain why mental causation would *appear*, to us, to occur, though it be an appearance only?"

No doubt, this feature could (and should) be built into epiphenomenalism, and we surely couldn't accept epiphenaminalism without it. But neither is it sufficient. After all, any conspiracy theory will have this feature as well. (Of course it *seems to you* the Free Masons aren't behind it all…!) We would still need independent reason to accept epiphenomenalism, reason that is strong enough to overturn our beliefs about mental causation. I have argued that a reason sometimes cited, the Completeness of the Physical, is not in fact strong enough to do this.

[21] An intermediate case might be color perception: It is a salient feature of experience that the world contains color, yet some people (though not all) are willing to relinquish that belief for the sake of a certain theory. Cf. Ellis, Jonathan (2005).

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