

# A Philosophical analysis of Davidson's theory of Anomalous Monism.

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## INTRODUCTION

A famous materialist alternative to Cartesian dualism is a particular kind of monist view about events. Davidson's theory of anomalous monism is a current brand of non-reductive materialism. Like any other identity theorist, Davidson wants to show that there is an identity between the mental and physical states, still there is no strict laws connecting the mental and physical domain. Davidson's theory is that every mental events identical with some physical event, but not every physical event is identical with a mental event. According to Davidson, an event is mental if it is describable in mental terms, and an event is physical if it can be described in physical terms. To Davidson, a physical term is one that features in the vocabulary of physicists, but he offers a single criterion for something to count as mental. To quote 'The distinguishing feature of the mental is not that it is private, subjective, or immaterial, but that it exhibits what Brentano called intentionality'.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** 1. Intentionality 2. Nomic subsumption 3. Psycho-physical laws

Donald Davidson in his famous essay "Mental Events" propounds his major thesis of anomalous monism. He explicitly formulates this materialist thesis for events; and his irreducibility thesis is restricted to intentional mental types, e.g., believing, desiring, and intending. Davidson's version of the identity theory is couched in terms of events rather than states, because he regards causation as a relation between events. But for our present purpose nothing of significance turns on the distinction between events and states. According to anomalous monism, every event-token is physical. But intentional mental predicates and concepts (ones expressing propositional attitudes) do not reduce, by law or definition, to physical predicates and concepts. In "Mental events" Davidson clearly says that there is mental causation.<sup>2</sup> The idea is that some mental events (not all) casually interact with physical events. Human actions which are bodily movements are caused by the mental states that rationalize them. Davidson offers an original argument for irreducibility thesis. Mental predicates and concepts are, he claims, governed by constitutive principles of rationality, but physical concepts and predicates are not so governed. The concept of rationalization is implicit in the idea of practical syllogism. The action mentioned in the conclusion follows from the premises about desire and belief. Thus people act on the basis of what they want and what they believe. Actions are bodily movements, which are explained in terms of desires and beliefs which are nothing but mental states. To put an example, my desire to buy a chocolate and my belief that a chocolate can be bought from a chocolate bar may and sometimes do cause me to go to a chocolate bar. Thus it proves that if a person desires a particular end, and believes that some action is the only or the best way to achieve that end, and then the alleged action is the rational thing to do in the circumstances.

Davidson regards the mind- body problem as the problem of the relation between mental and physical events. To him casual relation is a law- like relation between two particular events. His conception of events is that they are concrete and dated particulars – unrepeatable entities located in space and time.<sup>3</sup> According to the Davidson, two events are same if they have same cause and effect. He contends that events can be described in many ways and such different descriptions need not be logically equivalent or synonymous.

Davidson's maintains that all strict laws are found in physics only. He argues that where there is causality, there must be some deterministic law connecting events of kinds to which the events mentioned as cause and effect belong. In other words, Davidson believes in the nomological character of causality. By this he intends to mean that if two events are causally connected, there must be a strict law under which they can be subsumed. This is known as the 'nomic' subsumption' thesis.<sup>4</sup>

Davidson says that when events are causally related, they have descriptions that instantiate a law. Events can instantiate laws only relative to certain descriptions. So laws can subsume events only under certain description. He maintains not that every true singular statement of causality instantiates such a law, but that when events are related as cause and effect, they have descriptions that instantiate such a law. As we cannot formulate such laws with the mental states and their physical effects, there are no strict deterministic laws with regard to the mental.

However, since no strict deterministic laws of psychophysical interaction are available, this is called the anomaly of the mental – anomaly meaning failure to fall under a law. The mental is anomalous not only because there are no strict laws relating mental events to other mental events but none relating them to physical events either, i.e., laws linking mental events such as beliefs, intention with physical such as action. Here it should be made clear that Davidson opines that mental events do sometimes cause physical events.

To explain the casual relation between the physical and mental events, Davidson claims that mental events are physical events ontologically, though there is a categorical difference between the mental and physical events. To him, all events are physical.

Davidson is a materialist but he does not aim at any identification of mental properties with physical properties, nor any analysis of mental talk in other terms. It is a form the claim that there are no psychophysical laws to the claim that every mental event is also a physical event.

The first step in Davidson's argument is to substantiate the claim that there are no psychophysical laws. It is very difficult to give a fully accurate explanation and evaluation of the first step. The main idea is that the two domains, i.e., the mental and the physical, are subject to such different overarching constraints that there cannot be strict connection between them.

Davidson's thesis may be termed nonreductive monism. It is nonreductive in the sense that it maintains a categorical or conceptual difference the mental and the physical. Moreover, the thesis does not speak about any identification of mental properties with physical properties, nor any analysis of mental talk in other terms. Conceptual irreducibility is possible because mental concepts are governed by constitutive principle of rationality, whereas physical concepts are not so governed. It would not be wise to accept the thesis that we should do away with altogether at all levels and for any reason, even for ordinary social discourse, any conversation in terms of belief, desires and suchlike. Such talks are too useful to enable us to explain our behavior. In so far we live with other human beings, it is useful to accept the already settled practice of explaining and interpreting people's actions performed on the basis of belief, hopes, desires and suchlike. The Davidsonian position is still nonreductive monism as he claims that his position endorses ontological reduction, but eschews conceptual reduction.<sup>5</sup>

There are some fundamental problems in nonreductive monism as developed by Davidson. Let us start with the view that a physical state can have both a physical property and a mental property. This statement seems to be puzzling. In order to ascribe a mental property to something, we cannot do if it were merely a physical entity. It is granted that a purely physical object can have a non-physical property, e.g., The Tajmahal is beautiful. Here 'beautiful' is a non-physical property possessed by the Tajmahal. But that non-physical property need not be a mental property. To make this point clear, we must say that X has a mental property means X is or could be aware that it has this property.

A minimal self- awareness – potentially at least, is a structural requirement of possessing a mental property. This awareness orientedness is the distinguishing feature of a mental property. Since we could be aware not only of what we desire or believe something, desires and beliefs can be called mental states. I desire money and I am in a position to recognize that I desire money and that is a desire. Similarly, you believe that you are happy, and you are, really, in a position to recognize that you believe that you are happy and that this is a belief. A rather serious problem of nonreductive monism is linked with the notion of causality.

It can be stated as a counter argument that mental events, such as desires and belief, do cause, qua mental events, physical events like action – even though no strict deterministic law is available in such psychophysical casual interaction. So in order to stand in casual relations, Mental events do not require the backing of strict deterministic laws. As A.J. Ayer rightly pointed out ‘It is enough. ...that they (events under mentaldescription) claim the support of general statement of tendency.’<sup>6</sup> psychological explanations of human action, in terms of man’s general tendencies, are quite adequate to make this sort of explanation intelligible, and hence, psychological explanation can easily be regarded as a genuine form of casual explanations. So our understanding of mental causation derives primarily from our understanding of mentalistic explanation and not from redescription in physical terms.

Thus we can acknowledge the non- nomological casual laws on the basis of which we can hold that there would be no need to subsume mental events under physical description to render them worthy of instantiating a strict law. Consequently, there would also be no need to assume that mental events which are casually related to physical events are physical events.

However, to deny the anomalous character of the mental causation is to accept non- strict laws as genuine kind of laws - at the level of both psychological and psychophysical causation. Thus the principle of nomological causality ceases to be regarded as the sole authority of causation. So, neither ontological physicalism nor anomalous monism with regarded to mental causation is to be accepted.

To conclude, we may say that there are two alternatives. One is that propositional attitudes such as desire, belief, etc. are physical or neural events. The other alternative is that such mental events are causally idle events. Neither of the two alternatives is tenable. On the first alternative, it would be impossible to explain how desire and belief, being themselves physical events, sometimes fail to cause another physical event, viz, the appropriate action. The second alternative is contrary to our common sense.

We must say that mental events qua mental events cause physical or mental events. We should not be dogmatic to hold that the deterministic account of causation is the only theory of causation. Rather the causal relationship in terms of human tendencies is also genuine variety of causation which can very well explain the fact that my desire and belief are mental events and as mental events they cause me to act in the way I do.

## Reference

1. Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 211.
2. Ibid. p. 208.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Donald Davidson, ‘Thinking Causes’ in John Heil and Alfred Mela (ed.), *Mental Causation*, Clarendon press, Oxford, 1993, p. 3.
6. A.J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, New York, Vintage Books, 1984, p. 189.