

## DOES ANOMALOUS MONISM HAVE EXPLANATORY FORCE?

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The aim of this paper is to support Donald Davidson's Anomalous Monism<sup>1</sup> as an account of law-governed mental causation in a world unfettered by psychophysical laws. To this end, I will attempt to answer one principal objection to the theory: the claim that Anomalous Monism lacks sufficient "explanatory force."<sup>2</sup> Though not quite the standard objection, I believe it to be the most formidable, and hence the most crucial to address.<sup>3</sup> The argument's strength is that it need not dispute Davidson's assumptions. It accepts Anomalous Monism as an internally consistent theory and attempts to show that what follows is an account in which mental events routinely cause actions, but can never manage to explain them. If the objection is right, Davidson's theory has clearly fallen short of explaining mental causation in a satisfactory way. The success of Anomalous Monism, then, requires the falsity of the explanatory force objection. I argue that a

proper construal of Davidson's principle of rationality will show the objection to be misguided.

"Mental Events" reconciles the paradox which arises from three principles Davidson held *ex hypothesi*: (1) Mental events interact causally with physical events (*Principle of Causal Interaction*), (2) Where there is causality, there must be a law (*Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality*), and (3) There are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained (*Principle of the Anomalism of the Mental*).<sup>4</sup>

Tension is apparent in that some mental events must interact causally with physical events and thereby feature in laws, and that this is an explicit contradiction of the Principle of the Anomalism of the Mental. Accepting three further principles, in addition to the three above, will resolve the tension: (4) Each mental event is token identical with some physical event, (5) Causality (and identity) relations hold between individual events no matter how described, and (6) Events instantiate laws – and can be explained or predicted in light of laws – only as described. Thus, the Principle of Causal Interaction requires causal participation of events regardless of mental or physical description, the Principle of the Anomalism of the Mental pertains only to events described as mental, and the Principle of the Nomological

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1 All references to Davidson's original presentation of Anomalous Monism are from Donald Davidson, "Mental Events," reprinted in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by David J. Chalmers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2 To my knowledge, one of the strongest formulations of the "explanatory force" objection comes from Louise Antony. I will be addressing her arguments more or less directly, and taking them to be representative of objections of this type. The reader is therefore urged to see Louise Antony, "Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 2. (Apr., 1989), pp. 153-187.

3 The standard objections to Anomalous Mo

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3 The standard objections to Anomalous Monism, which are the various epiphenomenal accusations, are close relatives to the explanatory force objection. The main difference, as I see it, is that an account may successfully establish the causal efficacy of mental events without establishing the way in which mental events rationally explain actions. This is essentially Antony's argument. Though my paper is not meant to directly address the epiphenomenalist objections, my argument will, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to many formulations of it. This will be clear enough to anyone familiar with those objections if and when it should occur.

4 Davidson, *Mental Events*, 116

Character of Causality requires that two events in a causal relationship have *some descriptions* which instantiate a law.<sup>5</sup> The tension has dissipated, for now an event with a mental description (i.e. a mental event) may interact causally with physical events without violating any principles, so long as the mental event has a physical description (i.e. is also a physical event) which features in a strict law.

The explanatory force objection, which argues on the basis of the above characterization, is divided into two parts. In the first part, Antony argues that speaking of causally efficacious physical events in psychological does not explain the resultant event in all cases. Despite the truthfulness and rationalizing power of the mental descriptions of causal events, effects are only sometimes thereby explained.<sup>6</sup>

But what are rationalization and explanation? A rationalization simply refers to an instantiation of the Principle of Causal Interaction; it suggests a causal connection between a mental event and a physical event. By the Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality, any such connection implies the presence of a law. The important thing to note is that folk psychological (i.e. “commonsense”) rationalizations may obey such laws – and hence be causal – despite the universal absence of laws framed *in* mental terms. An explanation, on the other hand, is different. Not every true causal statement is a causal explanation. Explanations are intensional, which is to say that the cause of an event is an explanation of that event if and only if it is picked out in a particular way.<sup>7</sup> Antony’s example<sup>8</sup> showcases this intentional

aspect of explanation while introducing us to the first part of her objection:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never *chose* to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.<sup>9</sup>

Antony proposes that in cases like these, where the causal chain linking reasons to actions is somewhat amiss, rationalizations will not work as explanations. After all, Davidson only had two conditions for an adequate rationalization:<sup>10</sup> the principle of rationality and the causal condition. The principle of rationality says that “we cannot intelligibly attribute any propositional attitude to an

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a disaster, and with the reporting of each event in the newspaper. Perhaps the second example shows some kind of problem, but I do not see how any problem with non-mental events illustrates anything at all about mental events. In any case, the exclusion should not weaken any arguments. As Antony notes, both are used to show the same problem (*Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 168).

<sup>9</sup> Davidson as quoted in Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 167

Antony finds three conditions in Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.” I see no problem with her three criteria. As far as I can tell, mine and hers are equivalent, since Davidson’s principle of rationality would have us view another person as “a believer of truths” (*Mental Events* 123), which entails her first principle (viz., that the attributed mental attitudes be true). I formulate the requirements in the way I do after the fashion of “Mental Events.” Nothing of consequence to the argument will be lost if either criteria are substituted.

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5 *Ibid.*, 119

6 Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 183

7 Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 163-164

8 Antony actually uses two examples in her paper. The second example deals with a hurricane causing

agent except within the framework of a viable theory of his beliefs, desires, intentions, and decisions... (t)he content of a propositional attitude derives from its place in the pattern."<sup>11</sup> The causal condition says that "the event cited as the reason in the explanans is the cause of the event cited as the action in the explanandum."<sup>12</sup> Even though both conditions are met here (the belief-desire pair attributed to him does not make him incoherent, and the belief-desire pair caused the action), citing the belief-desire pair alone would plainly be inadequate, for that is not the whole story about *why* he dropped his companion. The reasons cause the action in the "wrong way."

What Anomalous Monism needs but lacks, Antony contends, is an account of how reasons and rationalizations come together as the causes of actions, or how "reasons can have causal efficacy *in virtue of their reasonableness*."<sup>13</sup> As things currently stand, it seems that the logicity of the mental description of a physical event dictates the causal connections into which it might enter, which would be strange, indeed. Antony wants to know what, precisely, the relationship is between the physical descriptions of one's body, inside and out, and the "commonsense" explanations of one's behavior.

In order to drive the problem into even further clarity, Antony asks us to imagine another climber, a vicious one this time, who, having the same desire to be free of her partner, *deliberately* does what she believes will fulfill that desire, viz., lets go of the rope. The problem for Davidson here is to say why rationalization is a

proper explanation in the second case but not the first.<sup>14</sup>

Antony uses these counterexamples as a lead-in to a "property theory" of psychological properties which she thinks is needed if Anomalous Monism is to hold up against these examples. If I can show, however, that Anomalous Monism is able to address these examples with its current machinery, Davidson would have had to commit to no such theory.

I submit that the stories of the two climbers are incomplete, so that it is no wonder there seems to be something lacking. In addition to the belief-desire pair in the thought experiments, we must mention *all other relevant beliefs and desires* for each climber – and we should certainly hope to find that they are multitudinous and diverse. For if the two climbers had all of the *same* beliefs and desires, including the two mentioned (as hypothesized by the examples), then in what sense is one "vicious" and the other merely "unnerved"? For that matter, how can one act deliberately, and the other unwittingly?<sup>15</sup> Each climber's rationality necessitates a divergent set of propositional attitudes. To the one we must allow the afflicting fear of guilt over another's demise, and to the other we rightly impute an unrivaled egotism. We need not accept these specifically, but only in some such contexts would their actions make sense.

If the unnerved climber had no other desires or beliefs with which the particular belief-desire pair in question could hang

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11 Davidson, *Mental Events*, 122

12 Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 166

13 *Ibid.* 168

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14 *Ibid.* 173

15 Of course, it may well be the case that both climbers are equally vicious, and that the unnerved one was merely denied the opportunity to exhibit his truly nefarious character. But I doubt this is what either Davidson or Antony mean by the examples. Nearly needless to say, I assume that the first, unnerved climber would not have intentionally dropped his companion, even had he been free from his overwrought event.

upon, becoming “unnerved” would be truly inexplicable. Observe that such a reaction follows only if he holds something like the belief that dropping his companion would be terrible. A climber who believes that dropping his companion is *in his companion’s best interest* would have no reason to become unnerved upon the realization that such an outcome was within his power. If this is at all accurate, then the original belief–desire pair can *only* cause the action when other relevant beliefs and desires are present, and once those other beliefs and desires are present, the action will be explained. This is just what Davidson’s principle of rationality said from the start:

There is no assigning beliefs to a person one by one on the basis of his verbal behavior, his choices, or other local signs no matter how plain and evident, for we make sense of particular beliefs only as they cohere with other beliefs, with preferences, with intentions, hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest.<sup>16</sup>

The reason, once we know its full mental context, does not cause the action in a “wrong way” at all. The examples, as used, begged the question against Anomalous Monism, for they did not properly acknowledge the principle of rationality. When we recognize this principle, all mental causes of an agent’s action *must* be sensible causes. It follows that if the action *can* be explained by the attitudes of the agent, it *will* be so explained. If it is not explained, then we must have failed to construe the agent’s actions in the most cogent way. The failure of the example was simply that it did not take into consideration enough of the agent’s attitudes. Reasons have causal efficacy “in virtue of their reasonableness” when and only when they are globally consistent with the agent’s rationality.

I have attempted to show that Davidson’s

principle of rationality is not only useful in establishing the “indeterminacy of translation,” but that it aids us in difficulties like the one above.<sup>17</sup> I will now show that it can help us to answer Antony’s other objection, too – one which *does* concern indeterminacy.

In a Davidsonian model, if one reason  $R_1$  (and not  $R_2$ ) causes Hermione’s action, it is because  $R_1$  is identical with some physical event  $c$ , and  $c$  causes the agent’s action.<sup>18</sup> But a key part of the principle of rationality is that it prohibits us from settling on any one interpretation of an agent’s propositional attitudes:

when we use the concepts of belief, desire and the rest, we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in the light of considerations of overall cogency: the constitutive ideal of rationality partly controls each phase in the evolution of what must be an evolving theory... a right arbitrary choice of a translation manual would be of a manual acceptable in light of all the possible evidence, and this is a choice we cannot make.<sup>19</sup>

Because of this indeterminacy, Antony argues that the question of which propositional attitude is identical with the neurophysiological event  $c$  will be answered differently every time, and hence there are no *real* psychoneural identities – not even token ones. The lack of “genuine facts” about an agent’s mental events dictates a lack of “genuine facts” about their relations with physical events. If we attempt

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17 All I mean by this is that the principle of rationality is not only useful for establishing that there are no strict psychophysical laws. See Davidson, *Mental Events*, 123

18 Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 183

19 Davidson, *Mental Events*, 123

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16 Davidson, *Mental Events*, 122

to hypothesize a fact of the matter that *c* is identical with some particular mental event, we will have settled on some theory of the agent's rationality, no doubt without the necessary full evidence. In light of all this, an Anomalous Monist cannot rely on causal links to rationalize actions – and hence cannot account for explanatory force – since there are no objective identities.<sup>20</sup>

How, then, can we simultaneously harbor the freedom, rationality, and efficacy of the person? I want to suggest that Antony has confused epistemological indeterminacy with metaphysical indeterminacy. While our *theory* of interpreting Hermione's propositional attitudes may be "radically indeterminate," it does not follow from this that Hermione's propositional attitudes *are themselves* radically indeterminate. Davidson's principle of rationality was an instruction to "third persons" to be charitable when *assigning* attitudes to agents, not a statement about the natures of agents' psychologies. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that there are no genuine facts about the contents of Hermione's mental events. In fact, we *must* assume that Hermione's attitudes and actions form a coherent pattern if we are trying to mirror that pattern with an evolving theory. If Hermione's mental events were themselves indeterminate, then no amount of evidence could give us reason to favor one translation manual over another.

If we assume a fact of the matter about Hermione's mental events while maintaining the radical indeterminacy of all theories *about* her mental events, the other difficulties quickly evaporate. Hermione has a mental event. Hermione performs a physical action. That physical action must have a cause. The cause must be physical. Hence, the mental event is (token) identical with the physical cause of the

physical action. But here's the kicker: *Because* any interpretation of Hermione's mental events will still be radically indeterminate, all speculation about the token identities will be indeterminate as well. The token identities are unknowable but present, and that's precisely what Davidson said all along.

#### Works Cited

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- Davidson, Donald, "Mental Events," *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (edited by David J. Chalmers). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

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<sup>20</sup> Antony, *Anomalous Monism and the Problem of Explanatory Force*, 183-184