Mental Properties and Causal Relations

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Donald Davidson's philosophy of mind lacks, so far as I am aware, an explicit account of just how mental properties figure in causal relations. It is true, as Davidson insists, that events and only events are the relata of causal relations; nonetheless, the properties of events that are causes (or, perhaps, the properties of the objects that participate in them) do play some role in bringing about the particular events, with their specific properties, that are their effects. Properties thus have some sort of causal efficacy: while it is true that the overloading of the canoe caused it to sink, we say, when we want to explain what happened, that it was because the canoe was *overloaded*—because it had that property—that it sank. Likewise, while it is true that Lou's desiring to see the world caused Lou's setting out to see the world, we say, when we want to explain what happened, that it was because Lou desired to see the world—because he had that mental property—that he set out to see it. I want, then, to supply Davidson's philosophy of mind with a way of understanding the role mental properties play in bringing events about, a way to understand in what their causal efficacy consists.

My suggestion, inspired by Davidson's concern to show that freedom to act is a causal power agents possess, is that Davidson should hold, or anyway should clearly announce that he holds, that those mental properties that can be cited in good causal explanations are *causal powers*

of the objects or events of which they are properties, and that it is because they are causal powers that they are causally efficacious.

As Davidson has said, a property is a causal power of an object if that property is such that a change of a certain sort in the object causes an event of another sort.[1] The causal powers objects have, then, come into play when certain conditions are satisfied.[2] For instance, the physical property of being inflammable is a causal power of inflammable objects: should an inflammable object come into contact with a hot enough flame for a long enough time, it will burn. And the fact that an object is inflammable is something that can figure in a causal explanation of why it burned when exposed to flame.

That those physical properties that figure in causal explanations are causal powers seems a tolerably clear answer to the question in what does the causal efficacy of physical properties consist. My contention is that mental properties are causal powers just as physical properties are. The mental property of having a reason to sing "Sweet Virginia" is a causal power of agents who have such a reason: should an agent who has this reason undergo the right sort of change, she will sing "Sweet Virginia." And that an agent had a reason to sing "Sweet Virginia" is something that can figure in a causal explanation of why she sang it after undergoing that change. I suggest, then, that if Davidson were to hold that mental properties are causal powers, he would have a tolerably clear answer to the question in what does the causal efficacy of mental properties consist.

Now I'm interested, of course, in the specific issue whether the thesis that mental properties are causal powers is true and enlightening. However, there are a couple of reasons why

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[1] "Freedom to Act," p. 64.

[2] Ibid, p. 63.

I want to discuss this thesis in the context of Davidson's philosophy of mind rather than simply on its own. In the first place, though it certainly needs to be clarified and developed, the thesis that mental properties are causal powers seems hardly to need much defence. So long as one allows that there are mental properties, in the unassuming sense to be given below, and that they can rightly be mentioned in causal explanations, one would be hard pressed to deny this thesis. In the second place, it is often charged that Davidson's views on the mental and its relation to the physical imply that mental properties must lack causal efficacy. Since mental properties are in fact causally efficacious, Davidson's critics conclude that something must be wrong with Davidson's philosophy. But if the thesis that mental properties are causal powers can be shown to be consistent with Davidson's views, this charge will be laid to rest.

I

It is Davidson's contention that mental events are simply those events that can be described using psychological terms while physical events are those events that can be described without using psychological terms. Now, according to Davidson, each mental event is a physical event, for any event that can be described using psychological terms can be described without using psychological terms, but perhaps not all physical events are mental events. Thus, at least concerning events, Davidson's ontology is monistic with a physicalistic bias. As well, Davidson argues both that there can be no strict laws containing psychological terms and, for that reason among others, that there can be no strict laws linking types of mental events with types of physical events. If he is right, then descriptions, explanations or theories that employ psychological terms cannot be reduced to descriptions, explanations or theories that employ non-psychological terms

exclusively; as Davidson sometimes, and somewhat misleadingly, puts it, the mental is anomalous with respect to the physical. Thus, at the centre of Davidson's philosophy of mind is a non-reductive, physicalistic monism, an ontology Davidson calls "anomalous monism."

There seems little about anomalous monism itself that would encourage the thought that from within Davidson's philosophy it is impossible to give an account of how the mental properties of objects and events figure in causal relations. It is true that if we hold that properties, whatever else they might be, are what correspond, in objects and events, to the terms that describe those objects and events, then we must conclude that no mental property is a physical property. But this in itself is not to impugn the causal efficacy of mental properties. It gives us no reason to think that, for example, our theory of the causal efficacy of physical properties, whatever it is, will not also do duty as a theory of the causal efficacy of mental properties.

What has raised doubts about whether Davidson can give an account of how mental properties, those features of mental objects and events that correspond to psychological terms, figure in causal relations are two of the three premises Davidson uses to argue for anomalous monism. Davidson and his critics agree on one of the three premises, that mental events can be causes and effects. But many of Davidson's critics hold that if mental properties are indeed causally efficacious, then one of the remaining premises, either the claim that strict laws cannot contain psychological terms or the claim that when two events are related as cause and effect they fall under a strict law, must be false. If both were true, they maintain, it would follow that mental events are causes and effects only because they have the physical properties that correspond to the terms of the strict laws under which they fall and, therefore, that only physical properties are causally efficacious. It must instead be true, then, if mental properties are not to sit on the

sidelines of causality, either that psychological terms can figure in strict laws just as physical ones can or that mental events, however they are described, can be causes and effects though they fall under no strict law at all.

It will help to clarify the problem Davidson's critics believe they have uncovered if we turn for a moment from talk of properties and causal efficacy to talk of explanations and their strength. We can agree that one has explained an event as well as possible if one deduces a description of it from a strict law and a description of an event that preceded it. Strict laws make for strong explanations. However, if it is true that strict laws cannot contain psychological terms, then it is also true that no psychological description of an event can be validly deduced from a strict law and a description of its cause. Now, since mental events are physical events, any event one might want to explain will have some purely physical descriptions. Moreover, if it is true that whenever two events are related as cause and effect there is a strict law covering them, then it is also true that there is, at least potentially, a sound explanatory argument that has as its conclusion a physical description of the effect, even though the effect is a mental event. This means that any mental event can be better explained when described as a physical event covered by a strict law than when described as a mental event.

Thus it seems to Davidson's critics that, for Davidson, what explains the occurrence of a mental event is that it and its cause are covered by a strict law—and, again, according to Davidson, strict laws employ physical terms only. A purported explanation employing psychological terms must, then, they say, for Davidson lack explanatory strength. Therefore, they conclude, if explanations containing psychological terms are truly explanatory it must be false either that strict laws must be free of psychological terms or that all causes and effects, and, in

particular, all those with psychological descriptions, are covered by strict laws. That is to say, on the one hand, if mental events are indeed covered by strict physical laws when described as physical, then, so long as psychological terms can be lawfully reduced to physical terms, there will be a way to account for the explanatory strength of psychological explanations; and, on the other, if some mental events, even when described as physical, fail to be covered by strict laws, then it cannot matter to the quality of explanations of them that there are no strict psychological laws.

The upshot of these lines of thought is, of course, that only if one of the two premises in question is false could we hope to say how mental properties figure in causal relations. But if the first premise is false, the premise according to which strict laws cannot contain psychological terms, then Davidson is left without anomalousness; and if the second premise is false, the premise according to which two events related as cause and effect must fall under a strict law, then he is left without an argument for monism.

It is not, however, difficult to see where Davidson's critics have gone wrong. It might well be true that, simply by noting that they are cited in a strict covering law, we can account for the causal efficacy of certain properties of causally related events. The property of being theta might well have been a property that played a role in an object's coming to have the property of being omega because, or in virtue of the fact that, there is a strict law to the effect that whenever an object has the property of being theta an object comes to have the property of being omega. Nonetheless, if Davidson's philosophy is to preclude other ways of understanding the causal efficacy of properties it must imply that the *only* way we can account for the causal efficacy of a property is to note that it is cited in a strict law. And we have no reason to think that it does. Of course, on the other hand, if it is to be shown that mental properties are not causally inert, it needs

also to be argued that it is not necessary for a property to be cited in a strict law for it to be causally efficacious. The argument I will give below that mental properties are causally efficacious because they are causal powers is, if successful, implicitly such an argument. Here I want only to indicate how implausible is the supposition that only properties cited in strict laws are causally efficacious. Very few of us know any strict laws—there are none outside physics, if, indeed, there are any at all. The properties cited in strict laws are structural, not dispositional, but most of our causal lore deals in dispositions. If only those properties that are cited in strict laws, or that are reducible to properties cited in strict laws, are causally efficacious, then most if not all of the properties we cite in our everyday business are causally inert and none of our explanations of the happenings around us is any good.[3]

I conclude that there is no good reason to think that Davidson's philosophy of mind makes it impossible to account for the causal efficacy of mental properties and, thus, that there is no good reason to think that my contention that mental properties are causally efficacious because they are causal powers is inconsistent with anomalous monism and the premises on which Davidson argues for it.

II

Davidson has on more than one occasion addressed the charge that anomalous monism and the premises on which he argues for it together imply the causal inertness of mental properties, but his

[3] A more detailed discussion of the implausibility of the idea that only those properties cited in strict laws are causally efficacious can be found in Brian P. McLaughlin, "Type Epiphenomenalism, Type Dualism, and the Causal Priority of the Physical," *Philosophical Perspectives* (Philosophy of Mind and Action Theory) 3, 1989, pp. 124ff.

standard answer to it is not that which I have given above. He begins instead from the thesis that mental properties supervene on physical properties in such a way that no two objects or events could share all their physical properties and yet differ in their mental properties. In fact, he says, they supervene, as do untold many physical properties, on just those physical properties that a physics capable of explaining with strict laws any event whatever would need to recognize. It is a corollary of this conception of the supervenience of the mental on the physical that if an object changes in one of its mental properties then it must also have changed in at least one of its physical propertiesCin fact, it must have changed in one of its nomologically significant physical properties.

The thesis that mental properties supervene on physical ones provides us, then, with a sense in which an object's or event's mental properties, though they are not just its physical properties under different descriptions, depend on its physical properties. And this, in turn, Davidson argues, provides us with a sense in which the mental properties of an object or event make a difference to its causal relations. For suppose that a mental event causes some other particular event. Would it have caused just that particular event had it differed in its mental properties? Because mental properties supervene on physical properties, had that cause differed in its mental properties, perhaps by lacking one of them, it would have had to have differed in some of its nomologically significant physical properties also. But had it differed in its nomologically significant physical properties, it could not have caused precisely the event it did cause. The event it would have caused instead might have been *similar* in many respects to the one it did cause if it did not differ too much in its nomologically significant properties. But, again, it could not have caused precisely the event it did cause, for, having different nomologically significant properties, it would have caused an event which would have differed in some of its properties from that which it

did cause, and if two events differ in any of their properties they cannot be the same event. Therefore, the mental properties of events, or the mental properties of the objects that participate in events, make a difference to the causal relations into which events enter.

I think this argument is both sound and succeeds in showing what Davidson intended it to show. But I also can understand why Davidson's critics have been dissatisfied with it. It depends on more than a few controversial premises, including, of course, that objects and events have all of their properties essentially. To find it persuasive one might already have to accept most of Davidson's metaphysics. Moreover, it establishes the causal relevance of mental properties by establishing the causal relevance of all properties. Thus, even if one agrees that it establishes the causal *relevance* of all mental properties, one might feel it has bypassed the question of the causal *significance* of what we take to be important mental properties. Being east of the Kootenays is currently a property of me that is causally relevant to the events in which I participate, as is each of my properties, but being east of the Kootenays might not strike one as an especially significant or especially efficacious causal propertyCnot as significant, for instance, as my being a creature with a kidney. Perhaps my desire to eat soon, although just as causally relevant as my being east of the Kootenays or any of my other properties, is really of even less causal significance to the events in which I will soon participate, including eating, than is my being east of the Kootenays.

For these reasons I prefer to begin my answer to Davidson's critics as I did in Section I, by questioning whether there is any reason to think that Davidson's views imply that the causal significance or efficacy of a property is necessarily a matter either of its being cited in a strict law or of its being reducible to a property that is. I will conclude my answer in Section III by saying a

bit more about the contention I have argued is consistent with Davidson's views, the contention that mental properties are causally efficacious because they are causal powers.

III

It is tempting to suppose that what really accounts for the causal efficacy of the properties, whether mental or physical, that we hit upon when explaining events is that these properties figure in covering *generalizations*, that class of sentences of which strict laws form the most exalted subclass. It is tempting to suppose this because it seems, at first blush, that, while clearly not all explanations rely on strict laws, all of them do rely on generalizations of some sort, if only implicitly. The impact of the rock caused the breaking of the window, and we explain why the window broke when hit by the rock by noting that it was made of glass; this explanation appears to work because we understand, even though the explainer does not say so, that windows often break when hit by rocks. But it would, I think, be a mistake to give in to this temptation, mainly because it is not clear that the properties we hit upon when explaining events always do figure in covering generalizations. It is especially unclear when the properties we cite are dispositional rather than structural. Suppose that we explain why the window broke not by noting that it was made of glass, but instead by noting that it was frangible. We understand, of course, that frangible things often break when hit by rocks, but since our understanding of this is hardly based on empirical evidence, our knowledge of this generalization adds little to the proffered explanation.

We might, of course, hypothesize that generalizations, whether strict laws or lax, are what account for the causal efficacy of *structural* properties. This might be true, but it does not bring us

closer to our goal of understanding the causal efficacy of *mental* properties. Mental properties, it appears, are typically if not exclusively dispositional. We understand that agents who want to eat tend to do things with the intention of eating, but not because this is an hypothesis well supported by empirical evidence.

Of course, empirical generalizations do play roles in our explanations of intentional behaviour, but usually as evidence or grounds for our attributions of mental properties to agents rather than as premises in explanatory arguments. That Sonja has gone a long time without food gives us reason to think that she wants to eat, for we know that people who have gone a long time without food tend to want to eat. What explains the fact that she is intentionally eating, however, is that she wants to eat.

It would seem, then, that we must look to the properties themselves, at least in the case of mental properties, and not to generalizations or other things beyond them, if we wish to find the ground of their causal efficacy. But what concerning a property of an object could account for its causal efficacy, if not the fact that that property is such that a change of a certain sort in the object that possesses it causes an event of another sort? It would seem, then, that mental properties are causally efficacious because they are causal powers.

IV

To conclude: If mental properties are causal powers, we have an answer to the question why they are truly causally efficacious and not just causally relevant. We want to know why, for instance, the fact that Sonja has the property of wanting to eat can explain why she intentionally eats. Suppose Sonja does want to eat and she undergoes some change that causes her act of eating. That

the property of wanting to eat supervened on some of Sonja's physical properties enables us to say that that property was causally relevant to her act of eating. That particular effect could not have had the properties it did have, whatever they happened to be, had Sonja not had the property of wanting to eat. However, that it supervened on some of her physical properties does not enable us to say why the event in which Sonja participated caused an effect that can be described as an act of eating. But that wanting to eat is a causal power, the particular causal power that it is, does enable us to say why the event in which Sonja participated caused an event that can be described as an act of eating. Wanting to eat is the causal power such that a change of a certain sort in an agent who wants to eat will cause an event of another sort, specifically, an act of eating. The notion of a causal power is, clearly, unlike that of a supervenient property, closely tied to the notion of explanation. And it is just because of this close tie that the notion of a causal power, unlike that of supervenience, can shed light on the question of the causal efficacy of mental properties.[4]

[4] I thank David Checkland, Wayne Henry, Ausonio Marras, and Dave Sturdee for their helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper.