

Identity Theory and Anomalous Monism

In this essay I will be presenting the view that whilst Identity Theory provides a suitable way to view mental events, it does not lead to the thesis that mental events are describable through physical laws. In order to demonstrate this I will begin, in Section 1, by introducing identity theory as a philosophical doctrine. In Section 2 I will present a popular argument for Identity Theories validity given our current psychological and scientific understanding. In the third section I will discuss how Identity Theory may be viewed as leading to a deterministic, law bound theory of mental phenomena before rejecting this conclusion in Section 5 and presenting, in my final section, an alternative version of Identity Theory that avoids this problem.

1. Identity Theory

Identity theory is a thesis concerning the relation between mental and physical events. We may have an intuitive grasp of what is meant by 'physical events' and 'mental events' but I will attempt to define the terms more clearly. Mental events are describable through mental terms. Such terms involve the use of 'mental verbs'. Such verbs "express propositional attitudes like believing, intending, desiring, hoping ... and so on"¹. Conversely, physical events are those which are describable in purely physical terms. The obvious exceptions for this rule are those sentences which are tautologically true. For example, the sentence 'x did or did not occur in Cambridge' describes every event, physical or mental – given the proviso that it makes sense to talk of mental events having location.

With this clarification of these terms in mind we may turn to examine what is meant by 'identity theory'. In his exposition of Identity Theory, Lewis states that

¹ Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*

'every experience [mental event] is identical with some physical state.'² Specifically, exponents of this view believe that every experience is identical with some neurochemical state.

2. An argument for Identity Theory

Lewis infers this conclusion from a simple two premise argument. The first premise is derived from the philosophy of Smart. Smart states that avowals of experience are of the form "What is going on in me is like what is going on in me when..."³, followed by a description of the typical stimuli resulting in, or response to, the experience. For example, when one perceives a yellow after-image after looking at the sun, one may reduce an avowal of experience to 'What is going on in me is like what is going on in me when I am looking at a yellow circle.' From this Lewis derives the premise "The defining characteristic of any experience as such is its causal role".

This principle is behaviourist in origin in that it utilises the behaviourist thesis that the causal connections between an experience and its typical manifestations and occasions of occurrence "somehow contain a component of analytic necessity"⁴. However, this principle improves the original behaviourist proposition in several ways.

Firstly, it recognises experiences as real – as effects of the situations that are their cause and to be themselves the causes of further manifestations. Secondly, this thesis allows for experiences to be causes and effects of further experiences. This is not only a seemingly more accurate account of experience than a doctrine that does not take account of experiences as causes and effects of further experiences but also allows for interdefinition of a mental state with others of a similar kind. The importance of this feature of our conception of Identity Theory

² Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*

³ Smart, *Sensations and Brain Processes*

⁴ Lewis, *Ibid*

will become apparent in my fourth section of this essay. The third advantage of the premise is that rather than being obliged to define an experience by the precise causes and effects of all of its occurrences (i.e. Experience 'e' can only be said to have occurred if and only if cause 'c' and effect 'e' are witnessed in conjunction with it), we may "identify the experience as that state which is *typically* caused in thus-and-such ways and typically causes thus-and-such effects."⁵

With the first premise of Lewis' argument, together with an account of the advantages it provides us with as part of a description of mental phenomena, we may move onto the second premise. This states: "there is some unified body of scientific theories, of the sort we now accept, which together provide a true and exhaustive account of all physical phenomena." This unified body of theories is such that theories are mutually supportive and composed out of further theories describing (eventually) a few fundamental particles in simple laws. This premise does not rule out any possibility of non-physical phenomena but rather denies that physical phenomena need ever be explained by the non-physical.

However, having granted the possibility of the existence of non-physical phenomena being compatible with our thesis we must stipulate that these non-physical phenomena cannot constitute a mental event. As physical effects are definitive of mental events, and non-physical phenomena cannot have physical effects mental events cannot be non-physical phenomena. Therefore, we may draw the conclusion that mental events are identical to physical phenomena. The most obvious and sensible candidate for these physical phenomena are neural states occurring within the brain. Whilst we have not positively established that these neural states must be the physical phenomena identical to mental events this is not of concern to our current discussion as the relevant conclusion has already been reached.

⁵ Lewis, Ibid

3. An apparent result of Identity Theory

The argument outlined above seems to lead to a thesis known as nomological monism. This is the doctrine that mental events are identical to physical events and that, as a result of this there exist laws correlating physical events to mental events. It is easy to see how such a conclusion can be reached. The above argument draws upon a body of scientific theories that is ultimately composed out of a few physical laws. As mental events are simply a class of physical events their causes must also be describable by these laws. Davidson refers to this feature of our discussion as the “Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality”.⁶ This result of our new understanding of mental events as physical events appears to lead us to the conclusion that, mental events are, in theory, predictable. That is, given a certain set of physical stimuli, a given mental event will always be caused. As this means that all mental events are governed by predicable physical laws, this thesis leads to determinism.

4. A rejection of Determinism as a result of Identity Theory

In his analysis of Identity Theory, Davidson aligns himself with Kant in agreeing that “it is as impossible for the subtlest philosophy as for the commonest reason to argue freedom away.”⁷ Given the view that determinism is obviously false, one must believe Lewis’ identity theory and the conclusions we can apparently draw from it as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Therefore, either the premises he uses must be false, rendering the argument unsound, or the inferential links between premises and conclusion must be invalid. Davidson takes the latter view as he seeks to only slightly alter the premises we have already discussed to argue for a version of Identity Theory that is compatible with human freedom –

⁶ Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*

⁷ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*

and, therefore, incompatible with the view that mental events are linked to physical events by physical laws. Davidson refers to this doctrine as 'Anomalous Monism'. It remains a form of 'monism' as it maintains that dualism is false. However, it is anomalous in that it postulates that mental events cannot be accurately described by normal physical laws.

We shall argue to this conclusion through another simple argument consisting of three basic principles or premises. The first premise asserts that there exist mental events that interact with physical events – as we have already seen the mental event of a desire to chop down a tree can lead to the physical event of a tree being chopped down and how the physical event of a tree's existence may lead to the mental event of our perception of it.

The second premise simply reiterates the Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality – that is, "events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws."⁸

The third premise is one quite unlike anything cited in Lewis' argument. This is the principle that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained. This is referred to as 'the Anomalism of the Mental'.

However, it instantly seems that we have stumbled across an obvious paradox through the contradiction of our second and third premises. Davidson recognises this and seeks to present a new conception of Identity Theory in order to reconcile these principles and remove the appearance of paradox from his thesis.

5. Davidson's conception of Identity Theory.

⁸ Davidson, Ibid

Davidson proposes that many philosophers who support identity theory obscure the possibility of such paradox being removed. For example, Taylor believes “unless a given mental event is invariably accompanied by a given, say, brain process, there is no ground for even mooted a general identity between the two.”⁹ The notion that certain kinds of mental events must always be accompanied by certain kinds of physical events in order for Identity Theory to be a viable doctrine precludes Davidson’s rejection of nomological monism. This preclusion of Davidson’s conclusion is a common theme amongst identity theorists. Kim is more explicit than Taylor when stating

“If pain is identical with brain state B, there must be a concomitance between occurrences of pain and occurrences of brain state B... Thus a necessary condition of the pain-brain state B identity is that the two expressions ‘being in pain’ and ‘being in brain state B’ have the same extension... there is no conceivable observation that would confirm or refute the identity but not the associated correlation.”¹⁰

Davidson proposes a radically different view when stating that whilst “anomalous monism resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical... [it] rejects the thesis, normally considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations.” Anomalous monism therefore denies that there exist laws that tie together physical events and mental events, so called “psychophysical laws”. Despite the rejection of these laws, anomalous monism is consistent with the notion that mental events are dependent upon physical events, though not to the extent that two identical physical events will necessarily cause the same mental event. Davidson therefore proposes that no physical sentence can be true of “all and only the events having some mental property”.

⁹ Taylor, *Mind-Body Identity*

¹⁰ Kim, *On the Psycho-Physical Identity Theory*

It is apparent that if there exist a finite number of mental events, one could construct a sentence of vast enough complexity to be coextensive with every mental predicate. However, we must be clear that such a sentence would not be 'lawlike'. We can illustrate this point by borrowing ideas from philosophers struggling with the problem of induction. Davidson defines a statement as lawlike, just in case it is a "General statement that supports counterfactual and subjunctive claims and is supported by their instances."

e.g. 'All emeralds are green.'

However, a statement such as

e.g. 'All emeralds are grue' (where grue means 'observed before time t and green, otherwise blue')

are not lawlike. This is because the word 'grue' is unsuitable to form laws about emeralds with. In an analogous fashion, physical terms are not suitable for forming laws about mental events. This is because whilst one can form laws about physical events by refining premises about the event based on other physical events – e.g. measuring length at a given temperature, the same is not true of attempting to form laws about mental events. Mental events occur in the context of other mental phenomena – beliefs, intentions etc – and these mental phenomena are not quantifiable in the same manner that one can quantify the physical context of physical events: "when we use concepts of belief, desire, and the rest, we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in light of considerations of overall cogency."¹¹

¹¹ Davidson, Ibid

This inability to form laws about mental events from physical terms leads to the anomalous nature of mental events, whilst continuing to allow us to view such events from the standpoint of an Identity Theory.