Consciousness of Freedom and Mind-Brain identity

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Abstract

Cartesian dualism projected the view of human mind as independent of the body, having its own laws, free from causality of physical nature, and a distinct, un-extended thinking substance 'res cogitans'. Later philosophers projected the idea of Mind-Brain identity thesis on the grounds that minds cannot exist without a brain. It was less a question of mind's existence and more a question of the occurrence of mental events that lead philosophers to the idea of a causal relation between the mental events and the physical events in the brain. Many agree that thoughts are the causal outcome of what takes place inside the brain, causally connected with the external physical environment. Still, it remained an unsettled matter as to how freedom of mind and the causal determination of brain events are related. Some materialistic monist philosophers tried to defend freedom of the mind on the grounds that the language of the mind cannot be reduced to the physical language of physical sciences. Therefore, they inferred that mind is free despite being causally determined by the brain processes; in so far as the mental events like wishes, desires, intentions, willing, decisions, choices, and thoughts cannot be described in physical language. There is a kind of anomaly about the mental which is irreducible to the laws of nature. Although the mental events are caused by the physical events yet they are irreducible to the form of physical events, and there are no laws that could be formulated to describe the mental in terms of the physical. Thus, the view emerged that mind means a set of language referring to a person's mental life that is physically caused yet free from causal descriptions, as it cannot be subsumed under any physical laws of nature. However, the mind-brain identity theorists have overlooked the aspect of consciousness, particularly self-consciousness. The fact that we are not only conscious but we are also self-conscious makes determinism of mind impossible. Being conscious of one's actions makes a difference to the causal outcome of actions such that it is impossible to predict what one may do consciously. And this fact does not fit well in the mind-brain identity thesis that projects the idea of a causal determination of all mental and physical events.

Keywords: Natural Laws, Predictability, Freedom, Mental Actions, Personhood, Consciousness, Self-Consciousness.

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Priority of the Mental

Mind-brain identity theorists defend the view that the mental events cannot occur without the physical events in the brain: But this does not explain whether the mental and the physical occur together or whether one is prior to the other in the order of occurrence. If the physical event is always prior to the mental in this causal sequences, then every mental event would always be the effect of a physical event. If the effect is merely an event in the causal series, the problem of freedom remains where it is. Unless it is shown that some physical events in the brain can be caused by some mental events, epiphenomenalism would be true. If the mind cannot affect the brain, the consciousness cannot be regarded as doing any real work.

Being aware of this fundamental difficulty, Davidson has formulated three principles and argued for their mutual consistency. He states the case as below:

> *Now let me try to formulate a little more carefully the apparent contradiction about the mental events that I want to discuss and finally dissipate. It may be seen as stemming from three principles. The first principle asserts that at least some mental events interact causally with physical events. (We could call this as the principle of causal interaction). Thus for example if some one sank the Bismark, then various mental events such as perceiving, noting, calculations, judgments, decisions, intentional actions and changes of belief played a causal role in the sinking of the Bismark. In particular, I would urge that the fact that someone sank the Bismark entails that he moved his body in a way that was caused by mental events of certain sorts, and that his bodily movement in turn caused the Bismark to sink. Perception illustrates how causality may run from the physical to the mental: if a man perceives that a ship is approaching, then a ship approaching must have caused him to come to believe that a ship is approaching. (Nothing depends on accepting these as examples of causal interaction.) Though perception and action provide the most obvious cases where mental and physical events interact causally, I think reasons could be given for the view that all mental events, perhaps through causal relations with mental events, have causal intercourse with physical events. But if there are mental events that have no physical events as causes or effects, the argument will not touch them. The second principle is that where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws. (We may term this the principle of the nomological character of causality). This principle, like the first, will be treated here as an assumption, though I shall say something by way of interpretation. The third principle is that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained (the anomalism of the mental).*[1]

I think the difficulty of understanding this formulation of the problem by Davidson is the result of his ambiguous use of the word 'event' both for the mental and the physical. This point leads the action-theorists to direct serious criticism against the event theorists. This ambiguity of the meaning of 'event' is also the reason that raises the question of priority of the mental or the physical. Both the difficulties have common basis. Davidson's first principle of causal interaction between the mental and the physical events does not clarify the question of priority of either. It also does not justify the use of the word 'event' for both. We can see that his attempted reconciliation of the three principles seems to involve his overlooking of the difficulty about events in case of the mental. In this context Davidson begins at his reconciliation. He states:

> *The three principles will be shown consistent with one another by describing a view of the mental and the physical that contains no inner contradiction and that entails the three principles. According to this view, mental events are identical with physical events. Events are taken to be unrepeatable, dated individuals such as the particular eruption of a volcano, the (first) birth or death of a person, the playing of the 1968 World Series, or the historic utterance of the words, you may fire when ready Girdley. We can easily frame identity statements about individual events, example (true or false) might be:*
> *The deaths of Scott = the death of the author of Waverly.*
> *The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand = the event that started the First World War.*
> *The eruptions of the Vesuvius in A.D. 79 = cause of the destruction of Pompeii.*
> *The theory under discussion is silent about processes, states and attributes if these differ from individual events.* [2]

And as a next step Davidson clarifies the *mental physical dichotomy* on linguistic grounds as below:

> *What does it mean to say that an event is mental or physical? One natural answer is that an event is physical if it is describable in a purely physical vocabulary, mental if describable in mental terms...*
> *We may call those verbs mental that express propositional attitudes like believing, intending, desiring, hoping, knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering, and so on. Such verbs are characterized by the fact that they sometimes feature in sentences with subjects that refer to persons...*[3]

However, Davidson must not, to be consistent, use the word 'event' for the mental and the physical alike. The mental and the physical are distinguishable on the basis of the distinct vocabulary in each case. And thus the word 'event' which is a purely physical term, cannot be used to characterize the mental. The term 'event' itself represents some physical

occurrence therefore it cannot be used to represent the 'mental'. Moreover, the use of the term 'event' for the mental leads to unacceptable consequence that thoughts, feelings, and all other mental activities that the conscious agent enacts become merely occurrences. Under the event-view the rational agent experiences his own mental events as and when they take place within his consciousness. This makes the whole question of rational action a matter of capricious occurrence dependent upon natural causes. The anomalousness of the mental, then does not help us understand the nature of freedom of thought and action. It is usually understood that the freedom from the laws of nature involves the role of an agent's will in acting according to his desires, intentions, or beliefs. If the will itself is regarded as an event taking place in the mind of an agent; there seems to be no role played by the agent. He becomes conscious of these mental events and then he becomes conscious of the correlated physical events. It can be seen that this makes the whole issue of freedom nonsensical.

If there are mental events, as Davidson maintains, which bring out the physical events of action then this relation has to be construed in accordance with the strict deterministic laws. But freedom of thought and action is incompatible with deterministic formulation. Not only this, it is also unacceptable to regard actions as some kind of events. At least it cannot be true from the point of view of the agent who acts. He cannot take his own actions as some kinds of events taking place in the physical world. From the point of view of an observer, the actions are some kinds of events taking place in the world. But actions cannot, without contradiction, be explained only from the point of view of a passive observer. The conscious agent's part in doing something is undeniable.

Actions and Events

Thus we come to the conclusion that the mental–physical dichotomy and its characterization as two kinds of events by Davidson is not satisfactory. We cannot take our mind as constituted by jumble of events in which each event could be individuated and dated. There must be some other explanation for what goes on in the mind of a person when he wills, desires believes, chooses, intends, wants reflects deliberates, and introspects his thoughts. These mental activities and their conscious apprehension cannot be called mental events.

Kent Bach argues that actions are not events. And this claim is applicable equally to the mental activities of the rational agent. What is true about the mental activities is also true about the bodily activities related with those mental activities. We can neither call the mental activities events, nor do we have any justification to call the actions as events. As Kent Bach states:

> *A common prejudice in action theory is that actions are events. Virtually no defense of this view is to be found, and hardly anyone has even considered an alternative. On all sides of the debate on individuation of actions, it is innocently presupposed that actions are events, as in the context of arguments regarding time, places and causes of actions. What I propose is that actions are not events but instances of a certain relation, the relation of bringing about (or making happen) whose terms are agents and events.*[4]

In view of this problem of actions and events, it is also arguable that in 'Anomalous monism' Davidson seems to ignore the point of view of the agent and emphasizes only the point of view of an observer. He seems to presuppose that the 'bringing about' of an action is a mental event. Accepting his views leaves us with a number of troubling questions unanswerable by his thesis. If the bringing about of an action is a mental event, what part the agent plays in this? What are the consequences of holding the event-view of the mental and the physical for the freedom of actions? What sense can be attached to the phrase 'a man freely did something', if what he did was an event caused by another event in his mind? It would not be proper then to say that he did something; rather it would be more adequate to say under event-view that something occurred in his mind, and as an effect something occurred in the form of bodily movements in the outside world. For, under the event-view of the mental and the physical, no sense can be attached to notions of bringing about or doing something as we take them under the perspective of a free and rational self.

Actions and Agents

Thus, the belief in freedom of action does conflict with causationism. The problem remains unexplained as to how a free and rational agent does something. How he acts if he really acts in the sense of bringing about an action? This question becomes problematic if the thesis of causation is maintained in action-theory. Under causationism the agent's action must be caused. And under event-view it must be caused by some mental event. Now replacing mental event with the agent implies that the action must be caused by the agent. But this creates a breach in the causal sequence of events because the agent himself is not an event. Given this, how can some non-event be the cause of some event from the point of view of observation? In response to this question some philosophers claim that an agent can be the cause of bodily movements called actions while remaining an *uncaused cause* of his actions. Roderick M. Chislom argues Likewise:

> *We must not say that every event involved in the act is caused by some other event; and we must not say that the act is something that is not*

> *caused at all. The possibility that remains, therefore, is this; we should say that at least one of the events that are involved in the act is caused, not by any other events, but by something else instead. And this something else can only be the agent – the man. If there is an event that is caused not by other events but by the man, then there are some events involved in the act that are not caused by other events. But if the event in question is caused by the man then it is caused and we are not committed to saying that there is something involved in the act that is not caused at all. But this of course is a large consequence, implying something of considerable importance about the nature of the agent or the man.*[5]

However, Chislom's view does not absolve us from the difficulty of accounting for the agent-action relation. We see that under causationism, actions must be viewed as events caused by other events. Now Chislom points out the possibility that the agent is the cause of actions. But at the same time the agent himself cannot be taken as an event otherwise the whole issue of action would become meaningless. But then the problem remains as to how something not being an event itself can be the cause of some events. We come to the conclusion that there is something intrinsically wrong in the very formulation of agent-action relation as a kind of agent-event relation. The only alternative left is that we should not regard actions as events at all. Otherwise we would have to face the unexplainable perplexity involved in agent-action relation. As we have seen in the earlier discussion about reason and causes, Davidson's event-view of reason-action relation or agent-action relation leads to this perplexity. Regarding reason as causes or regarding the author of those reasons as a cause of actions becomes problematic. It seems that causationism cannot be maintained consistently in the agent-action relation. Davidson's construction of this relation under causality does not explain in what sense an agent causes an action.

Regarding actions as events and establishing their causal relation with mental event, or alternatively with the agent, leaves the problem of intentionally doing something unexplained. As Thomas Nagel puts it:

> *The problem arises, because the self which acts…is threatened with dissolution by the absorption of its acts and impulses into the class of events…. I believe that in a sense the problem has no solution, because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things.*[6]

It seems that the reason for this apparent impossibility of solution lies in its wrong formulation. There are other rationally justifiable ways to formulate this problem. Davidson's formulation seems to provide justification for holding on to the belief in freedom of thought and action.

However, in the face of its obvious impossibility under causationism, we are stuck with the problem of explanation of agent-action relation which might legitimately settle the problem. Davidson believes, as hinted earlier, that the proof of anomaly or freedom of the mental lies in showing that every mental event is either a cause or an effect of some physical event. This sort of causal interaction between mind and brain seems to allow freedom where the mental event is alleged to be the cause of the physical event in the brain. It follows from this that a free action is that which is caused by some physical event in the brain which, in turn is caused by some preceding mental event.

Consciousness and Causes

However, in this scheme of mind-brain interaction it is not clear in what sense the mind or consciousness can be a causal factor if, As Davidson maintains, all mental events are ultimately dependent on, or are caused by the physical events in the brain. One solution of this problem, though not a satisfactory one, is offered by Antony flew. He contends that it is quite improper to conceive consciousness as a causal factor in isolation from the rest of the organism. He contends that in considering the interaction of mind and brain (mental events and the neural events) we should think of each organism as a whole. Flew considers that we do not need to postulate consciousness (conscious intentions) as a cause of action. Rather, we should take it as an essential part of action. Flew states:

> *Certainly we can sensibly ask about the particular physiological bases of particular forms of consciousness; and our scientists may find, for instance that it is a contingently necessary condition of the having of a visual experience that the visual area in the cortex should be in such and such a state, being stimulated thus and thus. Yet the enjoying or suffering of any form of consciousness is essentially the attribute of an organism as a whole; it makes no sense to say that the cortex or part of a cortex either enjoys or suffers anything. It is this fundamental logical fact the fact that consciousness essentially is an attribute of an organism as a whole, an attribute which can only be identified by reference to the general condition and behavior of that organism which inhibits the identification and theoretical isolation of consciousness as a separate causal factor. We simply cannot first isolate the particular state of consciousness of some organism and then contrast it with the whole general material state of that organism when it is thus conscious, asking whether the former affects the latter. The immediate moral seems to be that two way interactionism, conceived as requiring that sort of impact of consciousness on stuff has to be ruled out as nonsense.*[7]

This solution seems to be an advance in the apparent perplexity in so far as it rules out the formulation of the problem in a causal paradigm. It is also an advance in the sense that it introduced the idea of taking consciousness as a whole and this seems to remove the basic confusion arising out of Davidsonian divisibility of the mind into individualized, isolated and dated mental events. But the view of Flew lacks an important consideration. And because of this deficiency Flew's view could be misleading. Even if consciousness is attributed to an organism as a whole and not isolated from it as a part, there is a need to posit a *conscious self* who decides to do something, enjoys or suffers. The conscious self does not merely experience enjoyment or suffering as a result of physical events in the brain. Rather it also actively seeks enjoyments and tries to avoid sufferings by deciding and choosing alternative ways and means of doing things. Given this we are driven back to the original difficulty of explaining as to how the mind of a conscious rational agent acts. How it brings about the physical bodily movements if it is not simply one factor in the causal chain of natural events? Though this difficulty seems to be insurmountable but still at this stage it must, at the least, be understood that the agent or the self is not merely a link in the causal chain of physical events. The actions which it consciously performs are not merely physical events caused by other physical or mental events.

Thus examination of the above philosophical debate has shown that the question about the nature of a self-conscious agent re-emerges. The relation of an agent with his actions, under his view of himself as an autonomous individual remains unanswered. Now we shall attempt to conclude from what we have examined so far.

Conclusion

However, despite acknowledging the role an agent plays in his actions, Davidson and other identity theorists seem to be reluctant in going further. Quite surprisingly, the most obvious but problematic aspect that there is consciousness, besides the mind and mental-physical identity, is never brought into a problem. We have tried to point out that the question of freedom of action requires exploring the nature of human consciousness, in so far as it involves self-consciousness. In my view self-consciousness is intrinsically connected with freedom of an agent irrespective of the complex mechanism involved in thinking of doing something. The person as an agent acts as a whole, knowing what he wants to do, and knowing what he is doing. The calculated shot by a tennis player may involve physical mechanism and perception of angles, yet it is he, a conscious individual who hits the ball, and not his mental-

physical events or moving his hand. And he does so willingly since he could always throw his racket and quit by choosing to do so.

Given this it would be worth arguing that human consciousness seems to be the point of departure from physical determinism and mind-brain identity problem. Dividing a person into series of mental-physical events will not work towards explaining freedom of action. Though the brain is a physical structure, and though human mind could be envisaged as somehow dependent on the brain functionality, nevertheless, consciousness of one's own self as the person who acts ought to be starting point of our philosophical understanding regarding freedom and determinism.

It was only the problem of causation that moved the philosophers to agree about the possibility of freedom while retaining the causality, since an uncaused event or action makes no sense to them. I acknowledge that this problem of causality and its relation with human action is highly contentious. Still I contend that human consciousness, in so far as it involves individuality of a person as an active agent, over-rides causality despite involving it. It is hard to prove this. However, in so far as philosophical attempts bring causality into the question of freedom, they end up in being silent about initiation of action. It is clear that the chain of causality would not allow the person or the agent to be the initiator of physical events. Thus, the so called freedom as merely a matter of interpreting the mental as mental, in a language irreducible to physics, does not settle the question of initiation of action.

One may question my assumptions about consciousness as a point of departure from physical causality on the grounds that this makes human persons mysterious entities in a causally connected physical universe. However, the same mystery could be seen in the views that equate mind and brain in the name of causality. To me, consciousness is not mysterious; it is an undeniable fact of human existence, without which we are not human. In a philosophical sense, human consciousness, especially self-consciousness is neither anomalous, nor divisible into discrete mental-physical events. Therefore, it is possible to look at determinism as merely a thesis about causal relations of events, both mental and physical, and not a thesis about conscious human actions. If a philosopher takes his stand on a question as a person, he cannot at the same time, accept that he himself is divisible into discrete, individuated, mantel or physical events, without contradicting himself. The 'I' stands forth despite causality and transcends it. But I am not a transcendentalist. I only contend that the thesis of freedom is a thesis about conscious mental physical actions and not about events. It was shown in this paper earlier that actions cannot be taken as events in nature otherwise agent would disappear.

Thus, freedom, agency and consciousness go together against the physical determinism and the mind-brain identity. In my arguments about freedom here, I have confined myself to the sense of freedom that an agent enjoys in knowingly doing what he wanted, without bringing into consideration that he could have acted otherwise than what he did. Here, I only argue that the freedom of action is a conscious activity that engages causality into the bodily moments and non-bodily matter, such that this association of activity synthesizes into an action that is owned by the person who brought it all about. If we look at this activity as series of events causing each, other the ownership evaporates. It would be quite absurd to look at actions as a series of mental-physical events taking place out of the blue despite the deterministic claims that only this causally connected series of events make sense.

Notes & References

[1]Donald Davidson, 'Mental Events' in *Essays on Actions and Events,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 208, First published in *Experience and theory* ed. Lawrence Foster and Myles Burnyeat (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 79-101
[2] Ibid., 209-210.
[3] Ibid., 221
[4] Kent Bach, "Actions are not events", in *Mind,* Ixxxix No. 353 (1960): 114
[5] Roderick M. Chislom, 'Human Freedom and the Self', in *Free Will*, ed. Garry Watson, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1982), 28.
[6] Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck" in *Free Will*, ed. Garry Watson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 184
[7] Antony Flew, *A Rational animal* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1978), 138