

From dualism to epiphenomenalism

Definitions

Epiphenomenalism is the view that mental states (or consciousness at least) have no effect on the physical world.

Dualism about the mind (“dualism”, for short) is the view that mental states are not physical states.

Dualism is opposed to *materialism* (also known as “*physicalism*”), which is the view that mental states are physical states.

Physical states include neurophysical states (e.g., having a given firing pattern in a given area of one's brain) as well as so-called functional states.

Functional states may be thought of as high-level states of physical systems. Examples include states such as carrying a given information or being caused in a certain way.

Note that these definitions ignore some nuances often made in the literature. In the literature, distinctions are sometimes made between views called materialism, physicalism, functionalism, and central state materialism. For the sake of simplicity, these distinctions will be ignored in this course, and the above definitions will be used. Likewise, epiphenomenalism is sometimes distinguished from *parallelism*. However, epiphenomenalism as defined here for simplicity collapses the distinction, which we need not worry about for our purposes.

The connection between dualism and epiphenomenalism

It has become apparent in the course of the lectures that dualism and epiphenomenalism are closely related views. There are two sides to the relation between these views:

- a) One can easily argue from epiphenomenalism to dualism
- b) One can easily argue from dualism to epiphenomenalism

The way one argues from epiphenomenalism to dualism is very simple: if mental states were physical states (states of the brain, say), then it would seem almost inevitable that they affect other physical states in some way (hence that epiphenomenalism is false). After all, almost all physical events have at least trivial effects (e.g., displacing air molecules, disturbing ever slightly a gravitational field, etc).

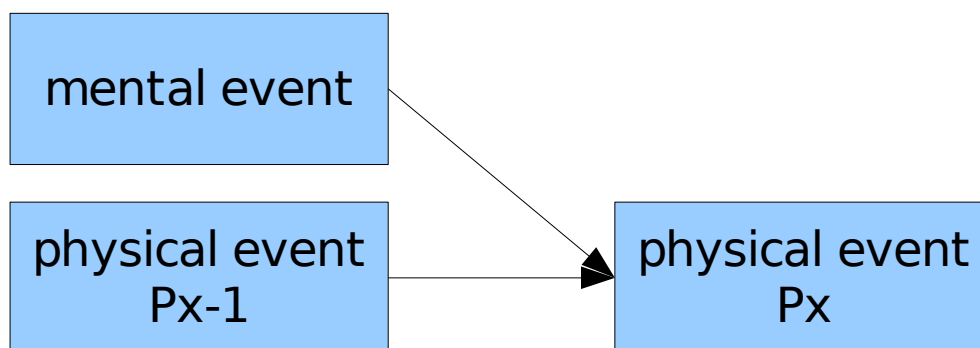
The argument from dualism to epiphenomenalism is more complicated. It relies on the assumption of the *causal closure of the physical world*, which is the claim that every physical event is lawfully determined by a prior physical event. This argument is what I have been calling the argument from causal closure. It also goes by the name of “exclusion argument”. The argument goes as follows:

1. The mind is not physical (dualism about the mind)
2. The physical world is causally closed
3. Therefore, the mind does not cause physical events

The inference from claims 1 and 2 to claim 3 proceeds by *reductio ad absurdum*: we assume that 1 and 2 are true and 3 is false, and we show that this leads to an absurd conclusion. This proves that if 1 and 2 are true, 3 must be true as well.

So let us suppose for a moment that the mind causes physical events (hence that 3 is false) even though 1 and 2 are true. So we know, given our suppositions, that there must be some physical event P_x which is caused by the mind, e.g. a voluntary movement one makes. By 2, we also know that P_x was lawfully determined by a prior physical event, which we are going to call P_{x-1} . Finally, we know, given 1, that P_{x-1} is not a mental event. So we can infer that a mental event caused a physical event P_x even though P_x was fully determined by a prior physical event P_{x-1} which was not the same as the mental event.

The following diagram summarizes the situation:



This outcome might reasonably be deemed absurd. The reason is that, for the mental event to cause P_x , it has to be true that *if the mental event had not occurred, P_x would not have occurred*. However, we know that P_x would have occurred even if the mental event had not occurred, because P_{x-1} would have necessitated it anyway. It seems that, as a general rule at least, an event A which is fully determined by an event B cannot also be caused by an event C distinct from B.

So we cannot maintain at once that

1. The mind is not physical
2. The physical world is causally closed
3. The mind causes physical events

If one wants to hold on to dualism (claim 1), one needs to reject either causal closure (claim 2) or claim 3 (the denial of epiphenomenalism). In other words, a dualist has the choice between denying causal closure or embracing epiphenomenalism. A number of authors have suggested that causal closure is fully

warranted by the scientific evidence, hence that dualism commits one to epiphenomenalism.

Jackson is an example of someone who more or less assumes causal closure. That is why he construes his defence of dualism in this week's article as also a defence of epiphenomenalism about qualia (consciousness): as soon as he is finished arguing for dualism, he tries to address objections to epiphenomenalism. He does not try to show that dualism leaves room for the mind to have physical effects. His article is important to our topic for two main reasons: it expounds the main motivations for dualism, and it offers important rebuttals of arguments against epiphenomenalism.

Note: the claim that dualism requires either denying causal closure or accepting epiphenomenalism has not gone unchallenged in the literature, but it does represent the opinion of a majority of authors. Causal closure also has often been challenged.