ABSTRACT. Nonreductive physicalism provides an appealing solution to the nature of mental properties. But its success as a theory of mental properties has been called into doubt by claims that it cannot adequately handle the problems of mental causation, as it leads either to epiphenomenalism or to thoroughgoing overdetermination. I argue that these apparent problems for the nonreductivist are based in fundamental confusion about causation and explanation. I distinguish two different types of explanation and two different relations to which they appeal: causation and determination. I argue that these types of explanation do not compete with one another, nor do these relations jointly result in overdetermination. In closing I develop a nonreductivist solution to mental causation which avoids both the hazards of epiphenomenalism and of overdetermination and so demonstrates a way to save nonreductive physicalism from the problems of mental causation.

Many are those tempted by some version of nonreductive physicalism. The attractions of such a view are obvious: The nonreductivism should ensure that mental properties are preserved in all of their distinctive character, while the physicalism should ensure that we nonetheless offer a view of mind compatible with a scientific world-view. But this appealing solution has been brought into doubt by arguments that the nonreductive physicalist faces an unpleasant dilemma regarding mental causation.

Either mental properties have causal efficacy or they don’t. If they don’t, then we seem to be left with a kind of epiphenomenalism about the mental. But epiphenomenalism has unpleasant consequences: First, it seems it would force us to give up our intuitions that our beliefs, desires, and so on do have a causal impact on the world. Secondly, if all mental properties lack causal powers, then there seems little reason to postulate them; they would fail tests such as Alexander’s dictum: “To be real is to have causal powers”. But the other horn of the dilemma, that mental properties do have causal powers, is hardly more palatable. If we allow higher-level mental
properties to have causal powers, we seemed threatened with a thoroughgoing overdetermination of many sorts of events which are caused both by instantiations of mental properties and of physical properties. Worse still, if we allow that mental properties may have causal effects at the physical level, we risk violating the causal closure of the physical. Fear of facing this dilemma has substantially dimmed the initial appeal of nonreductive views of mental properties.¹

One way out now acknowledged even by Jaegwon Kim, who develops such arguments against nonreductive physicalism in great detail, is to embrace functionalism.² As a functionalist one can maintain the view that mental property types are not reducible to physical property types, and yet allow that instances of mental properties are identical with instances of physical properties. If mental and physical property instances are identical, instances of mental properties will have all of the causal powers of the physical property instances (thus avoiding epiphenomenalism), and yet there will be no danger of overdetermination since there is but one entity at work as the cause.

The functionalist way out, however, is unlikely to fully satisfy many nonreductivists. For there seem to be at least two good reasons to resist the idea that mental property instances are identical to their physical bases: unlike physical property instances, they seem to have an essential qualitative nature, and in some cases at least they seem to have essential semantic or contentual features which also depend in part on external (“wide”) social and physical context. Those impressed by these features of our mental life will want to resist the ontological reduction of mental property instances to the physical, and thus, it seems, be left with the original dilemma.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the prospects for a different solution, one that the preserves the distinctive status of the mental by maintaining the irreducibility of mental property instances, as well as mental property types, to their physical basis. The alleged difficulties such views face with mental causation, I will argue, are merely apparent problems based in fundamental confusion about causation and explanation. Thus it would be a mistake to abandon such nonreductive physicalist views because of fears about handling mental causation.