ABSTRACT. Yablo suggests that we can understand the possibility of mental causation by supposing that mental properties determine physical properties, in the classic sense of determination according to which red determines scarlet. Determinates and their determinables do not compete for causal relevance, so if mental and physical properties are related as determinable and determinates, they should not compete for causal relevance either. I argue that this solution won’t work. I first construct a more adequate account of determination than that provided by Yablo. I then consider two common accounts of the mental, token identity theories and dispositional theories, and argue that on neither do mental and physical properties satisfy the requirements for determination.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the concerns of recent philosophy of mind is to find an account which can show how it is that mental events or properties are causally relevant to behavior. We frequently explain and predict people’s behavior by ascribing mental properties to them. We explain why it is that a student cheated on his test by saying that he desired to get a good grade, and thought that the way to get a good grade was to cheat. The problem comes in when we realize that cheating involves physical behavior of some sort. He must look over at someone else’s paper, or write out a cheat sheet, or arrange to steal a copy of the exam. Physical behavior can be explained, in principle, completely in physical terms. Some account in terms of neural firings, and muscle contractions, and nerve impulses can be given. Furthermore, this explanation is physical all the way down. At no point does mental content enter into this explanation. And, due to the closed character of the physical, it seems that at no point could mental content enter into the explanation. The physical seems, in short, to exclude the mental from causal relevance.

There are two main strategies for establishing a causal role for the mental in the light of this argument. The first consists in finding some criterion for causal relevance which mental properties satisfy, and arguing that mental properties are relevant in virtue of their satisfying this criterion, regardless of the fact that behavior can also, in principle, be explained in purely physical terms. The counterfactual and hedged nomic sufficiency accounts are probably the most common versions of this approach. A
mental property is deemed relevant to a particular event just in case if that subject had not had that mental property, the event would not have occurred\(^1\) or if there is a hedged law to the effect that people with that mental property typically behave in that way.\(^2\)

A second strategy for understanding the role of the mental, and the one I want to focus on in this paper, is to suppose that mental properties or events inherit their causal relevance from physical properties or events. This is the strategy which Davidson recommends in ‘Mental Events’.\(^3\) Mental events are token identical to physical events, so cause whatever the physical events cause. If Joe’s desiring to cheat just is identical with his physical state \(P\), then of course his desire to cheat causes whatever physical state \(P\) causes.

A problem with Davidson’s account, however, is that it seems to apply only to events, and not to properties. This matters, because events are causally relevant typically in virtue of only some of their properties. The singing of a line from an aria, for instance, causes a window to break not in virtue of its content properties, but in virtue of its physical properties.\(^4\)

One response to this difficulty would be to simply identify mental and physical properties, as we identified mental and physical events. If mental properties were identical with physical properties, then mental properties would be causally relevant to whatever those physical properties were causally relevant to. Unfortunately, this strategy does not seem tenable. Property identity at least requires coextensiveness, and the possibility of multiple realizability shows that mental and physical properties are not coextensive.\(^5\)

It is possible, however, that there is a weaker relationship than identity which would nonetheless allow mental properties to inherit their causal relevance from physical properties. Kim has suggested that supervenience is such a relationship. Psychophysical supervenience, roughly, is the idea that there can be no mental difference without a physical difference. Two subjects who are identical with respect to all their physical properties must also be identical with respect to all their mental properties. The picture would be as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
M & B \\
\vdots & \vdots \\
\vdots & \vdots \\
\vdots & \vdots \\
P & \rightarrow P^* \\
\end{array}
\]

where \(P\) and \(P^*\) are physical properties, \(M\) is a mental property which supervenes on physical property \(P\), and \(B\) is the behavioral property which supervenes on physical property \(P^*\). The dotted lines in the diagram indicate supervenience and the arrow indicates causal relevance. The idea is