Mind, Causality, and Ur-momism*

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Mental events are sometimes described as if they are causal products of physical events. The following are examples of prima facia causal reports about familiar mental events:

1. I felt pain from stabbing my finger with a knife.
2. I was surprised by the ringing sound.
3. I was embarrassed by his behavior.

Seemingly, in these statements, the causes of the mental events are uniquely and definitely referred to. It also seems that, in all of these statements, the causes are physical or quasi-physical matters or events, while the effects are all mental. Thus the causal theory of perception (or the causal theory of consciousness in general) is easily accepted as the theoretical reconstruction of these ordinary ways of speech. However, the causality here supposed to exist is called into question in some theoretical context. One of the main reasons to deny it is based on the doubt that we do not have any authorized medium to causally correlate the phenomena or events which are described in terms of physical predicates such as “stabbing my finger”, “the ringing sound”, .... with the phenomena or events which are described in terms of mental predicates such as “feel pain”, “was surprised”, or “was embarrassed”. Take the case of the report “I was surprised by the sound”. We often connect “the sound” and “my surprise” causally, and it is assumed that some scientific knowledge such as optics and neurophysiology will provide the causal detail to bridge the gap between the sound and my surprise (cf. Figure 1 below).

Serious doubt regarding this causality will be focused on the both edges of the causal sequence. Firstly why and how can “the sound” be the cause? There is a suspi-

* This paper was read in the philosophical colloquia at Universität Wien, Universität Salzburg, and University of British Columbia, Canada. I am deeply grateful to all people who arranged for me to read this paper, and who joined the discussion and gave me useful suggestions. I am especially grateful to Prof. Benedikt of Universität Wien, Prof. P. Weingartner of Universität Salzburg, and Prof. P. Remnant and Prof. S. Savitt of the University of British Columbia.

Annals of the Japan Association for Philosophy of Science, March 1988

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cution that the argument may fall into a circularity. Secondly, why and how can the mental event “my surprise” or my perception be the effect of a bodily state? Here, I will not discuss on the first edge. But I concentrate on the second doubt exclusively.

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According to the regular causal explanation of perception, a stimulus from the external object may cause some chemico-physical change in the brain, and as the effect of this brain process, a certain perception occurs. As a matter of fact, this type of causal explanation is, though it seems to be natural, theoretically quite dubious. In most of these cases, we must replace the expression “as the effect” by another expression “at the same time” or “simultaneously”. Thus we should say here that “.... such and such brain process occurred, and at the same time (or simultaneously) such and such mental event occurred” It is clear that there is no causal correlation between the two events which occur simultaneously. Then what should be the real relation between the brain process and the mental event which occur simultaneously?

On this point, I think most arguments of the recent “identity theory” are quite plausible, yet there seems to be some great misunderstanding in its fundamental argument. To begin with, I give a short comment on it here.

The identity theory is sometimes referred to as “modern materialism”\(^{(1)}\). However, is the identity theory necessarily materialistic? J.J.C. Smart, one of the radical advocates of the theory, says “If a sensation statement reports something, then this something is in fact a brain process”\(^{(2)}\). I know that most identity theorists are quite decent in saying that the proposed identity of sensation with brain process is not a strict identity nor a meaning identity, but it is an in-fact-identity, and contingent. Therefore, what is identified with sensation is not necessarily brain process, but it might be proven to be something else in the development of our factual knowledge. But still, he insists, it should be something material. What is the ground for this metaphysics?

Richard Rorty provides further detailed arguments for the materialism of the identity theory. He scrutinizes the cases in which a mental observational term will cease to have a referring use, and then finally the entity which was referred to formerly will disappear (This he calls the “disappearance form of identity theory”). Thus, instead of saying “I am in pain” we may come to say “My C-fibers are firing”
and then later on pain itself will disappear.

In stating this, it seems to me, his main stress is put on the relativity of our language habits or “linguistic practices”; this relativity renders the distinction between observation-terms and non-observation-terms contingent, and some observation-terms can be, in principle, replaced by other terms which used to be non-observational previously and later become observational; these old observational terms then become obsolete in the history of language practices. Essentially I agree that this sort of language change is possible. However, does this mean that the things or objects, whatever they may be, which were said to be observed by old observation terms really disappear? Surely, some old observation terms can, in principle, disappear but the observed objects themselves can not necessarily disappear. Surely, the word ‘pain’ can disappear by some historical contingency. However, this does not necessarily mean that the pain itself disappear. It may mean only that, by some contingency of language practices, the words “my C-fibers’ firing” may become richer so that they gain force to express, or to report my sensation together with its raw feels. I admit that Mr. Rorty succeeded in proving the disappearance of some mental words but, I am afraid, he did not prove the possibility of disappearance of all mental entities. At most he could show, ironically, that now-sensation terms may disappear and now-materialistic terms may become future-sensation terms by peculier and unrealistic linguistic training. If this is so, although he properly say that he is defending some form of the identity theory, he cannot say that he is defending materialism at all, even in its traditional form as he maintains(3).

If the identity theory is acceptable, then it should be entirely in the other form, I believe. In the following I will propose another possible form of identity theory, i.e. “ur-monism” in my words.

(3)

Now, let us return to the ordinary expression “I felt pain from stabbing my finger”, and also let us accept the theory of modern physics and neurophysiology as a factual knowledge. If the materialism of the identity theory is not acceptable, then what should we say about the relation between the brain process and my pain? Now, it is clear as I wrote before that we should not say “.... as the effect of the brain process, my pain occurred”, but we should say instead “.... there occurred some brain process such that, at the same time, I felt pain,” or more exactly “.... there occurred something where the brain process is observed and at the same time I felt pain”. Here, by this, I would like to suggest that there did not occur two events separately, but that there occurred one and a whole thing at one time for which we have two different ways of observation and description, on the one hand as a brain
process, and on the other hand as my pain.

The crucial point of the situation is reproduced by the following analogy. One day, a car which was driven by Mr. Brutus ran over Mr. Caeser, and Mr. Caeser died. There were two people on the spot, and they witness as follows respectively: Mr. A says that Mr. Brutus killed Mr. Caeser, and Mr. B says that a Mercedes Benz 220 D ran over an old man. Now, these two witnesses produce both true observational reports. Nevertheless, the two sentences have completely different meaning from each other. In this sense we can say that these two witnesses describe two different things, but still we cannot say that there happened two different events separately. No doubt we would agree that there happened only one event and the two people reported the event from their own view points and from their own interests.

The situation is quite similar in the case of reports of the brain process and pain. Namely, there happens only one event, and according to the two different ways of observation or from the two different points of view, we make the two different types of reports on it. Now then, what is the nature of the event here supposed to exist, and how do we describe it in the two different manners?

To some extent I follow the arguments of the Identity theory in the sense that I agree that the thing which is reported as a brain process is the same as the thing which is reported as pain. I do not agree only that the thing which is identified here should be inevitably material. Also, I do not think it is mental, either. I presume it is an event which is neither material nor mental but rather more radical and fundamental something. Here, to be mental or material is not the property of the event itself, but it is a property of our conceptual scheme or the framework of our language, through which we assign mentality and materiality to the events. Also, it is not the sort of thing which is reached to by scientific research or by special linguistic training (as Mr. Rorty suggests), but it is a sort of thing which has been, before science and the study of language use, presupposed to exist tacitly. We may call it an “ur-event”. In a sense this “ur-event” is unintelligible or unknowable. Because anything which is intelligible is to “erscheinen” in Kantian sense. And anything which “erscheint”, erscheint only as either mental or physical because of the limitation of our conceptual scheme. Thus, in reporting events we have no other choice to describe it as mental events or as physical events. In short, whenever I feel pain and at the same time my C-fiber’s firing occurred, according to my conjecture, there occurs only one fundamental event, “ur-event” in my words, and we observe and describe it as pain in a way and C-fiber’s firing in other way.

Our position here explained can be called, therefore, “ur-event monism” or simply “ur-monism” with “conceptual dualism” or “linguistic dualism”. It is, I believe, important to know these types of monism and the dualism are compatible with each other. Since Descartes, dualism has been said about substance, but in reality, mind-body dichotomy is the product of the conceptual scheme (probably a
priori) of our Subjekt. And even through the conceptual discrepancy of mind and body, we can logically reconstruct an ontologically monistic world view. Thus we logically construct the existence of the monistic ur-event and at the same time, we allow dualistic ways of conceiving it and reporting it by using the dualistic language system.

(4)

Now, from this ur-monistic viewpoint, how do we understand the mind-body causality? First, it is clear that there is no causal relation between the mental and the physical as simultaneous occurrences. Thus the C-fiber's firing cannot be the cause of my pain if they are simultaneous occurrences. However, also it is clear that when I say I felt pain from stabbing my finger, there should be some time delay between the time of the stabbing and the time of my feeling pain. More exactly, the time \( t_1 \) when the impulse by stabbing my finger reached to my brain is temporally earlier than the time \( t_2 \) when I felt pain. Namely, at time \( t_1 \) there must have occurred some ur-event \( U_1 \) other than the ur-event \( U_2 \) of my pain and C-fiber's firing. Here, I believe, we can theoretically assume a sort of causal relation between \( U_1 \) and \( U_2 \) as follows:

(Figure 2)

Thus the causal expression “I felt pain because I stabbed my finger” must be taken to be an abbreviation of the longer and more complicated expression “I stabbed my finger and as the result, at the time \( t_1 \) some ur-event \( U_1 \) probably with some brain process occurred, and as the effect of this \( U_1 \), another ur-event \( U_2 \) occurred at the time \( t_2 \) which I observed as my pain.” Exactly speaking, the causality here assumed is that which bridges between the two ur-events but not between the physical and the mental. By the exquisite function of our ordinary language, we can express it as if they are physical-mental causality.

We should notice that the causality thus interpreted is quite homogeneous with the ordinary concept of causality. In our ordinary ways of thinking, there is no such metaphysics as every event must be physical or mental. Rather, it is quite familiar that we seek a cause of an event in something neither mental nor physical. However, there will be some doubt that this kind of causality might differ from the concept of causality in modern science, where the causality is required to have an exact regularity even in the form of the differential equation, sometimes deterministic, as well as some other restrictions in terms of, for instance, energy transfer, its conservation and so forth. Then the causality of this type will be allowed only for
the physical objects or physical relations. But this view is, I am afraid, quite superficial. In reality, there exists a subtler and much more exquisite background structure in the nature of causality in general.

According to my conjecture, physical causality is a quite artificial and derivative product from the ordinary way of thinking, as follows: First, we unconditionally accept that every event, whatever it may be, can be designated and described by physical predicates, and of what are designated by those physical predicates we logically construct the world of physical objects for which we require deterministic regularity. In other words, it is not likely that there exists a world of physical objects first where the causality (or causal laws) is uniquely valid, rather, it is more likely that there is a framework of predicates corresponding to our conceptual scheme and by this framework of predicates we construct a physical world so that the causality with above mentioned restriction is applicable. By pursuing this policy to the extreme and limiting the applicability of the concept of causality within the realm of physical world (or the world expressed only by the physical predicates), modern science, especially physical science, has achieved noteworthy success.

If my conjecture above is plausible, then we cannot say that causality must always physical causality with the restriction of the physical science. There can be also mental causality so to speak, of completely different characteristics from physical causality on an equal footing in accordance with other framework of mental predicates or the conceptual scheme for the mental. (But I wonder whether it has been already established on the scientific level)

Now then is it also possible to construct a causal theory for “ur-events”? Clearly, there is no such causal theory with exact causal laws because we do not have any conceptual scheme for ur-events, and therefore, any ur-predicates so to speak to describe ur-events. We can just imagine that there are some causal-like relations (or ur-causality so to speak) for which we have only those two different framework of description, i.e. mental and physical or the mixture of them.

The position so far maintained is illustrated as follows:

(Figure 3)
I presume, there is a successive occurrence of ur-events for which both mental and physical descriptions are possible (sometimes mental description may be missing). Only between the two physical descriptions (of the ur-events) physical causality is established. Thus, if the causal theory of perceptions should propose the causality between, say, P2 and M2, (e.g. C-fiber’s firing at t2 and my pain at t2), then it is false. But if it proposes causal relation between P1 and M2, then the proposition could be plausible in the interpretation that it is an abbreviation of the sentence that “as the effect of the ur-event U1 for which P1 is the physical description, another ur-event U2 occurs for which M2 is the mental description.” In this way the causal theory can be finally saved on the ground of deep structure of ur-monism together with conceptual or linguistic dualism. And I believe this is the only possible and plausible way of saving the causal theory from criticism.

Finally I would like to add a short reply to a possible objection to this theory of ur-monism; i.e. why do we have to rescue the causal theory by introducing an odd entity like “ur-event”? Should it not be cut off by Occum’s razor? My answer is this. In short.

1) In order to resolve the traditional mind-body enigma, the identity theory without materialism is only plausible way. Therefore, here is definitely needed some fundamental entity, not material nor mental which is to be identified. Our “ur-event” fits best for this need.

2) It is now quite urgent to supply the philosophical foundation for mind-body causality even in the tradition of the physical science. In the course of the development of modern science, mental events are mostly set aside from consideration. This was a good strategy for the development of science for its first stage. However, in this century some new sciences arose which have to deal with the relation between mind and body directly. Psychophysics and psychopharmacology are those examples. Now nobody denies from scientific reason that as the effect of taking LSD or mescalin a hallucination occurs. This seems to be a typical scientific example of mind-body causality. In a sense, science is now in a crisis, for it cannot confine itself in the realm of physical objects. It is a great misunderstanding that science is essentially physical science. It is, I believe, only a provisional strategy of science that science has pretended to be exclusively physical science and rejected mental entities. The metaphysics of modern science itself is, I believe, rather the hidden dualism which is in awe of the existence of mind. Thus, we are urged now to reconsider the formerly notorious and long deserted causal theory of perception, and make it come back to the stage of mind body controversy with a new veneer of philosophical refinement.
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