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Reconciling Anomalous Monism and Scheme-Content Dualism: Reply to Manuel de Pinedo

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RESUMEN

El monismo anómalo y el rechazo del dualismo esquema/contenido son dos de las más importantes contribuciones filosóficas de Donald Davidson. Sería sorprendente encontrar que estas dos doctrinas están en conflicto. Manuel de Pinedo (2006) ha argüido recientemente que de hecho hay cierta tensión entre ellas. Piensa que el monismo anómalo requiere que los eventos particulares sean extensionales y, por tanto, que estén más allá de cualquier esquema conceptual, en tanto que el rechazo del dualismo esquema/contenido no permite tales eventos no-esquemáticos. En este trabajo argumento que las reservas de Pinedo están desencaminadas. El monismo anómalo de Davidson requiere eventos particulares extensionales, pero se puede sostener esto sin adoptar un dualismo esquema/contenido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *monismo anómalo, dualismo de esquema-contenido, Donald Davidson, triangulación.*

ABSTRACT

Anomalous monism and the repudiation of scheme-content dualism are two of Donald Davidson's more important philosophical contributions. It would be surprising to discover that these doctrines are in conflict. Manuel de Pinedo (2006) has recently argued that there is in fact some tension. He thinks anomalous monism requires token events to be extensional and hence beyond any conceptual framework, whereas the rejection of scheme-content dualism does not permit any such schemeless events. In this paper I argue that Pinedo's worries are misplaced. Davidson's anomalous monism does require extensional token events, but these can be invoked without adopting a dualism of scheme and content.

KEYWORDS: *Anomalous Monism, Scheme-Content Dualism, Donald Davidson, Triangulation.*

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Pinedo (2006) has recently argued that there is in fact some tension. He thinks anomalous monism requires token events to be independent of any conceptual framework, whereas the rejection of scheme-content dualism does not permit any such schemeless events. In this paper I argue that Pinedo's worries are misplaced. Davidson's anomalous monism does require extensional token events, but these can be invoked without adopting a dualism of scheme and content. The key to doing so rests in replacing Pinedo's suggestion that extensional events are noumenal with the suggestion that extensional events are part of a shared and accessible world.

I. ANOMALOUS MONISM AND TOKEN EVENTS

The doctrine of anomalous monism arises naturally from the combination of the following three tenets:

- (1) Mental events are causally related to physical events.
- (2) Singular causal relations are backed by strict laws.
- (3) There are no strict psycho-physical laws [Davidson (2001a), pp. 223; (1993), pp. 3].

At first glance these premises seem to form an inconsistent triad. If causal relations are subsumed under strict laws, and there are no laws relating the mental and the physical, how could mental events causally interact with physical events? If there are no strict laws between the mental and the physical, and the mental causally interacts with the physical, then how can causal relations be backed by strict laws? Finally, if mental events causally interact with physical events and causal interactions can always be described in nomological terms, how can there be no law-like patterns between the mental and the physical?

Davidson, however, finesses the seeming inconsistency to generate an identity theory between the mental and physical tokens. Suppose, based on premise one, that a mental event causes a physical event. Premise two contends that this interaction can be described in the form of strict laws. This law, however, must be strictly physical, since premise three contends that no law can be found between the mental and the physical. Thus the mental event causing the physical event will also have a description in law-like physical terms. Since there is both a mental description and an underlying physical description of the same event, the identity between the two is forged [Davidson (2001a), pp. 224, 231]. Due to premise three, however, the mental description cannot collapse into the physical description, so an identity between mental and physical types cannot be generated. The resulting picture, as Pinedo rightly points out [Pinedo (2006), pp. 83], is one in which monism can only be saved by positing ontological token identities. These ontological identities,

however, in Pinedo's words, imply that token events are "free-floating, independent of our conceptual resources and, ultimately, noumenal".¹

II. SCHEME-CONTENT DUALISM AND PINEDO'S ARGUMENT FOR INCOMPATIBILITY

According to Pinedo, Davidson's arguments against scheme-content dualism imply that no such 'noumenal' events beyond human conceptualization can exist. As a background, Davidson thinks empiricism suffers from the lamentable tendency to separate scheme from content. By 'scheme' Davidson means an organizing conceptual apparatus. Alternate terms that Davidson uses to describe a conceptual scheme include a paradigm [Davidson (1974), p. 8] and a language [Davidson (1974), pp. 9, 14]. No matter how described, the idea is that humans impose a conceptual or organizational scheme onto content. Content, on the other hand, is the neutral experience that presents itself to the senses [Davidson (1974), pp. 12-14]. The empiricist thinks that sense experience stands naked before the senses, awaiting various conceptual apparatuses to organize it. Davidson disagrees. He thinks that if content is raw and unconceptualized, then it is blind and cannot justify beliefs [Davidson (1990); Davidson (1999), p. 83; Davidson (2001b), pp. 143-145]. On the other hand, if schemes are detached from empirical content, then there is no limit to the amount of incommensurable schemes that can organize the neutral experience differently [Davidson (1974), pp. 11-13]. Davidson overcomes these problems by rejecting the dualism of scheme and content. The world we experience comes organized according to the language we grow up into, and the language we grow up into comes to us filled with the experiences we have from the world. There is no need to split these apart. But if they are not split apart, neutral or schemeless content seemingly cannot float independently of a scheme.

How, then, can Davidson sustain his view that events are ontological entities which are independent of human conceptualization in terms of law-like regularities or in terms of mental descriptions? In Pinedo's own words:

No separation is possible between content and scheme, i.e. there are no schemeless events waiting to be captured by one or more descriptive frameworks... In order to defend event monism we need a schemeless method to individuate events, i.e., a method which allows us to say that the same event is both the one described by the nomological vocabulary of physics and by the normative vocabulary of psychology [Pinedo (2006) p. 87].

Anomalous monism requires schemeless events that are independent of conceptualization, but Davidson also thinks schemeless entities cannot exist. How can both of these principles be true?

The problem runs deeper than this as well. For, if events are independent of description, and hence beyond our conceptual framework, how could we know that a particular event couched in mental vocabulary is identical to an event couched in law-like vocabulary?² There is no conceptual link between the two, so we have to posit an ontological identity. But this ontological identity is by definition outside of the conceptual domain, so it is at best a brute given, and at worst it is based on faith alone [Pinedo (2006), pp. 80, 83, 87]. Pinedo says Davidson will respond to this concern by invoking his model of discerning event identity: two events are identical if they share the same causes and effects [Pinedo (2006) pp. 82, 87]. But, if these causes and effects occur independently of description as well, then we again have no way of knowing that a mental event and a physical event share the same causes and effects. Pinedo expresses the worry as follows:

If Davidson is right in his rejection of the dualism, we would need ways to link intentional predicates and physical ones, otherwise our belief that an event intentionally described and an event physically described may share causes and effects must be held on faith. If nothing that we could know would be sufficient to say that two descriptions, one physical, one mental, are of the same event ... then we could never justifiably claim that the two descriptions did in fact refer to the same event. The only alternative would be to maintain that the connection between the two events was something “given” from outside the conceptual realm.³

I take Pinedo to mean that if an event floats freely from its description, then it is outside of the realm of conceptualization, explanation, justification and hence epistemology; and in so being, it is outside of the realm of things that can be known about. We therefore cannot know that it is identical with an event couched in law-like terms, nor can we know that it has the same causes and effects that an event couched in law-like terms has, for we cannot know anything about it.

III. ANOMALOUS MONISM AND EXTENSIONALITY

Pinedo is clearly right that anomalous monism relies on the assumption that events and causal relations are independent of their conceptualizations. Not only is this the only way to make sense of the identity claim in the face of the rejection of conceptual identities, but Davidson later uses the independent nature of causal relations to defend himself against the charge of

epiphenomenalism. Numerous critics [Honderich (1982); Kim (1984); Sosa (1984)] argue that anomalous monism implies the mental has causal potency as physical only, not as mental. Since causal relations are law-like, but the mental in itself is not law-like, the mental as itself does not cause anything, and hence it is epiphenomenal. Davidson responds by reminding his critics that events do not have causal power as described as mental or as described as physical, but rather events have causal potency as events:

For me, it is events that have causes and effects. Given this extensionalist view of causal relations, it makes no literal sense, as I remarked above, to speak of an event causing something as mental, or by virtue of its mental properties, or as described in one way or another [Davidson (1993), p. 13].

As an example, Davidson says naming the American invasion of Panama ‘Operation Just Cause’ does not change the consequences of the event [Davidson (1993), p. 8]. In the same way, when critics contend that only the mental as described under a physical description has causal power, Davidson reminds his audience that causal relations are extensional, and therefore happen no matter how they are described. Thus, although Pinedo occasionally hints at the possibility that Davidson may not wholeheartedly embrace the view that causality is extensional [Pinedo (2006), p. 89], Davidson pleads guilty as charged. It is not, therefore, in virtue of a rejection of the extensional nature of causation that the apparent tension between Davidson’s two dogmas will be alleviated. The remaining option is to explain the presence of extensional events while still rejecting scheme-content dualism.

IV. THE NOUMENAL WORLD AND THE ACCESSIBLE AND SHARED WORLD

Pinedo’s suggestion that anomalous monism makes causal relations ‘noumenal’ is an unfortunate exaggeration. Bridling this exaggeration provides the key to alleviating the tension that Pinedo sees in Davidson’s writings. The term ‘noumenal’ has a Kantian ring to it; a ring which suggests that humans may have phenomenal sense perceptions, while the actual noumenal world stands inaccessibly behind them; and a ring which suggests that the categories of the mind, or of language, generate a different organization of the world from person to person, so the actual world is not held in common.⁴ On the contrary, Davidson thinks the actual world is both accessible and shared.

On the assumption that the world is accessible, consider Davidson’s quarrel with the empiricists. The empiricist thinks raw sense data can justify beliefs, but Davidson thinks this view leads to skepticism because “a person’s sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different (remember the brain in the vat)” [Davidson (2001b), p. 145]. Our

senses could inform us that we are standing on a beach, but in reality our brain is mired in a vat whilst an evil scientist is electrically stimulating various neurons. This being the case, we should not look to the intermediate senses to justify our beliefs. Rather, we should look through our senses to the original causes in the world that make us assent to the truth of certain beliefs [Davidson (1990); Davidson (1999), p. 83; Davidson (1999), p. 105; Davidson (2001b), pp. 137-153; Davidson (2001b), pp. 193-204]. When I assent to the truth of 'I see a dog', something in the world causes me to assent to this belief. Through this causal chain I have immediate causal access to whatever it is in the world that causes me to assent to the presence of a dog. The rejection of scheme-content dualism therefore enables us to have access to the actual world: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish contact and unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false".⁵

The rejection of scheme-content dualism also leads to the conclusion that we all share a common world. Consider, for example, Davidson's criticism of conceptual schemes. The scheme-content distinction splits up an "organizing system and something waiting to be organized" [Davidson (1974), p. 11]. Raw sense data is waiting to be organized, and conceptual schemes organize this sense data differently, based on the background assumptions of the conceptual scheme. Davidson uses the following Whorf text as symptomatic of this view:

Language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order ... We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated [Davidson (1974), p. 12].

My conceptual scheme organizes and "distorts" [Davidson (1974), p. 6] my reality. If I have a different set of background assumptions from my neighbor, I will order the world very differently from them. Furthermore, if beliefs have their meaning based on these background assumptions, different conceptual schemes will fail to be translatable into one another.

In abandoning the dualism of scheme and content, Davidson rejects this view, preferring to say that the common world which I share with my neighbor is the subject matter of my utterances. The world is a common coordinate system, our conceptual schemes do not change that fact, and focusing on the common world enables us to compare our different beliefs and sentences with each other:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make

sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability [Davidson (1974), p. 6].

This means that different cultures share the same world, so I can establish what a foreigner means by certain words in her language; the common world is an entranceway into the foreign language. To summarize, Davidson does not use the term 'noumenal' to describe the extensional nature of causal relations. On the contrary, Davidson thinks that the actual world, where events and causal relations occur, is accessible and shared in common.

V. INTERPRETATION AND THE ACCESSIBLE AND SHARED WORLD

This shift in thinking helps in the following ways: if the world is shared in common, then it may be possible to calibrate two different vocabularies, like the vocabulary of the mental and the physical, since there may be a common point of reference. Secondly, if the world is accessible, then it may be possible to know about extensional affairs, such as the causal relations and event identities that are required for anomalous monism. Both of these possibilities are questioned by Pinedo, but they both come to fruition in Davidson's project of radical interpretation.

As a typical example of radical interpretation, I travel to a distant village and hear a native assert 'Largalump gobblupping!' at the same time that I assent to the fact that an elephant is eating from the leafy foliage of the forest. Another day goes by and we see that same elephant eating, so I say 'Largalump gobblupping!', and the native nods with approval. Of central importance in learning this foreign language is the accessible world that we both share in common: a common source causes me to assent to 'Elephant eating' and the foreigner to assent to 'Largalump gobblupping!' [Davidson (1990); Davidson (1999), p. 84].

Davidson calls this method of interpretation Triangulation. One point of the triangle is the shared world, another point is the utterance from the native, and I am the final point. The environmental cause and the native's linguistic utterance jointly make up the content of the word, thereby rendering scheme-content dualism impossible.⁶ This does not mean, however, that a different triangle could not have been formed. For example, if I had been in the presence of a neighboring tribeswoman when the elephant appeared, she would have exclaimed 'Phanta snick-snick' in her own native tongue. Two points of the triangle would be the same; namely, me and the shared environmental cause (i.e., the elephant), but the third point would have been a different linguistic utterance. This new triangle does not mean that the external stimuli could not combine with the utterances from the previous native,

thereby forming the original different triangle. And of course, another triangle could be formed between the elephant, myself and a Frenchman who utters ‘Voilà un éléphant qui mange’. On every occasion scheme-content dualism is avoided, since the linguistic utterance and the environmental cause jointly make up the content of these words. But, this fact never prevents an alternate triangle from forming.

Recall that Pinedo says “there are no schemeless events waiting to be captured by one or more descriptive frameworks” [Davidson (2006), p. 87]. This not only leads him to conclude that anomalous monism is in conflict with the rejection of scheme-content dualism, but also that there would be no way of knowing about the token identities between two different vocabularies (in this case, the mental and the physical). The interpretation I have just given supposes that there are extensional events. In distant regions of the world today, where no human voice has ever been heard, events are still happening. Trees are falling down, water is moving downstream and mosquitoes are still biting at various animals. Since these events belong to a shared and accessible world, they can be the constant and shared point on the triangle. As soon as humans come along and combine their linguistic utterances with these events, then the triangle is formed, and these events are no longer bare to them, in accordance with the rejection of scheme-content dualism. But their descriptions do not prevent the original event from happening, nor do they prevent another tribe from combining different linguistic utterances to these same events.⁷ It is possible, therefore, to reject scheme-content dualism while still acknowledging that there are extensional events. Not only does this interpretation reconcile the two doctrines, but it also provides an answer to Pinedo’s concern that there is no way to know about the token identities. Namely, the shared world enables the first tribe to compare their utterances with the second tribe, to see that they are talking about the same thing. This conclusion is perhaps too quick. I want to go over it again, but this time using the case of mental and physical vocabularies.

VI. INTERPRETATION AND MENTAL AND PHYSICAL TYPES

This process of radical interpretation can be repeated in the case of mental and physical vocabularies. It is easier to consider the case of actions, which are mental events, but are also described as physical bodily movements. For example, my friend John suddenly comes into view, and so I smile in greeting. I describe the event of my smiling by saying ‘I recognized my friend, so I decided to smile in salutation’. A neuroscientist observes the situation and describes the situation as follows: ‘Whenever light reflects onto his retina off of a certain determinate source, muscle contraction ensues on the face’. The neuroscientist and I are both caused to utter and assent to our

different sentences based on the same stimulus; namely, my sudden smiling. Although the vocabularies between the two are different, the stimulus is identical, as anomalous monism requires. This fact enables us to interpret what each other means by their words, and it also enables us to say that since the same event caused our utterances, we are both describing the same event.

The more difficult case is with internal mental states such as desires and beliefs. In one of Davidson's later commentaries on his work, he tells a story of reading a book where a neurosurgeon touches certain parts of a patient's brain, while the conscious patient recounts the experiences that each electric probe stimulates. Davidson explains:

When I read this, I thought I saw how in practice it might sometimes be possible to identify a physical event with a mental event: measure the length of time from the electric stimulus to the verbal response, trace the firing of the neurons as the effect spread through the brain, and consider some stretch of that spreading as the physical event identical with remembering the tune [Davidson (1999), p. 653].

Operating on the open brain of a conscious person allows mental vocabulary to be compared with law-like physical vocabulary. For example, if after some prodding a neuroscientist reports 'whenever there is electrical activity in these particular neurons, resultant neural activity occurs there'. The patient then reports her conscious experience 'I decided to think up an old joke to amuse myself'. If the patient reports the mental experience at exactly the same time that the scientist stimulates the neurons, it is possible for the two to interpret each other. Moreover, they can know that the events that stimulated their utterances are identical because they both assent to the truth of their particular utterances when this one event occurs.

VII. CONCLUSION

Pinedo argues that on anomalous monism events must be beyond conceptualization, and hence noumenal. He says this is impossible to reconcile with Davidson's rejection of scheme-content dualism, and that there is no way to know that a mental event is identical to a physical event. I have argued that anomalous monism does require the extensional nature of causation. However, this does not mean that causation is noumenal. Rather, it means that events belong to a common and accessible world, a position which is consistent with the rejection of scheme-content dualism. A linguistic utterance can be combined with this shared and accessible world without barring the possibility of a different linguistic utterance from being combined with the same portion of the common world. This is what anomalous monism

calls for: one event and two different vocabularies describing the event. Not only does this interpretation establish the consistency between Davidson's two doctrines, but it also means that there is a way to know that a mental event is identical to a physical event. Specifically, since my particular mental utterance (i.e., I desire a drink) is assented to at the same time that a neuroscientist's utterance in physical vocabulary is assented to (i.e., neural stimulation in the medial prefrontal cortex is occurring), I can conclude that one and the same cause brings about both of the utterances. We are, therefore, justified in extending interpretive charity to Davidson himself, for on inspection it turns out that two of Davidson's seminal doctrines are not in conflict with each other.⁸

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NOTES

¹ Pinedo (2006), 83. Pinedo repeats his assertion that events must be "noumenal" on pp. 80 and 89. On p. 94 he describes events as "transcendent", whereas on pp. 84 and 86 he states that events are "something given from outside the conceptual realm".

² See Stoutland (1976; 1980); Hornsby (1981); Honderich (1982); and Antony (1989) for similar concerns. Campbell (2008) offers a response to this problem that does not require the invocation of token events, but rather looks to Davidson's view that mental types supervene on physical types.

³ Pinedo (2006), 84. See also p. 88: "There is nothing *given* in experience which can serve as a ground for knowledge". Pinedo acknowledges his indebtedness to Hornsby for pointing out how difficult it would be to locate the appropriate physical type for a given mental type. Hornsby raises this issue in a discussion of Davidson's work (1999, 630), and Davidson responds to her (1999, 639). In his response he repeats his view that the actual laws that underwrite the mental descriptions may never be found, but he only needs to establish that they will be there somewhere.

⁴ Indeed, Pinedo (2006), 94, suggests that Davidson is somewhat Kantian at times. Although Davidson does share certain sympathies with Kant, on the important matter of scheme-content dualism he places himself within the Quinean tradition of rejecting the synthetic/analytic division, and in fact attempts to suggest additional steps to get out from under Kant's shadow.

⁵ Davidson (1974), 20. In other papers, Davidson translates this point into a discussion between the neural correlates of sense perception and the actual object. Quine argues that the content of a word is proximal, whereas Davidson argues that the content of a word is distal. Quine suggests that the content of the sentence 'Here is a cow'

is individualized to the neural turbulence in specific human brains. On the contrary, Davidson argues that the content of this same sentence is not in this close location, but in the more distant object in the world which causes the turbulence. Quine's suggestion has embedded individualism and privacy, whereas Davidson's suggestion allows for a common causal source. The same object, namely, the cow, can cause me and my neighbor to assent to the sentence 'Here is a cow'. We can, therefore, share content since we share an object in the world.

⁶ Davidson (1999), 208; 2001b (1990), 200-201. This point is more obvious in the case of a baby learning his first language. For the baby, the round object and the parent's utterance of 'ball' are both required in order for the baby to understand what 'ball' means to the parent.

⁷ Davidson (2004), 142, explains that "Nature in its causal doings is indifferent to our supply of concepts". See also Davidson (1993), 12 and Levin (1977).

⁸ I Would like to thank Rockney Jacobsen for helpful discussion and commentary.

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