

**Phil 397
The Mind/Body Problem**

Fall 1995
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**Robert Audi: *Mental Causation: Sustaining and Dynamic*
[Handout #17]**

To show: that the grounds for doubting that mental properties have causal power, i.e. can play a causally explanatory role in broadly causal generalizations, do not justify the negative conclusion.

§ Four Sources of Doubt:

- I. the view that reasons cannot be causes.**
- II. the view that the explanatory relevance of psychological states such as beliefs and intentions derives from their content, their explanatory role is not causal and we thus have no good reason to ascribe causal power to them.**
- III. the idea that if the mental supervenes on the physical, then what really explains our actions is the physical properties determining our propositional attitudes, and not those attitudes themselves.**
- IV. the thesis that since there are no laws linking (intentional) mental states to actions, those states cannot be genuine causes of action.**

§I. Reason and Causes

[A]. The Scope: Propositional Attitudes (such as beliefs, desires, and intentions)

["propositional attitudes" -- attitudes relating to some proposition and can be expressed by a propositional content such as a that-clause.

e.g. I believe that, I wish that, I think that (often include I desire that)

but not: I love that, I like that,]

[B]. A Distinction between Two Kinds of Reasons:

(1) "reason-states" -- psychological states such as wants, beliefs, and intentions (the abstract contents of propositional attitudes)

(2) "reasons" -- psychological elements that presumably play a *motivational role* in producing action, but they are not *causes* of action

⇒ Audi's Claim: Even if "reasons" are not causes of action, "reason-states" are.

[* *de re* beliefs vs. *de dicto* beliefs]

___ *de re* beliefs: *res* = things \Rightarrow beliefs about a certain object (belief is construed as a relation between a believer and an object)

de dicto beliefs: *dictum* = statements \Rightarrow beliefs about a certain proposition (belief is construed as a relation between a believer and a proposition)

e.g. ___ W. V. Quine

- (1) Ralph believes that the man wearing a hat on the beach is a spy. (*de dicto* belief)
- (2) Ralph does not believe that his next door neighbor, B. J. Orcutt, is a spy. (*de dicto* belief)
- (3) the man wearing a hat on the beach = B. J. Orcutt.
 \Rightarrow (4) Ralph believes of B. J. Orcutt that he is a spy. (*de re* belief)]

e.g. ___ John Perry

- (1) I believe that the man with the torn sugar sack is making a mess in the supermarket.
- (2) the man with the torn sugar sack = me.
- (3) I don't believe that I am making a mess in the supermarket. (*de dicto* belief)
 \Rightarrow (4) I believe of myself that I am making a mess in the supermarket. (*de re* belief)]

*** Arguments Against Reason-States' Being Causes:

[First Argument]

1. Only events can be causes (and effects).
2. Our reasons for doing something are not events; they are merely the disposition we are in (dispositional states last much longer than events).
3. Therefore, reasons cannot be causes.

[* disposition vs. events]

___ events have their spatial and temporal locality; disposition is more permanent.

___ e.g. a vase's breaking is an event; a vase's fragility is its disposition.

___ e.g. My having a headache is an event; my having the belief that life in general is good is my dispositional belief.

___ Audi seems to think that all propositional attitudes are dispositional.

[Audi's Reply]:

1. Not all causes must be events. A cause may be a sustaining cause which is a disposition.
2. "Sustaining cause": a comprehensive explanation of why a (non-event) state obtains, or why some process or activity continues over time.
 e.g. gravity is a sustaining cause for our weights
 God is a sustaining cause for the universe (???)
3. Our reasons for doing things are sustaining causes for our actions.
4. Therefore, reason-states can be causes.

§II. Mental Contents Versus Mental Causes

[The Argument Against Mental Causes]:

1. Mental states explain *by virtue of their content*.
2. But contents are *explanatorily relevant* merely as the result of the fact that our purposive explanation is rooted in a particular culture.
3. Contents henceforth are not the genetic causes.
4. Therefore, the explanatory role mental states play is not causal either.

[Audi's Reply]:

1. Granted, contents of propositional attitudes (i.e. our reasons for doing certain things) *are not* causes; they do not play any causal explanatory role.
2. But our mental life is like a cognitive "map" which is composed of our relevant beliefs.
3. On this cognitive map, mental content (our reasons) serves as a goal or a destination, and our action is explained as the means to this goal.
4. Therefore, mental contents do play an explanatory role for the explanation of actions.
5. Therefore, mental states which express these mental contents (i.e. "reason-states") do causally explain the actions.

§III. The Supervenience of the Mental

[Argument Based on Supervenience]:

1. Mental properties supervene on physical properties.
2. The underlying physical properties are more basic and it is these properties that are doing the real causal work.
3. Therefore, although the intentionalistic explanations based on mental properties do explain actions, they do not explain the real causal connection.

[Audi's Reply]:

1. Not all supervenient properties are going to lose causal explanatory power just because their base subvenient properties have the causal explanatory power (e.g. magnetism supervenes on set of base physical properties, and yet magnetism adds explanatory power).
2. Mental properties could "inherit" causal power from their base physical properties just as the magnetism of iron "inherits" its causal power from the base properties in virtue of which it is magnetic.
3. Causation is a transitive relation (If A causes B, and B causes C, then A causes C) and it forms a causal chain.
4. In the causal chain from the physical forces to the generation of action, mental properties play the role of providing a direction for the forces to go to.
5. Therefore, mental properties might also play a crucial link in the causal chain from the physical to action.

§IV. The Covering Law Problem

[Argument Against Mental Causation]:

1. There are no laws linking intentional mental states to actions.
2. But all causation must be "covered" by a general law.
3. Therefore, there is no mental causation.

[Audi's Reply]:

1. Not all laws have to be causal; not all causal laws have to be precise, universal covering laws.
2. A law is a general proposition that is testable (in principle) and that has predictive power as well as much explanatory power.
3. Intentional psychological laws, in the form as "If an agent, S, wants something, x, and believes that A-ing is necessary for realizing x (or that it is a good way to realize x), then, given the ability and opportunity to A, S tends to A", do have predictive and explanatory power.
4. Therefore, there are laws linking intentional mental states to actions (premiss 1 is false).

§V. Intentionalistic Explanation and the Dynamics of Action

*** Sustaining Causation vs. Dynamic Causation**

___ sustaining causation may obtain between dispositional states and actions as well as between events or processes and other events or processes.

___ dynamic causation is a productive or at least eliciting relation between causative events and events which constitute their effects (= event causation).

***** [A Summary of Audi's Claim]:**

___ (i) The formation of a belief, a desire, etc. is a mental event, but beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes are dispositional attitudes.

___ (ii) Mental events have *dynamic* causation over action, while dispositional attitudes have *sustaining* causation over action.

___ (iii) Mental events are dynamic causes in the sense that they "trigger" the disposition as well as the action to occur at the time that they did; mental dispositions are sustaining causes in the sense that they explain why an action takes place.

___ (iv) Even if the "triggering" mental event is also a physical event — and is thus operated on the basis of physical causation, this does not "exclude" mental event itself from doing causal or explanatory work.

___ (v) Intentional action-explanation generalizations are "causal" explanation in the sense that they express sustaining causation; they are also "non-causal" explanation in the sense that they do not express event causation.