

# Is the Mental Anomalous?

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The claim that the mental requires a *sui generis* form of explanation, namely rational, reason giving, explanation has its locus classicus in Davidson's work. However, the claim in the hands of McDowell appears to have very different connotations, and it is important to be clear that there is a difference between Davidson and McDowell on the reason for the anomalous nature of the mental. I will look at their arguments in turn, to see exactly what the claim amounts to, and what it rules out in the way of mental explanation.

## Davidson's Argument

Davidson's approach is based on a particular view of laws and causality. According to this view every causal interaction must be backed by a *strict* law. Davidson makes a distinction between homonomic and heteronomic generalisations, the former are those whose instances give us reason to believe that the generalisation could be improved by the addition of further conditions stated *in the same vocabulary* as the original generalisation. Heteronomic generalisations are those which can only be made more precise by shifting to a different vocabulary. For Davidson the claim that a generalisation is homonomic requires that its concepts come from a theory with strong constitutive claims. The reason for this is presumably that if we are to be assured that all the concepts utilised in specifying a given generalisation are from a single conceptual domain, then that domain must have a secure and entrenched identity. For the physical domain Davidson cites the example of length, arguing that: "the whole set of axioms, laws, or postulates for the measurement of length is partly constitutive of the idea of a system of macroscopic, rigid, physical objects."<sup>1</sup> The thought is that: "we cannot assign a length to any object unless there is a comprehensive theory holds of objects of that sort."<sup>2</sup> Thus the application of such physical concepts commits one to a certain conceptual framework. This notion of the constitutive concepts of a domain is then applied to the mental:

There is no assigning beliefs to a person one by one on the basis of his verbal behaviour, his choices, or other local signs no matter how plain and evident, for we make sense of particular beliefs only as they cohere with other beliefs, with preferences, with intentions, hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest. It is not merely, as with the measurement of length, that each case tests a theory and depends upon it, but that *the content of a propositional attitude derives from its place in the pattern.*<sup>3</sup>

Davidson could be interpreted from this passage just to be arguing for some form of holism: to have one propositional attitude one must have many. However, the claim seems to be stronger than this, because Davidson rules out global confusion and irrationality as a conceptual impossibility. The difference between holism and this position is made plain by the fact that a system could be holistic without being rational at all; after all conceptual role semantics is holistic, and one of the key objections to this position is that it does not respect the unique nature of the mental. So holism cannot be the ground for the *sui generis* nature of reason giving explanation. The further element in Davidson's argument is set out in the following passage:

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, D. (1980) p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 221.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 221, italics mine.

The heteronomic character of general statements linking the mental and the physical traces back to [the] central role of translation in the description of all propositional attitudes, and to the indeterminacy of translation . . . The nomological irreducibility of the mental does not derive merely from the seamless nature of the world of thought, preference, and intention, for such interdependence is common to physical theory, and is compatible with there being a single right way of interpreting a man's attitudes without relativisation to a scheme of translation. Nor is the irreducibility due simply to the possibility of many equally eligible schemes, for this is compatible with an arbitrary choice of one scheme relative to which assignments of mental traits are made. The point is rather that when we use the concepts of belief, desire, and the rest, we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in the light of considerations of overall cogency: the constitutive ideal of rationality partly controls each phase in the evolution of what must be an evolving theory.<sup>4</sup>

So the mental is anomalous because the ascription of mental states to an individual is an *essentially* interpretative enterprise. One of the virtues of this approach is that it makes clear why rationality is constitutive and exhaustive of the mental. For mental states just are ascribed as part of a complete mental set, a description that did not conform to the edicts of rationality just would not be a *mental* description. However, this interpretative approach is ultimately unsatisfactory, whichever way one construes it. Firstly, if we take Davidson's account literally it appears to deny the reality of the mental, taking instead an instrumental position reminiscent of Dennett's intentional stance. The interpretative approach is instrumentalist because "we must stand prepared, as the evidence accumulates, to adjust our theory in the light of overall cogency".<sup>5</sup> So at no point can we definitely say that an individual has a given belief, say the belief that  $p$  at time  $t$ , for we may at some future time,  $t_1$ , be forced by circumstances to alter our theory in such a way that the belief that  $p$  is no longer ascribed to them, at either  $t$  or  $t_1$ .

Such a position seems to be at odds with the rest of Davidson's philosophy, and so it would seem sensible to look for an alternative way to understand Davidson's argument for the anomalous nature of the mental. The most obvious move for a defender of Davidson to make is to argue that the account above misunderstands why the need for interpretation sanctions the anomalous nature of the mental. The argument would be that the individual really does have specific beliefs and desires, with all the causal properties that Davidson argues for elsewhere. The problem for the interpreter is just that the individual's belief system is so monumentally complex that their behaviour will always underdetermine whether a given theory is true of the individual. On this reading the alteration that is needed is due to our inadequate knowledge of the individual's belief system, rather than some radical form of instrumentalism. Support for this interpretation can be gleaned from Davidson:

An arbitrary choice of translation scheme would preclude such opportunistic tempering of theory; put differently, a right arbitrary choice of a translation manual would be a manual acceptable in the light of all possible evidence, and this is a choice we cannot make.<sup>6</sup>

The crucial question here is *why* we cannot make this choice, is it for the radical instrumental reason set out above, or is it merely due to empirical limitations, because we could never gather all of the possible evidence? Whilst the latter option avoids instrumentalism it degrades the argument for the sui generis nature of the mental because it makes the mental no different in status than some of the phenomena dealt with by the special sciences.

This point can be made clear by using an analogy with meteorology, although nothing hangs on this particular discipline if it was objected that it is not a special science, an analogy using biology would be equally effective. The earth's atmosphere is an immensely complex system, which can be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 223.

described at several different levels. Typically the meteorologist will use the vocabulary of fronts, atmospheric pressure, types of cloud formations etc. in attempting to describe and predict the weather. The meteorologist will also no doubt utilise a body of generalisations to help in this predictive task, which will be couched in this vocabulary. However, due to the tremendous complexity of the atmosphere, and the limits on our information gathering technology, the meteorologist will never be able to produce a totally accurate characterisation of the weather at any one time, let alone produce an accurate short term forecast. The generalisations with which he has to work cannot be made accurate enough if they are restricted to meteorological vocabulary, to get more accurate generalisations one would have to move down to the vocabulary of physics. It is conceivable that a sufficiently large group of physicists could produce such generalisations if they were given all the possible evidence there is, down to the last molecule, about the atmosphere. It is also conceivable that with these resources they could produce an accurate weather forecast, given that they had a total specification of the atmosphere's current state. In order to do this the physicists would have to abandon the vocabulary of meteorology, but this does not mean that the style of explanation employed by ordinary meteorologists is *sui generis*, and that clouds and cold fronts are anomalous. The alteration would merely involve a change of perspective, rather than a change in the *kind* of explanation deployed. If the meteorological is irreducible because it cannot produce homonomic generalisations, this does not lead us to conclude that meteorology is incompatible with science, or that it is illegitimate to try and explain the weather using meteorological generalisations. It is important to note that it may well be the case that the terms deployed in meteorological vocabulary will not be meaningfully reducible to any physically specified correlate, at least not in a way that would be of any use to the meteorologist in normal practice. Nevertheless it seems perfectly sensible to say that the meteorological level supervenes on the physical. The lack of any useful links between levels is the result of the extreme complexity of the system involved rather than any divergence in constitutive principles.

If Davidson's argument for the anomalous nature of the mental is based on the complexity of the subject of interpretation, then it appears exactly analogous to the case of meteorology. Thus it could be granted that we will never be able to produce a perfect "translation manual" without this proving that rationality is constitutive of the mental, so that there cannot be any psychophysical laws. All that his argument can establish, understood in this form, is that any such extensionally adequate generalisations would be so complex and disjunctive as to be of no practical utility whatsoever, but this is far short of his desired conclusion. A defender of Davidson's anomalous monism might object that even if the mental is analogous to meteorology this is all that is needed to establish the anomalism of the mental. For the vocabulary of meteorology is not reducible by strict bridge laws, at least not in a systematic way, to the vocabulary of physics. As Davidson writes:

. . . since the number of events that falls under each mental predicate may, for all we know, be finite, there may well exist a physical open sentence coextensive with each mental predicate, though to construct it might involve the tedium of a lengthy and uninformative alternation. Indeed, even if finitude is not assumed, there seems no compelling reason to deny that there could be coextensive predicates, one mental and one physical.

The thesis is rather that the mental is nomologically irreducible: there may be *true* general statements relating the mental and the physical, statements that have the logical form of a law; but they are not lawlike . . . If by absurdly remote chance we were to stumble on a nonstochastic true psychophysical generalisation, we would have no reason to believe it more than roughly true.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 215-6.

However, the meteorology analogy shows that we could even grant Davidson all of this, that any generalisations which we could produce would not be genuinely lawlike, without this demonstrating that the mental is unique. For Davidson has an overly demanding criteria for scientific reduction. The meteorology analogy is enough to argue against radical incompatibility of constitutive principles. We do not in fact require strict, lawlike, bridge laws between domains for reduction, it is enough to show that the two vocabularies are dealing with the very same stuff, but from different perspectives, and there seems to be no distinction here between the weather and the mental. Thus Davidson's argument is either based on an unattractive instrumentalism about the mental, or it fails to establish the strong conclusion that the mental is anomalous in an interesting way, which differs from anything found in the special sciences.

## McDowell's Argument

As noted above, McDowell's approach is different from Davidson's, and so there is a possibility that his argument does not fall foul of the meteorology counterexample. McDowell's argument for the sui generis character of mental explanation is not based on the notion of interpretation, rather it centres on the role of normativity in reason giving explanation:

. . . if someone offered to reflect the patterns required by rationality in a structure described in non-intentional terms, then, in view of the fact that the constitutive concept functions as an ideal or norm, he would be committing a kind of "naturalistic fallacy". . . The prejudice I have in mind would preclude giving this thought its proper significance, by inducing a refusal to recognise that it is something with the status of an ideal which is being credited with a constitutive role in governing our thinking about propositional attitudes. To recognise the ideal status of the constitutive concept is to appreciate that the concepts of the propositional attitudes have their proper home in explanations of a special sort: explanations in which things are made intelligible by being revealed to be, or to approximate to being, as they rationally ought to be. This is to be contrasted with a style of explanation in which one makes things intelligible by representing their coming into being as a particular instance of how things generally tend to happen. In the usual way of formulating the philosophical issue we are concerned with, "the physical" need do no more than point to the subject matter of those sciences which aim at explanation of the second sort<sup>8</sup>

It is not totally clear how much this position does differ from that of Davidson himself, the extra element concerns the idea that rationality has a normative force, which is expressed in a particular style of explanation. So it is not so much that the mental and physical have different constitutive concepts, but rather that as a consequence of this they require totally different styles of explanation, and it is in the characterisation of this difference that the divergence between Davidson and McDowell occurs. Thus the shared element between the two is the idea that the mental and the physical have incompatible constitutive principles. McDowell expresses this using the vocabulary of the space of reasons and the space of laws, which he takes over from Sellars. It is the stress on the consequences of recognising the normative force of the ideal of rationality that makes McDowell's account distinct, and forceful.

One way to bring out the difference between McDowell and Davidson is that the former could admit as a conceptual possibility that a functionalist might be able to give a description of a belief system that *in fact* mapped all the interrelations among propositional attitudes, whilst still maintaining that the mental was anomalous. The reason for this would be that the functional description would merely state causal relations between states and thus would not be able to capture the fact that a particular belief, say the belief that  $p \& q$ , constitutes a good *reason* for the belief that

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<sup>8</sup> McDowell, J. (1985) p.389.

*p*. The causal description cannot account for the force of the normative “ought”, it deals with law-like explanation rather than rational explanation. Another way to express this point is that there is a difference between a cause being internal or external to an explanation of why *c* caused *e*. For an explanation which deploys generalisations *c* is the reason why *e* occurred, but it is only an external reason, its being a reason had no part to play in the causal event itself. By contrast with rational explanation *c*'s being a reason for the occurrence of *e* was directly involved with the causal event, the reason was internal. There are at least four claims that can be drawn out of McDowell's argument:

1. Rational explanations are set apart from explanations involving generalisations; the mental is *sui generis*.
2. Reason giving explanation is normative, and is governed by the ideal of rationality.
3. The norms of rationality are uncodifiable.
4. Reason giving explanation requires sensitivity to the subject's viewpoint, it does not admit of an objective characterisation.

This line of argument has considerable force, because it really does look as though however detailed a causal story we tell we will never be able to explain the “ought” involved in rational explanation. However, this intuition could have its source in the fact that we do not have, at present, an accurate philosophical characterisation of exactly what rationality is. This allows it to take on the mantle of a Platonic form in the imaginations of philosophers, as an abstract ideal that nevertheless makes itself felt in the workings of our cognitive economies. Thus there are at least two moves that can be made against McDowell's argument. One might attempt to give a deflationary account of rationality which would maintain the rational status of the mental whilst abandoning the claim of anomalism, by showing that rationality does not entail anomalism. Alternatively one might look for a naturalistic style of explanation that is not simply causal which could account for normativity, perhaps in the teleological approach of biosemantics, for example. This is a line which I shall not follow for the present, but which could nevertheless lead to some promising results.

One approach of the first kind would be to argue that rationality is essentially a linguistic phenomenon, and so could be codified purely in syntactic terms. Motivation for this might be found in Wittgenstein's views on the grammatical nature of intentionality, which are exemplified by remarks such as this: “It is in language that an expectation and its fulfilment make contact”.<sup>9</sup> So our deductive abilities have their source in our grasp of the grammar of language, not in the essentially rational nature of mental states. The idea would be that reasoning and inference depend upon our abilities to recognise and manipulate linguistic symbols. This would mean that the norms of rationality would be based upon the norms of language, and in this way sense could be made of ceding authority to a set of norms in our inferential practice in such a way that would not entail the anomalism of the mental. Yet there does seem to be something more involved in reasoning, in that propositional attitudes attempt to fit the way the world is. This representational capacity cannot be purely linguistic, and so it might be argued that this extra element is essential but uncodifiable. The appearance of uncodifiability might arise because of a confusion between the deductive consistency of a belief system at a given time and the characterisation of the process of practical reasoning whereby an agent decides upon a course of action. It could be argued that the former can be codified by a syntactic, linguistic, system, whilst it is the latter which would not be codifiable in the same way. However, this might not create so much of a problem for the deflationary approach, because the

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<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1953) § 445.

analogy with meteorology could be used here to show that the uncodifiability of practical reasoning is due to empirical limitations rather than any more radical anomalism.

Something like the strategy deployed above has been used by Johnston to argue against a view of the mental in which it is seen as essentially rational.<sup>10</sup> He uses the notion of a mental tropism: a non-rational, non-accidental, but purpose-serving, connection between mental states. Such mental tropisms persist because they are advantageous for the individual, in exactly the same way that a plants turning towards the sun is advantageous for its survival (this analogy is suggestive of an evolutionary explanation for mental states). Johnston uses the idea of mental tropisms to dispel the paradox of irrationality, but moves beyond this limited aim, accounting for abnormal mental processes, to argue for the ubiquitous role of tropisms in normal cognition:

What is it for normal operations of the mind to be mediated by reason? I suggest that it is just for causal relations to hold between mental states one of which in fact is a reason for another. What is it for mental operations to be *guided* by reason? Just for the reasoner to employ a certain inhibitory capacity - the capacity to inhibit conscious changes in attitude when he recognises that those changes are not well grounded in reason. Here too we have mental tropisms, characteristic causal processes leading from one kind of attitude to another, tropisms that qualify as rational processes not because of some *sui generis* manner - rational causation - in which the one attitude causes another but because the one attitude is in fact a reason for the other. . . . the case of intentionally drawing a logical conclusion from one's beliefs must ultimately turn on the operation of tropisms connecting the attitudes in question. Thanks to innate dispositions, training, and employment of the capacity to inhibit competing irrational operations, certain mental operations conform to good inferential rules but are as blind as the operations of the tropisms that do not conform.<sup>11</sup>

This approach accommodates some of the elements in McDowell's scheme. Most importantly it has a story to tell about what makes mental processes rational, and explains how they can appear responsive to the norms of rationality, or as we should more carefully say, the norms of deductive logic and linguistic syntax. For if we take the source of such inferential practice to be linguistic then it is possible to account for "good inferential rules", so the problem of uncodifiability has been dealt with. The crucial factor in Johnston's account is that it allows for mental processes that are irrational, which opens the way for a denial of the anomalism of the mental. For if mental states need not be essentially rational this allows for an explanation of them in terms of generalisations, whether these are useful, or so complex as to be only of philosophical, rather than practical, interest. This alternative conception of the mental need not be the correct one, it is more important in dealing with McDowell's argument that it merely presents a coherent possibility which accounts for the facts of the matter. No doubt McDowell would deny that this approach captures the *sui generis* nature of rational explanation, and his key point of leverage in this would be on the nature of rationality itself, for he would not see its source as linguistic. Yet he needs some further argumentation to show why this alternative model could not possibly be the case. Further, it has been suggested that at least part of the appearance of uncodifiability is due to a failure to distinguish between deductive rationality and practical rationality. The latter may well be uncodifiable, but this could be due to immense complexity, as in the case of meteorology, and so would provide no succour to an argument for anomalism.

The two strands of argument for the anomalism of the mental discussed above may not be the only ones available, but they are the two most popular. Both have problems, and so the *sui generis* nature of the mental cannot be accepted as a given in the philosophy of mind, appearances

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<sup>10</sup> Johnston, M. (1988).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87-8.

to the contrary. The intuition that the mental simply must be *sui generis* comes from a false view of the alternatives. It is often thought that either the mental is anomalous or there must be psychophysical laws which would be of use to a cognitive psychologist. There is a third option, namely that such psychophysical generalisations are possible, but so complex as to be absolutely no practical use, just as in the case of meteorology. As in that case, for practical purposes we must be content to utilise a vocabulary which is only roughly empirically adequate; as in all sciences there is a payoff between specificity and utility. Neither of the arguments discussed shows that the mental is different from the subject matter of any of the special sciences in any nomologically interesting way. The result of this line of argument might be anomalism for all practical purposes, but it is enough to defeat the philosopher's purpose, which is far from being a practical one.

## References

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