Mechanisms of mental causation: 
An examination of the theories of Anomalous Monism and Direct Realism with regard to their proposals concerning the causal role of human mentality in the natural world.

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Abstract

One of the most interesting developments in recent psychological theorising has been a growing appreciation of the need for a viable theory of mental causation. Hitherto, the prospects for reconciling what seems to be the uniquely rational character of human thought and action with the non-rational mechanistic workings of the natural world have appeared to be limited or even illusory, and the pursuit of reconciliation of this sort has therefore formerly been dismissed as being either impossible of completion or inappropriate for contemplation. Much of the scepticism concerning the role of causal processes in human thought and action was dispelled, however, by the philosopher Donald Davidson, who argues that not only is human action capable of being caused by the actor’s thoughts and desires, but that only when such action is so caused, can it be rational.

Davidson’s proposal for the reconciliation of human rationality with causal necessitation is articulated in his theory of Anomalous Monism. According to this theory, there exists what may be termed an ontological-conceptual distinction between events themselves and the characters or properties that are attributed to events by human observers, and it is through recognition of this distinction that one discovers how mental events, that is, events that are amenable to description in the psychological vocabulary, are causally efficacious yet free from the constraints typically associated with the necessity and sufficiency of causal laws. Anomalous Monism, if it were workable, would therefore resolve the paradox according to which human mentality is at once integrated in, and yet unconstrained by, the mechanistic natural world, by demonstrating the compatibility of the facts of causation with the intuitions of folk psychology.

However, close examination of Anomalous Monism reveals it to rely on logically flawed anti-realist principles concerning the characters of events, properties and causation. It follows from this that the theory itself must be rejected, but the task that it was devised to undertake, the formulation of a viable theory of mental causation, need not be similarly discarded. Rather, what remains is the challenge of delineating an alternative theory, one that withstands logical scrutiny whilst addressing what is characteristic of human mental processes, and thereby what is characteristic of mental causation.
The theory of Direct Realism that is derived from the broader philosophical realism of John Anderson provides the materials for meeting this challenge. According to Direct Realism, mental phenomena are relational situations obtaining between certain organisms (including humans) and their environments. As such, mental phenomena are included in the range of phenomena occurring in the natural world and they are therefore subject to all of its ways of working, including its deterministic mechanisms.

The particular challenge that a Direct Realist theory of mental causation faces, that of demonstrating that relational situations can be causal, is revealed upon examination of the character of causation to be unproblematic. Furthermore, the seeming incompatibility between human rationality and natural necessitation is resolved when it is acknowledged that, rather than be an inherent feature of thought and action, logical structure is a characteristic of the natural environment that organisms are at times sensitive to, as revealed by its effects on the characters of their thoughts and actions.

Far from being remote or illusory, the prospects for reconciling human mentality with the causal mechanisms of the natural world are discovered in the present thesis to be favourable when a realist approach to the characters of both mental events and causation is adopted.
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References
I: Introduction

I.i Human freedom in a determined world

The suggestion that thought and action can be entirely accounted for in terms of the causal mechanisms that operate in the natural world is incompatible with traditional understandings of what it is to think and behave.

The widely held conviction that while, as a matter of fact, one’s past courses of action did unravel in certain ways, they could just as well, with the exertion of one’s will, have turned out differently, was famously illustrated in a lecture delivered by William James in 1884. James asked his audience to imagine that at the close of the meeting he, having the option of walking home via either Divinity Avenue or Oxford Street, proceeded through Divinity Avenue only to have the powers of the universe annihilate ten minutes of time and thereby return him to his starting position, ready to begin his journey home. At this point, he argued, although all circumstances were now as they were ten minutes before, he would be free to vary his past course of action by ignoring Divinity Avenue and walking home via Oxford Street instead.

The appeal of James’ (1884) argument is partly accounted for by the fact that it accords with what, for many of us, goes without question; the view that we are free to think as we please and act in accordance with our whims and fancies. Despite this, there exists good reason to suppose that thought and behaviour are caused, and it is only if this supposition is correct that the practice of psychological experimentation and therapy can be justified.

It is the lot of the psychologist, therefore, to question the freedom of the mind and to either discover a compromise, if such exists, between the liberty of free will and the necessitations of the natural world, or to reject one or the other of these. The past century has witnessed variations on each of these alternatives. Championing a deterministic view have been the behaviourists, with their focus upon the mechanisms by which all natural events, including behaviour, proceed. In contrast of focus to the behaviourists have been the hermeneuticists, who centre their attention upon the rationality of human mental processes as a distinctly human characteristic. What is curious about the hermeneutic and behaviouristic schools is that neither has attempted
to discover a mechanism in which mental events play a causal role. Causation and mental processes, it has been outrightly assumed by both, are mutually exclusive. Accordingly, in order to provide a deterministic account of behaviour, the behaviourists have eschewed investigation of all possible mental causes of behaviour, while the hermeneuticists, in their efforts to understand mental processes, have neglected causal inquiry.

Important attempts to remedy the exclusion of mental phenomena from causal processes, that is, attempts to found a workable theory of mental causation, can be found in the writings of Donald Davidson, who advocates a reconciliation between human agency and causation, and of the Direct Realists, who argue that there is no opposition between mentality and causal necessitation, that is, that mental events are themselves caused and causally efficacious. It is with these latter two positions that the current thesis is directly concerned, but before turning my attention to them, I shall briefly review the behaviouristic and hermeneutic movements with a view to demonstrating why mental events and causal relations have previously been deemed incompatible.

I.ii The purpose of psychology: prediction and control or understanding of meaning?

The behaviourist movement was characterised by its commitment to demonstrating that, just as human beings are part of the natural world, so too psychology is, or can be, an objective branch of natural science. In 1913, John Watson published a paper entitled ‘Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It’ in which he urged the replacement of mental states with behavioural contingencies as the proper objects of psychological study. He envisaged that the observation of animals, including humans, when placed in appropriately controlled experimental settings, would lead to the discovery of behavioural generalisations that would ultimately give way to explanations in terms of the physical and chemical processes involved in the functioning of muscles and nerves. By changing the focus of psychology from mental states that were observed by introspection to behavioural acts that were subject to supposedly more direct and objective observations, behaviourism sought to rid psychology of its unscientific and somewhat mysterious status. Of course, underlying the experimental emphasis within behaviourism’s methodology was the assumption that behaviour is fully determined and
that it is in principle possible, although in practice difficult, to discover regular causal associations between environmental conditions and behavioural acts. Further, the discovery of these regularities was foreseen as preliminary to both the prediction of behaviour in the presence of certain stimuli, and the control of behaviour through the manipulation of these stimuli.

In declared opposition to the behaviourist movement is the philosophy and practice of psychological hermeneutics. In its original context, hermeneutics studied the principles and methods that guide the interpretation of written texts that for various reasons were not open to an unambiguous first reading (Føllesdal, 2001). The purpose of interpreting these texts was to bring to light their meaning; to explicate what was unclear within them so that they could be understood. Interpretative practices have long since been seen to have application outside the area of written text, including the understanding of meaningful human actions (Gauld & Shotter, 1977).

While the behaviourists rejected psychological processes as objects of study because of their assumed irrelevance to causal analyses of behaviour, psychological hermeneuticists reject causal analyses because of their assumed irrelevance to understanding psychological processes, including meaningful action. Martin Packer (1985), for example, claims that human action has a semantic rather than a causal or logical structure, and that explanation of such action requires interpretation that takes into account the social and historical background in which it occurs in order for its meaning to be revealed.

Meaning, it seems, is the feature that most clearly distinguishes between the physical and the psychological characteristics of a given action. The bringing down of an auctioneer’s hammer, for example, is both a physical descent of a wooden object, and an indication that the item at hand has been sold. In studying human behaviour, one is typically interested in the meaning of actions rather than their physical specifications. Whether the auctioneer used a heavy or a light hammer is most probably of little concern to both the buyer and the seller. For them, what is important is that the price of the item has been fixed and that an agreement has been made. This is what the hammering means.
When an action is deemed to be meaningful in the way that it is claimed the auctioneer’s hammering is meaningful, it becomes open to a variety of interpretations. We may ask in what ways, and for whom, the action holds meaning. This is where the process of interpretation becomes important in psychology. The conventional meaning of the hammering, it may be agreed, is that the item has been sold. Nevertheless, there may be many additional meanings, perhaps personal ones, attached to that same action. For the seller of the item, the hammering that signifies its sale might mean a release from debt, but also the loss of a treasured heirloom. The buyer, on the other hand, might understand the hammering to mean an increase in his or her social status, and an associated increase in hours that must be spent at work. The explication of meaning, whether conventional or personal, requires an acquaintance with social customs and also personal beliefs, feelings and endeavours. This explication, hermeneuticists maintain, is the primary goal of psychology.

The emphases of the behaviouristic and hermeneutic approaches to the study of action, it follows, differ vastly. Behaviourists have as their primary aim a functional or causal analysis of behaviour in terms of environmental contingencies, that is, factors residing outside of the organism. The aim of a hermeneutic interpretation of action, on the other hand, is “… first and foremost the giving of an account that is sensible in the way it addresses current interests and concerns, not a search for timeless and ahistorical laws and formal structures” (Packer, 1985, p.1088). The hermeneutic approach to psychology assumes that it is only through identifying a person’s cultural setting and individual history that one can attempt to elucidate the meaning of his or her behaviour. This contrasts sharply with the timeless laws that apply to the interactions of physical objects; the cause and effect relations that persist regardless of cultural epoch and past experiences. Consequently, the methods employed by psychologists from the behaviouristic and hermeneutic schools are quite different. While both are concerned with behaviour, the behaviourist tries to explain it through the methods of the natural sciences, with particular emphasis on causal analyses, whilst the hermeneuticist tries to understand it via interpretation according to principles that have been developed independently of the tools with which non-meaningful phenomena are examined.

The hermeneuticists’ justification for espousing a unique methodology for the study of human thought and action centres on the view that to use the methods of the natural
sciences within psychology, as does behaviourism, would be scientistic, that is, would be a kind of play-acting at science when in fact scientific methods are inappropriate (Martin & Thompson, 1997). Behind the hermeneuticist’s claim that the methods of the natural sciences are inappropriate for psychology are two driving forces: firstly, there are methodological concerns that both the discovery and manipulation of psychological causal regularities are beyond human capabilities (Martin, 1993); and, secondly, there is the more pressing concern that natural science methods are inappropriate in psychology because, “What is meaningful has quite different modes of Being from the objects of those sciences” (Jaspers, 1963, p.355). As might be expected, behaviourists, like hermeneuticists, are guided, albeit to contrary conclusions, by methodological and ontological theses. To these I now turn.

**I.iii Methodological issues**

Initially, methodological concerns appear to have supplied the primary motivation for behaviourists to ignore psychological phenomena in causal analyses. Watson (1913) wrote that, “One can assume either the presence or the absence of consciousness anywhere in the phylogenetic scale without affecting the problems of behavior by one jot or one tittle; and without influencing in any way the mode of experimental attack upon them” (p.161). Watson’s approach does not deny the existence of consciousness, it simply ignores it as irrelevant to experimental methods.

B.F. Skinner (1953), too, makes claims that appear to serve similar practical interests, such as, “The practice of looking inside the organism for an explanation of behavior has tended to obscure the variables which are immediately available for a scientific analysis” (p.31). The accessibility of external events for functional analyses seems to suggest to Skinner that these are the events most appropriately focused upon in behavioural studies. Even if there does exist a causal chain from an environmental stimulus (the first link) to an inner state of the organism (the second link) to organismic behaviour (the third link), Skinner advises that “… we may avoid many tiresome and exhausting digressions by examining the third link as a function of the first. Valid information about the second link may throw light upon this relationship but can in no way alter it” (p.35). Once more, it is methodological ease that appears to be directing the behaviourist to ignore the causal relevance of psychological processes rather than uncertainty that such processes exist or are causally efficacious.
The behaviourists are not without company in employing methodological issues to promote their mode of investigation. One proponent of hermeneutic methods, Jack Martin (1993), makes a strong case concerning the doubtful prospects of ever discovering causal mechanisms with which therapists could potentially help their patients. He does not deny that such mechanisms might be at work, but argues that it is only in artificial contexts such as laboratories that causal regularities can be discovered, and, further, that the displacement of persons from their social, linguistic, cultural and historical contexts ultimately alters the psychological phenomena that the therapist wishes to explain. The conundrum is thus that it is only in real-world contexts that psychological phenomena can be observed whilst it is only in controlled artificial situations that causal regularities can be observed. Consequently, practical barriers appear to necessitate abandoning the search for psychological causal mechanisms, and likewise the goals of prediction and control which are so often paired with the quest to discover these mechanisms.

Methodological and epistemological difficulties in discovering and utilising psychological causal regularities will of course be of great importance to the practice of psychology insofar as it aims to alter what are considered to be negative thoughts, feeling and behaviours in persons seeking psychological counselling. However, the ease or difficulty with which one is able to apply the methods of psychology has no bearing on what is a vastly more important question, whether indeed psychological phenomena are caused and in their turn causally efficacious. As both Skinner (1953) and Martin (1993) agree, one’s inability to detect causal mechanisms is no guarantee that none are there to be found. If the hermeneuticist’s suspicion that causal mechanisms are absent from psychological processes were based wholly upon methodological considerations such as these, then it would be resting upon very unsure soil. Similarly, the fact of ‘ease of experimental methods’ would be a highly unsatisfactory reason for ignoring psychological processes in behavioural analyses, and, indeed, Skinner (1963) is critical of those who, for purely methodological reasons, ignore the role of thought processes in producing behaviour whilst assuming them to exist. In addition to their respective methodological concerns are the discrepant ontological assumptions that behaviourists and hermeneuticists have concerning the characteristics of mental phenomena, and it is these that are primarily responsible for directing the behaviourist towards, and the hermeneuticist away from, seeking causal regularities in human behaviour.
I.iv Ontological issues

The methodological discrepancy between the behaviourist and the hermeneuticist reflects the opinion of the former, that human action is a species of physical event for which one need develop no methods in addition to those of the natural sciences because humans form part of the system with which natural science is concerned, and of the latter, who maintains a physical-psychological dualism.

Skinner (1974) rejects the notion that one can maintain a dualism between psychological and physical events, whilst supposing that these interact causally, in the following way, “The puzzling question of how a physical event causes a mental event, which in turn causes a physical event, remains to be answered or dismissed as unanswerable…” (p.211). The assumed absence of physical dimensions in mental events is, he argues, a reason for rejecting them. A science of behaviour, as Skinner envisages it, “… must consider the place of private stimuli as physical things, and in doing so it provides an alternative account of mental life” (p.211). The alternative account mentioned here incorporates the facts of physiology with the environmental contingencies to which an organism is exposed, and provides a more complete account of behaviour than can knowledge of those contingencies alone. What appears is an explanation of behaviour in purely physical terms with mentalistic descriptions being disregarded as pre-scientific superstitions.

One immediate advantage of rejecting mentalistic accounts of behaviour in favour of purely physical accounts is that the latter are clearly amenable to causal analyses in a way that the former have not been. As Skinner (1953) suggests, “Prevailing philosophies of human nature recognize an internal “will” which has the power of interfering with causal relationships and which makes the prediction and control of behavior impossible” (p.7). No such interference occurs in a purely physical account of behaviour from which mentalistic states and events have been discarded as mere fancy.

The claims of dualism and self-determination that are inherent in traditional mentalistic accounts of behaviour therefore brought Skinner to the conclusion that the explanation of human behaviour requires knowledge only of environmental contingencies and, where possible, physiological facts. Consequently, mentalistic explanations of
behaviour were viewed as antithetical to causal explanations, and mental entities and events were deemed to be mere inventions, absent from the natural world.

Hermeneuticists also recognise the traditional dualism between physical and psychological events and the consequent impossibility of causal interaction between the two, however, rather than attempt to do away with the ‘mental realm’, they embrace the dualism and forsake the goal of psychological causal analysis in favour of understanding meaningful, rational, human action.

In their attempts to elucidate the meaning inherent in intentional actions, hermeneuticists aim to discover a rational configuration of beliefs and desires that renders the action intelligible. The process involves consideration of many types of influence external to the actor, such as cultural practices, social settings, the expectations of others and any other factor that could be useful in revealing how the particular action fits into a larger psychosocial context. It is in response to the demands of developing a rationally coherent picture of meaningful action that Karl Jaspers (1963) concludes that “… the understanding of meaning demands other methods than those of the natural sciences” (p.355). His argument proceeds from stating that natural science methods are inhibitory to the understanding of meaning to the suggestion of several principles by which meaning can be investigated. These principles are a mixture of ontological claims concerning the characters of meaningful phenomena, and suggested methods that are tailored to best interpreting them. Four of the six principles are included and elaborated on in what follows in order to demonstrate that psychological hermeneuticists view psychological phenomena as having differing modes of existence from physical phenomena.

A. Empirical understanding is an interpretation

“What is meaningful only has empirical reality in so far as it appears in perceivable facts. It is related to this that all empirical understanding is an interpretation” (p.355). Jaspers’ first principle for the elucidation of meaning indicates that meaning is manifested in the expressions, actions and creations of individuals, and that it is only through coming into contact with these manifestations that an observer can begin to understand the meaning of another. It follows that all understanding of another’s meaning is an interpretation of that meaning’s physical manifestations, and,
furthermore, that regardless of the degree of certainty one comes to feel when his or her interpretation appears to concur with all of the perceived facts, an alternative interpretation is always possible.

B. Understanding follows ‘the hermeneutic round’

“… we may only understand the particular from the whole but the whole may only be understood via the particular” (p.355). Following the ‘hermeneutic round’ or ‘hermeneutic circle’ refers to the to-and-fro process involved in interpreting a person’s actions. It is only in the context of the entire psychological make-up of a person that a component part, such as an individual action, can be understood. However, holistic understanding, too, is reliant upon interpretation of the psychological component parts, such as individual actions. Consequently, there is no optimal starting point for the interpretation of the meaning of a person’s actions, rather it is necessary to proceed to-and-fro between the individual components and the larger picture, each influencing how the other is to be understood. Furthermore, there is no objective endpoint at which the movement from part to whole and back again is no longer necessary. Interpretation is an ongoing process.

C. Opposites are equally meaningful

“Everything that is meaningful moves in opposites, and it is related to this that, methodologically, opposites are equally meaningful” (p.355). Jaspers relates that just as it is understandable that someone feeling weak and wretched may also feel spiteful and hateful towards better off others, it is equally understandable that the wretched person may feel lovingly towards others; opposite understandings are equally plausible. The lesson here is a methodological one which warns against assuming, a priori, one interpretation over its opposite without due consideration of all of the facts. From this principle one discerns the futility of attempting to predict future behaviour, and subsequently the implied rejection of a key behaviourist goal.

D. Unlimited interpretation

“The particular, whether an objective fact, an expression, intended content or act or indeed any single psychic phenomenon, loses meaning when isolated but gains meaning in context. It is related to this that all phenomena are open to unlimited interpretation and reinterpretation, just at the point where understanding stops” (p.356). This
principle asserts that the apparent establishment of a definite interpretation of meaningful phenomena is quickly overturned as an alternative interpretation presents itself. This suggests a fluid interchange between the process of understanding and the objects of understanding. Even when the objects of understanding remain unaltered, the understanding itself progresses and becomes refined, finding new meaning in what has previously been only partially understood. The infinite process of reinterpretation, Jaspers argues, precludes the use of the methods of the natural sciences, their criteria being inadequate for the revealing, or construing, of meaning. Instead, what is required in interpretation is the development of a coherent and complex although tentative account of what is observed. With the accretion of facts comes greater certainty of understanding, but this process does not lead to the elimination of alternative interpretations.

The principles outlined here for the guidance of the hermeneuticist are clear in suggesting that the objects with which psychology is concerned, human beings, are not to be adequately understood through the employment of traditional scientific approaches. While the hypotheses of the latter admit of falsification and subsequent rejection, incompatible interpretations concerning human actions need not suggest that one or the other must be discarded, so long as each is consistent with empirical observations. Consequently, multiple interpretations concerning any one action may coexist peacefully without fear of displacement. This situation is understood to be a product not of the complacency of those espousing rival interpretations, each content to uphold his or her own version, but rather of the inconclusive or indeterminate character of the objects of interpretation themselves. Underlying the hermeneutic method is the assumption that interpretation is not simply a passive means of understanding what exists independently of being studied, rather, that in the absence of interpretation all meaning ceases to be. This is to say that meaningful thought and action have no existence independently of interpretation, or that it is only through their being interpreted that thought and action become meaningful. Rather, then, than have an objective independent existence, psychological phenomena are presumed to have a subjective existence, one that is dependent upon third person interpretation.

The constitutive element of psychological theories, whereby what is studied exists because it is studied, is a feature that is wholly absent from the natural sciences. We do
not, for example, believe that our circulatory systems came into being only with their discovery, rather, that they could be discovered precisely because they existed already. Likewise, the movements of the planets proceed indifferently to the opinions, wishes and assumptions of human observers. The existence of natural phenomena such as circulatory and solar systems is well understood to be prior to, and independent of, any investigations concerning them. It is only when we come to the human sciences, such as aesthetics, ethics, and psychology, that the independent existence of what is studied is either questioned or outrightly denied. Is a painting beautiful if there is no-one who judges it to be so? Is an action wrong if there is no-one who condemns it? These questions concern the conditions of existence of aesthetic and moral properties. The interpretative approach taken in psychology raises like questions: Do individuals think thoughts and perform actions independently of, and prior to, being interpreted as thinking thoughts and performing actions? Do psychologists discover rational patterns in human thinking and behaviour that need not have been discovered in order to have existed?

As has been suggested, psychological hermeneuticists are implicitly committed to the denial of the independence of rational behaviour from interpretative processes. According to them, psychological investigation does not simply expose its subject matter, it simultaneously creates it. It is this that primarily sets apart the rational mental phenomena of psychology from the non-rational phenomena of the natural sciences, and in this we see why both behaviourists and hermeneuticists have concluded that mental and causal processes are incompatible.

Nevertheless, there remains the possibility that the behaviourists and the hermeneuticists have been mistaken in their conclusions, and that mental causation is indeed possible. Two theories of mental causation are to be examined in the present thesis. The first of these is the well known account of mental causation championed by Donald Davidson (1917-2003), that of ‘Anomalous Monism’. Davidson adopts the interpretative approach to psychology. He accepts that human beings are rational and that as rational beings their psychological processes are exempt from the causal

1 As Maze (1983) notes, hermeneutics need not take this approach because the meanings of social customs and rituals are objective, and are therefore discoverable facts concerning the societies within which they are practiced. Nevertheless, as demonstrated, the dependence of rationality upon interpretive processes is assumed by at least some hermeneuticists, and among their numbers is Donald Davidson, with whom I am primarily concerned.
regularities governing the physical world. Nevertheless, he recognises that thought is causally related to the physical world, that perception, for example, is an effect of external stimuli impinging on the sense organs, and that human behaviour impacts on the physical environment. Further, far from adopting the sort of mental-physical dualism that might be supposed of one who argues for the exclusion of mental events from physical causal laws, Davidson’s theory is monistic – he believes in the identity of mental and physical events. The paradox of human rationality in a non-rational deterministic world is, according to Davidson, resolvable. Part I of this thesis examines the account of mental causation offered by Anomalous Monism.

The second theory of mental causation to be considered derives from the work of a lesser known philosopher, John Anderson (1893-1962), and is known as ‘Direct Realism’. Direct Realism differs from Anomalous Monism in a variety of ways. It rejects the interpretative approach to studying psychological processes, arguing that they, like all natural phenomena, exist independently of being contemplated and thus do not require interpretation in order to exist. Further, it rejects the notion of free choice whereby thought and behaviour occur independently of causal conditions. Direct Realism asserts that the rationality of human thought, where it obtains, reflects the logical structure of the world rather than being an inherent characteristic of thought itself. The paradox that results from viewing humans as set aside from the rest of the world by virtue of their rationality does not arise for the Direct Realist, who considers mental phenomena to exist in space and time, that is, to be fully incorporated parts of the natural world. Acceptance of the Direct Realist account of mental causation does, however, require that one relinquish the oft-cherished conviction that human behaviour is inherently rational and purposeful. The account of mental causation put forward by Direct Realism is examined and developed in Part II of this thesis.