
Preface

THAT THINKING should make things happen—cause things—seems both necessary and impossible.

If thinking didn't make things happen, the foundations of how we think about ourselves would collapse.

Here are some of the things I make happen. I choose cereal rather than eggs for breakfast. I walk to the train rather than take the bus. I stand up to let someone sit on the train. I make certain to schedule my evening around my wife's plans, around my son's plans. I conveniently forget to wash the dishes.

My actions come from my self, my consciousness, my feelings, my experience, my choices, and, most important, my values. I make things happen by thinking about and feeling for the best way to live. If I act for the good, then I have done well, and I am proud of my actions. If I act unkindly or selfishly or thoughtlessly, then I have done badly, and I regret or feel anguish over my actions. But if *I* didn't make them happen, then I shouldn't feel these things. If these good and bad things flow from something other than my thinking, then what's the point of saying that I am good or bad? Putting value to one side, it is nearly impossible for me to so much as imagine that I am not making these things happen. *I* reach for the cereal; *I* make the box move.

But, on the other hand, it seems impossible for me—my consciousness, my feelings, my experience—to make anything happen. We are physical beings with physical bodies and physical brains. Our minds, our consciousness, our experience, our sense of values, all these things are completely physical. The physical world operates according to the laws of nature. The laws of nature govern each change in us, as they govern each change at every point in space and time. The physical properties of things are what matter. The mental properties don't: they are like labels for complex but arbitrary assemblies of physical things with physical properties.

The mental causation problem is the problem of resolving this apparent contradiction.

This book argues that the contradiction is only apparent. The world does proceed according to the laws of physical nature. But parts of it also proceed according to the laws of mental nature. The laws of physical nature don't rule out laws of mental nature, so long as the two are coordinated in a certain way.

My argument takes the form of a model of what the laws of mental nature are like and how they are related to the laws of physical nature. The model is presented in the last chapter of the book, chapter 9. It is developed against a background of ideas about physical laws, about causation, and about properties and how they are connected with laws and causation. Chapters 5 through 8 describe and argue these background ideas.

The mental causation problem is that mental properties and physical properties appear to be competitors for being the causes of things, and physical properties are the obvious winners. The solution is to set out how mental properties and physical properties are related in such a way that it will no longer make sense to say that mental properties and physical properties are competitors with one another in the same struggle for causal relevance.

If they are not competitors in the same struggle, then the possibility opens up of a conception of causal relevance according to which properties are causally relevant when they are the most successful competitors *in their own proper competitions*, competitions *at their level*. Physical properties are causally relevant because they are the most successful competitors at the level of fundamental physics. Mental properties can also be causally relevant if they are the most successful competitors at the psychological level. (Assuming, that is, that there is a psychological level; if science somehow shows that thinking isn't what makes behavior happen, then it clearly can't be causally relevant. But then, as Jerry Fodor wrote [1989: 156], "If it isn't literally true that my wanting is causally responsible for my reaching . . . then practically everything I believe about anything is false and it's the end of the world.")

Chapters 1 through 4 examine the history of the problem. Plato thought minds or souls are radically different from bodies, and Aristotle thought souls and minds are ways that bodies are organized (chapter 2). Each way of thinking leads to distinctive problems for mental causation. Aristotle's philosophy of mind is especially interesting and useful: a crucial difficulty for his view (the problem of connecting by definition mental states with perception and action) haunts twentieth-century philosophy of mind. Yet his distinction between form and matter provides a key to the solution to the problem of mental causation.

Descartes (like Plato) argued that the mind is really distinct from the body and consequently struggled (in the end, fruitlessly) to explain how they could interact causally. Thomas Huxley argued that everything that bodies do is physically explicable and hence that conscious experience is causally irrelevant (chapter 3). Huxley's contemporaries called this position "automatism." To get rid of the misleading connotation that we are automata, just simple robots, the term "epiphenomenalism" was soon pressed into service: mental occurrences are epiphenomena, caused by physical things but themselves not causing anything.

The struggle to make sense of how we can possibly make things happen (how our minds can possibly cause changes in the world) intensified in the twentieth century as science became ever more confident that things that happen in the physical world have physical causes that completely suffice to explain them (chapter 4).

Following a path opened up by Kant, Wittgenstein and Ryle argued that mental things aren't causes at all (and so there couldn't be a mental causation problem). Philosophy of mind since then almost unanimously assumes that minds are physical and that reasons are causes. Central state identity theory is the most successful with mental causation: since mental things and mental properties are just physical things and physical properties, mental things and properties must be just as much causes as physical things and properties. The trouble is that mental properties aren't physical properties. Functionalism and anomalous monism argue for this claim, yet each has distinctive difficulties with mental causation.

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I wrote this book partly out of a sense of frustration over the contemporary conversation about how natural science (physics, biochemistry, neuroscience, cognitive science) understands the mind and its place in nature. If you are convinced that you are a free agent—that what you do is at least some-

times up to you—then you are likely to be convinced that there is something about the mind (or soul or spirit) that cannot ever be understood by natural science. Conversely, if you believe that the truth about the mind will emerge from natural science, you are likely to think that free will is an illusion and that you never make anything happen.

I think this is a false dichotomy. I think it can be shown that, even if natural science demonstrates that minds are purely physical, your choices at least sometimes make things happen. If you can make things happen, then some of your actions are done freely: you do indeed have free will.

This book is for those who find this problem as frustrating and as compelling as I do, whether or not you have training in philosophy. I have attempted to lay out some of the historical origins of the problem and to show how it lives and breathes in contemporary discussions of the mind-body relation. The solution I offer depends on taking stances on controversial issues in contemporary metaphysics. I have attempted to keep the discussion of these issues as accessible as possible. Each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading that provide some guidance for the interested reader or student venturing into the thickets of recent debate on these issues. For newcomers to the problem, I want to show how the problem is connected up with contemporary philosophy of mind. But I also want to make a serious and original proposal about how the problem may be solved.