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DISCUSIÓN/DISCUSSION

Anomalous Monism and Radical Interpretation. A Reply to Dwayne Moore[1]

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RESUMEN

En un artículo publicado por *Teorema* en 2010, D. Moore argumenta que mis dudas acerca de la consistencia entre el monismo anómalo de Davidson y su rechazo del dualismo esquema-contenido son inapropiadas. He defendido que hay una tensión que subyace a la filosofía de Davidson que se acentúa cuando contrastamos su ontología monista con el holismo que se sigue de sus propuestas sobre interpretación radical. Los argumentos de Davidson son compatibles, según Moore, en virtud del carácter extensional de los sucesos y de la naturaleza causal de la triangulación. En este artículo sostengo que ambas ideas acentúan la tensión en lugar de aliviarla.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *monismo anómalo, esquemas conceptuales, holismo, interpretación radical, triangulación*.

ABSTRACT

In a paper published by *Teorema* in 2010, D. Moore claims that my misgivings regarding the coherence between Davidson's anomalous monism and his rejection of scheme / content dualism are misplaced. I have argued that there is a tension underlying most of Davidson's philosophy that becomes more notable when we contrast his monist ontology with the holism that vertebrates his ideas about radical interpretation. Moore appeals to the extensional character of events and to the causal nature of triangulation to make Davidson's arguments compatible. In this paper I hold that both approaches highlight, rather than ease, the tension.

KEYWORDS: *Anomalous Monism, Conceptual Schemes, Holism, Radical Interpretation, Triangulation.*

1. In his paper "Reconciling anomalous monism with scheme / content dualism. A reply to Manuel de Pinedo" [*Teorema* 29 (2010) pp. 51-61], D. Moore argues that my misgivings regarding the consistency between Davidson's

anomalous monism and his rejection of scheme / content dualism, or third dogma of empiricism, are misplaced [see Pinedo (2006)]. I claimed that there is a tension underlying most of Davidson's philosophy that becomes more notable when we contrast his monist ontology with the holism that vertebrates his ideas about radical interpretation. With respect to the compatibility between two of Davidson's most famous arguments, I maintained that he might be forced to abandon his commitment to the nomological character of causality in order to avoid falling into the very dogma that he criticizes in "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme" (1974).

The core of Moore's reply is to embrace part of Davidson's official story: events themselves, extensionally conceived, are shared between speakers, even if the speakers individuate them by means of vocabularies that cannot be linked nomologically. An event's identity has to do with the events that cause it and those that are caused by it, while the predicates that we can use to pick it up are not essential to its nature.

I will begin by summarizing my argument against Davidson's anomalous monism and Moore's reply and then consider whether his (and Davidson's) insistence on the extensional character of causality might indeed save the day. Finally, I will argue that extensionality is incompatible with the rejection of the third dogma and with other central aspects of Davidson's philosophy, in particular his holism and his explanation of linguistic interpretation.

2. Let's start by recalling the path that leads Davidson to embrace event monism, i.e., the token identity between physical and mental events. Mental events can cause or be caused by other events (mental or physical). As a result, they are potentially describable in physical terms. Anomalous monism makes the following, apparently inconsistent, principles compatible (see Davidson 1970):

(1) Mental events cause physical events (Principle of Psychophysical Interaction);

(2) When there is causation there is a strict law that relates cause and effect (Nomological Character of Causality); and

(3) There are neither strict psychological nor psychophysical laws (Anomalism of the Mental).

For our purposes, it is important to ask two main questions regarding the conclusion that every (causally efficacious) mental event is a physical event: Can physically individuated events and mentally individuated events be the same? And, if so, do we have the resources to establish such identities?

It seems quite obvious that we can give different descriptions of the same event. We can, for instance, offer a more fine-grained description of the event: Peter's welcoming his friend (with a smile and a kiss). Two descriptions of the same event that share no predicates are also quite common: "Peter's welcoming his friend" and "Peter's smiling to his friend and kissing her". But, welcoming someone, smiling at someone or kissing someone, inasmuch as they are intentional actions, are all mental events. What about theoretically more interesting identities, such as "someone's acquiring the belief that it is raining outside" and "someone's having such-and-such neurons firing"? Principle (3) above highlights the impossibility of any type-identity between both kinds of events. If we could help ourselves to such identities, our monism would not need to be anomalous. They are not necessary either: token-identities are sufficient to account for mental causation without mental laws. If token-identities are not the result of type-identities, we have to face a gap between causal explanations and causal relations. The gap is a consequence of the idea that causal relations are relations between events however they are described (i.e., the idea that they are extensional relations) and the idea that causal explanations depend upon the vocabulary used to individuate the events (which amounts to their being intensional). This gap has an advantage: we can genuinely capture a causal relation even by means that are not subsumable under strict laws, as long as we capture the right events. Or, to put it differently, an incomplete description of a cause is not the same as a description of an incomplete cause.

However, there is a very high price to be paid, one that Davidson cannot afford. This leads us to the second question that I highlighted above. What are our resources for establishing psychophysical identities? The breach between causation and explanation means that the deep nature of causal relations may remain unknowable to us. This may seem a very strong statement (and, as we will see, this is part of Moore's objection to my argument), but I believe that it follows from some important Davidsonian ideas. For instance, one of his earliest papers on these issues ("Causal relations") finishes thus:

> But the assumption, ontological and metaphysical, that there are events, is one without which we cannot make sense of much of our most common talk; or so, at any rate, I have been arguing. I do not know any better, or further, way of showing what there is [Davidson (1967) p. 162].

This is already a summary statement of the rejection of scheme / content dualism. What then are the resources, within our common talk (including our scientific talk) to determine that two descriptions, respectively phrased in the nomological vocabulary of physics and in non-nomological, intentional vocabulary, are descriptions of the same event? My claim is that the third prin-

ciple behind anomalous monism together with the insistence on the profound link between language and ontology precludes any such determination. Not only is our common talk the only conceivable way to show what there is, but "(…) in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality" [Davidson (1977), p. 199]. There is no other way, for instance, no possible appeal to pre-conceptual items in experience or to a universe waiting to be organized by a conceptual scheme [Davidson (1974), pp. 189-92]. Semantics, epistemology and metaphysics are not independent enterprises.

Furthermore, Davidson has argued extensively (with independence of his rejection of the third dogma) in favour of a very strong variety of semantic and mental holism. While Davidson offers no argument in favour of the nomological character of causality, principle (3) is a consequence of several central strands of his philosophy. In particular, to individuate a mental event is to place it within a large holistic network defined by the presumption of rationality that is behind any form of interpretation. Both its individuation and its identity depend on its (rational) connections to the rest of the subject's mental life. The consequences of this holism for Davidson's general ontology have not been sufficiently explored by him and this has led to very different exegeses of his work.[2] But, in any case, his holism is, at the very least, an extremely uncomfortable home for the idea of token-identities without type-identities and for his appeal to the extensional nature of events. The radically different nature of intentional and physical explanation should mean either that physical and mental descriptions capture different aspects of reality or that there is something going on in the world that may be radically unknowable to us. I see no problem with the first option and urge Davidson to accept it and to abandon his dogmatic commitment to the nomological character of causality. Causal pluralism should be a consequence of what is best in his work.

3. Moore considers that the split between extensional causation and intensional causal explanation that I find problematic in Davidson is far from being a relapse into the third dogma. He makes much of the possibility of radically interpreting an unknown language in virtue of there being common, accessible causes in a world shared by interpreter and speaker (Moore develops this thought by means of the idea of triangulation; I will come back to it below).

> [I]f the world is shared in common, then it may be possible to calibrate 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 extensional affairs, such as the causal relations and event identities required by anomalous monism [Moore (2010), p.57].

Given that we can talk about the same things in different languages and understand each other if we pay sufficient attention to features of the world that are salient for speaker and interpreter, it seems natural to think that we can also speak about the same thing (event, causal relation) by using mental and physical vocabularies. It is precisely this projection that I want to call into question. The rejection of the third dogma and the nature of radical interpretation guarantee that no conceptual veil precludes the possibility of sharing knowledge about the world, however distant our languages and cultures may be. Nonetheless, it does not guarantee that knowledge can be had about the same event from both a nomological and an anomalous perspective. Despite Davidson's loyalty to Quine, the rejection of scheme / content dualism makes radical interpretation a closer relative of Wittgenstein's sharing a form of life than of radical translation.

Moore also takes my suggestion that token-identities and causal relations are noumenal as an unfortunate exaggeration. Davidson is certainly no idealist. It is clear to him that there are plenty of events and causal relations that no one has ever described, observed or thought about and this does not make them noumenal. In this reply I have deliberately avoided the term "noumenal", partially as implicit acceptance of the terminological criticism, partially as a consequence of having been convinced by Rae Langton's book *Kantian Humility* (2001) of the healthy and sobering role that the idea of things-in-themselves may still play in philosophy. This, however, does not mean that I am ready to follow Moore on the path that takes token-identities out of the noumenal world and into the accessible and shared world. Granting that Davidson's rejection of scheme / content dualism implies that communication (and interpretation of foreign languages) rests on sharing a common world, the features of which are largely independent of anyone's paying any attention to them, still falls short of granting that extensional events may end up being talked about by means of radically different spheres of our language, such as our physical and our psychological talk. Here is Moore stressing the function that extensional events play for Davidson:

> Since these events [events with which no rational creature has entered in contact] belong to a shared and accessible world, they can be the constant and shared point of a 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 the scheme-content dualism [Moore (2010), p. 58].

In my original paper I only dealt briefly with Davidson's appeal to extensionality. I mentioned there that Davidson was entitled to use this line of argument against a popular, but misguided, form of criticism opposed to his anomalous monism: the accusation of making mental properties epiphe-

nomenal (Moore lists some classic papers that pursue this form of criticism). According to this objection, given that there cannot be any causal connection without a law linking cause and effect and the non-existence of mental laws, an event's mental properties cannot be part of its causal powers. We need a description to individuate an event, but the event doesn't need a description to interact causally with the rest of the world (Moore provides a quotation from one of Davidson's last papers that elegantly summarizes this idea: "[N]ature with its causal doings is indifferent to our supply of concepts", [Davidson (2001), p. 142]). The dependence of an event's identity on its causal / extensional links to other events would suffice, not just as a reply to the charge of mental epiphenomenalism, but also for an anomalous monist unconvinced by Davidson's argument against scheme / content dualism.

To be fair, there is a lot to be said in favour of anomalous monism. With it Davidson attempts the impossible and almost achieves it. Anomalous monism is a way of reconciling principles (1) to (3) above, which is heroic enough. But it is also the consequence of holding on to some important, and apparently incompatible, philosophical ideas. On the one hand, Davidson wants to retain the idea that normativity is inescapable. No matter what our explanatory purposes may be in a given context, having knowledge about the world is something that only communicating, rule-sensitive agents can do. We cannot reduce the intentional and normative vocabulary used to make sense of such agents to non-intentional and nomological vocabulary. Furthermore, the very intentionality that we presuppose in practicing radical interpretation is part of the causal fabric of the world, as principle (1) states. Finally, the irreducibility of a normative to a nomological stance that is behind principle (3) doesn't imply, for Davidson, that we are talking about different things in each case. Event monism is his way of cashing out the latter insight. However, there are other, ontologically less committed, monist alternatives. For instance, we could say, following Strawson (1959), that psychological and physical properties are predicated of the same *things*. We could say that they are predicated of different aspects of the same *world*. To put it differently (in a way that closely follows Davidson's decision to state the problem in Kantian terms in his paper "Mental events"), the only way to make sense of the idea that we are agents that voluntarily subject themselves to norms and that, in so doing, modify the causal flow of nature is not to identify events couched in normative vocabulary with events couched in physical vocabulary. What makes event monism seem compulsory has nothing to do with principles (1) and (3), with Davidson's ontological commitment to events or with the central role that they play in his account of causality. It is principle (2) that is doing the work. [The closing remarks of this paragraph take their inspiration from the final paragraphs of McDowell (1985)].

4. And still, there might be an even deeper layer of Humeanism at play here, related to my objection to the identity between events belonging to a holist framework and events whose identity depends merely on their causes and effects. Davidson's ontology is far from holistic and that in itself seems to raise a difficulty for squaring his conception of the mental and his radical externalism. While the picture of the mind that emerges from radical interpretation and the principle of charity is one populated by internal relations, with respect to the non-mental world he might well be committed to what some authors have called 'Humean distinctness' [see, for instance, Molnar (2003)], the idea that nothing is internally related to anything else, that every existing thing may not have existed without anything else needing to change. All modal animation, so to speak, comes from outside things (or events, or facts). It is provided by the laws of nature. The nomological character of causality might be a remaining dogma of empiricism, although not a gratuitous one, if I am right regarding Davidson's metaphysical Humeanism. The idea that causal relations demand generality (in the form of laws) is a necessary complement to an atomistic view with respect to physical items (Mumford (2004) offers a compelling argument linking both theses). There are two alternatives to pairing physical atomism and nomological causality: either to abandon the idea of necessary connections in nature (that is, becoming fully Humean) or to accept the existence of singular causality, i.e., of natural necessity without laws.

I think Davidsonians would be well advised to follow the second path. One of the consequences of rejecting scheme / content dualism is giving up an image of the world as populated by atoms that only become organized (interconnected) once they are subsumed under a conceptual scheme. Abandoning this image means, at the very least, losing the stronger motivation behind principle (2) of anomalous monism.

5. His externalism is perhaps the place where the tension that pervades Davidson's work becomes more apparent. I will only dwell on his highly controversial swampman thought experiment and on his use of the triangulation analogy. He made use of the latter for the first time in his paper "Rational animals" (1982) to explain the origins of objectivity (that go hand in hand with the origins of language and thought). He introduced the idea as follows:

> Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world [Davidson (1982), p. 105].

The interactions with the object that Davidson talks about are purely causal and fit squarely within a framework where the extensional character of events marks the separation between causal explanations and causal relations. The relation between each speaker and the object is per se devoid of objectivity (in analogy with the relation between an observer incapable of movement and a distant object: the observer would need to move around in order to know where the object was placed). The linguistic and communicative link between the speakers is a necessary complement to the causal relations between the speakers and the object in order for those relations to have a conceptual nature. However, it is unclear that the speakers can exploit merely causal relations to infuse objectivity into their linguistic exchanges. Again, Davidson seems to be treading dangerously close to scheme / content dualism.

Things change for the better when Davidson returns to triangulation in "Epistemology externalized" (1990):

> […] we cannot resolve the question of the contents of mental states from the point of view of a single creature. This is perhaps best seen by thinking about how one person learns from another to speak and think of ordinary things. […] [T]he learner is rewarded, whether deliberately or not, when the learner makes sounds or otherwise responds in ways the teacher finds appropriate in situations the teacher classes together. […] The teacher is responding to two things: the external situation and the responses of the learner. The learner is responding to two things: the external situation and the responses of the teacher. All these relations are causal. Thus the essential triangle is formed which makes communication about shared objects and events possible. But it is also this triangle that determines the content of the learner's words and thoughts when these become complex enough to deserve the term [Davidson (1990), pp. 201-2].

Attending to the role played by causal relations within the context of learning suggests that the line between teacher and object ceases to be merely causal, despite Davidson's explicit commitment to the causal nature of the relationship between teacher and situation. The teacher is already capable of thinking of the object as being part of a public world and as existing independently of its being thought about, hence the line between both is already fully conceptual (after all, it is her capacity to class situations together that she is trying to transmit to the learner). That line can indeed be exploited in order to make sense of linguistic interpretation, but it comes too late to explain the origin of thought and language. Or, to put it differently, if the relation teacher-situation were an extensional one, it would be of no use for teaching the learner how to speak about it, and if it is intensional (as I claim), then it cannot be prior to the emergence of objectivity.

Davidson also invokes causality (causal history, in this case) in his contribution to the genre of externalist thought experiments. He asks us to imagine that, through some form of cosmic coincidence, at the same time that he

is killed by lightning while walking through a swamp, a nearby tree becomes an identical copy of him. The swampman not only looks like him but also speaks like him and goes on to do the same things that he would ("It moves into my house and seems to write articles on radical interpretation", Davidson writes with characteristic self-mockery, "No one can tell the difference" [Davidson (1987), p. 19]). However, even though you would be tempted to ascribe meaning to the swampman's words and to interpret him as having a mental life, according to Davidson you would be mistaken. His argument looks very convincing at first:

> But there *is* a difference. My replica can't recognize my friends; it can't recognize anything, since it never cognized anything in the first place. It can't know my friends' names (though of course it seems to); it can't remember my house. […] Indeed, I don't see how my replica can be said to mean anything by the sounds it makes, nor to have any thoughts [Davidson (1987), p. 19].

But there is something strikingly unDavidsonian about the idea that something that behaves in an interpretable way (and that is indistinguishable in his behaviour from someone who is himself practicing interpretation) may not be interpretable after all. In the papers that Davidson devoted to discussing radical interpretation the emphasis is always placed on the interconnection between linguistic understanding and attribution of mentality. It comes as a surprise that knowledge regarding the causal past of the speaker is necessary to be able to ascribe meaning to his utterances and to make sense of his movements as intentional behaviour. There cannot be anything more to being a thinker than being interpretable and interpreting others, and the criterion for this is a capacity to engage in linguistic communication. "Our sentences provide the only measure of the mental" [Davidson (1997a), p. 77].

It might well be that our intuitions regarding the swampman example force us to limit our reliance on radical interpretation and the presumption of rationality as criteria for the ascription of thought. This would certainly weaken principle (3) above. Anyway, if I am right in pressing the analogy between, on the one hand, the incompatibility between radical interpretation and Davidson's use of the swampman example and, on the other, the incompatibility between anomalous monism and the rejection of scheme / content dogma, then in each case one of the poles needs to be abandoned.

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NOTES

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[2] Contrast, for instance, Ramberg (1989) and Malpas (1992) with LePore & Ludwig (2005) and (2007).

[3] The appeal to triangulation to account for the learning situation can also be found in Davidson (1992), p. 119. In contrast, its role for the emergence of thought and objectivity is further explored in Davidson (1997), pp. 127-8.

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