EPIPHENOMENALISM AND CROSS-REALIZATION
INDUCTION

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Summary
In the first part of this paper I argue that epiphenomenalism does not pose a threat to nonreductive physicalism, if type-epiphenomenalism does not imply the redundancy of mental (or in general higher-level) typing of events and/or states. Furthermore, if justifiable induction over folk-psychological regularities is possible independently of the ways in which these regularities are realized, type-epiphenomenalism does not imply the redundancy of mental typing. In the second part of this paper I explain how justifiable ‘cross-realization induction’ can be possible. This explanation does what none of the currently available ones can: combine the generally accepted ideas that (i) folk-psychology is a successful means of predicting, explaining, and understanding human behaviour and (ii) that mental states are multiply realized. Given these two steps, it is relatively safe to say that there is no epiphenomenalism-threat to nonreductive physicalism.

I am currently using a word-processor that runs on a Macintosh computer. The same program—i.e. a qualitatively identical one—also exists in a PC version. Despite the fact that the hardware, and therefore the programming behind both versions, is rather different, the software in each case is (virtually) identical from a user’s point of view.

Suppose I don’t know of the existence of PCs and see one for the first time. It is running ‘the same’ word-processor I am familiar with. I don’t know anything about the physical make-up of PCs, but I do know how my own computer works. It takes a few minutes to find out that the PC program resembles the one I always use even though the physical make-up of this computer is rather different from mine. After some investigating I confidently—and correctly—predict what the program will do given certain inputs. And when someone asks me why
the computer reacts to a certain input in a certain way, I can ‘explain’ this to some extent by citing the regularities to which the computer is subject when it runs this particular program.

I can make these predictions and come up with these explanations through induction, given what I know of my own computer program. But it is only knowledge of my computer from a user’s perspective (or ‘higher-level’ perspective), not knowledge of its physical make-up, that allows me to make the relevant inductions.

In this paper I argue that some of nature’s regularities, in particular those underlying folk-psychological prediction and explanation, resemble the word-processor(s) in the above example to a significant extent, and that this fact dissolves the problem of epiphenomenalism that appears to threaten nonreductive physicalism. In Part I, I shall argue that if folk-psychology allows for induction of the above kind—which I shall label ‘cross-realization induction’—this will defuse the threat allegedly posed by epiphenomenalism to nonreductive physicalism. In Part II, I shall explain how justifiable cross-realization induction in folk-psychology can be possible.

1. Epiphenomenalism and Cross-Realization Induction

1.1 The Problem of Epiphenomenalism Anatomised

A variety of positions in the philosophy of mind fall under the heading of ‘nonreductive physicalism.’ Against each of these the charge of epiphenomenalism has been levelled: (slightly inaccurately put, see below) when mental events supervene on but are not reducible to a person’s neural events, and when causal overdetermination is excluded, there are good (though not universally accepted) reasons to consider the neural events the causes of that person’s actions rather than the supervening mental events.

1. Among the variety of nonreductive-physicalist positions there are two major ones: Davidson’s anomalous monism and various nonreductive forms of functionalism. These theories rely on a slightly different metaphysics, one in terms of mental and physical events, the other in terms of mental and physical states. The argument of this paper is entirely neutral with regard to this metaphysical dispute. When I speak of mental and physical events and no specific position is discussed, I shall mean ‘mental and physical events or states’ by it. The same goes for ‘mental and physical states.’