

**Phil 317: Handout #20**  
**Tyler Burge: *Mind-Body Causation and Explanatory Practice***  
**Professor JeeLoo Liu**

**§ Burge on Epiphenomenalism**

**Argument for Epiphenomenalism [I]:**

- (A) Mental event-tokens are identical with physical event-tokens.
  - (B) The causal powers of a physical event are determined only by its physical properties;  
and
  - (C) mental properties are not reducible to physical properties.
- ⇒ A mental event's mental properties play no role in determining its causal powers.

**Argument for Epiphenomenalism [II]:**

- (a) The world of physical events and properties is a complete and closed system, in the sense that physical events can be caused only by virtue of physical properties of other physical events;
  - (b) Mental properties are not reducible to physical properties;
- ⇒ No physical events can be caused by virtue of mental properties, even if these mental properties are properties of physical events.

**Q1: What counts as "physical properties"?**

\_\_\_ Burge: I will assume a very broad notion of physical property which includes one's relation to the environment *specified in non-mentalistic, non-intentional terms.*

**Q2: What constitute "causal power"?**

\_\_\_ i) the causal power of a type of event = the patterns of causation that type of events enter into.

\_\_\_ ii) we identify the "patterns of causation" as explanatory in our causal explanations.  
 ⇒ the properties that exemplify causal power are also the properties that are explanatory.

**§ Burge's Argument Based on Twin Earth:**

**To Refute:** (local) supervenience --- [one's mental properties supervene (locally) on one's intrinsic (non-relational) physical properties.

**To Show:** It is possible for person's body, considered in isolation from its relations to the environment, to be physiologically and molecularly the same event if the person were to think thoughts that have different intentional content. [i.e. one's intrinsic physical states could be the same while one's mental states alter.]

**Example:**

**Earth: 'aluminum'(the word) → aluminum (the metal)**

Twin Earth: 'aluminum' (a word in Twin-English) → twalum (a different metal that seems just like aluminum)

[Burge's Argument]:

1. Bert and his physical identical on Twin Earth, Twin-Bert, could have the same intrinsic physical states, yet their intentional contents involving "aluminum" are different since these are about different metals.
2. A mental state cannot be the same mental state once it has a different intentional content. [i.e. same intentional content is one of the *necessary conditions* for same mental states.]
3. Therefore, it is possible for people to have different mental states even though their intrinsic physical states are identical.

Q3: Why do these physical properties have to be "intrinsic"?

\_\_\_ Burge: Because the individuation of brain states is done in accordance with the physiology of the brain.

Q4: Why would Bert's and Twin-Bert's mental *content* be different?

\_\_\_ Burge's Lemma for Premiss 1:

- (i) Our mental *content* are necessarily "intentional" (e.g. our beliefs are *about* some states of affairs; our desires are *about* some objects.)
- (ii) Intentionality =(roughly) referring to things outside one's body.
- (iii) Therefore, mental contents are necessarily individuated (into kinds or types) by reference to things outside the body.

§ Burge's Argument for Intentional Content:

1. The system of intentional content attribution is the fundamental means of identifying intentional mental states and events in psychological explanation and in our self-attributions
2. Systematic, informative, important explanatory schemes usually make the strongest claim for providing individuating descriptions.
3. Systematic, informative, important explanatory schemes of events and states are also our strongest indications of causal relevance.
4. The system of intentional content attribution provides systematic, informative and important explanatory schemes.
5. Therefore, intentional contents should be used both for individuation of mental states and in assigning causal relevance in mental causation.

§ Burge's Argument Concerning Psychology:

- (1) Psychological states do fall into systematic patterns which psychological explanation can make use of.

- (2) But these patterns do not seem to involve ordinary physical properties (like mass, energy, composition, and so on) that physical explanations and descriptions make use of.
- (3) So the view that there are, in the ordinary, physical patterns seems doubtful.
- (4) Therefore, the explanation offered by psychology is indispensable.

**§ Burge's Reply to the Problem of Exclusion:**

- a) Why should mental causes alter or interfere with the physical system if they do not materially consist in physical processes?
- b) We have reason to think that mentalistic and physicalistic accounts of causal processes will not interfere with one another.
- c) The two causal explanations are explaining the same physical effect as the outcome of two very different *patterns* of events.
- d) Mental causes do not interfere in the physical chain of events. But non-interference is in no need of explanation in ontological terms.
- e) There exists a "category difference" between psychology and neurophysiology and there may not be any bridging relationship.

**§ Burge's Conclusion:**

\_\_\_ As long as mentalistic explanation yields knowledge and understanding, and as long as that explanation is (sometimes) causal, we can firmly believe that mind-body causation is part of the world.

\_\_\_ If intentional mental events are type-individuated in terms of their intentional 'aspects' -- if such events enter into causal relations and are cited (in terms of those aspects) in explanations, then there seems to be very reason to conclude that those aspects are causally efficacious.

\_\_\_ [Burge's Final Argument Against Epiphenomenalism]:

1. Much of the interest of psychological explanation lies in helping us understand *ourselves* as agents.
2. And we define our *agency* in terms of our mental events' having the intentional characters that they have.
3. But if our intentional mental events (such as wants, desires, wills, intentions) are not causally efficacious, as claimed by epiphenomenalism, then the *agency* would not be ours.

4. Therefore, psychological explanation must be based on the assumption that our *intentional* mental events are causally efficacious.
5. Therefore, epiphenomenalism is wrong.