

Notes on David Lewis' "An Argument for the Identity Theory"

The Psychophysical Identity Theory:

The hypothesis that, as a matter of contingent fact, every experience is identical with some physical state.

This identity statement stands in contrast with a statement like "Every sister is identical with some female sibling". This is not a matter of contingent fact. It is a necessary truth, due solely to the logical consequences of the definition of "sister".

It is thus clear that, if the psychophysical identity theory is true, it is not a necessary truth, due solely to the meaning of "experience".

Lewis is not arguing for the identity theory on the grounds of simplicity or economy. He is arguing that it is a consequence of the claim that "physical phenomena have none but purely physical explanations".

He presents his argument, in brief, in this way.

- 1) The definitive characteristic of any (sort of) experience is its causal role, its most typical causes and effects.
- 2) Causal roles, in fact, belong to certain physical states.
- 3) These roles belong, by analytic necessity, to experiences.
- 4) Therefore, those physical states have the defining characteristics of experiences.
- 5) Therefore, those experiences are those physical states.

Lewis then adds the important claim that the physical states that are experiences are introspectible processes or activities. These physical states are not being claimed to be the intentional objects that these experiences are experiences of. For example, if pain is identical with the firing of C-fibers, it does not follow that the

experience of pain is an experience of firing C-fibers. It is merely claimed that the experience of being in pain is introspectible, even though the one who has introspective access to the pain may have no idea that pain is the firing of C-fibers. Nor does it follow that C-fibers are themselves in pain, given the identity of pain and the firing of C-fibers.

Some argue that experiences cannot be neural events on the grounds that all neural events have locations, whereas no experiences have locations.

Lewis asserts that he finds this claim to be lacking in necessity. He suggests that it is supported by nothing more than prejudice.

Experience-ascriptions have the same reference as neural state ascriptions, but they do not have the same sense.

The reference of experience-ascriptions is accomplished by specifying the causal role that happens to belong to that state in virtue of causal laws.

Neural state ascriptions refer to a state by simply describing it in detail. So, the identity theory does not entail that whatever is true of an experience is true of some neural state.

The reason for this point is that “ a truth about things of any kind as such is about things of that kind... (only) together with the sense of the expressions by which they are referred to as things of that kind.”

In defense of the first premise:

The particular causal role that defines any experience is expressed by a finite set of conditions that specify its typical causes and its typical effects under various circumstances.

Lewis adds that these typical causes and effects may include other experiences. So, for example, it is typical for pain to cause an experience of longing to stop it.

He notes that this principle does not apply only to first-person reports of experiences.

The first premise does not assert that materialism is true. It only captures the idea that experiences are real events and that they have real connections to other things. The premise would be true even if materialism turned out to be false.

It is inconsistent with some other theories, e.g. Behaviorism, Epiphenomenalism and Parallelism. It does have some affinity with Behaviorism because of Behaviorism's claim that Behavior is causally linked to the environment and that the environment causes various sorts of behavior.

Lewis' first premise differs crucially from Behaviorism in that it insists on the reality and causal efficacy of experiences as well as on their introspective accessibility.

Lewis says that it is the causal role of experiences that explains how they are introspectively accessible. They reliably cause other experiences directed intentionally upon them. The experience of pain reliably causes awareness of this experience. Such awareness and the experience that it is awareness of are interconnected.

Under this approach, we may expect that experiences will form mutually interdefined families. No harm to the identity theory will come from this result. Indeed, it is a logical consequence of the way that experience is defined by the theory.

Third defense of premise 1:

It is not necessary to define an experience by its actually occurring causes and effects. One need only refer to it as the sort of state that is typically caused by X and which typically causes Y. There may be exceptional cases. Behaviorism is unable to handle this residue of cases. (Examples: perfect actors, victims of paralysis)

Lewis does not try to prove his first premise. He is content to point in the direction of the many instances of experiences that are found to have causal roles and claim them as contributing to verification of Premise 1.

Defense of Premise 2:

This premise is just a plausible hypothesis. It alleges that there is some unified body of scientific theories that will provide a true and exhaustive account of all physical phenomena. He maintains that whoever shares his and others' confidence in the explanatory adequacy of physics must accept the identity theory.

Interestingly, Lewis admits that his second premise does not rule out the existence of non-physical phenomena. It simply denies that it will ever be necessary to explain anything by reference to non-physical phenomena. For all we know, there may be non-physical phenomena that are perfectly correlated with physical phenomena or even be completely unrelated to physical phenomena. On Lewis' version of the identity, none of these non-physical phenomena would be experiences.

There is little doubt as to which physical phenomena experiences must be. Alternatives to neural states have so far not been absolutely ruled out. But no one has any plausible suggestion as to what else they might be.