



Book Review

The Lost Cause: Causation and the Mind-Body Problem by Celia Green. Oxford Forum, 2003, 235pp, ISBN 0-9536772-1-4.

Reviewed by Constantine Sandis

Readers who have never come across Celia Green's writings before will be in for a small surprise when they reach the Preface, Testimonials and Introduction which immediately follow Howard Robinson's informative Foreword to Dr. Green's ninth book. If there is a place at all, however, for discussing Green's biographical carplings and her related discontent with academia it is certainly not here.

The Lost Cause, based on her Oxford D.Phil thesis, is Green's first endeavor into so-called analytic philosophy, a tradition she paradoxically seems both at home with and determined to fight against on ideological grounds. Green's overall agenda is to question the metaphysical underpinnings of the physicalism which currently prevails in the philosophy of mind, and in particular as it relates to the topic of mental causation. The central thesis under attack here is causal closure, the view that physics is a causally closed system and that we consequently need never go outside the physical domain when tracing the causal ancestry of any given physical event.

It is well known that causal closure leaves us clutching to two very unattractive horns of the mental causation dilemma: either epiphenomenalism is true (i.e. the mental doesn't cause anything) or we have a case of overdetermina-

tion (i.e. the mental is causally efficacious but it does not cause any events which do not also have a sufficient physical cause). Of course many philosophers have sought to find a third way of accommodating physicalism (see Heil & Mele 1993) but those of us who, like Green, are not convinced by the results of these recent efforts will want to rethink closure.

Green does a good job of exposing the dogmatic underpinnings of current materialism adherence to which makes mental causation seem deeply problematic. Her main argument is that while these physicalists adhere to the view that causal relations only hold between physical events micro-physical causal laws make no reference to such entities:

[A]s the increased precision of physical causal descriptions has enhanced the ontological status of the physical, the relevant microcausal descriptions themselves have become increasingly divorced from common-sense ideas of causation, based on our everyday experience of the physical world on a macroscopic level. (p50)

This is indeed both true and largely unaddressed outside the philosophy of physics. Consequently, as Green argues, most physicalists

fail to appreciate that:

[T]he problem of how mental events could be causally linked with physical events emerges as no greater than that of causally linking physical events to one another at the microlevel of theoretical physics (p35).

Green is indeed right to point out that there is a debate among physicists as to whether the fundamental forces postulated by physics (be they lines or force, magnetic fields or what have you) are even *real* things let alone physical ones and that this should make physicalists in the Philosophy of Mind weary of just what their project amounts to. If causation at the microlevel of theoretical physics need not appeal to physical entities how is one to justify physicalist accounts of mental causation? Could such physicalism be nothing more than a dogma? Green suggests that the physicalism in question is motivated by features of our macroscopic experience of causation which cannot be licitly imported to the microlevel. Why should this matter? The idea is that if theoretical physics can do without physical events at the microlevel then there is no reason to insist that all mental events must be physical:

[I]n the ultimate explanation of microscopic physics the commonsense concept of a cause no longer has any real role, and there is no justification for ascribing a differential status to physical-physical correlations as distinct from mental-physical ones (p51).

This conclusion may well be correct. Green's reasoning, however, faces two distinct difficulties here. The first is that she doesn't provide us with a reason why those physicists and/or philosophers of physics who maintain that the fundamental forces postulated by theoretical physics must be real (and possibly even material) cannot be right. For all she has told us then, to

the extent that these metaphysical issues make sense, it may turn out that physicalism had better be true at the microlevel as well.

The second difficulty lies in Green's acceptance of Russell's claiming that causation as we ordinarily think of it ('billiard ball' causation) and the language which accompanies it has no place in physics (p57). She therefore takes herself to be a (contra Nancy Cartwright) a realist about 'mathematical physics' and instrumentalist where 'causal stories' are concerned (p38). Given the claims about microphysics it is vital for Green's argument that the *real* causation can only be found at the microlevel. But the claim about our ordinary causal language does not show that our macrolevel understanding of causation is in any way skewed. Indeed, if anything, it tells us that theoretical physics is not very informative when it comes to our everyday causal questions.

Part of the problem is that Green either ignores or misinterprets some of the most important figures in the literature, from Hume to Davidson. Her treatment of Hume for example (which incidentally relies solely on secondary literature) betrays a certain ignorance concerning the object of his regularity thesis:

[C]ausal explanations are supervenient on *microlaws*...the causal relation implied by these laws is no more than a nomic regularity into which we project ideas of directionality and agency which are 'imported' from our ideas at the macrolevel .(pp-50-51 cf. 62-63.)

This has additional repercussions as Green also insists that since cause effect asymmetry has no place in the equations of theoretical physics (ch. 3) there is nothing problematic about the notion of backward causation. Perhaps she would have done better to consult Wittgenstein's 1937 criticism of Russell's understanding of causation which (among many other things) powerfully demonstrates that the cause-effect language game is a rooted feature of our macroscopic

experience which includes ideas about ‘directionality’ and ‘agency’. Our ordinary causal talk may have no place in physics but it does not follow from this that causation as experienced at the macrolevel is not real.

Green also misidentifies the difference between causal relations and causal explanation as the difference between causal stories and the laws of physics. This cannot be right since a cause in Cartwright’s sense ‘makes its effect happen’ (Cartwright 1983:76) a role which Davidson restricts to the causes of relations which according to him do not explain anything at the microlevel (1980: 161-2). For Cartwright then, the laws of physics are falsehoods which are nevertheless (somewhat contentiously) capable of explaining whereas according to Davidson, by contrast, they are truths which explain nothing. What all this reveals is that Green conflates microscopic relations with (law providing) equations and macroscopic relations with explanations. Given this confusion, it is unclear what her claim that ‘mathematical physics’ is real whereas as ‘causal stories’ are not, amounts to.

Despite these difficulties *The Lost Cause* is, overall, a worthwhile reminder of the various problems which surround the physicalism which currently dominates the Philosophy of Mind. We also find, in the penultimate chapter, five successful counter-arguments to those who claim to that phenomena such as subliminal perception, blindsight and split brains provide us with empirical evidence which shows that consciousness is an expendable part of brain activity.

Unfortunately Green’s characteristic polemic style throughout the book (and her almost political approach to her being part of a philosophically estranged minority) does herself no justice, as many of the issues she raises as old as they are complicated, though her writing leaves no indication of this. Wittgensteinians such as John Hyman (1991), for example, have

long been fighting methodological battles against those who mix empirical findings (say about blindsight) with conceptual confusion to make a philosophical point. Likewise, there is little that is new about Green’s philosophy of physics and any good introduction to the subject (e.g. Lange 2002) will dwell on the problems which she addresses. It is good for these issues to be imported into the Philosophy of Mind, but unless Green can convince that she is a serious thinker it may only serve to give anti-physicalists a bad name and ensure that her own cause is indeed a lost one.

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