

Epiphenomenal Properties

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Some believe that higher-level properties must either be epiphenomenal, or somehow be reducible to lower-level physical properties. But what is an epiphenomenal property? Colloquially, it is often said that epiphenomenal properties are properties without causal powers. But what is it for a property to have no causal powers? In order to answer this, we need an account of what it is for a property to have some causal power; only after that we can understand what it is for a property to have none. In this paper, I argue for the thesis that a property has some causal power just in case it is a matter of a law of nature that anything with that property must have that causal power. I call this ‘the nomic bearers thesis’ (NBT). NBT is a reductive thesis: it reduces the causal powers of a property to those of its bearers. I argue that NBT offers a better explanation of the relationship between properties and causal powers than the other candidates in the vicinity. After defending NBT against some foreseeable objections, I use it to show that a property is epiphenomenal if and only if its instantiation does not nomologically necessitate any certain causal power. I conclude by arguing that, on this understanding of epiphenomenal properties, higher-level properties are not epiphenomenal.