

The Nature of Mind

Far from being a banality or philosophical naivety, the question of the nature of mind as distinct from the physical body is a major crux of philosophical thought to which the brightest intellectual geniuses have devoted their attention. With the possible exception of moral philosophy, it is the subject on which the largest number of full-size books, monographs and journal articles have been written in the present century's academic philosophy. It has ramifications that reach very far into the fields of ethics, psychology and sociology, to say nothing of religion. Within the traditional divisions of metaphysics itself, it touches such diverse disciplines as ontology, epistemology, mental philosophy and the veriegated questions of the essential nature of human person, explanation of his behaviour, freedom, moral responsibility and immortality.

Let me say at the outset that I hold no brief for the currently fashionable linguistic-analytic method that has turned philosophy into a narrow and specialized academic subject of little relevance or interest to anyone outside the small circle of professional philosophers. The inevitable result of this type of doing philosophy has been that serious philosophical work beyond the conventional sphere has been minimal. It is characteristic of this type of philosophers

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that they come to think they can dismiss, analyse away or dissolve a complex and profound metaphysical question in a few deft "moves" or with a few clever points and to distrust whatever is not put in the professional patois of "claims", unpacking, entailment and which does not have the sleek professionalism and glibness that now passes for rigour and brilliance. By declaring a deeply significant question a muddle, they easily try to get away with it. This unincisive and cavalier attitude has been particularly exhibited in the case of the nature of mind by the best known English speaking philosophers right from Gilbert Ryle down to Richard Taylor, D. M. Armstrong and K.V. Wilkes. The last mentioned philosopher, for example, writes in her recently published book entitled "Physicalism".

"The physicalist we have described has no longer to contend with the 'mind-body' problem. The problem, though, is dissolved rather than solved. Psychophysiological functionalism prevents it from arising, stops the question even being posed. The reason, very simply, is that it allows for no class of mental events, states or processes that can be set in an interestingly problematic relation to a class of physical events, states, and processes." (p. 114)

The same cavalier attitude comes out unmistakably when we read the following lines by Richard Taylor in his book "Metaphysics".

"If a philosopher reasons that a body cannot think, and thereby affirms that, since a person thinks, a person is a soul or spirit or mind rather than a body, we are entitled to ask how a spirit can think. For surely if a mind or soul can think, we can affirm that a body can do so; and if we are asked how a body can think, our reply can be that it thinks in precisely the manner in which the dualist supposes a mind or soul thinks". (p-30)

These lines, I am sure, give a big jolt to all its readers and are likely

to produce very poor view of the role and utility of philosophical arguments. Despite the works of the numerous philosophers writing in this vein, the question of the nature of mind has survived to this day and remains a source of acute perplexity to serious thinkers. And, astonishingly enough, it survives to this day in much the same form.

The problem of the nature of mind has many facets and it is not possible for me to touch them all within the compass of a short paper. The best I can do is to point out my own general position on this question and a brief mention of the bases on which I take my stand. I think that the most profound, and for that matter, most enduring solution to this riddle was that of Descartes. I do not indeed agree with every feature of Descartes' dualism or for all the ways in which he presented his views. Nevertheless, I believe that he was right in essential in his views about mind and body and that he was much more perceptive in his ways of presenting his ideas than is commonly supposed to-day. To rehabilitate Descartes *in toto* is a herculean task and I cannot attempt it in the short time at my disposal. My aim is a more modest one. I shall, so to say, take a *via negativa* and make rather detailed critical comments on D.M. Armstrong, a major writer on the subject who has taken anti-dualist position on this issue by defending a materialist or physicalist theory of mind in a massive work under the same title.

D.M. Armstrong's version of the Mind-body Identity theory, the doctrine of Central-state materialism, is extremely radical and tough-minded in identifying conscious experiences with the brain. The central point of his theory is that it does away entirely with conscious mental states, insofar as they are very crudely equated and identified with the brain states. The substance of Armstrong's view can be put briefly and not too misleadingly in the

proposition: 'The mind is nothing but the brain'. Like other Identity theorists he too bases his argument on extremely misleading analogies. We must first look carefully at the analogies that he gives to elucidate the mind-brain identity, and examine their soundness. He, for example, writes :

"If it is true that the mind is the brain, a model must be found among contingent statements of identity. We must compare the statement to 'The morning star is the evening star', or 'the gene is the DNA molecule', or some other contingent statement of Identity". (p. 77).

Armstrong then goes on to argue, quite correctly, "But if the mind is the brain, is a contingent statement, then it follows that it must be possible to give logically independent explanation (or alternatively, ostensive definition) of the meaning of the two words 'mind' and 'brain'. It seems to me that Armstrong's implicit premise that his two examples of contingent identity are comparable analogies to the thesis that 'the mind is the brain' is fundamentally mistaken. This becomes clear when we analyse the three cases :

- (1) The morning star and the evening star are one and the same physical object.
- (2) The gene is a theoretical concept ; the DNA molecule is a chemical entity.
- (3) The mind is a person's lived conscious agency i.e., it is given before we can begin any analysis, etc. If it is regarded as a theoretical concept, it, still refers to the subject of experience or psyche. Whereas the brain is an organ of the body.

Now obviously there are very big and important differences between these three cases and it is glib and unincisive to consider them as analogous statements. Only in the first case (morning star

and evening star) can the two things be regarded as one and the same thing. The concept of identity as applied in the supposed gene concept is indeed very loose and naive. The discovery of DNA, the elucidation and analysis of its structure, etc., has not altered the conceptual status of the gene in any way. The word 'gene' continues to represent a principle (or a theoretical concept) which is temporally prior and logically distinct from the chemical entity to which, we now know, it refers—the DNA molecule. It is therefore fallacious to talk of the identification of the gene with the DNA molecule. But apart from the fact whether or not the identification in this case is justifiably maintained, it surely has no parallel to the mind-brain case.

The problem in relation to mental is not simply one of finding out (through science as in the case of the gene) what the empirical referent of a particular theoretical concept is. It is in fact the far more considerable one of establishing that an already existing 'empirical' referent of the concept 'mental state', viz., conscious experience, is identical with a hypothesized brain state. Armstrong, with other central state materialists, is in fact asserting that conscious experience and neurophysiological processes are one and the same thing; to equate this with the gene-DNA example is grossly inaccurate and therefore very misleading. This also shows the philosophical futility of the idea of 'contingent identity' on which the Identity theorists base their argument so heavily. If two apparently distinct things are thought to be one and the same thing there can be no question of any kind of identity until the issue has been decided one way or the other by critical inquiry and investigation. When identity is established it is logically necessary that the two things are in fact one and the same thing (a tautology). Even here, it must be observed, the identity of the mental with the physical is not exactly of this sort, since it is held to be simultaneous

identity rather than the identity of a thing at one time with the same thing at a later time. If an object did not have two distinct aspects or phases, it would not be a *discovery* that they are indeed one and the same body. My essential point here is that the analogies usually cited by Identity philosophers are not at all relevant or helpful in this context.

We now move on to the second stage of Armstrong's argument—the idea that if 'the mind is the brain' is a meaningful statement, then it must be possible to give a logically independent explanations of the words 'mind' and 'brain'. He says ;

"The word 'brain gives no trouble...the problem is posed by the word 'mind'. What verbal explanation or ostensive definition can be given of this word without implying a departure from the physicalistic view of the world ? This seems to be the great problem, or, at any rate, one great problem, faced by a Central-state theory. Central-state Materialism holds that when we are *aware* of our own mental states what we are aware of are mere physical states of the brain. But we are certainly not aware of the mental states *as* states of the brain. What then are we aware of mental states as ? Are we not aware of them as states of a quite peculiar, mental sort ?"¹

Conscious experience does have this 'quite peculiar, mental quality' and Armstrong is undoubtedly right in seeing this as a formidable problem for a materialistic programme. This problem has led some physicalists to the extreme and, therefore, clearly paradoxical position of not allowing the statements that assert or imply the existence of mind. A true physicalistic world-view would simply talk about the operations of the central nervous system, and will completely write off talk about the mind and mental processes.² Armstrong does not accept this approach. Despite the difficulties, he

attempts to sketch out a solution of the word 'mind' in the form of a physical, quasi-behaviourist explanation thus :

"Psychologists very often present us with the following picture. Man is an object continually acted upon by certain physical stimuli. These stimuli elicit from him certain behaviour, that is to say, a certain physical response. In the causal chain between the stimulus and the response, falls the mind. The mind is that what causally mediates our response to stimuli... As a first approximation we can say that what we mean when we talk about the mind, or about particular mental processes, is *nothing but* the effect within a man of a certain stimuli, and the cause within a man of certain responses".

This line of reasoning is certainly a very desperate one indeed ; an outstanding example of pure question-begging nothing-buttery. Man has conveniently been turned into a machine and his conscious experience reduced to the effect of certain stimuli and the cause of certain responses'. A dualist certainly takes effects and responses into consideration, but he would not maintain with Armstrong that the brain processes as such cause human purposive activities. Armstrong is here very wrongly deriving a materialist ontological conclusion from the psychologist's methodological behaviourism. Experimental psychologists undoubtedly talk of mind as a sequence of stimulus-effect-response in a rough and tentative manner, but that surely does not warrant a philosophical theory about the nature of the conscious subject or mind in itself and the mental states.

Armstrong goes on : "The concept of a mental state is the concept of that, whatever it may turn out to be, which is brought about in a man by certain stimuli and which in turn brings about certain

responses. What it is in its own nature is something for science to discover."⁴

I find this position implausible on two counts. First, the naivety with which he allows the facile equation of 'the concept of mental state' with 'whatever it turns out to be', when in fact he clearly envisages that it will turn out to be physical process in the brain. Is there not a profound theoretical problem here : how will it ever be possible to say or to demonstrate that the conscious experience and a neurophysiological process are as a matter of fact one and the same thing ? Secondly, if indeed this is 'something for science to discover' why not deal with this scientifically, i.e. by producing supportive scientific evidence and devising ways of examining the theory as a scientific hypothesis by actual neurophysiological experimentation.⁵ Armstrong, instead of giving any positive evidence, dogmatically asserts :

"Modern science declares that this mediator between stimulus and response is in fact the central nervous system, or more crudely and inaccurately, but more simply, the brain."⁶

More question-begging. The sole mediator is the central nervous system only in reflex activity. If Armstrong or for that matter any neurophysiologist wants to include mind and mental states in his conception of the central nervous system, clearly the burden of proof is on him to show how conscious experience can be equated or identified with the brain. In any case 'modern science' cannot 'declare' anything because it is not a person.

By far the largest part of Armstrong's book is devoted to a philosophical analysis of the concept of Mind in which he tries to show that the ordinary meaning of 'mental' can be summarized adequately in the formula 'apt for the production of bodily be-

haviour'. Though Armstrong separates himself from the earlier positions of Feigl, Smart and others who tried to take behaviourism as far as it could go, yet his amended position is also heavily indebted to behaviourism. Put succinctly, it is this :

"The concept of a mental state is primarily the concept of a person apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour"⁷

What differentiates this from behaviourism is that the mental state is not absorbed into behaviour. It is left with its separate existence. But it is characterized in a topic neutral way, for it is only identified extrinsically through its consequences. It is further asserted that in reality it can be identified with physico-chemical states of the brain. But here the confusion starts. Armstrong elaborates on some of the terms used in the above formula in some detail but all the hedging around only reinforces one's feeling that the formula (and the whole approach it entails) is fundamentally unsound. The issue is clinched by a statement of Armstrong which can be regarded as a major concession of the weakness of his position. He states :

"It will be seen that our formula 'state of the person apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour' is something that must be handled with care. *Perhaps it is best conceived of as a slogan or catch phrase* which indicates the general line along which accounts of the individual mental concepts are to be sought, but does no more than this"⁸.

Slogans and catch phrases invariably involve considerable oversimplification, if not distortion, and it is surely significant that Central-state materialism is driven in desperation to devise a formula that is, in principle, liable to be found so crude and misleading.

Let us take a closer look at the two main components of the formula :

(1) A state of the person (apt for bringing about the corresponding behaviour).

(2) Behaviour.

(1) If 'mental states' are to be equated or identified with 'states of the person', let us see where the consistent application of the formula leads. I take two examples (a) A completely unconscious person may show behaviour of various kinds—both reflex and spontaneous. Here 'a state of the person..' is in fact the physiological state which is apt for the production of the kind of behaviour exhibited. A specific example of this would be the sort of physiological change that a clinical neurologist infers following his examination of an unconscious patient who has had a stroke. Now on Armstrong's formula the particular physiological state concerned is in fact the person's 'mental state'. (b) Disordered behaviour in a conscious person may be the specific expression of an actually demonstrable organic lesion in his brain, say, a brain tumour. If we are to follow Armstrong, the brain tumour is the person's 'mental state', since it is that state of the person which is apt for the production of corresponding behaviour.

(2) Behaviour. There are two objections regarding this. Firstly, behaviour is too limited and superficial a concept (even the extremely complicated behaviour of an artist painting a picture) to allow of any simple equation with the corresponding 'mental state'. Take, for instance, the example of a novelist for closer examination. His behaviour which on a superficial view is relatively uniform, in fact turns out to be very complex on minute scrutiny: consider one aspect of this—the fine movements of his hands and fingers as he writes. This behaviour may be very complex, qua behaviour, but it yet remains a fragmented, erratic external expression of teh

novelist's actual succession of 'mental states' as experienced by him. Here one has only to think of the wealth of imagery a novelist's imagination must call forth when he is at work. Secondly, to the extent that there is any correspondence between mental states and behaviour surely it is the former that must have priority. So that we need to invert Armstrong, and we get : some items of behaviour may be apt for allowing an inference about the mental state which produces them.

An examination of Armstrong's analysis of various mind related concepts like secondary qualities, will, perception, imagination, etc. makes it clear that he does not in fact allow us to use these mental words in the way to which we are accustomed. He too like Smart and other mind-body identity theorists, falls back upon some sort of translation scheme. He tells us, for example :

"I have pain in my hand' may be rendered somewhat as follows: 'It feels to me that a certain sort of disturbance is occurring in my hand, a perception that evokes in me the peremptory desire that the perception should cease'. What is meant by 'a certain sort of disturbance' here ? If we simply consult our experience of physical pain, its nature cannot be further specified.'⁹

But is there any point in purging the mental through attempts like this ? Once we have admitted introspective language, that is, language describing how things are for the experiencing person, then we have accepted in some sense an 'inner reality', for we accept talk about states and occurrences as they are experienced by an agent. Armstrong shows a lot of ingenuity in adapting his scheme to make room for such difficult notions as those of imagination and perception, but on the points of central importance he seems to be more anxious to cling dogmatically to his identity thesis than to report and accept the facts as he finds them. To give one example, although

much of the language he uses (e.g., 'seeing, 'hearing') suggests very strongly that perceptual learning depends on the occurrence of sense experience which is 'something quite different from the acquiring of beliefs about the environment', he shies away from admitting this uncomfortable conclusion because (as he tells us frankly on page 217), he 'has been unable to see how' it can be made 'compatible with a causal analysis of all the mental concepts'.

I shall now try to show that Armstrong has not been able consistently to maintain the strict identity of the mental states with the cerebral ones. My argument would be based on the consideration of an objection against identity thesis which Armstrong himself formulates in a very precise manner thus :

'I begin with the relatively frivolous objections : those that are based on a failure to understand the position being attacked. In the first place, it may be objected that the theory has the absurd consequence that, when a person is aware of having a pain and at the same time a brain-surgeon looks at his brain, the two of them may be aware of the same thing.

'The objection is frivolous, because the consequence is not absurd at all. The patient and the surgeon may be aware of the same thing, but they are aware of very different characteristics of it. An analogy would be : one person smells the cheese, but does not taste it ; the other tastes it but does not smell it. The patient is aware that there is something within him apt for the production of certain behaviour, the surgeon is aware of certain intrinsic characteristics of this something. And, unlike the case of the cheese, it needs a theoretical scientific arguments to show that what each is aware of is in fact one and the same thing.'¹⁰

Far from being frivolous, the essence of this objection is probably the most weighty single counter-argument to Central-state materialism. The theory most certainly does have the absurd consequence that a conscious experience is identified with a neural process in precisely the way indicated in Armstrong's example. It is simply a logical consequence of the thesis that mental states and brain states are one and the same thing. The argument used to counter this criticism is fundamentally inconsistent with his main thesis; indeed, it destroys his whole theory. The essential point here is that the statement that mental states and brain states 'are one and the same thing' has now become; they are 'very different characteristics of it, i.e., of one thing. There is a very great difference between the two statements, and it turns out to be crucial. Take Armstrong's own analogy of smelling and tasting the cheese. The consideration here is that the taste and the smell are different characteristics of, but by no means one and the same thing as, the cheese. They are properties, in fact emergent properties, of the cheese; these emergent properties are logically, epistemologically and physiologically distinct from that of which they are properties, i.e. the cheese. Indeed I would say that there is no strict analogy between our sensations pertaining to cheese and the awareness of pain. The patient's experience of pain is not as such related with the brain state as smelling and tasting are related with the cheese. The absurd consequence that what the patient feels is what the surgeon sees is not 'based on a failure to understand the position being attacked'; it is a direct consequence (logically necessary) of Armstrong's position. We must therefore conclude that the absurdity is the result of a consistent application of a theory: a *reductio ad absurdum* of Central-state materialism itself.

The argument adduced by Armstrong in order to save his theory introduces a distinct notion altogether, that of 'very distinct characteristics' of one thing, and is clearly inconsistent with his main

theory. To assert that the patient's pain, i.e., the conscious experience of pain, is a property (or Armstrong's 'characteristic') of the neural process, quite different from the property of the same process seen by the surgeon, is in fact to hold a dualist position—at least in its 'double-aspect' version. I would myself however not agree with Armstrong even in maintaining that the experience of pain is an aspect of the underlying brain state. From the point of view of the patient surely the conscious experience of the pain itself is quite distinct from the physical state of his brain. I cannot see how this conclusion can be avoided. We are left with no less a position than the consciousness-brain dualism itself. Armstrong's attempted defence of Identity theory or a materialistic view of mind is a very question-begging undertaking indeed. It is radically wrong to talk of "a theoretical scientific argument to show that what each is aware of is in fact one and the same thing". The experience of pain is a distinct mental occurrence ontologically different in nature from anything we can observe externally through our senses. We do not feel sensations in our brains—brain tissues are actually insensitive. Therefore sensations and experiences are not states of the brain or central nervous system. No kind of observation or investigation with instruments could determine the presence of thinking inside the skull, unless the investigation was conceived of as determining the occurrence of some physical process inside the skull, the occurrence of which was itself to be used as the criterion of the occurrence of thinking. But if the investigation was so conceived the theory would not be that of mental-brain identity.

Similar mistake was committed by P. F. Strawson when he summed up his position in Chapter 3 of his book *Individuals*. He wrote: "X's depression is something, *one and the same thing*, which is felt by but not observed by x, and observed but not felt by others than x" (p. 109 italics mine). How are we to interpret this sentence? If we take it literally, Strawson is identifying what x feels with what

others observe. In that case there is an obvious objection. Strawson mentions the awkward facts in a single sentence, but offers no further comments: he says in brackets, 'of course, what can be observed can also be faked or disguised' Strawson is not, surely, entitled to gloss over these facts as if they made no difference to his thesis. Ali's feeling depressed and his depressed behaviour cannot be identified, since, as Strawson himself concedes, either may occur in the absence of the other. Since depression may be successfully simulated without being felt and may be felt without being betrayed, we cannot accept Strawson's thesis that it is 'one and the same thing'. Once we admit intentional language, that is language describing how things are for the agent, then we accept in some sense an "inner reality", for we accept talk about things as they are seen or experienced by an agent.

On the positive side, my claim is that identity or physicalistic theories of Armstrong, philosophical or logical behaviourism of Strawson and his acolytes and the psychophysiological functionalism of K. V. Wilkes leave a vacuum at the heart of our moral and practical life. They all make us out to be hollow men in a wasteland. They tell us that we are machines-enormously complicated machines, but in the end nothing more. And after all what is the value of a world in which only such machines existed? If one looks at the list of things which, in the opinion of major thinkers, make life worth living, one finds such things as spiritual bliss or happiness, wisdom or understanding, friendship, the sense of beauty, the sense of duty. All of them, mind you, are forms of consciousness. The wisdom prized by Spinoza was not that of a computer. It was conscious insight, the experience of understanding, cultivated and enjoyed by a human person. If mind is undermined, philosophy itself becomes mindless and I, for one, am not prepared to indulge in such self-negating enterprise. Far from accepting the position of

most writers and thinkers on the subject which reduce human person to a physical entity or a complex machine, I would rather declare :

I am philosophical, therefore I do not exist.

REFERENCES

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 78.
2. See, for example, Paul Feyerabend ; 'Mental Events and the Brain', *The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. LX (1938). He proposes that mentalistic language involves an irrational, unempirical theory carried over from a primitive and superstitious past. Cf. his 'Experience', *Mind* Vol. 59 (1950) p. 195 passim.
3. Armstrong : *op. cit.*, p. 79 (my italics).
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 79.
5. I am, however, not sure if scientific experimentation can help in this area at all. If scientific instruments gave a neurologist access to my brain processes, this would not be the 'direct' access which I have to my experience.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Armstrong : *op. cit.*, p. 82.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 84 (italics not in the original).
9. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.
10. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.