

The Relationship Between Mind and Body

Often the most simple and obvious ideas, upon critical examination and reflection, show themselves to be complicated and profound. The commonplace in our experience can expose the depths of our ignorance. What are we closer to than ourselves, and yet the simplest question that we can ask about ourselves—What am I?—produces the most profound perplexity. The question of our nature is one of the hardest to answer and one of the most important.

The question of man's nature, while simple and fundamental, has the greatest philosophical consequences. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and law all depend on our answer to this question. Both morality and law presuppose that men are moral agents who have responsibilities, and who can incur guilt and be worthy of praise. Machines or robots have no responsibilities and thus are worthy of neither praise nor blame. If men are robots, then law and morality as traditionally conceived are misguided at best and pure nonsense at worst. Most religions, and Christianity in particular, assume that humans are spiritual beings, capable of communing with God, who is the supreme spiritual being, and of surviving the dissolution of their bodies in death. Again, if man's nature is material, then religious practices and hopes are in fact ill-conceived. This issue is highly significant, and some answers must be found. For some answers that have been suggested, we shall follow Jerome Schaffer's fine treatment in *The Philosophy of Mind* (Prentice-Hall) and "Mind" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Monistic Theories of Man

One large class of answers to the question. What am I?, may be generally called *monistic* theories of human nature. We shall discuss the following general approaches: materialism (including extreme materialism and the identity theory), idealism, and the double-aspect theory.

Extreme Materialism

The oldest philosophical mind-body theory is materialism.

Exposition. In its most extreme form, materialism is the view that *we are our bodies*. It is clear that we have bodies, and that they are material. "We" are identical with "our bodies"; we are nothing more than our bodies. Whenever we use personal pronouns, we refer only to bodies, ours and others.

Extreme materialism's advantage is its simplicity. Some bodies belong to animals, while others belong to men or women. So viewed, a person's identity is nothing obscure or metaphysical, at least with respect to the *kind* of thing he or she is.

A second advantage of extreme materialism's view of man is that it eliminates the debate about the relationship between body and mind. According to this perspective, there is no longer a problem concerning the connection of the two; there is no more question about how one can act upon the other. Extreme materialism makes these questions unnecessary.

A third benefit, so some might argue, is that it solves the questions concerning human death, the death of a man is simply the cessation of those functions which constitute life. Human death exactly parallels animal death. The end of person is identical to the end of his body, which will ultimately return to dust.

A fourth reason some accept extreme materialism is that it has an explanation for everyone's concern with his own body. Because we *are* our bodies, the health or well-being of our bodies is the health and well-being of ourselves. Any threat to our body is a threat to us. Such concern is universal, regardless of one's religious or philosophical beliefs. Some would claim this is strong evidence for extreme materialism.

Criticisms. In spite of the antiquity of this position, it has been beset by enormous difficulties. Most philosophers throughout the history of thought have maintained that any theory, even the most absurd, is superior to that of extreme materialism.

The strongest objection to materialism is the criticism of the central thesis that we are identical to our bodies. We are nothing more and nothing less than physical matter. But if this is true, it follows that anything that can be said about our bodies can be said about us, and anything that can be ascribed to us can with equal justification be asserted of our bodies. If there is something that can be said about us but not about our bodies, then we have shown that our bodies and ourselves are different entities.

Given this claim of identity, we may now ask, Is there *anything* that is true of our body which is not true of ourselves, or vice versa? We can say, for example, that we and our body have the same weight. To give our correct weight is to give the correct weight of our body.

But not all assertions work this way. We can ascribe praise or blame to ourselves. However, it is absurd to ask (except in a very metaphorical way) which part of our body is guilty. The whole man is guilty and the whole man seems to be more than just a body. Suppose a shoplifter is caught by a policeman, who says that he is going to arrest him. What shoplifter would respond that *he* should not be arrested, only his *hand* should be booked at the police station? The policeman will take the whole person to the station. Or, assume that you do well in a philosophy class. It makes no sense to praise your brain for its success. The point is that we cannot without great incongruity ascribe *moral predicates* to physical objects like our bodies.

The problem with what has been called *mental predicates* is even greater. Let us examine the concepts of anger and love. Suppose we are angry with a roommate. What sense can we make of the question, *Where* are we angry? Is our head or chest angry? We are angry all over; it makes no sense to try to localize our anger. It will not do to reduce anger to

certain physiological changes in our body, such as increased adrenalin in the bloodstream. This is not what we mean by anger. The same can be said of love. It makes no sense to speak of our brain or heart being religious. If we are religious, it is not our body that is religious. It is the *whole* man, and this is more than just his body. If we love God, it is not only our body that loves him. We love him with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The problems become even more pronounced when we discuss *epistemological predicates*, those propositions about belief and knowledge. Truth or falsehood is impossible to determine solely on a material or physical basis. Assume that at the present someone believes that it is 1872. This belief is false, but what physical state or part of the body can be identified with the false belief? A physiologist might give us a complete description of all the physical states that one might be in at any particular moment, but it would be impossible to distinguish some of these states as true and others as false.

The Identity Theory

The identity theory is a recent version of materialism, presented and defended by J. J. C. Smart and H. Feigl, among others.

Exposition. The identity theorists use the philosophical distinction between meaning and reference, or connotation and denotation. For example, the “morning star” and “evening star” have different meanings or connotations. However, both expressions have the same denotation or referent—the planet Venus.

Armed with this distinction, the identity theorists claim that mentalistic and physicalistic terms have different meanings or connotations, but that they do as a matter of fact have the same denotations or referents, namely physical phenomena. Not only is the “morning star” and “evening star” an example of this identity but also “water” and “H₂O” as well as lightning and a specific type of electrical discharge. In each of our examples above the discovery of the identity was more than a philosophical discovery; it was, at least in part, an empirical or factual discovery. Sometimes this identity is called *de facto* identity. With regard to mental predicates, they will be shown to be *de facto* identical with brain states, so the identity theorists predict, once science learns more about the function of the brain.

Criticisms. It should be clear that materialism formulated in terms of the identity theory, with its *de facto* rather than logical identity between physical and mental states, does indeed avoid many of the traditional criticisms of older materialism. A thought, for instance, can be identical with a brain event even if a person knows his thought without knowing about the brain, because there is no logical identity between the two, only *de facto* identity. The identity between the thought and the brain state would be an empirical discovery.

The identity thesis, then, is in part an empirical theory which claims that for each particular mental event to occur some particular brain state must exist. However, the evidence which could decide whether there is a correlation between mental events and

brain states is inadequate. We cannot determine whether the theory is true or even probable, although many scientists take it seriously and use it to guide their research. Even if the theory were shown to be true or highly probable, this would not be enough to establish the identity thesis. The identity thesis does not just hold that mental and physical events are related in some systematic, possibly even law-like way, but that they are one and the same event, namely the physical event.

Often the claim that the mental and physical event is the same is supported by appeals to conceptual considerations, "Ockham's Razor" (the simplest explanation is preferred), analogies with other scientific methodologies, and the goal of a unified science. All of these considerations are noble and praiseworthy, but they do not decide our question.

Another objection to the identity theory is the location problem. While it makes sense to ask the location of a physical event, it is absurd to ask the location of a mental event. Since two connotatively different things are the same event only if they occupy the same space, it cannot be the case that thoughts and brain events are identical.

Still another criticism to the identity theory is that it cannot account for a distinguishing feature of mental events, namely their privileged access by the subject who has them. An essential characteristic of a thought that is ours, so it is argued, is that we have privileged access to it. If mental events were really reducible to, or even basically, physical events, then they would be public. *Any* person would be in as advantageous a position as the subject to report the mental occurrence. The fact that this is not so suggests that mental events are not physical events.

The central problem for materialists of whatever form is that they attempt to reduce man to nothing but his body, or matter. Philosophically and theologically this does not seem to be justifiable.

Idealism

The opposite extreme of materialism is idealism.

Exposition. Idealism, as we discussed earlier (p. 144), is most prominently associated with Bishop George Berkeley. He maintained that the mind and its perceptions are the only things that exist: to be is to be perceived. Thus, man is not reducible to matter, but is reducible to mind (see chap. 7).

Criticisms. Despite the brilliance and skill of Berkeley's arguments, his idealism has never seemed very plausible. Few have agreed that a simple statement about putting one's hand on his forehead is ultimately equivalent in meaning to a highly complex and sophisticated statement about the sense perceptions of God. While there may be some value to viewing the world as Berkeley did, in the end it yields an incoherent and impractical picture of reality. It too is guilty of the reductive error.

The Double-Aspect Theory

A final form of monism is the double-aspect theory.

Exposition. The double-aspect theory holds that the physical and the mental are simply different aspects of something that is itself neither physical nor mental (although some philosophers claim that it is both). The most notable thinker who took this approach to the mind-body problem is Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza claimed that man could be considered an extended, bodily being as well as a thinking being. Neither of these characterizations alone or in combination exhaustively describe the underlying substance of man. According to Spinoza these different aspects of man are full descriptions of man under differing categories. Man can be described from a psychological and from a physical aspect. Other philosophers have preferred to talk of these as differing *levels* rather than aspects.

While some philosophers have limited the double-aspect theory to man alone, others have called themselves *panpsychists*, ascribing to all physical objects a corresponding mental aspect. Spinoza claimed this was true, although he believed that in some entities the mental aspect was so crude or primitive it did not deserve the name “mind.”

Criticisms. While the double-aspect theory does attempt to transcend traditional mind-body problems, there are two reasons given for rejecting it.

First, it is argued that there is a need to explain the nature of the underlying unity. Spinoza called it “God or Nature.” But this is confusing and contradictory, since God is infinite and nature is not. Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century called this underlying unity “the Unknowable.” To P. F. Strawson, a contemporary philosopher, the unity is the *person*, an entity capable of both physical and mental predicates. We can ascribe to it both states of consciousness and corporeal characteristics. But such a description is no help, it is argued, and we are back to the starting point. In response to this criticism some philosophers have claimed that it is not necessary to know *what* something is, but only to know *that* it is. While we cannot define the what, we still know that it does exist.

A second problem for the double-aspect theory is that we need a clearer definition of the word *aspect*. The advantage of talking about differing aspects or viewpoints is that the differences are not inherent in the thing under discussion, but exist in the *way* the thing is approached; in relation to purposes, outlooks, or conceptual schemes, and so on.

Some philosophers have distinguished between the aspects by approaching man “from the inside,” as subject, or “from the outside,” as object. To view man from the inside is to view him mentally, and to view him from the outside is to view him physically. But some would argue this is of no help, since talk of insides and outsides already presupposes a physical body “surrounding” a central self or mind, which begs the question if the underlying unity is neutral. Other philosophers have said “inside” and “outside” are only metaphors. If so, then they must be defined before any progress can be made.

Some philosophers have found the double-aspect theory unacceptable because it does not advance our understanding of the mind-body problem; it merely gives us more verbal baggage. Others claim that it is indeed helpful; the fact that it cannot fully explain the view does not prove it to be false.

Dualistic Theories of Man

Dualistic theories of man distinguish not only between the meanings (connotations) of mental and physical expressions but also between their referents (denotations). As we shall see, there are radically different theories of nonidentity. Some hold the expressions refer to differing *substances*, others to differing *events*, others to differing *properties* or *relations*, and still others to differing *states*. We shall discuss five forms of dualistic theories: interactionism, parallelism, pre-established harmony, occasionalism, and epiphenomenalism.

Interactionism

The simplest and most common dualistic way of expressing the relationship between our bodies and our minds is interactionism.

Exposition. According to interactionism, minds and bodies together constitute the human person in this present state. Mind and body causally act upon one another in that mental events may cause bodily events, and vice versa.

This position finds support in the way in which we often describe our experience. Pain, a mental event, can cause us to wince or withdraw a hand, which are bodily events. Our thoughts can either slow or hasten the rate of our heartbeat. Fear can cause us to perform physical acts such as lifting a heavy object that normally would be beyond our powers. Finally, our emotions can cause us to shake or tremble.

We also describe bodily events as having mental effects. A decaying tooth can cause a dull ache, a bright light can produce an afterimage, and a fine piece of music can bring us a sense of well-being.

Descartes presented interactionism in its classic form. He held that there are two kinds of substances, mental substance and corporeal (“extended”) substance. According to Descartes, the defining property of the mental substance is that it thinks, and the essential characteristic of a corporeal substance is that it is extended (has spatial magnitude). Man alone possesses both of these substances, and in the human person the one can effect events in the other. They form a single system of interacting parts. (While Descartes formulated his view in terms of *substances*, the position might just as easily be formulated in terms of mental events or states. Commitment to interactionism does not entail a commitment to mental substance.)

Criticisms. In spite of its popularity, two major objections have repeatedly been brought against interactionism. The first objection is empirical in character. Some have charged that interactionism contradicts the physical principle of the conservation of matter and energy: if interactionism is true it means that physical energy is lost when physical events cause mental events, and gained when mental events produce physical events.

The second criticism grows out of the radical distinction which Descartes makes between the mental and the physical. If indeed they are as diverse as Descartes claims, then how can they ever be causally connected? It would appear that one could not effect the other.

Both of these objections, however, can be answered. With respect to the first objection one can respond that the principle of the conservation of matter and energy does not apply to the complicated area of brain phenomena. Or one might deny that energy is lost or gained at all, and thus the conservation principle is intact. It could be argued that it is not necessary to postulate the loss of physical energy in performing the non-physical.

The second objection, that the mental and physical are too diverse to be causally connected, rests on the assumption that a cause contains all the same properties as the effect. This assumption is not widely held today. For instance, electrical activity may result in a magnetic field, which in turn may affect the position of a piece of iron. In this example there is no apparent similarity between cause (electrical activity) and effect (the movement of a piece of iron). Would we, however, be justified in denying a causal relationship among the effects above? One might answer that we are not justified in deciding a priori what can and cannot be causally connected. Moreover, we are not required to explain *how* a causal relationship exists before we are justified in asserting *that* one does exist. Further, the Christian would assert that though God and man are diverse in their natures, they have a causal relationship.

There is, however, a third objection to interactionism that is more troublesome. The criticism is that mental events are not causes but rather are the *outcome* of physical events, which are the actual causes. Notice that the claim is different from materialism or the identity theory. This objection does not *reduce* mental events to the physical; it claims that the causality goes in one direction, from the physical to the mental (see *epiphenomenalism*, p. 191). As physiology continues to advance, so it is argued, we will see the priority of the physical. Then the causal power of the mental will be seen to be an illusion. Given the present state of scientific knowledge, it is impossible to determine whether this objection to interactionism is justified.

Parallelism

Parallelism is one of the views about the relationship of mind and body that emerged as a response to the objection that the mental and physical are too diverse to be causally connected.

Exposition. Parallelism holds that the mind and the body are correlated in a systematic manner but that there is no interaction, direct or indirect, between either. The mind and

the body are like two trains running side by side, parallel but unconnected. The motivation for this view is clearly to avoid the problems of interactionism. Having concluded that causal interaction is impossible, the parallelist simply claims that every mental event is systematically correlated with some physical event or events. Whenever the mental events occur, so do the physical, but neither can be said to be the cause of the other.

Criticisms. Parallelism seems to be unacceptable on at least two grounds. First, there are cases when mental activity ceases but bodily functions do not, as in a comatose individual. Even more generally this occurs (to a lesser degree) during normal sleep. If there is a one-to-one correspondence between mind and body, how can these two phenomena be explained?

There is, secondly, a more serious reason for rejecting parallelism. This position is at odds with our usual empirical procedures. The parallelist is forced to admit that the systematic connection between mental events and their corresponding physical events is *purely accidental*. This runs counter to a whole trend in modern scientific method and statistical technique which would deny that such a high degree of correlation could be purely accidental. If we are ready to accept the supposed systematic relationship as the product of chance, then we must be equally ready to accept that some of the most solid findings of science might be the result of chance. If this is so, then the whole structure of modern science and its methodology is undermined.

Preestablished Harmony

Preestablished harmony is a slight, but important variation on parallelism. Leibniz argued that God made mind and body perfect mechanisms, and at their origin synchronized them. By this preestablished harmony they would be forever in phase without subsequent intervention. This theory gives the philosopher a way to relate mental and physical substances or events.

In this view God replaces the chance of parallelism to avoid the troublesome second objection. But the seeming relationship between mind and body is still quite weak, for there is no causal relationship. They merely have parallel, preestablished histories.

Occasionalism

Occasionalism, a view held as early as Augustine, is another response to interactionism, and as such is related to the previous dualistic theories.

Exposition. Many philosophers after Descartes accepted his radical distinction between mind and body, and did not accept causal interaction between mind and body. At the same time most thinkers admitted that there did seem to be some kind of systematic relationship between the two substances. There was a need to explain how this could be.

A group of philosophers, the most notable of which were Arnold Geulincx (1625–1669) and Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715), developed a theory which claimed that God is the connecting link between mind and body. When we will (mental) to move our foot, then on that occasion God moves our foot (physical). Or if there is a car in our field of vision (physical), God causes a visual image of a car (mental) to be seen. Occasionalists commonly used the analogy of two clocks that are synchronized not because of some direct causal connection but because they had the same maker. Mental and physical events do not ever affect one another, but they are rather the result of God's activity.

The occasionalists were so thoroughgoing that they denied any causal relationship between any natural events. God's causal intervention was necessary for even the simplest of actions, such as one billiard ball striking another billiard ball. As it turns out, God is the single true cause in the universe. Without His providential intervention none of the regularities in nature would occur.

Criticisms. Occasionalism only gained popularity for a short period of time, but it is important to study as a transition to more sophisticated views of mind and body.

There are two reasons for rejecting occasionalism. The first is that occasionalists see no relationship between mind and body. Any supposed connection is mere illusion, caused by God to appear as a connection. What is more problematic is that occasionalists deny any genuine causal connection even in natural events (our billiard ball example).

The second objection is that the theory pictures God in a way entirely out of keeping with the biblical record. God is continually intervening within the causal chain. God is making our arm move, a visual image appear, and two billiard balls strike one another. The Bible teaches that, while God *can* intervene directly into His creation. He often uses what have been called *secondary means* to accomplish His purposes. For example, in creation God made vegetation, trees, animals, and man, but He then commanded them to produce "after their kind" (Gen. 1:11 , 12 , 21 , 24 , 25 , 28). This is not to deny that He is ultimately in control of secondary means of providence, but it does deny that God is the single, proximate cause of everything that happens.

Epiphenomenalism

Epiphenomenalism is an old theory, but it is still attractive to some philosophers today.

Exposition. If we reject parallelism, preestablished harmony, and occasionalism because we feel that there is overwhelming evidence for some kind of causal connection between the mind and the body, then epiphenomenalism is an attractive alternative. Epiphenomenalism holds that the causal relationship or interaction goes only in one direction, from body to mind. Thus, physical events have mental effects, but not vice versa. Epiphenomenalism, properly understood, is not merely a sophisticated materialism. There are genuinely two entities or substances, mind and body. There are genuine mental events, but their occurrences are *entirely* dependent upon the physical. The physical is primary, the mental is by-product.

The chief support for epiphenomenalism is to be found in the contention of modern science that the physical world is an autonomous system. It is claimed that someday our knowledge will advance to the point where it will be possible to explain all events in the physical world—even human behavior—in terms of physical events and physical laws. While verification of this prediction is not yet possible, those who hold the theory live in hope of such a prospect.

Criticisms. The primary objection to the epiphenomenal theory is that in spite of the epiphenomenal claim to the contrary, mental events apparently are able to cause physical events. Epiphenomenalists argue that the supposed mental causal efficacy is an illusion. The brain event that causes a wince *also* causes the sensation of pain. Because the sensation of pain occurs slightly prior to our wince, we incorrectly assume that the pain causes the wince. In fact, we know nothing of what is taking place in the brain. Epiphenomenalists assert that some brain event can and will in fact be shown to precede our experience of pain.

Conclusion

The problem of the mind and the body remains a source of philosophical dispute. Some philosophers have attempted without success to show that it is not a real problem. As we have seen, there have been many proposed solutions to the problem, but there is at present no solution that is decidedly superior on purely philosophical grounds. Most contemporary philosophers of mind hold to some form of the identity theory, interactionism, or epiphenomenalism, at the same time recognizing that there are problems with each view.

As Christians, however, we can go a little further, even if we cannot settle all the philosophical issues. First, although many contemporary philosophers have adopted the identity theory, which is a highly sophisticated form of materialism and monism, such a position is clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The Bible unmistakably teaches that man is more than the purely material. Man's body was taken from the dust of the ground, but God breathed His breath into man (Gen. 2:7). Man, then, is *something more* than simply a body. Christian theologians have disagreed whether that something more is merely immaterial or whether it is soul and spirit. The point of agreement, however, is that man is not reducible to matter. Therefore, unqualified monistic theories must be rejected.

But that is not all. For Christian theologians are agreed that an important part of the something more which characterizes man is that in Scripture, he is said to have been created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26 , 27). Male and female are the bearers of God's image. While we may disagree as to the exact nature and content of that image, we are agreed that it is this aspect of our constitution that gives us our immense worth. Although people are sinners and worthy of eternal punishment, they are of infinite value because they bear the image of God. Man is so precious to God that He sent His son, Jesus Christ, to die for us.

Suggested Readings

Aristotle *De Anima*

Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, meditation 2

Evans, C. Stephen. *Preserving the Person*

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*

MacKay, David. *Clockwork Image*

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¹Geisler, N. L., Feinberg, P. D., & Feinberg, P. D. (1980). *Introduction to philosophy : A Christian perspective* (Page 179). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.