

Has the Mind-Body Problem Advanced over the Years?

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1. Introduction

The mind-body problem is one of the deepest puzzles of philosophy. It is the problem of giving an account of how the mind or mental processes are related to bodily states or processes. Ever since its beginning in antiquity the problem has intrigued philosophers and theologians. Even today philosophers of mind, neuroscientists and psychologists are all concerned with this problem. Since René Descartes (1596- 1650) introduced the famous Cartesian Dualism, separation of mind and matter into two different but interacting substances, much discussion has followed. Current debate in philosophy of mind has become too technical for a layman to follow although the mind/body problem continues to enjoy a great popular appeal. We ask like Susan Greenfield (Greenfield 2002) *How does a wrinkled lump of grey matter weighing little more than a kilogram manage to think, love, dream and feel such widely different sensations as raw pleasures and numbing depressions?* This of course assumes that the human brain is the seat of all mental activity.

2. The problem

It has been customary to divide loosely the problems about the human mind into easy and hard ones. The former refer to empirical brain research and experimental psychology, implying that there are no mysteries and we are making rapid progress in these fields. On the other hand there are philosophical problems about the relation between mind and body which can be termed the hard problems. Whether there has been any progress in the philosophy of mind over the years is debatable. The answer would depend on what we mean by philosophy and by progress.

A principal problem in the philosophy of mind, as already mentioned, was kicked off by René Descartes by postulating two different kinds of substances in our bodies: *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). This crude form of substance dualism opened up so many difficulties (how to fit it in with all our beliefs of science?) that it is no longer pursued by either scientists or philosophers perhaps with the exception of Karl Popper or John Eccles.

According to Franz Brentano (1838-1917) the mentality of mental phenomena consists in their *intentionality*—their aboutness or their being directed upon an object. Many of my beliefs, desires, intentions are directed to external objects. But how could processes in my brain be *about* anything? Of course, there are many mental activities and emotions which are not *about* anything in particular.

The problems of the mind can be enumerated in terms of further ideas, e.g. Mental Causation or Intentional Causation: How could a conscious mental state have any impact on a physical object such as a human body?

The major problem, however, remains the problem of Consciousness (or self-consciousness), the feeling of subjectivity, the feeling of 'I'. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) stated that consciousness was the greatest wonder of all wonders. David Chalmers opens his new book *The*

Conscious Mind (Chalmers 1996) as follows: *What is Consciousness? Conscious experience is at once the most familiar thing in the world and the most mysterious. There is nothing we know about more directly than consciousness, but it is far from clear how to reconcile it with everything else we know.* Another recent book *Conscious Experience* edited by Thomas Metzinger (Metzinger 1995) begins with these words: *How can consciousness arise in a physical universe? ...Today, the problem of consciousness – perhaps together with the question of the origin of the universe – marks the very limit of human striving for understanding.* To quote another expert: *Consciousness is almost certainly a property of the physical brain. The major mystery, however, is how neurons achieve effects such as being aware of a toothache or the smell of cinnamon. Neuroscience has not reached the stage where we can satisfactorily answer these questions...no one would say we pretty much understand the neurobiological mechanism of awareness (although Dennett's book title *Consciousness Explained* (Dennett 1991), rather misleadingly suggests otherwise. (Patricia Smith Churchland in (Metzinger 1995, p.185))*

3. Some Current Views on the Mind-Body Problem

Starting from Ryle's classic *The Concept of Mind* (1949), through writings of philosophers like Wittgenstein, Davidson, Searle, Dennett, Chomsky, Nagel, McGinn, Smart, Armstrong, Fodor and many others up to today's work in Cognitive Science, the current status of the philosophy of mind is too vast to be meaningfully summarised by me. I can only attempt a subjective thumbnail picture.

We can see basically two schools of thought:

1. The mind-body problem, or the problem of consciousness can never be understood fully however much we may learn about the functions of the brain. We may call this a mysterian or pessimistic view. A related view is that we are asking needlessly meaningless questions which cannot be answered.

2. We are getting closer to an understanding of consciousness by the advances in neuroscience and cognitive science, notwithstanding the fact that science does not claim to be able to explain everything.

Philosophers can be divided into Dualists and Monists. Dualists like Descartes may be rare nowadays but many philosophers do not accept that matter alone can explain mental phenomena and seem to suggest a milder form of dualism.. They argue that any objective physical science would leave an 'explanatory gap' failing to describe what it is like to have a particular experience and failing to explain why there are phenomenal experiences at all.

Other philosophers, called Naturalists or Physicalists or adherents of Identity Theories (mental events are identical with physical events) assert that matter is all that there is for us to study. Consciousness appears as an emergent property from matter, they say. Or, better still, it is suggested that once we develop the

right concepts and ask the right questions we will be able to solve the mind-body problem once and for all.

Wittgenstein has recorded vast amount of his reflections on mental states and subjectivity. Without going into his thoughts on private language argument or access to the inner, we can just recall his repeated declaration that the problems of philosophy would vanish if we attended properly to language. As an example he reminds us that in thinking about the mind we are often in the grip of a picture whose application we do not fully understand (Metzinger 1995 p.133)

A group called Eliminativists (or Eliminative Materialists) counsel the abandonment of the whole set of terms consciousness, self, qualia that usher in the problems of mind and body.

In the heyday of Artificial Intelligence a computational model of the mind (neuro-anatomy and chemistry don't matter) was proposed, but Searle with his Chinese Room example and others have convincingly shown that a computer or a Turing machine cannot have what we call consciousness.

The theory of mind currently in vogue with cognitive scientists is known as functionalism. Functionalism is the modern successor to behaviourism. and arguably is the most influential position on the mind-body relation today (Honderich 1995 p.579). Functionalism says that mental states are constituted by their causal relations to one another and to sensory inputs and behavioural outputs. (Guttenplan 1994 p.323)

4. Nature of Philosophy and Progress in Philosophy

Philosophy can be taken either as a guide to life or as a clarification of our concepts (Sanatani 2001). Despite rumours about the death of analytical philosophy, we prefer the modern Anglo-American style of philosophising and appreciate the views of Wittgenstein on the nature of philosophy. W.V. Quine and Bertrand Russell thought philosophy as an extension of science, Wittgenstein differed. The following quotations will give an idea of Wittgenstein's views. (Sanatani 2001)

Philosophy is wholly distinct from science, and its methods and products are not those of the sciences. (NL)

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thought.

Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. (T 4.112)

Philosophy is not a cognitive pursuit; there are no new facts to be discovered by philosophy; only new insights. ((PR; PG 256)

Philosophy seeks to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language (PI #132)

The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness. (PI 255)

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (PI 109)

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not survey (übersehen) the use of our words. Our grammar is lacking in perspicuity (Übersichtlichkeit). A perspicuous representation produces this understanding, which consists in seeing connections... (PI 122)

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything... (PI 126)

With such views Wittgenstein would have hardly believed in the progress in the philosophy of mind, or for that matter in any type of philosophy over the ages. But then how to evaluate the production of page after page of philosophical writings, including perhaps 30,000 pages by Wittgenstein himself? One might ask, like John Haldane, Has Philosophy Made a Difference and Could it be Expected To? (O'Hear 2001).

According to Haldane a common complaint seems to be that philosophy is characterised by a general and marked failure to make progress. What was being discussed in antiquity about substance, identity, time, knowledge, value and virtue.. is still being debated today with no incontestable sign of advance let alone of resolution. Haldane further says that this complaint comes not only from outside philosophy but is also heard from within philosophy, especially from those attracted to a scientific conception of philosophy. (O'Hear 2001, p.155).

Like Wittgenstein we do not accept a scientific view of philosophy. We believe philosophy should clarify our questions and thereby somehow show if our questions are at all answerable or not. If a question is clearly answerable and objectively verifiable, it ceases to be a philosophical question and ends up being a scientific one as has often happened in the past. There are no new philosophical questions to discover only new insights are provided by worthy philosophers. A philosophical analysis throws fresh light on age-old problems and provides valuable insight but rarely gives a clear-cut yes/no answer or prescribes what we should or should not do. Again with Wittgenstein we believe philosophy has a therapeutic value, it can remove our intellectual worries and bring us a peace of mind. In other words, philosophy as a discipline is one that soothes rather than solves but is no less constructive or important for that.

These remarks can be illustrated by the current status of the mind/body problem. The scientific study of the brain has made remarkable progress. But the age old philosophical questions remain unanswered. With the proposal of new theories and models the modern philosophy of mind has become a very rich, and at the same time a technical field where only a specialist can find his way. But we have still not found within our brains the seat of consciousness, nor any extra-material substance proposed by Descartes. We are still groping for an understanding.

References

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