

# Philosophical Conversations

## An Interactive Newsletter

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*Philosophical Conversations* is designed to stimulate thought and discussion, and keep you philosophically active. The format will be the presentation of a brief position paper to which responses are encouraged. In the subsequent issues selected responses may be published in addition to a new position paper. We invite you to respond to this position paper, either by contacting the author or the Department. (Addresses, mail and e-mail, and phone numbers and fax numbers are provided at the end of this issue).

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## The Mind-Body Problem

Professor Harry Deutsch\*

The mind-body problem is the problem of understanding the nature of the mind and its relation to the body and to the physical world in general. As you may recall, Descartes thought that minds were *not* part of the physical world of tables and chairs, blood and brains. The mind, according to Descartes, is wholly "immaterial"—which is not to say that it is *irrelevant*—but rather to say that it is not made of matter, i.e. it is not made of stuff constituted by atoms and obeying the laws of physics. The Cartesian idea of a shadowy mind, soul, spirit, or self, which is not itself a physical, much less a biological, phenomenon, has been spurned by most 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers as the myth of the "ghost in the machine." (See G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*.) Contemporary philosophers and psychologists, even those with religious predilections, reject Cartesian Dualism (the dualism of immaterial mind and material body) as bad philosophy and worse science. For most of this century, research on the nature of the mind deliberately excluded the conscious mind as a proper object of scientific study. According to behaviorism, the conscious element in perception, sensation, memory and thought is, from a scientific viewpoint, an illusion. Subjective experience—for example, the pain you actually feel when you have a toothache—is not directly objectively observable and hence is not scientifically explainable. Your toothache is not directly observable by me—I can't feel it—and in this sense your toothache is not an objective phenomenon, at least not according to the traditional understanding of objectivity. The causes and effects of pain, such as the way you behave when you are in pain, are objectively observable, however, and hence the only sensible way to formulate a theory of the mind is to study observable behavior. Hence, behaviorism.

This view of the conscious mind has been abandoned for the most part, although it survives as part of the most recent physicalist paradigm: Computational Functionalism. According to this view, the mind is to the brain as software is to hardware. That's the "computational" part. But, furthermore, mental states are to be characterized not in terms of their intrinsic nature but in terms of their "causal role", i.e. the events that produce the state and the events it produces—which is really just the behaviorist's stimulus/response syndrome. Thus, a particular mental state, say, a sensation such as pain, is identified not in terms of what it is like to have the sensation, how it feels, but rather in terms of its publicly observable causes and effects. Moreover, to be in pain is to be running (or implementing) a program, though no doubt a very complicated one, and one which, in human beings, consists in sequences of neural firings. One of the important advantages of this theory is that it allows for the "multiple realizability" of mind. A martian or a computer can be in pain provided each is in a state that occupies the relevant causal role. (of course, little attention is paid to the obvious problem of giving a complete account of the causal role of *any* mental state.) On this view, the mind is not necessarily a biological phenomenon and might also be present in electronic systems (computers) or weknownotwhat systems. A few self-styled "neurophilosophers", however, maintain that minds as we know them are realizable only in biological systems, as we know them.

Recently there have been some noteworthy challenges to the physicalist-functionalist orthodoxy and, in response, some vigorous defenses of it. This debate is one of the most vital developments in philosophy, but it is not confined to philosophy. As the century comes to an end, philosophers have teamed up with psychologists, computer scientists, neuroscientists, physicists, *et al*, to make a frontal assault on the mind-body problem. This new multidisciplinary research program is called "cognitive science" and there are now cognitive science departments and programs at most universities and colleges. (ISU has a cognitive science minor.) Now, "recently" in academia means roughly within the last 25 years! Thus, one of the first and most powerful challenges to the physicalist orthodoxy was contained in an article entitled "What Is It Like To Be a Bat" published in 1974 by Thomas Nagel, currently a professor of philosophy at NYU. Nagel argued that no amount of information about the brain and behavior of bats could possibly tell us what it would be like to be a bat, or to have bat-consciousness. Nagel chose the example of bats because he thought that the conscious experiences of bats was such an alien form of consciousness that we human beings could not even form a conception of what it would be like to have such experiences. Nagel's point is that the physicalist's description of a conscious experience leaves out the key ingredient of it—namely, what it is like to have it! A similar argument, due to Frank Jackson, an Australian philosopher, goes like this: Mary has lived her entire life in a totally black and white environment. But she has become a leading physiologist with a specialty in color vision. She knows every objective scientific fact about color vision it is possible to know. But there is

something about color vision she does not know. She does not know what it is like to see a colored object, say, a red object! And nothing in her experiments on monkey's brains or in her textbooks can possibly give her this information. Once again the point is that the physicalist's account of the nature of mental states leaves out their crucial characteristic, namely, the inner, first-person, subjective, what-it's like-to-be in one of them. When combined with other related arguments such as Searle's Chinese Room argument and Chalmers's Zombie argument (see John Searle "Minds, Brains, and Programs" and David Chalmers's *The Conscious Mind*) these arguments present a powerful case against traditional physicalism. They have led some to turn back to dualism, attempting to give it a naturalistic twist. This is Chalmers's approach. Others argue that precisely because our access to the conscious mind is subjective we will never be able to comprehend it in scientific terms. Colin McGinn, a philosopher at Rutgers, has developed this view in a paper entitled "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?" Still others, most notably Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts who has written book after book on the mind-body problem, attempt to pooch pooch the idea of subjective consciousness as little more than a left over Cartesian superstition. One person was quoted in Newsweek as saying that "Consciousness may be an evanescent illusion." How ironic! You may recall that for Descartes the one thing that *couldn't* be illusory was one's own consciousness.

Now here is the punch line: In a recent paper entitled "Subjective Physical Facts" a graduate student of Colin McGinn's has made an interesting proposal. He suggests that in fact Mary *doesn't* know all the purely physical facts about color vision when she is stuck in the black and white environment. She doesn't know what it is like to see a red object, and that itself is a physical fact—a subjective physical fact. Standard physicalism has always assumed that the physical was invariably objective, that any purely physical fact could be apprehended by anyone. Science, after all, is written entirely in the third person and it has been universally assumed that no one has any special access—or lack of access—to any genuine physical fact. But each of us does have a special kind of access to our own consciousness and lack of access to that of others. (And don't let philosophical sophisticates brow beat you into thinking you don't have such special access.) The proposal, then, is to rehabilitate physicalism so as to allow for non-objective physical phenomena. There clearly are purely physical facts that are essentially *indexical*. And it is generally conceded that there is a close connection between subjectivity and indexicality; that, for instance, experience is always in the first-person. (Indexicals are words like "I", "now", and "here" that have certain strange features that put them on the cutting edge of semantic theory. For example, "I" is not like a proper name since *you* can't use it to refer to me even though *I* can.) Here's an example of an indexical physical fact: Suppose someone sends me flowers (but no one ever has!) and when they arrive I think to myself "The flowers are here." The thought that "the flowers are here" is different from the thought that "the flowers are at 1103 Broadway," (1103 Broadway is my address) since I—or someone else—could know that the flowers are "here" without knowing what address is "here." (Conversely, one could know that the flowers arrived at such and such address without knowing that they have arrived "here.") If there are *indexical* physical facts, why not *subjective* physical facts as well? McGinn's student explores the connection between subjectivity and indexicality in detail in his doctoral dissertation. The student, by the way, is Max Deutsch, my son.

\*Harry Deutsch received his PhD in philosophy from UCLA in 1982 and joined the ISU faculty that same year. In 1994 he received an NEH fellowship to complete a book on the philosophy of language. He has published widely in the areas of logic, language, metaphysics, mind, and most recently, aesthetics. He is currently on sabbatical and working on a book titled "The Metaphysics of the Imagination."

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