

Carter - Material Minds

The issue of mind-dependent existence vs. mind-independent existence raises the question: *What is a mind?* Only by answering this question can a decisive position be taken on what is or is not mind-dependent. It may be that the whole notion of mind-dependent existence can be dispensed with altogether. At least some philosophers would argue for that goal. How might such an argument proceed? One way to begin to formulate such an argument is to ask what a Mind is. Can this question be answered in terms of the notion of Substance?

Descartes and Dualism

Both minds and bodies are *substances*, according to many philosophers. Some of these philosophers would say that the mind is a primary substance in Aristotle's sense of the term.

Descartes was one of these philosophers. According to Descartes, minds are immaterial, active and unextended. Bodies are inactive, material and extended. Minds and bodies are utterly different in their essential natures.

Material things undergo changes, according to Descartes, only by the application of the force of *motion* in other material things, through direct contact. Minds also undergo changes, according to Descartes. But minds undergo two very different sorts of changes. One sort of change happens when the mind itself acts. Example: trying to understand something, trying to remember something, trying to solve a problem, deciding to start a project, etc. Another sort of change happens when the mind is affected by something other than itself. Examples: seeming to hear a sound, seeming to see light, being surprised by an event.

Suppose, for the time being that the first kind of change wherein the mind itself acts is not puzzling or problematical. How can the second kind of change in the state of a mind happen?

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How can the mind be affected by something? As we ordinarily think of this sort of change, it is commonly brought about, at least in part, by some state of one's body. Thus, we say that the flashing of light in the sky causes one to seem to see light as a result of changes the light causes in our eyes and nervous system. Descartes's theory of the mind accepts this ordinary/scientific way of thinking about how changes in the state of one's mind may happen. But Descartes' theory of mind is much more specific than anything in our ordinary way of talking about minds. We do not, ordinarily work out for ourselves just what the nature of a mind may be. Descartes did. Moreover, he did this together with working out a precise way of conceiving the nature of material things. Material things do not have powers of action. All of their changes are really reactions to events.

Elizabeth's question: How can something immaterial and unextended determine the movement of something material and extended (i.e., body parts) so as to perform voluntary acts? How can the necessary *contact* between them occur, if one is material and the other immaterial?

Descartes' conception of the mind requires that a person has a mind as one of his/her *proper parts* and a body as the other of his/her proper parts. But this only reinforces the power of Elizabeth's question. Does Descartes's definition of a mind portray minds as things that are more puzzling than they are explanatory?

Suppose one adopts the following (commonsense?) definition of a mind.

A person's mind is that proper part of the person which, in normal circumstances, is apt to produce deliberate, intentional behavior.

This definition of a mind makes mind's causal role in producing deliberate bodily actions its essential, defining feature.

Perhaps an advantage of this way of defining what minds are is that this definition is at least initially more plausible than Descartes' definition of Minds. It does not explicitly require that the mind is something immaterial and thus does not lead directly to the problem pointed out by Elizabeth.

A simple example of how this definition of mind explains what minds are would be that Jack's making an insulting remark to Jill is caused by Jack's desire to insult Jill together with his belief that if he says certain words to her she will be insulted. The movements of Jack's lips, teeth, tongue, etc are caused by this *belief* together with this *desire*.

Minds are defined to be things that cause actions insofar as they are things having states, the occurrence of which cause certain bodily motions

It is difficult to determine whether Descartes thinks that this causal role is *an essential defining feature* of the mind. Materialists (e.g. David Armstrong) deny that an immaterial mind could play this causal role. On behalf of their own support for an anti-dualist position, they advance arguments like the following:

1) A person's mind is (essentially) that proper part of the person that normally produces this person's deliberate behavior.

2) Scientific research reveals that it is physiological activity in a person's brain that normally produces this person's deliberative behavior.

So, 3) A person's mind is his/her brain, (a material substance)

But can the essential nature of minds be defined in terms of this causal role?

Is anger, for example, whatever the inner states are which typically produce such behavior as shouting, flushing, clenching fists, trembling, etc?

Some phenomenological objections to the casual role definition of mind:

Someone might be caused to be in these same internal physiological states but also prevented from having any sort of inward feeling when they behave in ways typical of an angry person. Would they then really be angry? If all inward feeling were absent but the behaviors and their inner physiological causes were still going on, would not these behaviors better be described as those of a cleverly controlled, but mindless, entity?

Critics of the causal role definition of mind maintain that it is not the causal role of mental states which captures their essential nature but how it feels to be in those states. Hence, this objection is called a phenomenological objection.

Possible materialist responses. to the phenomenological objection.

1) The case of programmed Alice is irrelevant since the causal role definition specifies that the inner physiological states are those which normally bring about the behavior.

Obviously, artificially induced ones are not the normal ones.

2) It is a mistake to define mental states in terms of the way they feel “from the inside”.

This actually makes it impossible to define them, except by each person in a *purely private* way, and that would make it impossible for anyone to know anything about the mental states of others or even whether anyone else has mental states at all.

Many non-dualists would say that, in fact, each of us knows a great deal about the mental states of others. Application of mental state terms to anyone, including oneself, would be impossible if only purely private criteria governed the application of such terms. In fact, the application of these terms is governed by public rules and is made possible by such public rules.

For example, it is true as a general rule that, when someone is in a highly dangerous situation and they are trembling, pale, bug-eyed, panting, whimpering and their heart is beating wildly, they are *afraid*. It is publicly observable *behaviors* such as these that mental states like fear are *essentially* connected with. So, the private, phenomenological character of these mental states is not what defines their essential nature.

Another potential objection (by Donald Davidson) to the causal role theory of mind argues that there is no causation without causal laws. Only if there are psychophysical laws relating mental states and bodily behavior would it be possible to define the mind in terms of its causal role in producing deliberate behavior. There are laws governing purely physical (non-psychological) phenomena (heating, cooling, electricity/magnetism, light, gravity, etc.). But, some would argue, there are no psychophysical laws. Therefore, one might argue, the causal role theory of mind is false.

An **epiphenomenalist** would agree with the claim that mental states do not cause bodily behaviors. Mental states themselves are caused by inner physiological events, but the mental states, in turn, do not cause bodily behavior. The bodily behavior is caused by whatever are the same inner physiological events that cause the mental states. Mental states as such are causally impotent. Even though it seems to us that mental states are the causes of our deliberate actions, this is only an illusion.

So, the argument continues, since it is a mistake to identify mental states with the inner causes of behavior, the mind cannot be identified with the brain, according to epiphenomenalists (as well as cartesian dualists).

Davidson's Materialism

The great difficulty with epiphenomenalism is that it is a position according to which it is impossible to explain any deliberate bodily action by reference to any of our mental states. Our beliefs, desires, choices, hopes, fears, attitudes, feelings, really have no connection with anything we say or do. If you want to understand why a person did or said something, you can only do so by finding out what is happening in their brains.

So, in fact, if epiphenomenalism is true, very few people ever understand why anyone says or does anything. Nearly all of us are just mistaken in supposing (as we constantly do) that we do and say what we do or say because of what we want, believe, fear, choose or feel.

It is also very difficult to justify holding anyone responsible for anything they do, if epiphenomenalism is correct. To the extent that this consideration justifiably raises doubts about epiphenomenalism, the causal role theory's plausibility is strengthened.

Davidson's materialism begins with a rejection of epiphenomenalism and a defense of the causal role theory of mind. But, he points out, this means we seem to be committed to all three of the following claims.

- 1) Psychological events cause physical events (bodily movements)
- 2) Causality requires laws. Events that are causally related are linked by a law-like tie or connection.
- 3) There are no psychophysical laws. (e.g., that a desire for x is invariably followed by bodily behavior B).

At first, it seems impossible for all three of these propositions to be true. Davidson, however, maintains that all three are defensible and ought to be defended. The key to defending all three is to describe mental states in strictly physical terms. (For example, to describe my desire for a Caribbean vacation as being a complex pattern of firings in a particular region of my brain). Davidson suggests that perhaps the reason why it seems that there are no psychophysical laws is that we harbor a lingering dualism that makes us resist describing mental states in strictly physical terms. That lingering prejudice for dualism may be why some would still find epiphenomenalism appealing.

Davidson notes that Science has begun to try describing mental states in physical terms and there are very good prospects that brain and behavioral scientists will have more and more success in their attempts to do so. Recent progress in the study of the physiological mechanisms of behavior and the workings of the brain gives us good reasons to reject dualism. If we agree with Elizabeth in supposing that the mind must have something to do with producing deliberate actions, we must infer that there are psychophysical laws *yet to be discovered* and these laws are possible only if a materialist theory of mind is correct. The mind will be that proper part of a person that is normally what produces deliberate bodily behavior. Since it is the brain which has this role, the mind is the brain.

The whole notion of mind-dependence as a type of ontological dependence will have to undergo radical re-examination if materialism is true. It would seem to be utter nonsense to argue, as Berkeley did, that ordinary material things like trees exist only in the mind, if the mind is the brain. Indeed, if the only plausible notion of what a mind is were that minds are composed of massively parallel networks of neurons that communicate by chemical and electrical signals, what would this mean for Berkeley's references to the mind of God?

Materialism gains plausibility even without strong assurance of dramatic progress in the neuroscience of human beings from reflecting on the nature of nonhuman creatures. Is it not true beyond doubt that creatures like cats, dogs, gorillas and dolphins have feelings, emotions, expectations, curiosity, intelligence, etc.? On the other hand, there seems to be very little reason to suppose that, in order to have such qualities, these animals must have *immaterial* minds. What about even simpler creatures such as fish, fleas and amoebas? Is there a non-arbitrary line that divides creatures with minds from all mindless beings?