

I have the ideas of matter and thinking, but possibly shall never be able to know whether any mere material being thinks or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own ideas, without revelation, to discover whether Omnipotency has not given to some systems of matter, fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to matter, so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance: it being, in respect of our notions, not much more remote from our comprehension to conceive that GOD can, if he pleases, superadd to matter a faculty of thinking, than that he should superadd to it another substance with a faculty of thinking; since we know not wherein thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the Almighty has been pleased to give that power, which cannot be in any created being, but merely by the good pleasure and bounty of the Creator.

Whether Matter may not be made by God to think is more than man can know. For I see no contradiction in it, that the first Eternal thinking Being, or Omnipotent Spirit, should, if he pleased, give to certain systems of created senseless matter, put together as he thinks fit, some degrees of sense, perception, and thought.

(John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.iii.6)

## **Need Reasons Be Causes?**

Arguments against materialism are almost as old as philosophy itself. The most familiar sort of argument against materialism in ancient philosophy is that of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*.

If you were to say that without having such things – bones and sinews and all other things that I have got – I wouldn't be able to carry out my decisions, you would be right; but to say that my actions are caused by these ... rather than simply by the choice of what is best would be an utterly slipshod sort of argument, Fancy not being able to see that the real cause is different from the mere sine qua non of any cause! (Bluck, R.S.1955)

Mere physical factors, according to Plato, cannot sufficiently explain deliberate actions. Besides physical causes of physical events, there must be non-physical causes of those physical events that constitute human actions. These non-physical causes are the *reasons* we have for acting as we do.

A similar claim has been advanced with regard to the causes of belief. When we believe a proposition by having reasons for it, our belief is allegedly caused in a non-physical way even though various physical conditions may be necessary for basing a belief on reasons. Beliefs that are sufficiently caused by *nothing but* physical events are non-rational beliefs, according to those who advance this claim. Rational beliefs would thus be impossible if all beliefs were caused by physical events alone. The argument is often qualified by a related claim that the causality of reasons is essentially distinguished by the causality of physical events in virtue of the fact that

reasons have propositional content and support beliefs in virtue of their propositional content, whereas mere physical events have no propositional content. Let us follow the example of various other philosophers and call this type of argument against materialism the Argument From Reason (AFR). The following is a general version:

1. If materialism is true, then no event can cause another event in virtue of its propositional content.
2. But some events (reasons) do cause other events (beliefs) in virtue of their propositional content.
3. Therefore, materialism is not true

Mind-body dualism would not follow directly from the soundness of AFR. One would first have to prove that only an immaterial substance is capable of non-physical causation of beliefs in virtue of having reasons. However, AFR is, understandably, considered as one means of supporting mind-body dualism. In any case, dualists are obliged to at least provide reasons for claiming that materialism is false in addition to providing positive reasons in support of dualism. Hence, the relevance of AFR for dualists.

Many other philosophers besides Plato have advanced versions of AFR. Augustine and Descartes are well-known such philosophers. In spite of massive assaults by philosophers and scientists on dualism, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some philosophers have begun to defend it again. A number of them have created somewhat different versions of AFR in order to attack materialism. These include C.S. Lewis, (1947), (1967), (1970) Victor Reppert (2003) and William Hasker (1999)

Another argument against materialism that has antecedents in the history of philosophy is the argument from Unity of Consciousness (UC). Descartes and Leibniz advanced versions of this argument. However, the best-known version is due to Kant. Here is one of the ways that Kant expressed the argument.

... suppose it be the composite that thinks: then every part of it would be a part of the thought, and only all of them taken together would be the whole thought ... For representations (for instance, the single words of a verse) distributed among different beings never make up a whole thought (a verse) and it is therefore impossible that a thought should inhere in what is essentially a composite. It is therefore possible only in a single substance which, not being an aggregate of many is absolutely simple. (Kant, 1965 p. 335)

Kant called this argument a paralogism. He thought that it was a fallacy but his reason for thinking it a fallacy is that he was considering it as a proof of the immortality of the soul. Though he judged that it failed to prove that claim, he did consider it a proof that materialism is false.

He wrote: “From this argument follows the impossibility of explanation in any materialist terms of the constitution of the self as a merely thinking subject.” (Kant, p. 376)

UC also has been revived in somewhat different forms in recent years. Lewis, Reppert and Hasker have advanced it as well as AFR.

It should be noted that the task that confronts the materialist who tries to defend herself against AFR and UC is not to prove that materialism is true but merely to show that *these arguments* do not demonstrate that materialism is *impossible*. AFR aims to show that there *could not be* rational beliefs that are caused by nothing but physical events. UC aims to show that unified consciousness is impossible if the mind or thinking subject is nothing but a composite of physical entities. Opponents of materialism do not take these claims to be *logically* impossible, but they do maintain that such things are *metaphysically* impossible. There could not be such things as unified consciousness or rational inference, if materialism were true. I will examine AFR in this paper. Examination of UC must be deferred to another occasion.

AFR opposes metaphysical naturalism (MN), which entails

C) The physical order is causally closed. All physical effects have physical causes.

So, proponents of AFR claim, if MN is true, then

(MP) either mental phenomena do not exist or they are reducible to, are functions of or supervene upon physical states or processes.

According to advocates of AFR, some of our beliefs are caused by being rationally inferred from other beliefs. But the sort of causation that they allege is involved in rational inference they argue could not be any type of physical causation.

In rational inference, they claim, we are caused to believe P in virtue of

- a) entertaining and accepting certain propositions and
- b) understanding the propositional content of those events and
- c) recognizing that the premises do logically support P

However, they claim, if (MP) were the case, then mental events would be just one type of physical event. So, no beliefs would really be caused by mental events qua mental events. Given C, all events would cause other events solely in virtue of their physical properties. Therefore, none of our beliefs are the result of rational inference. But some of our beliefs are due to rational inference. Therefore, MN is false.

Hasker, for example, in (1999) asserts that “On the assumption of the causal closure principle, no one ever accepts a belief because it is supported by good reasons (p. 68) What Hasker thinks materialists cannot correctly allow, given their metaphysics, is that “... good reasons and the principles of sound reasoning are causally effective in determining the outcome of the assessment process.” Hasker is insisting that rational inference involves a kind of causation. One believes p because of one’s reasons for p. Yet, he claims, this is not mechanical but teleological “causation”. He does not elaborate on what he means by teleological causation. I will take up this point at a later stage in the paper.

Here, then, are the key concepts to be examined:

- 1) Event E has propositional content p.
- 2) S is caused to believe p in virtue of
  - a. Understanding and accepting (the propositional content of) q and
  - b. Recognizing that q logically supports p.
- 3) S is rational in accepting p only if there is a causal connection between
  - 2a, 2b and accepting p.

One possible response to AFR is to argue that it rests on a mistaken presumption, i.e., the presumption that the concept of rational inference entails that reasons for beliefs are causes in some appropriate sense of “cause”.

Another possible response is to argue that reasons could be causes of inferential beliefs in a way that does not violate MN.

I am not absolutely committed to either response but I do believe that one of these two possible responses would be sufficient to refute AFR. I will develop the first response in the paragraphs immediately following this one.

The most pressing issue for the first response concerns how reasons furnish *justification* for the beliefs from which they are inferred. I will adopt the following definition from John Pollock for this purpose.

Believing that P is a reason for S to believe that Q if and only if it is logically possible for S to become justified in believing Q by believing it on the basis of P. (Pollock, p. 36)

Since this definition does not spell out what is involved in believing Q *on the basis of* believing P, it does not automatically rule out the sort of mental causation that proponents of AFR claim is involved in rational inference, I think that no questions are begged by adopting it. Moreover, adopting it does not seem to necessarily guarantee that rational inference *does* involve mental causation either.

Is this basing relation a matter of irreducibly mental causation?

For the time being, I am going to assume that justification is the sort of property that is demanded for beliefs by the standards of doxastic or internalist epistemologies. Justification according to the standards of externalist or reliabilist epistemologies is different matter. I will discuss a reliabilist approach in another paper.

The next step is to add some elements to Pollock's definition that will help specify the basing relation of which he speaks. According to the standards of at least some internalist epistemologies,

S has (good) reasons R for a belief that P if and only if

- a) S is justified in believing P insofar as S believes R, which entails that
- b) the propositional content of R logically supports the propositional content of P and
- c) S can adduce R in support of believing P.

Condition c) immediately above is part of Pollock's general approach. Proponents of AFR are friendly to such a condition since it captures part of what they say is involved in an *agent's* being rational in inferring P from R as opposed to what is involved merely in an *inference's* being rational. Later, I will explain how agent rationality in this sense may be possible, consistent with MN.

We may now pose a crucial question for AFR: *Why* is it necessary for rational inference that inferred beliefs be *caused* in virtue of understanding propositional content and recognizing logical connections between propositions?

One ought to distinguish between beliefs as *psychological* phenomena and beliefs as the propositional *objects or contents* of these psychological phenomena. I contend that, for epistemic purposes of assessing the justification possessed by a belief inferred from another belief, the issue of how the former belief was caused is simply irrelevant.

As long as conditions a), b) and c) above are satisfied, the belief could be caused by anything at all, including drugs or a brain seizure. One would still be justified in believing P simply virtue of those three conditions having obtained.

Whether one has reasons for believing P, what those reasons are and whether they are good enough to justify one's belief can be determined in complete ignorance of the causes of the belief. That is all that is necessary for determining whether or not an inference is rational. So, we may draw the following preliminary conclusion:

A belief is *rationally* inferred from other beliefs only if the inference conforms to the norms or standard of good (deductive or inductive) reasoning. To say that the inference was rational is a *normative* assessment, not a causal explanation, not even if beliefs should happen to be irreducibly mental phenomena and not even if there were an irreducibly mental sort of causation that operates in some psychological contexts.

Recall that proponents of AFR consider it a potent weapon against MN. But, given the previous discussion about the nature of rational inference, what evidence about the capacities or limitations of the human brain would rule out the possibility that, just by using their brains, suitably trained human beings could consciously follow the norms of correct reasoning? To merely assert that brains cannot cognize propositional contents or logical relations between them *simply* because brains are physical things would beg the very question at issue. Thus, I urge proponents of AFT to take the lockean epigram of this paper seriously.

## Part II

Although I think the foregoing arguments for the first type of response are sound, I propose to strengthen them further by exploring the notion of a rational inference from a different angle. I hope that the exploration will be of value and it will be if it serves the purpose of illuminating the concepts of *propositional content* and *logical norms* which have been left unanalysed so far. Once these notions have been made more determinate in ways that respect MN, we will have further reasons to reject AFR.

Proponents of AFR are likely to insist that I have not done anything to explain how MN can handle such notions as propositional content, understanding propositional content or awareness of logical norms.

They maintain that these are crucial elements in rational inference and I suspect that, without some account of these notions, they would be unconvinced by my points concerning the notion of having reasons in the sense of making normatively correct inferences. Hence, the need for the following part of this paper.

My exploration of these notions proceeds by means of using what Wilfrid Sellars once called “the Myth of our Rylean Ancestors”. (Sellars, (1963) ). Sellars asks us to imagine a community of human beings who are just like us except that they have no concept of private, inner mental events. In other words, for them, thinking (for example) is simply “thinking out loud”, i.e., what we call overt speech acts. Sellars names the myth after Gilbert Ryle because Ryle was and remains a widely known exponent of Conceptual Behaviorism; the philosophical thesis that, by definition, creatures have mental properties in virtue of their actual or potential behavior. (See Ryle, )The people in Sellars’ myth are perfectly described by the principles of Conceptual Behaviorism,

For citizens of this community to understand the propositional content of a linguistic utterance is just a matter of their *knowing how to correctly use* that type of utterance for purposes of observation, action and inference. This sort of linguistic know-how, of course includes the ability to criticize their own and others’ linguistic (as we would say) performances, including inferences, by reference to rules for their correct execution.

Indeed, in the mythical community, there is no real distinction between the propositional content (meaning) of an utterance and its *inferential powers*. What a type of utterance *means* in a given community is entirely a matter of what inferences may legitimately be drawn from it, much as being a certain type of Chess piece is entirely a matter of what moves may be legitimately made with it in the context of playing according to the rules of Chess.

In the mythical community, then, an inference by S is rational if and only if it is made in conformity with the community’s deductive and inductive standards and S could tell others (or himself) the propositional components of his inference and how his inference conforms to those standards.

Here, in the cognitive workings of this mythical community, is *one model* of understanding propositional content and recognizing the logical correctness of the form of one's inference. But, on this model, nothing like mental causation is involved in rational inference. It is a model of *linguistically overt* rational inference and it explicitly presents rationality of inference as essentially a normative property.

The point of the Rylean story, for present purposes, is that, in it, we can exhibit a simplified version of the concept of rational inference. It is a version which is thoroughly naturalistic, though not in the same way as the currently most common materialist philosophies of mind are naturalistic. It is a naturalistic model of rational inference because it is specified within a kind of Verbal Behaviorism which postulates a logically necessary connection between capacities for rational behavior and linguistic competence.

In the mythical community, rational inference would not be classified as a type of brain process or even as a matter of linguistic behavior in the sense that we (post-Rylean) persons mean by "linguistic". The citizens of the mythical community would characterize their and their compatriots' overt performances as *mental* activities (thinking, inferring, observing, etc) both because they have no concept of private, unobservable activities and because they have the resources for classifying their performances as *meaningful*, in other words, as having *intentionality*. For them, an intrinsic part of understanding propositional content is their capacity to participate in the public business of criticizing each others' inferential performances according to shared standards of correctness. For them, understanding meaning is itself impossible apart from acting in accordance with shared standards of inferential correctness.

The present point of using the Rylean myth is to increase the plausibility of the claim that reasons are not causes. Reflection on this mythical community is helpful in this regard when we contrast the ways of its citizens with those of our actual (post-Rylean) community which does have the concept of mental activities as private inner episodes and which does distinguish between these and the overt speech episodes that express our mental acts.

Reflection on the contrasts and similarities between us and the Ryleans is helpful for our present purpose because it provides a plausible exposition of the idea of propositional content, i.e. sentential meaning. It provides such an exposition because it allows, indeed requires, that many different phonological items in different speech communities (e.g., German speakers, Chinese speakers, etc.) may have the same propositional content, i.e. the same inferential powers

Since that is true for Rylean communities, we may generalize to the conclusion that there is no theoretical limit on what sorts of items can have a specific propositional content: not only overt speech episodes but private inner states of persons, including what may eventually turn out to be states of human brains.

Even for us post-Ryleans, it is a highly plausible view of rational inference that our reasons for our beliefs are not properly classifiable as causes of our beliefs, whether or not they be turn out to be events in our brains. Even for us post-Ryleans, the rationality of inferences is inherently a matter of their meeting normative standards of inference. Indeed the standards for correct inference would be the same for us as they would be for the Ryleans. They are rules of a very general type, viz. rules of inference, rules of a sort that can only exist within social communities of linguistically competent persons.

Private inner episodes of inferential thinking are subject to the same rules of criticism as are those we perform audibly. They are either rational or less than rational in the same ways. Understanding the propositional content of a private, silent inner thought is the same sort of thing as understanding the propositional content of an overt utterance in the Rylean community: it consists of knowing what inferences may be correctly drawn from the thought.

I realize that this conception of understanding propositional content entails that different people can have more or less understanding of propositional content. That is a point that I find to be quite plausible in any event. So, at present, I see no reason to defend it. .

A recent example of this sort of approach to propositional content and the understanding thereof is the one taken by Robert Brandom. See especially his discussion of “conceptual role semantics’ in his book *Making It Explicit*.

AFR’s requirement that, in a rational inference, one recognizes that the premises of one’s inference support its conclusion should be granted. Normal reliance on logical intuitions of validity or inductive strength is undeniably real, but I contend that this fact does not endanger MN.

One reason it does not endanger MN is that such logical intuitions are not due to any infallible intellectual faculty comparable to Cartesian intuition. Even when our logical intuition is functioning optimally, it is capable of error. For empirical studies that demonstrate the fallibility of logical intuition, see Phillip Johnson-Laird on syllogistic deduction (*Mental Models* and the 1982 studies on inductive reasoning by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman .)

At best, logical intuitions are fallible but highly reliable and result from training, practice, etc. in the application of general rules of inference. In this sense, logical intuition is potentially as reliable, but not more reliable than the perceptual abilities of practiced observers. Given this naturalistic news about logical intuition and the kind of account of the general reliability of logical intuition just alluded to, conceding AFR’s requirement of recognizing logical support of premises for a conclusion can provide no comfort for enemies of materialism.

Metaphysical naturalism may entail that all physical effects have physical causes, but that fact does not further entail that rational inference is impossible either for us or for Ryleans and for the same reasons. Rational inference should not be conceived as involving causation of beliefs at all, not even if, after future advances in neuroscience, beliefs turn out to be states of the brain, all of which occur in strictly deterministic fashion.

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