

Is Your Mind Your Brain?

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When you arrived at the location where you are now perusing this paper, your action was preceded by a prior decision to make the journey: a mental event. Perhaps you did not make the trip alone; you arranged to come with a friend, to meet them beforehand, and to travel with them to where you currently are. That involved prediction on your part of how your friend would behave. That prediction was not a matter of physical comings and goings involving slide rules, the laws of physics and your friend's mass and velocity. It involved your appeal to their mental events and states. You believed that they would meet you because they believed that it was what they ought to do, in the light of what they wanted, given that they are rational human beings.

You do not predict everything that happens in the world in such a way. When you are calculating which way the avalanche will fall, or the boulder roll, during a hazardous mountain hike, you do rely on the slide rule and the laws of physics, at least in their everyday 'folk' variant. If you say that the avalanche has a mind of its own, and that is why it blocked the path, you are speaking metaphorically. So in our dealings with the world we treat some parts of it differently from other parts, and the grounds we give for this difference is that parts of the world have minds and other parts don't. Philosophers have always been puzzled as to what this difference amounts to and this puzzlement has survived scientific progress in the understanding of the physical basis of behaviour. This progress is made up not only of the emergence of an autonomous science of psychology, originally a discipline that was part of philosophy, but also the emergence and spectacular development of the brain sciences, centrally neurophysiology. How can this be? Haven't we understood all that there is to understand about the mind when we know that the mind is the brain?

Philosophy being philosophy, philosophers are worried about the word 'is' in the sentence, 'the mind is the brain'. It has to be understood in the sense of strict and literal identity at a time. In that sense, when we say that the table is the table, we do not mean that it is very similar to some other table, that in another sense of the word 'identity' means, 'is very similar to'. Identical twins are identical in that sense of 'very similar to', but philosophers are interested (typically) in identity strictly conceived. One thing that has seemed, to many philosophers, to follow from the claim that one thing is identical to another is that they would have to share all their properties or features. (It does not follow that if two things share all their features or properties that they are the same.) So if we really believe that the mind is the brain, then the mind and the brain should share all their features. But many philosophers have believed that the mind and the brain do not share all of their features and therein lies the problem. This claim needs to be unpacked considerably. What is it about the mind that we do not believe that a brain can also possess? Candidates for such features are: representation (directedness), rationality, consciousness and, generally, the belief that there is a 'what it is like' to be a mental subject. The philosophers' worry is that we do not find these features in a brain.

Each of you is, I take it, neither a cyborg nor a zombie. If I knock off your head I won't find the white oozing goo that emerges from the heads of the automata in the

Aliens series of movies. Nor are you a zombie in the sense that you are a physical replica of a human being that does not have experiences. The philosophical zombie is not a flesh-eating instance of the undead, but an imagined human subject that is physiologically a replica of you but has no mental life. You, by contrast, do have a conscious mental life. As you sit reading this, you have a distinctive range of experiences, unlike the zombie or the cyborg that has none. This seems to suggest that your mental life has features that a brain does not have. Suppose that I rigged up a means for you to view your brain processes as you were reading this paper. Suppose in a mirror you saw the output from this device, a cerebroscope. How would you reconcile the pale grey mushy stuff you see in the mirror with the complexity of your mental experience? Doesn't your mental life have features that are just missing from the life of a cyborg or a zombie, even if they have functioning brains? What is missing?

Expanding on this line of thought, philosophers have argued that minds can represent, whereas brains cannot. You can think of things, whereas brain states simply are. You can think of the non-existent, such as an imagined mountain made entirely of gold. Your mind represents the world as so and so, whereas nature gives evidence not of complex representation but merely of signs, such as the rings of a tree that indicate its age. The kind of representing that minds do is more complex because, paradoxically, there is a richer sense in which it can go wrong. The tree's rings signal states of affairs without the same capacity for error, but your thoughts can be wrong in a thousand ways (alas).

Second, and related to your capacity to represent, you are a thinker. Your thoughts can be tied together by relations that are rational. If you are thirsty, and you believe that your thirst will be relieved by putting 50p in the Coke machine, and you have 50p, then you ought (other things being equal) to put the money in the machine for the drink to slake your thirst. These mental states of yours did not just happen in sequence. They *were* a sequence, a rational chain of argument. This sequence depended on other mental states of yours. I said you should put the money in the machine if all other things were equal. But suppose that they were not. Suppose that 50p was your only coin for your call home for your parents to come and pick you up and if you drank the Coke you would be stuck overnight at a deserted railway station with a collection of mass murderers. You ought not to buy the Coke but you ought to make the call. So it seems these rational sequences call on a range of mental states that you have and they are all implicated in some kind of network of states. What, in the brain, corresponds to that? What is that at the level of neurons? We know that, in fact, the brain does operate in a network like way. But where is the sensitivity to rationality in such networks? Your thoughts must make sense, whereas your brain events merely are.

Third, you are a conscious subject. There is a difference between being conscious and being non-conscious. For a whole person, that is the difference between being awake and responsive, and being unconscious or asleep. But we also think that this distinction applies to individual states you can be in. You can be conscious of a thought, or a sensation like a pain, or you can be not conscious of those things. The difference seems to be a matter of awareness. How, looking at a brain and its states and events, could we explain the difference between those of its own states of which it is aware and those of which it is not aware? Is it a matter of having an internal

scanner? If so, then brains could be conscious, but so will handheld and laptop computers and many other devices of comparable (and higher) complexity. Are they conscious too?

One way to sum up these worries is that there is a 'what it is like' to be a mental subject. There is a 'what it is like' to be you. I don't mean by this that you are alienated, or hopeful about the future and such like. I mean simply that at the level of being a conscious mental subject, there is what it is like to be such a thing. This is a very difficult thing to describe or to do anything other than point to (and a metaphorical pointing at that; philosophers who believe in such a thing spend a lot of time hitting themselves on the head). It is a bit like Dizzy Gillespie's response to the woman who asked him to explain rhythm in jazz: his answer, paraphrased, was that if he needed to tell her she was not ever going to know.

At this point, a certain amount of exasperation may set in. How can it be denied that the mind is the brain? We have the spectacular successes of psychology and neurophysiology as proof that it is. Science, by this stage in our collective history, stands on its own two feet and it does not postulate the operations of mind to explain anything. In particular, the most fundamental science, physics, describes everything that happens. It does not do so in terms that are always useful or helpful. If you want to know the causes of an economic recession, you need an explanation in economic terms using the typical concepts and procedures of economics. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which those very same features of the world that the economist describes in her successful explanation of a recession are those features that a physicist could describe if she chose to do so. It would be a long, boring, and shapeless list in lieu of a 'description', but it would be true. True statements can have many other defects, but remain true. So physics gives a true and complete description of everything that there is, even if not always a helpful or salient description. Less abstractly, we know that behaviour has a physical basis. Drugs affect our brains and our behaviour, brain damage impairs mental function, mental illness can be cured by anti-depressants. How can these facts be denied? These facts show that the mind is the brain.

These facts are undeniable, and if they are undeniable we had better find a way, if we want to sustain our conclusion of claiming that the mind is not identical to the brain, of dealing with them. An initial response is to say that of course the brain is very important for the functioning of the mind, but then a steering wheel is very important for the functioning of a car. But steering wheels do not drive cars, drivers do. Similarly, the brain is a very important conduit for mental functioning, but it is not a mind. Damage to the conduit damages the operations of mind the way that damaging the steering damages the functioning of a car. But mind and brain are not identical.

The serious challenge comes from the argument that says that everything in the world has a true physical description. So if the mind is distinct from the physical brain, we seem to be suggesting that its doings and happenings are not physical doings and happenings which is ruled out by this argument. What can we say here? There are three routes.

One is to say that we just need to build in to physics, at a fundamental level, laws that correlate physical events with mental properties. This expands the repertory of what we count as physics. The problem here is that everything that happens, we believe,

happens because it has physical causes. So now we have two competing causes for events, a brain event cause and a mental event cause. We know that the first of those, being physical, completely explains what it causes. So we have accepted that there are parts of the world that are mental, mental events that are not brain events, at the cost of making them idle spectators of the passing show. They are caused, but do not cause. This seems a very heavy price to pay.

The second option is to deny our principle. The world is not, as it seems to be, physically closed and complete. That seems desperate.

The third option says: let's make a new distinction. That is the distinction between two particular things being identical at a time, and types or classes of things being identical. In the former sense, perhaps we have been shown that mental events are brain events. But describing them in that way makes a difference. There are many sciences, if we look beyond physics, where mental sayings and doings make a difference to what we can and cannot explain. Mental talk makes a difference, but not the kind of difference we accommodate by making it a magical exception to the claims of physics or a special unusual part of physics. On this relaxed view, mind talk and brain talk are two ways of talking. They do not introduce new classes of thing into the world. They are different vocabularies with different commitments but none the worse for that.

This view may have problems of its own. It looks, for example, as though one and the same event in the world can have both a true physical description and a true mental description. But how could that be if that event does not have different properties? And if it does have different properties, don't we re-state our initial worry? It is the event described as a brain event that completely explains what happens, not the fact that this event is also your decision to read a philosophy paper.

The answers to these concerns go deeply into central questions about how language relates to the world and whether it is basically made up of events, or of substances instantiating properties. Our initial problems were about the distinctive features of the mental; those aspects of our mental life that suggest that the events of our mental life cannot be identical, as a type, with the type of events in our brains. But further examination of that view has taken us a long way from the initial starting point to consideration of issues about descriptions and properties. But then this reflects the holistic character of philosophy, where nearly all problems overlap. Perhaps this was only to be expected in the mind's investigation of itself and its place in the natural world.

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