

## MIND/BRAIN IDENTITY AND THE CARTESIAN FRAMEWORK

I propose briefly to examine two arguments which in 'Scientific Materialism and the Identity Theory,' Norman Malcolm deployed against "the claim that mental events or conscious experiences or inner experiences are brain processes." To appreciate both the strength and the limitations of these arguments is to see how far, and in what sense of 'mind,' that theory should be seen as identifying mental events with brain processes. It will also suggest that to make the theory viable it is necessary to abandon that very Cartesian framework within which the modern psycho-physical problem first arose.

Malcolm's paper was originally read at the Sixtieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, in answer to a contribution by J. J. C. Smart, entitled simply 'Materialism.' The former was first published in *Dialogue* (Vol. III, 1964), and the latter in the *Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. LX, 1963). But my reference to both these papers are to their reprintings in C. V. Borst's collection *The Mind/Brain Identity Theory* (London and New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 1970), a now widely accessible volume also including all the other contributions to which I shall refer.

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1. Malcolm, as we have just seen, speaks first of "the claim that mental events or conscious experiences or inner experiences are brain processes." But he proceeds at once to complain that "These expressions are almost exclusively philosopher's terms, and I am not sure that I have got the hang of any of them." So he chooses to "concentrate on the particular example of *sudden thoughts*. Suddenly remembering an engagement would be an example. . . . Suddenly realizing, in a chess game, that moving this pawn would endanger one's queen, would be another example of a sudden thought" (p. 171: italics original).

Malcolm's first response to "Smart's claim that a sudden thought is strictly identical with some brain process" is this: "It is clear that a brain process has spatial location"; but "*as things are* the bodily location of thoughts is not a meaningful notion. . . . We do say such a thing as 'He can't get the thought out of his head'; but this is not taken as giving the location of a thought, any more than the remark 'He still has that girl on the brain' is taken as giving the location of a girl" (p. 174: italics original).

I can only, yet must, commend Malcolm's further insistence upon the irrelevance to the philosophical discussion of thoughts, or of anything else, of speculations that the future progress of science will induce people to employ the word 'thought', or any other word, in some sense quite different from any in which these words are used today. Such

speculations have no more direct relevance to the question whether pain, in the present English sense of 'pain', is a brain process than does the unspeculative, dull, present fact that already all Francophones use that particular four-letter word 'pain' to mean not pain but bread.

Malcolm is also, and more centrally, right to urge that "the bodily location of thoughts is not a meaningful notion." With appropriate alterations the same applies to sensations. For, although it is true to say that the throbbing, or the tickle, or whatever, is wherever the subject ingenuously indicates that it is, this truth does not carry the implication that there is any thing in that position. A famous observation by Descartes drew the attention of philosophers to the fact that sensations may be felt as where some limb or part of a limb might have been had that limb not been amputated. In our own time Wittgenstein urged that a whole person, who had never suffered any amputation, might and ingenuously without any logical impropriety indicate as the felt position of some sensation a place outside his/her body. There is, therefore, no contradiction in saying that she has a stabbing pain in her leg, while simultaneously suggesting, either that the physiological basis of this sensation is to be found elsewhere, or even that it has no particular physiological basis at all.

But the most this shows is that to be viable an Identity Theory has to be more careful in stating precisely what the proposed identity is supposed to be between. Thomas Nagel took two of the steps necessary in a paper on 'Physicalism,' read to the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, in 1964, and first published, in a revised version, in the *Philosophical Review* (Vol. LXXIV, 1965). Nagel said: "But if the two sides of the identity are not a sensation and a brain process, but my *having* a certain sensation or thought and my body's *being* in a certain physical state, then they will both be going on in the same place—namely, wherever I (and my body) happen to be . . . even if a pain is located in my right shin, I am *having* that pain in my office at the university" (p. 218: Nagel's italics).

This proposal requires not one but two amendments to the position often, whether rightly or wrongly, attributed to U. T. Place, J. J. C. Smart, and David Armstrong. In the first place, we have to be both explicit and consistent in maintaining that on the one side we have a person and that person's states of consciousness:

"the psychological term of the identity must be the person's having a pain in his shin rather than the pain itself, because although it is undeniable that pains exist and people have them, it is also clear that this describes a condition of one entity, the person, rather than the relation between two entities, a person and a pain. For pains to exist *is* for people to have them. This seems to me perfectly obvious, despite the inno-

cent suggestions of our language to the contrary (p. 216: italics original).

It is here that I refer back to Descartes, for it was he who set the modern psycho-physical problem, conceived as the problem of characterizing the relations or lack of relations between consciousness and stuff. He never himself lost his grasp on the point which to Nagel seems obvious. But his contention that states of consciousness are not, and could not be, states of anything corporeal, has provided (and continues to provide) support for the notion that such states are themselves, in Nagel's sense, entities: logical substances, that is, defined as whatever can significantly be said to exist separately and in its own right<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, while Descartes himself contended that all states of consciousness are and must be attributes of essentially incorporeal subjects, radicals within the same Cartesian tradition are apt to follow Hume in attempting to dispense with such metaphysical entities by arguing that people are logical constructions out of "loose and separate" fragments of consciousness. It is indeed one of the most striking of all the many striking paradoxes of the history of ideas that Ryle's "ungullible Hume," Hume the lifelong mortalist, Hume "the all-destroyer," followed uncritically in the steps of such establishment immortalists as Descartes and Berkeley and Butler by accepting altogether without question that people are essentially incorporeal. Hume here confined his ostentatiously radical challenge to the proposition that there are logical substances for the activities and affections of people to be attributes of:

There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF. . . . But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions . . . (*Treatise* I (iv) 6: pp. 251 and 252 in Selby-Bigge).

The second amendment proposed by Nagel involves "making the physical side of the identity a condition of the body rather than a condition of the brain." His reason for proposing this is that he is "doubtful that anything without a body of some conventional sort could be the subject of psychological states" (p. 217). He thus accepts Malcolm's objection against Smart:

Could a *brain* have thoughts, illusions, or pains? The senselessness of the supposition seems so obvious that I find it hard to take it seriously. No experiment could establish this result for a brain. Why not? The fundamental reason is that a brain does not sufficiently resemble a human being (pp. 179-80: Malcolm's italics).

I do not in general dissent. But there is a very serious ground for unease in the particular case of pains. We cannot be too careful to avoid making a mistake such as was made by all those Cartesians who denied consciousness to any of the brutes. This mistake licensed, even if it did not in fact have the effect of encouraging, unlimited cruelty to non-human animals, on the formally decisive, but substantively erroneous, grounds that it is impossible to be either cruel or kind to creatures incapable of any mode of consciousness. We must not by any philosophical argument weaken, however slightly, what may already be inadequate inhibitions on stimulating brains and other nervous tissues preserved *in vitro*; and be in fact, like the Cartesians about the brutes, wrong.

A second suggestion is that we ought to retain on the physical side of the alleged identity some reference to the brain and to the central nervous system in general. There are good philosophical reasons for abandoning the exclusive concentration upon these. But there are equally good scientific reasons both for mentioning them and for allowing that their functioning is contingently dependent on that of the rest of the organism. All these claims can be met by a formulation which speaks of the person's body (or, better, the person), and particularly his/her brain or central nervous system, being in such and such a (physical) condition. Whether we should specify particularly the brain or the whole central nervous system must, presumably, depend both on the findings of the physiologists and on which particular mode of consciousness is presently under discussion.

Once the mental and the physical sides of the alleged identity have both been adjusted along the lines suggested by Nagel, the first of the two objections presented by Malcolm loses its force. Yet nothing could show more clearly the strength and the durability of the Cartesian framework than the facts (1) that supporters of an Identity Theory have so often exposed themselves to decisive falsification by this objection, and (2) that their opponents have equally often found it obvious that the same objection must be correspondingly decisive against any alternative token of that theory type.

That supporters have exposed themselves in this way is easily proved. The landmark paper by U. T. Place, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" first published in *British Journal of Psychology* (Vol. XLVII, 1957), begins: "The thesis that consciousness is a process in the brain is put forward as a reasonable scientific hypothesis, not to be dismissed on logical grounds alone" (p. 42). Herbert Feigl, in his "Mind-Body, not a Pseudo-Problem," first published in *Dimensions of Mind*, edited by Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1960), writes: "Certain neurophysiological terms denote (refer to) the very same events that are also denoted (referred to) by certain phenomenal terms. The identification of the objects of this twofold reference is of course

logically contingent . . ." (p. 38).

In his "Sensations and Brain Processes," first published in *Philosophical Review* (Vol. LXVII, 195), J. J. C. Smart does talk of people reporting that they have after-images and so on. Yet when he turns to meet the objection that "The after-image is not in physical space. The brain process is," Smart replies: "This is an *ignoratio elenchi*. I am not arguing that the after-image is a brain process, but that the experience of having an after-image is a brain process" (p. 61). Smart's reply is as exposed to the spatial objection as the theses of Place and Feigl. For the word 'experience' is surely one of Feigl's "phenomenal terms," while "the experience of having an after-image" is certainly a mode of consciousness. It makes no sense to ask where the experience, the consciousness, is, as opposed to where the person is who either enjoys or suffers that experience, that consciousness.

It is again easy, but also worthwhile, to provide further illustrations of the fact that opponents have often found it obvious that the spatial objection must be decisive. In "Could Mental States be Brain Processes?" first published in the *Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. LVIII, 1961), Jerome Shaffer begins by distinguishing C(onsciousness)-states from B(rain)-processes. He concludes: "The fact that it makes no sense to speak of C-states occurring in a volume occupied by a brain means that the Identity-Theory cannot be correct" (p. 115).

Shaffer then proceeds to consider Smart's suggestion that "We may easily adopt a convention . . . whereby it would make sense to talk of an experience in terms appropriate to a physical process" (p. 62). Shaffer on this point concludes: "There is nothing in the way we teach the use of C-state expressions that rules out their having spatial location. . . . So we can adopt an additional rule that would allow us to locate C-states in space" (p. 118). The interest of this conclusion for us is that Shaffer has overlooked that his C-states are not logical substances, not what Nagel would call entities. It surely cannot be right to substantialize C-states by trying to provide them with locations logically independent of the locations of the logical substances of which they are states. In essaying this Shaffer embarks upon an ill-starred neo-Humian "bold attempt." He is sufficiently the orthodox Cartesian not to attribute C-states to persons of flesh and blood, while he is at the same time enough of a radical to want to substantialize these states rather than to allow them to be states of incorporeal subjects.

Yet it is one of Shaffer's critics, Robert Coburn, in "Shaffer on the Identity of Mental States and Brain Processes," first published in the *Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. LX, 1963), who provides a still more bizarre illustration of the strength and persistence of the Cartesian framework. For Coburn objects against the Smart-Shaffer proposal: that "the idea that something should be going on in such and such a place, and yet that one person should occupy an intrinsically privileged epis-

temological position vis-a-vis that occurrence, is *prima facie* absurd" (p. 132).

It is important not to confound this objection to the idea that C-states might be spatially located with another urged against Smart, by Kurt Baier, in "Smart on Sensations," first published in the *Australian Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. XL, 1962). Baier's contention bears directly not on the idea of the spatial location of C-states but on Smart's fundamental identification:

Smart is . . . wrong in thinking that introspective reports leave open the question whether they are reports of something private or of something public; hence in thinking that they leave open the question whether or not they are reports of something irreducibly psychic; hence in thinking that there is room for the "metaphysical discovery" that sensations are identical with brain processes (p. 105).

It is, therefore, Coburn and not Baier who has exposed himself to devastating rejoinders. Not merely is it not the case that "the idea that something should be going on in such and such a place, and yet that one person should occupy an intrinsically privileged epistemological position vis-a-vis that occurrence, is *prima facie* absurd," but it is the case that everything about which anyone could be said to "occupy an intrinsically privileged epistemological position" is something which goes on in such and such a place. For such epistemological privilege is, by common consent, if it exists at all, the prerogative of people having sensations, and so on. And someone's having sensations, and so on, is something which goes on, and could go on, only wherever that person happens to be situated. That Coburn should thus insist that what appears to constitute a truth of logic "is *prima facie* absurd" can be explained only in terms of a deep though tacit Cartesian conviction that modes of consciousness cannot ever be attributed as they always are and must be—to beings which are essentially corporeal, and hence essentially spatial.

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2. Malcolm's second objection against Smart runs: "A thought requires circumstances or, in Wittgenstein's word, 'surroundings' (Umgebung). Putting a crown on a man's head is a coronation only in certain circumstances. The behavior of exclaiming 'Oh, I have not put out the milk bottles,' or the behavior of suddenly jumping up, rushing to the kitchen, collecting the bottles and carrying them outside—such behavior expresses the thought that one has not put out the milk bottles *only in certain circumstances*" (p. 176: Malcolm's italics).

This too is, I think, a decisive objection against the thesis that particular thoughts, in the present everyday and quite untechnical sense of the word 'thought', might be identified with particular ongoings in the brain. But, once again, it is not the whole story. Malcolm, it will be remembered, started to take issue with "the claim that mental events or conscious experiences or inner experiences are brain processes." He then complained: "These expressions are almost exclusively philosophers' terms, and I am not sure that I have got the hang of any of them." So he chose to "concentrate on the particular example of *sudden thoughts*."

I will not resist the temptation to mention that the Master was not afflicted with this insufficiency of understanding when he wrote, in the *Investigations*: "The feeling of an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain-process: how does it come about that this does not come into the considerations of our ordinary life?" (§412, pp. 124 and 124E). But what has to be noticed is the present relevance of the introduction by Descartes of his peculiar sense of 'thought', and the corresponding criterion of the mental. Thus in Principle IX of Part I of the *Principles of Philosophy* he explains: "By the word 'thought' I understand all that of which we are conscious as operating in us. And that is why not alone understanding, willing, imagining, but also feeling, are here the same thing as thought. For if I say I see, or I walk, I therefore am, and if by 'seeing' and 'walking' I mean the action of my eyes or my legs, which is the work of my body, my conclusion is not absolutely certain. . . . But if I mean only to talk of my sensation, or my consciously seeming to see or to walk, it becomes quite true because my assertion now refers only to my mind. . . ." (Haldane and Ross translation, Vol. I p. 222).

This new definition makes the word 'thought' embrace all modes of consciousness; and the Cartesian criterion of the mental is, consequently, consciousness. What, therefore, Descartes officially means by 'thought' and 'mental events' is just "conscious experiences or inner experiences." But, as we ought to expect when someone prescribes a new usage which goes so much against the grain of entrenched verbal habits, he himself was among the first to mistake what is and is not implied by the word in its new as opposed to its old meaning. The most interesting example of such a lapse from his freshly embraced principles is provided by the treatment in Part VI of the *Discourse* of what we have learnt to call The Problem of Other Minds. In this phrase we today construe the word 'mind' in a strictly Cartesian way. It is for us the problem of how we know that other people have "conscious experiences or inner experiences." But when the fount and origin himself inquired how, supposing we were to be confronted with "machines which bore a resemblance to our body and imitated our actions as far as it was morally possible to do so," we could "recog-

nize that, for all that, they were not real men," his "two very certain tests" for the controlling presence of minds were tests of rationality, with no reference to the stipulated crux of consciousness (*Ibid.*, p. 116).

The relevance of all this lies in the fact that the Identity Theory was originally developed to serve as a solution to the Cartesian psycho-physical problem; the problem, that is again, of the relations or lack of relations between consciousness and stuff. It should, however, cause no surprise that both proponents and opponents have from time to time forgotten the limitations determined by the official Cartesian definition of 'thought' and the official Cartesian criterion of the mental. Malcolm as an opponent so lapses when, after announcing that he has perhaps not "got the hang of" talk about "conscious experiences or inner experiences," he chooses "to concentrate on the example of *sudden thoughts*." And, as we shall see in a moment, Smart as a proponent, especially when carried away by his own wider ideological aspirations, gives some occasion for Malcolm's misunderstanding.

But Malcolm is, as I have agreed already, absolutely right in urging that, in the ordinary as opposed to the Cartesian sense, "A thought requires circumstances. . . ." And, just as in different circumstances "the thought that one has not put out the milk bottles" involves different behaviour, so in different circumstances and in different people that same thought involves or is accompanied by different "inner experiences," and maybe sometimes by none at all. The moral is that an Identity Theorist must not claim that a person's having such and such a thought just is that person's being in such and such a physiological condition, and in particular his brain's being in such and such a condition. That road is definitively closed by what Malcolm says. The Identity Theorist, as such, ought not to say anything directly about thoughts, in the ordinary sense of 'thought'. Instead he should attend to all but only "conscious experiences"; all but only what I have sometimes alternatively called modes of consciousness. This class will, of course, include all the "inner experiences" which are for different people and in different circumstances involved in having thoughts, in that same ordinary but more complex sense of 'thought'.

Proponents of the Identity Theory usually start with and emphasize the Cartesian psycho-physical problem, narrowly construed. But then, like Descartes himself, they tend to move, without fully appreciating that they are making a move, and a very big move indeed, to a quite different and much more wide-ranging interpretation of 'thought' and 'the mental'. Feigl provides in a single sentence a text book example showing how quickly and how innocently this enormous and unfortunate shift may be effected: "The crucial and central puzzle of the mind-body problem, at least since Descartes, has consisted in the challenge to render an adequate account of the relation of the 'raw feels,' as well as of other mental facts (intentions, thoughts, volitions,

desires, etc.) to the corresponding neurophysiological processes" (p. 35).

Both Place and Smart begin in the same place, as is indicated by the titles of their first statements of the Identity Theory. These were, respectively, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" and "Sensations and Brain Processes." But Smart is also, very explicitly and very properly, concerned with issues of world-outlook: the debate over the Identity Theory is for him a vital battle on the ideological front. (I suspect that this is true also of Malcolm, although he is much less forthcoming about such matters.) It will be helpful to distinguish, as perhaps Smart himself does not always do, two different ideological aspirations. One is materialism, specified by Smart as "the theory that there is nothing in the world over and above those entities which are postulated by Physics" (p. 159). The other is something which, sympathetically parodying Chinese denunciations of "the New Tsars", I label "Great Physicist imperialism."

For anyone who accepts the anti-Cartesian principles of the present paper the only immediately relevant difficulty about the former is likely to be that arising from Smart's insistence upon specifying materialism in terms of "those entities which are postulated by Physics." Will the fact that persons and other possible subjects of consciousness are seen to be essentially corporeal be sufficient to satisfy Smart's ontological requirements? If not, then his materialism, unlike, say, the paradigm materialism of Hobbes<sup>2</sup>, is itself one more manifestation of what I characterize abusively as Great Physicist imperialism.

What this is, is the demand that all explanation is, or ought to be, ultimately physical; and if, as I fear, the more stringent interpretation of Smart's materialism is correct, then all approved entities must be similarly reducible. Smart writes: "I am concerned to deny that in the world there are non-physical entities and non-physical laws. In particular I wish to deny the doctrine of psycho-physical dualism. (I also want to deny any theory of 'emergent properties' since irreducibly non-physical properties are just about as repugnant to me as are irreducibly non-physical entities.)" A footnote to the second sentence quoted remarks: "That Strawson's view is essentially dualistic can be seen from the fact that he admits that disembodied existence is logically compatible with it" (p. 160).

This note is significant. For in truth, since Strawson generally insists that the possibility of attributing two fundamentally different kinds of predicates is essential to the unitary concept of a person, this concession is better seen as an aberrant postscript than as a final revelation of an ultimate ontological dualism. That Smart sees it as he does suggests that he shares the Cartesian inability to accept that one and the same subject may carry two fundamentally different kinds of predicate. The consequent fear of ontological inflation if he admits such different kinds of predicate is, presumably, one of the reasons why for Smart—

as has often been remarked—one of the two terms of the alleged identity appears to disappear in favor of the other. Experiences are really a special class of brain processes. Yet even these special brain processes are not really experiences.

Equally—as has not been noticed so often—in part because of this vicarious imperialism on behalf of the physicists—it is that the first term of the identity is taken to embrace a whole lot more than “inner experiences.” He says:

even though love may elude test-tubes, it does not elude materialistic metaphysics, since it can be analyzed as a pattern of bodily behavior or, perhaps better, as the internal state of the human organism that accounts for this behavior (p. 160).

Yet even when all this has been said about Smart’s wider concerns, and about how his Great Physicist imperialism constitutes one motive for over-extending the scope of the Identity Theory, I still remain a little perplexed about just what is the sort of reduction to physics which he hopes to achieve, and why. For he seems at least part of the time to concede that talk about “inner experiences” (and presumably also talk about motives and purposes and intentions) is legitimate, and is not logically reducible to talk about physiology, much less to talk about “those entities which are postulated by physics,” presumably not including persons. But conceding this legitimacy, and if such logical reduction is impossible, then the explanation of conduct in terms of the motives of agents must be other than physical explanation and not logically reducible to it<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand Smart apparently cannot rest content with the sort of ontological reduction which is manifested when we insist that “there could not be . . . nations without nationals” (p. 167). For we can certainly allow, and allow without making any reckless claims on behalf of Physics: both that people have emergent characteristics, in the sense that things can significantly and truly be said about people which could neither be significantly said, nor logically reduced to what could significantly be said, either about the organs in a human organism, or even about any other whole organism at a substantially lower evolutionary level; and that there could no more be instantiations of these various emergent characteristics without there being the appropriate flesh and blood organisms for them to characterize, than there could be football or cricket teams and displays of teamwork and team spirit without any corporeal players.

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I have in this paper considered only two arguments against the

Identity Theory, and the amendments necessary to meet these objections. There are many other objections which also need to be considered and, if possible, met. For instance, there is that of Baier mentioned here only to distinguish it from another, offered by Coburn. But I may perhaps end by saying that the Identity Theory as it emerges from the present consideration does now seem to possess a simplicity, a plausibility, and even an inevitability, which for me at least it never had before.

The claim now is that for a person to be enjoying or suffering some mode of consciousness just is for that person, and in particular his brain and central nervous system generally, to be in such and such a physiological state. To the suggestion that this equation is incoherent, because the person in question has privileged access to the "inner experiences," whereas there is no such privilege with regard to the physiological states, I am inclined to reply with complacency: "But of course, that person is the person who is actually enjoying, or suffering; and of course you cannot enjoy his enjoyment or suffer his suffering. You can only enjoy or suffer your (perhaps similar) enjoyments and sufferings."

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This indispensable idea of substance (logical) is perhaps best explained with the help of famous passages from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. See my *An Introduction to Western Philosophy* (London and Indianapolis: Thames and Hudson, and Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>If you have never come across the statement of total metaphysical materialism in Chapter 46 of *Leviathan* you will be glad to read it here. Others may relish reading it again: "The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it worldly men, but the universe, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal, that is to say, body; and hath the dimensions of magnitude, namely length, breadth and depth. Also every part of body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the universe is body; and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing; and, consequently, nowhere" (Spelling and punctuation modernized).

<sup>3</sup>I have attempted a non-reductionist, yet still in a Hobbesian sense radically materialist, account of man as 'A Rational Animal' in *Brain and Mind*, J. R. Smythies (Ed.) (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and Humanities Press, 1965). I wonder what more than an account of this sort Smart wants, and why.