

A ROOM WITH TWO VIEWS: MIND–BODY MONISM WITH A DIFFERENCE

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Wolfe Mays in memoriam *

Abstract

This paper defends metaphysical mind-body monism while accounting for the apparent duality of mental and physical events by emphasizing the duality of modes of access to mental events, the subjective mode of access which is experiencing or living through, and the objective mode of access which is typically mediated by instruments.

Keywords

Mind-Body, Intentionality, Monism, Dual-Aspect.

* I have long wanted to dedicate a paper to my doctoral supervisor Wolfe Mays, and this seemed to me a suitable choice of paper to do so. Sadly, within a few days of my completing it and writing the dedication, Wolfe died. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of twentieth century philosophy and his graduate seminars in Manchester served to introduce his students to dozens of names that one would not have encountered elsewhere. The magpies amongst his students, of whom I was one, learned through his example to read, learn and think for themselves and not be led by philosophical fads, and for his breadth, liberality, freedom from prejudice and scorn for fashion I am most grateful. The choice of this paper is mildly ironical firstly in the fact that some of the ideas in this paper come from that chapter of my Manchester dissertation of which Wolfe emphatically did not approve, and secondly that they appear in the proceedings of a conference of a society for analytic philosophy, against certain extreme forms of which Wolfe fought a long and in many respects successful campaign. That analytic philosophy now embraces and takes seriously the thought of many more figures than in the 1960s and 1970s, and that there is, despite remaining differences of emphasis and style, no longer a sharp methodological or topical divide between “analyticals” and “continentals”, was I hope a source of quiet satisfaction. I am sad that he will no longer be able to respond in his characteristic manner to the paper’s content and to the irony.

Metaphysical Mind-Body Monism

There is, I believe, no mind/body dualism, either of different substances or of different properties. I shall not argue this here, because many others have given manifold reasons why dualism is empirically extremely unlikely. If you believe in dualism of substances or properties then by all means stop reading here: I do not intend to convert you. Rather I want to help convince the unconvinced that one can be a metaphysical monist and yet still take account of and be true to the apparent dualism that we all experience between our own ideas, thoughts and feelings on the one hand and the physical world of bodies and energy that we perceive around us. Where there are not two kinds of things, mental things on the one hand and material things on the other, there is no metaphysical problem about how the two kinds are related. Hence, as a metaphysical monist, I recognize no metaphysical mind-body problem. The residual problem for a monist is how there can appear to be a problem, and here I think we do need some explanation and some theory.

Mentality and Intentionality

I accept, with reservations, Brentano's characterization of mentality as entailing intentionality or directedness to an object. I use this to mention four distinctions. Let us call a creature endowed with mental characteristics a subject. The first and certainly vague distinction is between subjects and non-subjects. I shall not speculate about this ontological duality but simply assume it exists. Secondly we have the distinction between a subject and a subject's mental or intentional act. This is a metaphysical distinction, between a substance and one of the processes or events happening in it. Thirdly we have the distinction between a mental act and what that mental act intends. This is an epistemic distinction and the proper subject of the theory of intentionality, about which much ink has been spilt but which I shall also assume is relatively uncontroversial. Finally and most importantly for my purposes there is a distinction between being a mental act enjoyed by a subject and being a mental act intended by that subject. This is a special case of the third distinction, where the object is a mental act. Armed with these minimal distinctions, I shall now attempt to show how metaphysical monism is compatible with and indeed leads to epistemic dualism.

It is characteristic of the mental that it consists in or contributes to the phenomenal representation of things to an individual. This fact of representation is I believe an original and emergent feature of complex biological systems, but we are so familiar with it, being ourselves such systems, that it takes some agility of mind to realise its importance. The mark of the mental is intentionality, or rather being either intentional or contributory towards intentionality. Brentano was right. The easiest way to catch such intentionality on the hoof, apart from introspection, is to check the language we use to describe such events and states for referential opacity. Opacity is the logico-linguistic mark of the mental, when we describe things,¹ so Chisholm was right. But opacity is a feature of language, and the meaningful expressions we employ in language borrow their intentionality from the prior and indeed basic intentionality of the mental, so Husserl was right, as indeed was Aristotle, from whom the mental bearer account of meaning derives.

If there is in certain respects a duality of mind and body, as in some sense it is trivial to affirm, then while it will be reflected in language, it will not be due to language. A metaphysical monist will claim it is due to the metaphysical gap between physical and mental items. But I think the materialists are right that there is no such gap. I would also disagree with functionalists and others that the mental is distinct from but supervenes on or is realized in the physical. They are not different, they are the same: every mental act and event is a physical act or event and one cannot slip a knife between them. So Place, Smart and Armstrong are right. By Leibniz's Law, whatever properties the one has, the other has, so physical acts can represent phenomenally and mental

¹ Simons 1995.

acts have spatial location and time of occurrence in the brain. There is no absurdity in any of this. Whether the phenomenal types of mental occurrence will be found to line up neatly with the physical types of brain occurrence is a different and more difficult matter. There is at least token identity. Maybe the types will line up too: time and experiment will tell. It is not a priori evident that the types will line up and correlate.

Duality of Modes of Access

We know for certain that stones and rivers don't think,² we are pretty sure that worms and trees don't think, about octopi and lizards and birds and mammals we are more unsure. We are in general fairly sure that many or most higher mammals think. A few outrageous anthropocentrists aside,³ few philosophers will deny Hume's commonsense belief that "beasts" think and indeed may reason.⁴ Indeed, the more animal psychologists delve into the mental powers of non-humans, the more they are inclined to "upgrade" animal intelligence and the more fluid the border comes between humans and non-humans. From an evolutionary point of view this is absolutely to be expected, and does not contradict the also reasonable view that there are striking and marked differences between humans and non-humans which turn almost wholly on the use of complex language. This does not mean we need to sink into a Chomskyan Cartesianism. It is all a matter of balance.

Our evidence for animal thought comes directly from our observation of the complexity of their behaviour (so Wittgenstein is partly right), and latterly from more sophisticated ethnological observation and experiment. It is natural for us to empathize with animals and imagine they have experiences rather like ours, but this is dangerously anthropomorphic and not really necessary.

When we investigate what goes on in human and animal nervous systems when the subject is thinking, we do so by means of more or less sophisticated observation and measurement of their brain activity in conjunction with knowledge about the anatomy of the brain. All our direct evidence which is non-behavioural comes from readings, measurements and representations of brain activity. The plain and simple fact about this is that there is a difference between being the subject having the brain activity and being the subject observing the brain activity, and a difference between the brain activity in the subject and the brain activity in the observer. These distinctions are so obvious that it is embarrassing to state them. However, we philosophers have the dubious duty sometimes to recur to the, if only to remind those who might stray off into fantasies that some facts are too basic to be ignored. This is one. No one would ever confuse a stone with the observation of a stone, nor (idealists aside – you see, some philosophers do deny the obvious) would they confuse the event of a tree falling in a forest with the perception of that event by some passer-by. So no one should confuse my mental acts as observer with yours as subject, even when the objects of my acts, which I do not experience, are the acts which you do experience. I experience (in the sense of *erleben*, not *erfahren*) not your acts but mine, but the objects of my acts, to which I have access via intentionality mediated by instruments, are the very same acts you do experience.

But it will be objected that in no sense do I have your mental acts as my objects; what I have as objects are meter readings or computer images, not experiences as had by you. This is to suppose that mediated intentionality cannot access the target or ultimate objects of cognition. But that is absurd. When I look through a telescope at the moon, I see her craters, albeit with optical assistance to my innate capacities. When I see a photograph of the Queen, it is Her Majesty

² I am using the word 'think' just as Descartes did, for all forms of conscious experience. This is merely to keep matters snappy, and no form of cognitivism is implied thereby.

³ Including, I am afraid, some analytic philosophers, such as Wittgenstein and Davidson, at least according to standard interpretations.

⁴ On the impressive representation and reasoning power of at least one African grey parrot, see Pepperberg 2000. So Locke was right (about parrots).

whom I think about, not her picture. When I see the computer images of a gamma ray burst in a distant galaxy, the burst itself is my ultimate object, not the pictures. And when I hear you tell me there has been a railway accident somewhere, it is the accident itself I now think about, not your representation of it. So when with the help of sophisticated instruments I have cognitive access to events in your brain, it is these events themselves that are my ultimate intentional object, and not the intermediary perceptions of the instruments, crucial though these are epistemically. We do not just perceive: we also think through the perceptions to their object.

It may now be objected that even if we accept that the brain events themselves are what I am thinking about, that these brain events, precisely because they show up in instrument readings, electrical charge fluctuations and the like, cannot be the mental events you are having, with their warm phenomenal immediacy, since none of this phenomenal side shows up on the computer or meter readings.

This is to beg the question. My answer is that they can very well be the same, precisely because experiencing the acts (living through them) is what gives them the phenomenal immediacy the subject has, and precisely not living through them means the observer does not have the same kind of access to them. The two modes of access are inexorably different, so it is not surprising that the properties and characters the acts manifest to the experiencer are different from those they manifest to the observer. It is as if one were to require the view from inside a house looking out to be just like the view of the house from the outside looking in. Looking out of the house one sees the trees, streets, sky and so on outside, and just a small bit of the walls and window frame: looking in one sees the outer and inner walls, rooms, furniture, contents and occupants within. Of course they are different kinds of view. But it is still one house.

Now let us extend the metaphor a little further. I am in my house, looking out of the window. I can see other houses, and looking through their windows maybe a little of their contents and occupants. I have a room with a view. I assume other occupants can look into my room about as much as I can into theirs, which is always partially and incompletely. But there is another view they do not have from my room, which is the view of my room from the inside. They may see some of the same things I do, such as the desk and lamp by the window, the picture on the wall. But it is always a different perspective from mine. To see things my way, they would have to be inside the room as I am. So my room has two views, the view within, and the view without. Even a prison cell has the first kind of view, though it is not what we standardly call a room's having a view.

The analogy is this. My view of my room from inside is like my own experience of my brain events, from the inside, as subject. My view outside is what my perceptions reveal to me of the world outside me, and that may include some knowledge of other people's thoughts. Someone else who looks inside my room from outside is an observer of my mental acts, but because they are not me, they cannot experience my acts, and their external perspective means they pick up aspects of the same events that I do not, such as their location in the brain and so on.

Where the analogy limps is that one can go inside any house and see what it is like from the inside, but you cannot become me and have my mental experience from the inside. However, let us not be too pessimistic. Technology and brain science may eventually put us in the position of being able to know as if from the inside what it is like to actually have the experience of someone else. All (!) that would be required would be a way to somehow reproduce or copy the occurrent mental/brain events of the one subject into that of the other, the way one now copies the data from a CD to a hard disk on a computer. Then – assuming our mental hardwares were sufficiently alike, of which it is not known whether it is a surmountable hindrance or not — I could know what it feels like to be you, and vice versa. We might not be able to know what it is like to be a bat, because bats may be so different in hardware and physiology from us that the reproduction would not work, but even that is perhaps not wholly beyond the bounds of possibility. As a moderate technological optimist I would not rule out surprises here, although they may lie far in the future.

Coda

If I am right that the apparent differences between mental events and brain events are the result not of a metaphysical duality but of two different modes of access, then metaphysical monism is compatible with epistemic dualism, and indeed makes it natural to expect there to be a radical dualism of properties accessible by the different routes, especially at this stage of lack of brain mapping and thought reproduction. Mental life and representation is uniquely distinct and different from anything else we encounter in nature, so any comparisons we use, such as that with a room with two views, are bound to be gauche in detail and implicitly to presuppose the distinction we are trying to illustrate. We are already mental, and it's no use trying to pretend we can get round this, because everything we think about, no matter what, we do so thanks to our own mentality. Without a mind we really are windowless, so let's just get on with using what capacities nature has graciously given us to think about ourselves and our role in the world, to employ our ability to introspect and give a phenomenological description from the inside of mental events as they unfold, both for its own interest and for the light it may shed on the correlation between phenomenal and neural characters.

The theory I have outlined is a metaphysical monism with an epistemological dualism, but a dualism of modes of access, not of objects accessed. The apparent properties of the objects accessed will vary between the two modes in much the way that the visual properties of a leaf differ from its tactile properties. It seems to me that there are precedents for this view in earlier philosophy, though they are not exact. The theory seems at first blush not so different from that dual aspect theory upheld by Spinoza, according to which mind and matter are two different aspects or attributes of the one substance. Nevertheless, Spinoza is a metaphysical dualist because the attributes are genuinely different and not simply the result of different modes of access. In the end I am not so concerned whether the theory is more Leibnizian, or Whiteheadian, or Wittgensteinian, or whoeverian. In analytic philosophy, history helps us locate a position among the space of alternatives, and it can help us avoid previous mistakes, but whether it is correct (true) or not is another matter altogether.

References

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