The Nature of the Mind I

(I) The Problem of Other Minds

You know – don’t you? – that you have a mind and that you can think. And you probably would say that you know that there are objects “out there” in the world; at least, you might feel justified in making such a claim (leaving aside the skepticism that Descartes had asked us to consider). Here’s a chair; here’s a book; here’s a piece of paper… But, now, the hard question: Can you know that other things (human beings, for example) have minds? You know you have a mind. But you know this by “introspection” – by looking inside yourself. When you look around, you can observe other beings that look like you in some sense, but you don’t observe minds. Could your classmate be an android (i.e. a robot, a computer on legs)? Could your classmate be a zombie (i.e. the living dead, a human body absent a soul or a mind)? How would you know? Or what reasons do you have for believing that there are minds other than your own?

Bertrand Russell argues that it is the principle of analogy that will provide us with an answer to this problem, or rather, provide us with the step that allows the inference. Russell’s argument seems to be this:

1. Principle of Analogy: “If, whenever we can observe whether A and B are present or absent, we find that every case of B has an A as a causal antecedent, then it is probable that most B’s have A’s as causal antecedents, even in cases where observation does not enable us to know whether A is present or not.” (p. 316b)
2. I observe in myself that the cause of certain bodily actions (e.g. speaking) is a mental process.
3. I observe this bodily action in another being.
4. Therefore, it is probable that the cause of that action in the other being is a mental process.
5. Therefore, it is probable that the other being has a mind.

So, no certainty. Is this the best we can do? Or does the original problem of other minds rest on a confusion?

(II) Descartes’s Myth

According to Gilbert Ryle, Descartes has bequeathed to us a confused ontology, one in which there are two kinds of substance: mental substance (minds) and material substance (bodies). This supposed distinction of mind and body has become entrenched in our philosophical and everyday discourse, so much so that it can count as the “official doctrine.” The view at work Ryle disparagingly calls the “Ghost in the Machine.” And in the end it rests upon a category mistake.

What is a category mistake? One way to think of a category mistake is to think of juxtaposing subjects and predicates that don’t go together. For example: “This cup of coffee is in B-flat minor” or “The cube root of 27 is blue”. But coffee can’t have a musical key and numbers can’t be colored. Ryle himself gives several examples of category mistakes, the first of which is quite famous: A visitor walks around Oxford and is shown libraries, laboratories, classrooms, offices, and so on, and then says, “Yes, but where is the University?” But, according to Ryle, “The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized.” (p. 319b) In other words, the visitor makes a mistake in assuming that there are offices, libraries, dormitories and a University. Similarly, in a later example, Ryle mentions the joke, “She came home in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair.” (p. 322b) But it makes no sense either to conjoin these terms or to disjoin these terms. Ultimately, the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine is guilty of just this kind of
category-mistake, for the phrase “there occur mental processes” does not mean the same sort of thing as “there occur physical processes.”

One of the consequences of Ryle’s view is supposed to be that the ontological distinction between matter and mind is dissipated and that “both Idealism and Materialism are answers to an improper question.” (p. 323a) Why? Because both idealism and materialism claim that there is a real answer to the question, What is there? The idealist says, “Only minds exist”; the materialist says, “Only material bodies exist.” But perhaps the answer is this: There’s a something that exists the activities of which can be described in mentalistic language and physicalistic language. How satisfactory is that? (Note: this is presumably bad news if you (want to) believe in the existence of an immortal soul that survives your bodily death.)

(III) Materialism and the Nature of Mind

One of the dominant doctrines of the mind in the mid-20th-century was Behaviorism. In one sense this view follows from some of the things we saw in Russell above (and from Ryle, who also espoused behaviorism). The idea is that outward signs of behavior are the only true and accurate guides to discerning the nature of mental life. This view also became incorporated in the general research strategy of materialism with respect to the mind. (Even though Ryle claimed that materialism gives an answer to an improper question, materialism survives as a research strategy, by which I mean that one ought to look only at materialistic and physicalistic factors in examining the world.) As Armstrong (see below) puts it, “The mind is not an inner arena, it is an outward act.” (p. 326a)

(a) David Armstrong

Armstrong presented one of the earliest and strongest versions of materialism with respect to the mental. In his view, we have good reasons to believe that we can (or will be able to) give “a complete account of man in purely physico-chemical terms.” (p. 324a) What is a mental state? Part of the answer will be that mental states are dispositions – that is, a mental state is a (physical) state that, in the proper conditions, will produce a particular behavior. Thus, “we reach the conception of a mental state as a state of the person apt for producing certain ranges of behaviour.” (p. 328b)

(b) David Lewis

Lewis, too, argues for a materialist account of mind. More specifically, he argues for what is called the “identity theory”: the view that states and processes of the mind are identical with states and processes of the brain. E.g. pain just is the firing of synapse S. This view is combined with behaviorism (or functionalism) – the idea that mental states can be identified by the role they play in the life of an organism. E.g., pain just is something felt by an individual under certain circumstances and is something that produces certain immediate reactions (screaming) and future reactions (avoidance).