
Bryan Magee’s *Popper* (London: Fontana, 1973) is a good introduction to the work of Karl Popper.


What is the mind? Do we have non-physical souls? Is thought simply an aspect of physical matter, just a by-product of nerves being stimulated in the brain? How can we be sure that other people aren’t just sophisticated robots? How can we tell that they are actually conscious? All these questions fall into the category of philosophy of mind.

**PHILOSOPHY OF MIND AND PSYCHOLOGY**

Philosophy of mind should be distinguished from psychology, although they are quite closely related. Psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour and thought; it is based on observation of people, often under experimental conditions. In contrast, philosophy of mind is not an experimental subject: it does not involve making actual scientific observations. Philosophy concentrates on the analysis of our concepts.

Philosophers of mind are concerned with conceptual issues which arise when we think about the mind. A psychologist might investigate, for example, personality disorders such as schizophrenia by examining patients, running tests on them, and so on. A philosopher on the other hand would ask conceptual questions like ‘What is the mind?’ or ‘What do we mean by “mental illness”?’ Such questions
cannot be answered by examination of actual cases alone: they require us to analyse the meaning of the terms in which they are expressed. To illustrate this point, consider another example. A neuro-psychologist investigating human thought might make observations of the patterns of nerve stimulation in the brain. A philosopher of mind would ask the more basic conceptual question of whether the activity of these nerves amounts to thinking, or whether there is some feature of our concept of thought which means that it cannot be reduced to a physical occurrence. Or, to put it in a more traditional way, do we have minds distinct from our bodies?

In this chapter we will examine some of the central debates in the philosophy of mind, concentrating on the question of whether a physical explanation of the mind is adequate, and on whether we can have knowledge of other people’s minds.

The Mind/Body Problem

In the way we describe ourselves and the world we usually make a distinction between the mental and physical aspects. Mental aspects are such things as thinking, feeling, deciding, dreaming, imagining, wishing, and so on. Physical ones include feet, limbs, our brains, cups of tea, the Empire State Building, and so on.

When we do something, such as play tennis, we use both our mental and our physical aspects: we think about the rules of the game, where our opponent is likely to play the next shot, and so on, and we move our bodies. But is there a real division between mind and body, or is this just a convenient way of talking about ourselves? The problem of explaining the true relationship between mind and body is known as the Mind/Body Problem.

Those who believe that mind and body are separate things, that each of us has both a mind and a body, are called mind/body dualists. Those who believe that the mental is in some sense the same thing as the physical, that we are nothing more than flesh and blood and have no separate mind substance, are known as physicalists.

Zombies

There is a lot at stake here. Imagine that it is possible to make a perfect copy of your body that matches every molecule. A physicalist would have to say that your artificial twin would experience consciousness just as you do. A dualist, in contrast, could allow that even though there are no physical differences between you there may be mental ones. In an extreme case your artificial twin might act in just the same sorts of ways as you, come out with the same sorts of comment in the same accent, but actually have no inner life. Your twin might be a kind of zombie. This zombie does all the sorts of things you do, says ‘ouch!’ when it burns itself, for instance, but doesn’t actually feel pain.

This is obviously a far-fetched example, and no one is suggesting that some people are zombies of this kind. The point of it is to bring out the very different assumptions of physicalists and dualists. In principle for dualists mind and body can separate. Dualists can make sense of the thought experiment. For physicalists there can be no zombies of this kind: they believe that anyone who shares your structure molecule for molecule will have the same sort of inner life as you, will experience consciousness as you do.

Dualism

Dualism, as we have seen, involves a belief in the existence of a non-physical substance: the mental. A dualist typically believes that body and mind are distinct substances which interact with each other but remain separate. Mental processes, such as thinking, are not the same as physical ones, such as brain cells firing; mental processes occur in the mind, not in the body. The mind is not the living brain.

Mind/body dualism is a view held by many people, particularly by those who believe that it is possible to survive our bodily death, either by living in some kind of spirit world or by being reincarnated in a new body. Both these views presuppose that human beings are not just physical beings, but rather that our most important part is the non-physical mind or, as it is more often called in religious contexts, the soul. René Descartes is probably the most famous mind/body dualist: such dualism is often called Cartesian dualism (‘Cartesian’ being the adjective formed from Descartes’s name).

A strong motive for believing dualism to be true is the difficulty most of us have in seeing how a purely physical thing, such as the brain, could give rise to the complex patterns of feeling and thought which we call consciousness. How could something purely physical
feel melancholy, or appreciate a painting? Such questions give dualism an initial plausibility as a solution to the Mind/Body Problem. However, there are a number of powerful criticisms of it as a theory.

CRITICISMS OF DUALISM

Cannot be scientifically investigated

One criticism sometimes leveled at mind/body dualism is that it does not really help us to understand the nature of the mind. All it tells us is that there is a non-physical substance in each of us which thinks, dreams, experiences, and so on. But, it is alleged by physicalists, a non-physical mind couldn't be investigated directly: in particular, it couldn't be investigated scientifically because science only deals with the physical world. All we could examine would be its effects on the world.

Against this the dualist might reply that we can observe the mind through introspection, that is, through considering our own thought. And we could and do investigate the mind indirectly through its effects on the physical world. Most science works by inferring the causes of observed effects; scientific investigation of a non-physical mind would be an instance of this same type of approach. Besides which, mind/body dualism at least has the benefit of explaining how it might be possible to survive bodily death, something which physicalism cannot do without introducing the idea of the resurrection of the body after death.

Evolution

It is generally accepted that human beings evolved from simpler life forms. However, a dualist will find it difficult to explain how this could have been so. Presumably very simple life forms such as amoebae do not have minds, whereas human beings, and probably some of the higher animals, do have them. How then could amoebae give rise to creatures which have minds? Where could this mind substance have suddenly come from? And why does the evolution of mind so closely parallel the evolution of the brain?

One way in which a dualist could answer this criticism is to say that even amoebae have minds of a very limited sort, and that the mind evolved in parallel with the evolution of animal bodies. Or the dualist could go a step further and say that every physical thing also has a mind of some sort: this last view is known as panpsychism. According to panpsychists even stones have very primitive minds. The development of human mental ability can then be explained in terms of its being a combination of physical substances and thus a merging of simple minds to create a more complex one. However, few dualists are sympathetic to such an approach, partly because it blurs the distinction between human beings and what we consider to be the inanimate world.

Interaction

The most serious difficulty the dualist faces is that of explaining how two such different substances as mind and body could possibly interact. It is clear, in the dualist view, that, for example, I can have a thought and then this thought can give rise to a bodily movement. For instance, I can think that I will scratch my nose, and then my finger moves up to my nose and scratches it. The difficulty for the dualist is to show precisely how the purely mental thought can lead to the physical scratch.

This difficulty is made more pronounced by the fact that events in the brain are very closely linked with mental events. Why do we need to introduce the idea of the mind as distinct from the body when it is obvious that, for example, severe damage to the brain leads to mental deficiency? If mind and body are really distinct, why is this so?

It contradicts a basic scientific principle

Another aspect of the difficulty of explaining interaction is that it seems to contradict a very basic principle of science. Most scientists, particularly those who are physicalists, assume that every change in an object can be explained by a prior physical event: the causes of all physical events are themselves physical. So, for instance, if a nerve cell in someone's brain fires, a neuropsychologist will look for a physical cause of this. But if pure thought, which is an activity of the mind, can lead to action, then some merely mental events must directly lead to physical ones. Dualists are left having to justify
revising quite a basic assumption of science. Of course, they may feel that they can justify this revision on the grounds that dualism is self-evidently true; but, if there is any doubt about this, it seems more sensible to assume that it is the theory of dualism that is at fault, and not the scientific assumption which has produced such fruitful results in scientific research to date.

**DUALISM WITHOUT INTERACTION**

**Mind/body parallelism**

One way in which the dualist can get round the problems associated with explaining how mind/body interaction is possible is to deny that it occurs at all. Some dualists have argued that although both mind and body exist, and we all have one of each, there is no actual interaction between them. This slightly strange idea is known as psychophysical parallelism. Mind and body run in parallel like two clocks which have been set to the same time. When someone stands on my toe I feel a pain, but not because I get any message from my body to my mind. It is simply that God (or else a quite staggering cosmological coincidence) has set the two independent aspects of me running in parallel. At the time someone treads on my toe it has been so arranged that I feel pain in my mind, but the one event does not cause the other: it's just that they occur one immediately after the other.

**Occasionalism**

Another equally strange attempt to explain how mind and body can interact is known as occasionalism. Whilst parallelism declares the apparent link between mind and body to be an illusion, occasionalism allows that there really is a link, but argues that this is provided by the intervention of God. God supplies the connection between mind and body, between my toe being injured and my feeling pain, or between my deciding to scratch my nose and my hand moving.

A major problem with mind/body parallelism, at least in its most plausible form, and with occasionalism, is that they both assume that God exists, something which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, is by no means self-evident. Moreover, even Theists are likely to find these theories a little far-fetched.

**Epiphenomenalism**

A third approach to the problem of interaction is known as epiphenomenalism. This is the view that, although events in the body cause mental events, mental events never cause physical ones, nor do they give rise to other mental ones. The mind is, then, an epiphenomenon: in other words it is something which does not directly affect the body in any way. The epiphenomenalist explains my apparent ability to raise my hand by thinking about it as an illusion. Raising my hand is a purely physical action which only seems to be caused by my thought. All mental events are directly caused by physical ones, but no mental events give rise to physical ones.

Like parallelism and occasionalism, epiphenomenalism has little plausibility as a theory of mind. It raises as many difficult questions as it answers. Not least of the problems associated with it is that it makes free will an impossibility: we can never really choose to act, all we can have is an illusion of acting from choice. And why does causation take place only in one direction, physical causes having mental effects, but never vice versa?

**Physicalism**

Having examined mind/body dualism and a number of criticisms and variants of it, let's now take a look at physicalism. Physicalism is the view that mental events can be completely explained in terms of physical ones, usually events in the brain. In contrast to mind/body dualism, which states that there are two basic sorts of substance, physicalism is a form of monism: it is the view that there is just one sort of substance, the physical. An immediate advantage of physicalism over dualism is that it suggests a programme for the scientific study of the mind. In theory at least it should be possible to give an entirely physical description of any mental event.

Physicalist philosophers do not try to discover precisely how particular brain states match up with thoughts: that is a task for neuropsychologists and other scientists. Such philosophers are mainly
concerned to prove that all mental events are physical, and that dualism is therefore false.

There are several varieties of physicalism, some more open to criticism than others.

**TYPE-IDENTITY THEORY**

This variety of physicalism states that mental events are identical with physical ones. A thought about the weather, for example, is simply a particular state of the brain. Whenever this particular state of the brain occurs, then we can describe this as having a thought about the weather. This is known as type-identity theory. All physical states of a particular type are also mental ones of a particular type.

To make this view clearer, consider how the terms ‘water’ and ‘H₂O’ both refer to the same substance. We use the term ‘water’ in everyday contexts, and ‘H₂O’ in scientific ones. Now, whilst both terms refer to the same thing, they have slightly different meanings: ‘water’ is used to draw attention to the substance’s basic properties of wetness and so on; ‘H₂O’ is used to reveal its chemical composition. Few people ask for a jug of H₂O to add to their whisky, yet water is H₂O: they are one and the same thing.

Similarly a flash of lightning is also an electrical discharge of a certain kind. Whether we use ‘flash of lightning’ or ’electrical discharge’ to describe this event depends on whether we are caught in a thunderstorm or giving a more scientific analysis of what is going on. We can use the everyday term ‘lightning’ without having any awareness of the scientific analysis of the cause of this phenomenon, just as we can use the term ‘water’ and understand what it’s like to get wet, without being aware of the chemical composition of water.

To get back to the mind/brain identity theory now, ‘a thought about the weather’ and ‘a particular state of the brain’ may be two ways of referring to precisely the same thing. The two phrases describe an identical event, but the meaning of the phrases is somewhat different. Most of us would use the mental description ‘a thought about the weather’ to describe this thing, but, according to the type-identity theory, a scientist could, in principle, give a detailed analysis of the brain state which is this thought. What is more, a type-identity theorist would argue that all thoughts of this type are actually brain states of this same type. One advantage of this theory of the mind is that it suggests the sorts of things which neuropsychologists could look for; namely the physical states of the brain which correspond to various thought types. However, there are several objections to the type-identity theory.

**CRITICISMS OF TYPE-IDENTITY THEORY**

No knowledge of brain processes

We have direct knowledge about our thoughts, yet most of us know nothing about brain processes. Some people see this as an objection to physicalism: thought cannot be the same as a brain process because it is possible to know about the thought without knowing anything about neurophysiology. We all of us have a privileged access to our own thoughts: that is, we know better than anyone else what our own conscious thoughts are; this is not so with brain states. Yet if thoughts and brain states are identical, they should share the same properties.

However, this objection is not a serious problem for the physicalist. We may not know anything about the chemical composition of water, yet this does not stop us understanding the concept ‘water’, and recognizing its taste when we drink it. Similarly all thoughts may be brain processes, yet there is no reason why thinkers should be expected to understand the precise nature of these brain processes in order to understand their thoughts.

Properties of thoughts and of brain states

If a thought about my sister is identical with a certain brain state, then it follows that the thought must be located in exactly the same place as the brain state. But this seems a little strange: thoughts don’t seem to have precise locations in this way. Yet it is a consequence of the type-identity theory that they should do. If I have a fluorescent green after-image from staring at a bright light, this after-image is a certain size, a lurid colour, and particular shape, yet my brain state is presumably very different in these respects. How then could the after-image be identical with a specific brain state?
All thoughts are about something

All thoughts are about something: it is impossible to have a thought about nothing at all. If I think ‘Paris is my favourite city’, then my thought is related to a place in the actual world. But brain processes and states do not seem to be about anything: they do not seem to relate to anything outside themselves in the way that thoughts do.

Qualia: what it is like

Type physicalism, like many attempted solutions to the Mind/Body Problem, is often criticized for failing to take into account conscious experience: what it is actually like to be in a certain state. Consciousness may be hard to define but it certainly includes sensations, feelings, pain, joy, desire, and so on. The Latin word *qualia* is sometimes used as a general term to cover such things. Although we can talk about ‘water’ and ‘H₂O’ as alternative descriptions of the same thing, ‘a recollection of my first view of New York’ cannot so easily be paraphrased as ‘a certain brain state’. The difference is that in the second case we are not dealing with inanimate objects: there is a particular feel to this conscious experience. Yet to reduce this thought simply to a brain state gives no explanation of how this could possibly be so. It ignores one of the most basic phenomena associated with consciousness and thinking: the existence of *qualia*. To emphasize this point, consider the difference between the purely physical aspects of a terrible pain – in terms of the behaviour of nerve cells and so on – and the actual excruciating feeling of the pain: the physical description fails completely to catch what it is really like to experience this state.

Individual differences

Yet another criticism of the type-identity theory is that it insists that, for example, thoughts about the weather must all be brain states of the same type, even when the thoughts are had by different people. But there may be good reasons for believing that different people’s brains function in slightly different ways, so that different brain states in different people could still give rise to a similar thought.

Even this presupposes that thoughts can be neatly divided up: that we can say where one thought ends and another begins. A basic assumption of the type-identity theory is that two people can have thoughts of precisely the same type. On closer analysis this seems to be a dubious assumption to make. If you and I are both thinking that the dark sky looks beautiful, we may express ourselves in identical words. We may both draw attention to the particular way the clouds are illuminated by the moon, and so on. But are we necessarily thinking a thought of the same type?

My thought about the beauty of the sky is not easily isolated from the whole of my experience of night-time skies, which is obviously very different from yours. Or again, if I believe that the author of Nineteen Eighty-Four wrote under a pseudonym, and you believe that Eric Blair wrote under a pseudonym, do we share a thought of the same type? Certainly our statements of our beliefs would refer to the same man, who was more usually known in literary circles as George Orwell. Yet there is no easy answer to such questions. What they show is the difficulty of carving up our mental life into neat slices which can then be removed and compared with slices from other people’s mental lives. If it is impossible to determine when two people are having thoughts of the same type, then type-identity physicalism is implausible as a theory of the mind.

**Token-identity theory**

One way round some of these criticisms of type-identity theory is provided by token-identity theory. Like type-identity theory, token-identity theory, which is another form of physicalism, states that all thoughts are identical with brain states. However, unlike type theory, token-identity theory allows that thoughts of the same type need not all be brain states of the same type. This theory uses the basic distinction between ‘type’ and ‘token’: this distinction is most easily explained through examples. All copies of the book War and Peace are tokens of the particular type (the novel War and Peace): if you own a Volkswagen ‘Beetle’ car, you own a token of the particular type (a ‘Beetle’ car). The type is the species; the token is the individual instance of the species. What the token-identity theory says is that individual tokens of a particular type of thought are not necessarily physical states of precisely the same type.
So, when I think ‘Bertrand Russell was a philosopher’ today, this may involve a different brain state from when I thought that thought yesterday. Similarly, in order for you to think this thought, you needn’t be in the same brain state as I was on either occasion.

The token-identity theory, however, is open to at least one major criticism.

CRITICISMS OF TOKEN-IDENTITY THEORY

Same brain states could be different thoughts

This simple token-identity would seem to allow that two people could be physically identical, right down to the very smallest molecule, and yet differ completely mentally. This seems to make the mental too much independent of the physical. It makes the relationship between the physical and the mental completely mysterious: more mysterious even than does mind/body dualism.

However, token-identity theorists usually build the notion of supervenience into their theory. A property of something is supervenient on another property (literally, ‘goes above’) if it depends on that other one for its existence. So, for instance, beauty (assuming it to be skin deep) can be said to supervene on physical attributes: if two people are physically identical, then it is impossible for one of them to be beautiful and the other not. However, this is not to say that all beautiful people are identical with each other; merely that if two people are identical form to cell, one cannot be beautiful and the other not. If we adapt the token-identity theory of mind by adding to it the idea that mental properties are supervenient on physical ones, it means that if the physical properties are kept the same, the mental ones cannot vary. In other words, if two people are in precisely the same brain state, they will have the same mental experience. However, this does not mean that just because two people are having the same mental experience they must be having the same brain state.

BEHAVIOURISM

Behaviourism provides a rather different way out of the Mind/Body Problem from the dualist and physicalist theories we have examined. Behaviourists deny the existence of the mind altogether. Let us examine in more detail how they could plausibly deny what to most people seems to be obvious.

When we describe someone as being in pain, or as irritated, this is not, the behaviourist argues, a description of that person’s mental experience. Rather it is a description of that person’s public behaviour or potential behaviour in hypothetical situations. In other words it is a description of what they would do in such and such circumstances, that is, their dispositions to behave. To be in pain is to have a tendency to wince, groan, cry, scream, and so on, depending on the intensity of the pain. Being irritated is having a tendency to shout, stamp one’s feet, and answer people rudely. Although we talk about our mental states, according to the behaviourist that is just a shorthand way of describing our behaviour and tendencies to behave in certain ways. This way of describing mental behaviour has led us to believe that the mind is a separate thing. Gilbert Ryle (1900–76), a famous behaviourist philosopher, called this dualistic view ‘the dogma of the ghost in the machine’, the ghost being the mind and the machine the body.

The behaviourist’s account makes the Mind/Body Problem a pseudo-problem – not a genuine problem. There is no problem of explaining the relationship between mind and body because mental experience is easily accounted for in terms of behaviour patterns. So, rather than solving the problem, the behaviourists claim to have dissolved it completely.

CRITICISMS OF BEHAVIOURISM

Pretending

One criticism sometimes made of behaviourism is that it fails to make a distinction between someone actually being in pain and someone pretending to be in pain. If all talk of the mental is to be reduced to descriptions of behaviour, then there is no room for an explanation of the difference between a convincing actor and someone who is genuinely in agony.

Against this objection a behaviourist could point out that a dispositional analysis of someone pretending to be in pain would be different from that of someone actually in pain. Although their behaviour would be superficially similar, there would certainly be
circumstances in which it would differ. For instance, someone pre-
tending to be in pain is unlikely to be able to produce all the physi-
ological accompaniments of pain – temperature changes, sweating,
and the like. Also, someone who is pretending to be in pain would
respond very differently to pain-killing drugs from someone who
was genuinely in pain: the pretender would have no way of telling
when the drugs had started to work, whereas the person who was
actually in pain would realize because of a change in his or her pain
behaviour.

**Qualia**

Another criticism of behaviourism is that it fails to include any
reference to what it actually feels like to be in a particular mental
state. By reducing all mental events to behavioural tendencies,
behaviourism leaves *qualia* out of the equation. It is surely a major
criticism of the theory that it reduces the experience of actually
being in pain to simply having a disposition to scream, wince, and
say ‘I am in pain’. There is something which it really feels like to
be in pain, and this is an essential aspect of mental life, yet
behaviourism ignores this.

**How do I learn about my own beliefs?**

According to behaviourism, the way that I learn about my own
beliefs is precisely the same as the way that I learn about other
people’s beliefs, namely by observation of behaviour. But surely this
is an inaccurate picture of what actually happens. It may be true that
I can make interesting discoveries about what I actually believe by
listening to what I say, and monitoring what I do in various cir-
stances. However, I do not need to make observations of my own
behaviour in order to know such things as that I believe that murder
is wrong, or that I live in England. I know these things without
needing to act as a private detective investigating my own behaviour.
So behaviourism does not give a satisfactory explanation of the
difference between routes to self-knowledge and ways of finding out
about other people’s beliefs.

A possible reply to this criticism is that what I do when I intro-
spect (look into myself), to see if I believe that, for instance, torture is
cruel, is to think to myself ‘What would I say and do if I learnt of
someone being tortured?’ The answer to that question would then
reveal to me my relevant dispositions. If this is true, then the
behaviourist is justified in assuming that there is no important dif-
ference between finding out about one’s own case and finding out
about someone else’s. However, this analysis of introspection is not
particularly convincing: it does not match with what I feel that I do
when I introspect.

**Pain of the paralysed**

Since behaviourism is based entirely upon the responses or potential
responses of the individual in question, it seems to follow that on a
behaviourist analysis people who are completely paralysed cannot
have mental experience. If they cannot move, and never will be able
to, how can they behave in any way? A behaviourist would have to
say that the completely paralysed cannot feel pain, since they show
no pain behaviour. And yet from the evidence of people who have
been paralysed and regain movement we know that people who are
paralysed often have very rich mental experience, and certainly have
the capacity for experiencing pain.

**Beliefs can cause behaviour**

A further criticism of behaviourism is that it does not allow the
possibility that a person’s beliefs could be a cause of their behaviour.
On a behaviourist analysis, the cause of someone putting on their
raincoat is not a belief that it is raining. Rather, it is the tendency to
put on a raincoat which is the main constituent of the belief. Mental
events cannot cause behaviour because they do not exist independ-
ently of behaviour: according to behaviourism, mental events are
just dispositions to behave in certain ways. Yet it is surely true that,
least on occasion, our mental events do lead to behaviour. I put on
my coat *because* I think it’s going to rain. But a behaviourist couldn’t
use my belief that it is going to rain even as an explanation of my
behaviour because my belief is actually constituted by the behaviour,
and by my disposition to behave in certain ways: the belief and the
action are not separable.
FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism is a recently developed approach to the Mind/Body Problem. It concentrates on the functional role of mental states: in practice this means concentrating on inputs, outputs, and the relation between inner states. A functionalist defines any mental state in terms of its typical relations to other mental states and its effects on behaviour. So a thought about the weather is defined in terms of its relations to other thoughts, and to behaviour: what leads me to have the thought; its relation to my other thoughts; and what it leads me to do. As such, functionalism benefits from some of the insights of behaviourism – such as that mental activity is usually intimately linked with behavioural dispositions – whilst allowing that mental events can actually be causes of behaviour.

Functionalism can be more easily understood through a comparison with the relationship between a computer and its program. When talking about computers it is convenient to make a distinction between hardware and software. The hardware of a computer is what it is actually made out of: transistors, circuits, silicon chips, screen, keyboard, and so on. The software, on the other hand, is the program, the system of operations which the hardware carries out. The software can usually be adapted for use in a number of different systems. The software is usually a complicated system of instructions to the computer hardware, which can be physically carried out in a number of different ways, but achieving the same result.

Functionalism as a theory of mind is concerned with the software of thought rather than the hardware. In this it resembles behaviourism. In contrast, physicalism is concerned to show the relation between certain bits of hardware – the human brain – and a particular software package – human thought. Functionalism is not a theory about the hardware of thought at all, although it is certainly compatible with various kinds of physicalism: it is neutral about what sorts of physical systems mental programs operate in. Its main concern is to specify the relations which hold between different sorts of thought and behaviour.

CRITICISM OF FUNCTIONALISM

Qualia: computers and people

Whilst functionalism is an extremely popular theory of the mind among philosophers, a frequent criticism of it is that it does not give an adequate account of conscious experience and sensations: what it is like to be in pain, to be happy, to be thinking about the weather, and so on.

A similar objection is often made against the view that computers can have minds. For instance, the contemporary philosopher John Searle has used a thought experiment to attempt to indicate the difference between a human being understanding a story and a computer ‘understanding’ one. Imagine that you are locked in a room. You do not understand Chinese. Through a letterbox in the door come various Chinese characters printed on bits of card. On a table in the room is a book and a pile of bits of card with other Chinese characters on them. Your task is to match the Chinese character on the piece of card which came through the letterbox with a Chinese character in the book. The book will then indicate another, different, Chinese character which is paired with it. You must take this other character from the pile of cards on the table and push it back out through the letterbox. From outside the room it appears that you are answering questions about a story in Chinese. The cards coming into the room are questions written in Chinese; those you push back out are your answers, also in Chinese. Even though you don’t understand Chinese, from outside the room it appears that you understand the story and are giving intelligent answers to the questions you are being asked about it. Yet you do not have any experience of understanding the story: you are simply manipulating what to you are meaningless characters.

A so-called ‘intelligent’ computer program is in the same position as you in Searle’s ‘Chinese room’ thought experiment. Like you, it just manipulates symbols without genuinely understanding what they refer to. Consequently, if we think of functionalism on the computer analogy suggested above, it cannot give us a complete picture of the mind. It does not capture genuine understanding, making it equivalent to manipulating symbols.
OTHER MINDS

We have now examined most of the major attempts to solve the Mind/Body Problem. As we have seen, no theory of the mind is entirely satisfactory. Let's turn now to another issue in the philosophy of mind, the so-called Problem of Other Minds. How do I know that other people think, feel, and are conscious in the way that I am? I know for certain when I am in pain, but how can I ever be sure that someone else is? In the way I live my life I assume that other people are sentient beings, capable of experiences very similar to my own. But can I know this for sure? For all I know, other people could all be highly sophisticated robots, or, as they are sometimes called, automata, programmed to respond as if they had an inner life, when in fact they do not.

Whilst this notion may seem close to a form of paranoia, it is a serious question to which philosophers have devoted a great deal of attention. A study of it reveals important differences between the way we come to learn about our own experience and the way we learn about other people's experience.

Not a problem for behaviourism

Before looking at the most common way of answering these doubts about other people's experience, it is worth pointing out that the problem of Other Minds does not arise for behaviourists. To a behaviourist it is clearly appropriate to attribute mental experience to others on the basis of their behaviour since that is what the mind is: tendencies to behave in certain ways in certain situations. This gives rise to the infamous behaviourist joke: two behaviourists have sex and afterwards one says to the other 'That was great for you; how was it for me?'

THE ARGUMENT FROM ANALOGY

The most obvious answer to the doubt that other people are conscious is an argument from analogy. As we saw in Chapter 1 when we examined the Design Argument for God's existence, an argument from analogy is based on a comparison between two quite similar things. If one thing is like another in some respects, it is assumed that it will be like it in others.

Other people resemble me in many important respects: we are all members of the same species, and consequently we have quite similar bodies; we also behave quite similarly. When I'm in extreme pain I scream, and so do most members of the human species when they are in situations in which I would expect them to be experiencing pain. The argument from analogy claims that the similarities in body and behaviour between my own case and those of other people are enough for me to infer that other people are genuinely conscious in the way that I am.

CRITICISMS OF THE ARGUMENT FROM ANALOGY

Not a proof

The argument from analogy does not provide a conclusive proof that other people have minds. Arguments from analogy require a good deal of supporting evidence. But in the case of this argument from analogy there is only a single instance - myself - in which I have witnessed the connection between a certain sort of body and behaviour and a certain sort of consciousness.

Not only this, but there are many ways in which other people's bodies and behaviour differ from my own. These differences may be more important than the similarities: I could use an argument from analogy to demonstrate that the differences between my body and behaviour and other people's indicate a probable difference in types of mental experience between us. Besides, arguments from analogy, being inductive, can only give probable evidence for their conclusions: they can never prove anything conclusively. So, at the very best, such an argument could only show that other people almost certainly do have minds. It's not a deductive proof, but, as we have seen in the chapter on science, there is no proof that the sun will rise tomorrow, yet we still have good grounds for feeling sure that it will.

Unverifiable

Yet there does not seem to be any way of showing conclusively that a statement such as 'he is in pain' is true, or, for that matter, that it is
false. Just because someone is screaming, it does not follow that they are experiencing the same sort of thing as I do when I am in extreme pain. They may not be having any experience at all. Any verbal report of their experience is unreliable: a robot could have been programmed to answer persuasively in such circumstances. There is no possible observation which could confirm or refute the idea that that person is experiencing pain. Obviously the fact that someone was screaming would be enough in actual cases for us to be fairly certain that that person was in pain. But, from a logical point of view, the behaviour does not give absolute proof of pain (though most people work on the assumption that it is reliable).

Of course we may find it rather far-fetched to suppose that other people are not conscious. So we might be so sure already that other people do have minds that we would not need a conclusive proof of this matter – certainly most of us act on the assumption that they do, most of the time. Solipsism, as we saw in the chapter on the external world, is not a tenable position.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has concentrated on debate about dualism, physicalism, and the Problem of Other Minds. These are central issues in the philosophy of mind. Since philosophy is very much concerned with the nature of thought, many philosophers, particularly those who specialize in the philosophy of mind, have seen the sorts of questions discussed in this chapter as lying at the heart of almost every philosophical question. Certainly many of the most brilliant philosophers of the twentieth century focused their energies on questions in the philosophy of mind. As a result, much writing on this area is of a highly sophisticated and technical kind. The books listed below should give you some guidance through the complicated maze of writing on the subject.

FURTHER READING


There are numerous online philosophy of mind resources. One very useful site is run by the philosopher David Chalmers and includes his annotated bibliography of contemporary work in the philosophy of mind. It is at (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~chalmers).