

The Mind-Body Problem

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The interaction of mind and consciousness with the body, and whether they are separate or not has been the subject of much discussion and debate between philosophers since antiquity. This paper shall look at how dualists, materialists and idealists view the realm of mind and consciousness and how the realm of mind and consciousness relate to the physical body. Additionally, the concept of an independent mind that transcends physical functions of the body shall be discussed along with the author's views on this concept.

The argument of what realm the mind and consciousness reside in, and how they interact is a question brought to us from antiquity. Certainly, this question is one of philosophy's oldest, possibly dating back to when humans began to wonder about their place in the world. In the modern world, however, three main views exist on this realm of the mind and consciousness and their interactions – dualism, materialism, and idealism. This classification is, however, in the simplest terms and in fact, the variety of theories which exist are far more elaborate (Goodwin, 2005; Young, 2005) and beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, in the interest of space and time only these three broad classifications will be discussed in brief.

Dualists postulate that the mind and consciousness are parallel to the body in that they coexist and work together, often relating the body to a machine that the mind and consciousness manipulate and control. Many dualist theories invoke a divine influence as the interaction, or catalyst, between consciousness and the body, although this is not a universal held dualist belief (Young, 2005).

Materialist, on the other hand, postulate that the mind and consciousness are simply an ordinary physico-chemical process; the interaction of chemicals and process of the brain create the realm of consciousness. This theory and the theories that descend from this over-simplified

explanation place the realm of the mind and consciousness within the brain and its electro-chemical interactions (Young, 2005).

Idealists have yet another explanation, and are possibly the most extreme and far-fetched by the standards of modern thought and scientific thinking. Idealists propose that no physical body, or indeed a physical reality, exists; to an idealist only mind and consciousness are real, and the physical realm is simply an illusion the mind or the collective of human minds have created (Young, 2005).

Historically, the relation of mind and body is unclear, although Descartes attributed it to the movements of the pineal gland and how it related as an intermediary for the nervous system and the brain. This caused him to theorize that the pineal gland was, therefore, the seat which consciousness must live. However, he did not believe that consciousness was a product of the pineal gland, but that this was the impetus of the interaction between the mind and body. Other dualists postulate that divinity is the force that facilitates the interaction of mind and body and go no further than to state such, making no attempts to explain the interaction and leaving this up to faith rather than science (Young, 2005).

Modern science is proving this dualist theory partial wrong. Although modern science still generally holds a dualist perspective, the separation of mind and body is becoming considerably narrower. In a classic example of presentist thinking, Barasch takes a scathing look at the theories proposed by Descartes and how until recently their decedent theories have been the dominating perspective on the mind-body dichotomy. In his 1993 article in *Psychology Today Magazine*, Barasch degrades Descartes and those who held his theoretical approach to the mind-body dichotomy, and praises modern science for discovering chemical messengers like neuropeptides which appear to act as messenger chemicals throughout the body. The discovery

of over five dozen such neuropeptides in every area of the body has launched a new medical branch known as psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). Barasch still holds the basic dualist philosophy in his writing, wherein the mind and body are separate entities, but states that they are so enmeshed in the actions of each other that they are practically indiscernible (Barasch, 1993).

“What PNI has shown us is that the human being is a walking biological Heisenberg Principle, in which the observer's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes can have measurable effects on physical reality. Within the margins of its homeostatic aloofness, the "It" of our own biology is exquisitely responsive to the "I" of subjective experience.

And these responses are no mere grace notes. Hypnosis, long considered a negligible medical therapy, has been successfully employed to treat children with congenital ichthyosis, so-called fishskin disease—a genetic illness. Meditation and relaxation techniques have been shown to affect blood platelets, norepinephrine receptors, and cortisol levels; biofeedback to influence phagocyte activity; mental imagery to enhance natural killer cell function in patients with metastatic cancer. In a now famous study, David Spiegel, M.D., of Stanford University showed that women with advanced breast cancer who took part in a psychological support group lived twice as long as those who did not take part, a benefit no known drug can claim” (Barasch, 1993).

There is exists an old question of whether or not an independent mind that transcends physical functions of the body exists. Descartes was a dualist in his perspective when he postulated that this was so, and used the central nervous system and pineal gland as the conduit of interaction between the independent mind and the body. Materialists propose a different theory which opposes this view, stating the mind is merely a function of the body and is in no

way separate, and idealists state no physical body exists, only mind (Goodwin, 2005; Young, 2005).

Modern science, while still dualist in perspective, is quickly finding a middle ground between dualism and materialism, where the mind is a separate entity from the body but is so enmeshed with the body that it exists within the physical construct of the brain and body, possibly within the messenger chemical system of neuropeptides and partially withing the electro-chemical processes of the brain and nervous system (Barasch, 1993).

As of the writing of this paper, the author does not have enough knowledge and experience in this realm in order to take a stand and make a statement on whether or not an independent mind exists and how it may interact with the physical body. Strong evidence for a dualist and materialist perspectives can be found, and even some evidence for idealist perspectives are available. At this juncture, however, it would be premature for the author to make a statement one way or another, and such a statement would be simply conjecture based on belief supported by some learned evidence rather than strong evidence ruling out any other possibility.

Three main categories of thought attempt to classify the realm of the mind and consciousness and their interactions with the physical body; dualism, materialism and idealism all look at this interaction in a different way. The relation of the physical body to the realm of mind and consciousness depends on the perspective used to examine this relation. Dualists see the relation as a parallel where mind and body are separate entities working together. Materialists see the mind as purely a function of the body and not separate in any way, and idealists propose that the physical body is an illusion generated by the mind, and that only consciousness is real. In the end, the author could not honestly make a statement on where he stands on the mind-body

dichotomy and whether or not such a thing as an independent mind that transcends physical functions of the body exists in the dualist sense, or whether the monistic views of materialism or idealism are more accurate.

References

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