

The Intellectual Landscape: An Overview of Central Problems and Positions in the Philosophy of Mind*

(Terms that one should have in their conceptual repertoire are outlined in red)

The central problem in the philosophy of mind continues to be the **mind-brain (or body) problem**: **What is the relationship between *states of mind* (beliefs, desires, urges, sensations, emotions, even moods, etc.) and states of the brain or body (physiological states).**

And why exactly does this pose a problem? *Causal relevancy*: our states of mind are supposed to influence bodily motions (in action), and in turn be influenced by states of our body (in perception). Now how can that be?

1. **Cartesian Dualism** (Descartes): **One's mind and body are separate substances that interact with one another deep inside the head** (perhaps, surmised Descartes, the pineal gland).

The problem: How can something *non-physical* (or wholly outside the physical realm) have any kind of influence over the physical realm? Cartesian dualism appears to posit “spooky”, physically inexplicable movements (or vibrations) that are nowhere actually observed. This runs against the *principle of causal exclusion*: Physical effects, if they are to have any cause at all, must have causes grounded in the physical realm.

Aspect Dualism (Davidson, drawing from some themes from Spinoza) holds that the dualism between mind and body really lies in our language. Mental discourse and physical discourse are just two separate, *incommensurable* ways of talking about the same stuff.

But this, too, doesn't really address the central problem. There needs to be some sort of systematic relationship between the mental states responsible for some bodily motions and the physical causes also responsible for them. (Otherwise then it would seem possible for the two to come apart.)

2. **The Identity Theory** (Smart): **Mental states and Physiological states are simply to be identified with one another.** You might think of them as different “names” for the same things (like “water” and “H₂O”). A pain in my toe, for instance is simply the same as a certain pattern of “c-fiber firings.”

The difficulty: There might be creatures with radically different physiologies (bats, octopi, bots, and Martians), whom we nevertheless want to say are capable of having the

same kinds of mental states that we can have. But how can we identify pain with c-fiber firing, if octopi are also capable of feeling pain but altogether lack c-fibers?

The problem is even worse when we consider “higher”, cognitive states. My belief that Hegel was a great philosopher probably cannot be reduced to any tidy pattern of neural activity, which can then be identified with anything in Bob Brandom’s (or your) head. Our brains are simply too different from one another.

The “Token” Identity Theory (Davidson again): Perhaps there is nothing in common between me and an octopus or Bob Brandom. Instead, a belief or pain is to be identified with one particular physiological state in me and perhaps a completely different kind of physiological state in an octopus or Bob.

Still, one would like to know how we are to associate particular mental states with particular physiological states, and what entitles us to think of one physiological state in me belonging to the same mental type as a different physiological state in another. What is in common between them?

3. **Logical Behaviorism** (Ryle): Don’t even bother looking for beliefs inside the head (or “the ghost in the mind’s machine”). Instead, what is in common between octopi and us are our *dispositions to behave* in certain ways. We can both be said to fear sharks by our tendencies to cower and flee from them, and to like shellfish by our inclinations to gobble them up when given the chance. Similarly, Bob and I can both be said to share a belief in Hegel’s philosophical genius by dint of our inclinations to say things like, “Hegel was a great philosopher.” **Ryle’s idea was that perhaps we should just go ahead and identify mental states with those behavioral dispositions.** He further suggested that in principle, we should be able to *translate* statements containing terms referring to mental states into statements without such terms: statements referring merely to behavioral dispositions.

Behaviorism was also meant to solve **the problem of other minds: how can we know that others have mental lives roughly equivalent to that which we take ourselves to have.** If mental states were “ghostly” inner states, then it would be very hard to verify their existence in others, even though they engage in behavior similar to my own. But if mental states are simply behavioral dispositions, then we can easily understand how others could have such things.

Troubles:

(1) The translations Ryle envisaged were practically (and perhaps) conceptually impossible. Not only are they exceedingly cumbersome and difficult to specify, the behavioral/dispositional terms themselves seemed to presuppose mental or intentional capacities, and also to require qualifications specified in mental terms. For instance, a logical behaviorist might take my belief in Hegel’s greatness to be equivalent to my disposition to say things like (or that *means!*), “Hegel was a great philosopher.” But the notions of *saying* and *meaning* themselves seem to implicate mental capacities, and

moreover, I'm disposed to say things like that only if I *understand* English and *desire* to say something *about* Hegel which I *take* (or *believe*) to be true.

(2) Logical behaviorism also appears to get the causal and explanatory story all wrong. We tend to think that mental states are causally prior to and responsible for our overt behavior, not that they are identical with our dispositions to behave. After all, nothing can be the cause of itself.

(3) There also seems to be a problem with "qualia." We'll talk about that in conjunction with the next account.

4. **Functionalism** (Putnam, and many others):

The underlying thought: Different things with varying physical constitutions may be *functionally equivalent* (or serve the same function). A computer (or car, or cheese slicer) can be made of very different kinds of components and yet still count as a computer (car/cheese slicer). Moreover, computers of very different makes can be understood as running the same program, by virtue of undergoing functionally equivalent internal state transitions. Perhaps octopi, robots, and humans can be understood as *functionally equivalent* when it comes to mental capacities. That is, they can be understood as undergoing similar (functionally equivalent) inner state transitions, which are ultimately responsible for their overt or external behavior.

So according to the functionalist, **mental states are to be thought of as functionally specified internal states, which are postulated as the theoretical inner causes of overt behavior.**

Computational functionalism (a species of functionalism) takes the analogy with the computer literally. With respect to their mental capacities, humans are to be considered some sort of computer (or at least information processor).

A problem with functionalism (Ned Block): Functionalism appears to leave something out. Creatures with identical functional profiles may nevertheless differ along the phenomenal dimension of mind or consciousness. It seems that "what it's like" to be a bat may be different from "what it's like" to be a human, or that "what it's like" for a robot to see red or feel pain may differ from what it's like for you or me to see red or feel pain. Functionalism, then, can't account for these subjective differences in the qualitative character of conscious experience. The difficulty in accounting for qualitative character (or "qualia") in objective vocabulary or from a "third-person" point of view has come to be known as **the hard problem of consciousness** (Chalmers).

5. **Eliminative Materialism** (Churchland): There is no mind-body problem, because there's no such things as mental states (at least as they've been traditionally construed). Talk about mental activity is an outmoded, "pre-scientific" way of speaking

which ought to give way to the more scientifically respectable languages of neuroscience or the other cognitive sciences.

Problem: It's far from clear how one can get by without ordinary talk about mental activity. Indeed, such talk might be required in order to make sense of scientific activity itself.

[*A Tamil version of this page can be found at <https://meditativewisdom.com/blogs/science/philosophy-of-mind>. Many thanks to Anamika Nair for taking the time to provide the translation.]