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INTELLECT: MIND OF MATTER

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PROLOGUE: THE REASONS FOR THIS BOOK

The reasons are not to seek. They can be found in the title of this book.

Three words in the title go a long way toward telling the whole story “mind,” “matter,” and “intellect.” The contemporary view of mind denies the intellect as a distinct faculty—a special power of the human mind that makes it radically different in kind, not just in degree, from the minds of all other animals on earth.

When the intellect is ignored or denied as a distinctive faculty of the human mind, mind and matter tend to coalesce. It is almost as if the recognition of the intellect were required to preserve the separation of mind from matter, or, to go a step further, to declare the superiority of mind over matter and the irreducibility of mind to matter.

In books that dominate the contemporary literary scene, the word “mind” is used as a synonym for “body.” For example, the Oxford University Press has recently published an 826 page volume entitled *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*. In a review of that book, the *London Economist* opened by saying: “For mind, read body. Much of *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* is about physiology ... so much is now known about the brain and the role it plays in mental life that to ignore it in a companion to the mind would be like writing a book about the weather and leaving out the clouds.” And in its notice of the same book, *The New York Times* headed its review with the words “Neurology, Neurosis, and All That.”

“Mind” and “brain”—are these interchangeable terms? They seem to be so regarded by those who approach the subject from the viewpoint of neurophysiology or neuropsychology. Yet a distinct meaning for the word “mind” persists in references to the various

aspects of our mental life that the neurophysiologists think they can explain in terms of the action of the brain and central nervous system.

What is true of neurophysiologists is also true of computer technologists, especially those experimenting with the production of machine, or artificial, intelligence. A book recently published by Marvin Minsky, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, bears the title *The Society of Mind*, though it is entirely about mechanical structures and processes.

The identification of minds with brains or minds with machines that imitate brains may be justified by the fact that these authors, who are thoroughgoing materialists, are offering neurological or mechanical explanations of what others in the general public regard as mental phenomena.

It is not only neurophysiologists and computer technologists who reductively identify mind and brain. We find the same materialism in a great deal of contemporary psychology, especially among those who call themselves behaviorists. Preeminent among them is Professor B. F. Skinner of Harvard University, who treats the mind as nothing more than a convenient fiction and regards the words we use to describe the mind as nothing but metaphors derived from words that refer to physical phenomena.

The New York Times, in reporting an address delivered by Professor Skinner at a recent meeting of the American Psychological Association, headlined its story with the words "B. F. Skinner Insists It's just Matter Over Mind."

I would like to point out two things before I go any further. One is the curious and persistent fact that all these different forms of materialism cannot avoid using the word "mind" and all the other words that refer to mental phenomena. What makes mind a useful fiction? Why is it found indispensable by neurophysiologists, computer technologists, and behavioral psychologists? If the words that they use to describe mental states and activities are just metaphorical in meaning, why do the scientists resort to them instead of speaking more exactly in strictly literal (i.e., physical) terms.)

The answer is that without some reference to mind, mental states, and mental activities, the scientists could not significantly assert their claim to having reduced mind to matter, or, if not that, at least to having explained all so-called mental phenomena in purely materialistic terms.

The conscious experience that everyone has, including the scientists who are trying to explain it, resists the attempt on anyone's part to do away entirely with all references to psychological as contrasted with physical phenomena. If all such references were banned as totally null and void, poets and novelists would be unable to put their pens to paper; and the rest of us would be unable to engage in conversations that involve the exchange of intimacies.

The second point to which attention must be called concerns the use of the word "materialism." That word is most frequently used in ordinary—nonphilosophical—speech to name a moral or cultural attitude, one that either overemphasizes or exclusively stresses the value of material possessions, the physical comforts and conveniences that money can buy and wealth can provide.

When moralists think there are more important or worthwhile goods to be sought in life, they use the term "materialist" to condemn those who value nothing but the trappings of this world and the pleasures of the flesh, not to mention the enticements of the devil. But when we are talking about mind and matter, the words "materialism" and "materialist" are used in a quite different sense, not to signify a person's pursuit of material possessions but rather to indicate one's view of reality—of what does or does not really exist. The words are then used in a metaphysical, not a moral, sense.

The fundamental tenet of metaphysical materialism is that only material things exist—only physical bodies or quanta of physical energy. Nothing immaterial—nothing nonphysical or incorporeal—exists, though some physical things or processes may have aspects that appear to be immaterial.

Metaphysical materialism, stated in these bold terms, has two obvious defects. The first is that it has its foundation in a negative proposition that has never been proved and never can be. In other words, it rests on the unprovable postulate or assumption that nothing immaterial does or can exist. That assumption may be true. Making it is not an error. Asserting it dogmatically as an established truth, however, not as something that may be assumed, is a serious error, a culpable mistake to be avoided.

The second defect of metaphysical materialism is its grudging admission that some bodily states and physical processes have immaterial aspects. This admission by the materialist does not contradict his assertion that nothing immaterial exists—that is, nothing which is itself an immaterial entity exists in the way that bodies exist.

Nevertheless, the materialist is compelled to admit that brain states and processes, which are material existences, do have what must be regarded as immaterial aspects to which we cannot help referring when we talk to one another about our conscious experiences.

Not all bodies or physical processes have immaterial aspects. These are to be found only in the realm of organic bodies or living organisms. We do not know with certitude, but we have no good reason to doubt that a snarling cat is feeling anger or that a whining puppy is feeling pain.

Now let me return once more to the title of this book, which states the thesis that this book aims to defend. If intellect were not a distinctive component of the human mind, a set of powers it uniquely possesses; if, in other words, the minds of men lacked intellects, then their minds would differ only in degree from the minds of other animals. But if human beings alone have minds that possess intellectual powers, then it is not matter over mind, as Professor skinner and others assert, but rather mind over matter, as this book claims in opposition to all varieties of metaphysical materialism in the contemporary world.

We know what it means to say matter over mind—that only bodies exist and anything that appears to be immaterial cannot be more than an aspect of physical states and processes. But what does it mean to say mind over matter.

The immaterialism asserted here is not theological—not the assertion of God's existence as a purely spiritual being, nor that angels exist as incorporeal intellects, intellects without bodies. It is much more limited and qualified than that.

It asserts that the intellect is an immaterial component of human nature. The intellect cannot normally function without dependence on the activity of the brain, but the brain is not the physical organ of intellectual thought, as the eye together with the brain is the physical organ of vision.

In other words, of all the powers possessed by human beings, only our intellectual powers and operations are in themselves immaterial. Even though it must be admitted that all the activities of intellectual thought are so dependent on brain states and processes that they cannot occur without them, nevertheless, intellect as such is not reducible to brain, nor are its characteristic activities merely subjectively experienced aspects of brain states and processes.

It may be asked why, in stating the thesis of this book, have I refrained from using the word “spiritual” and have been content with the negative term “immaterial”? The answer is that all of our knowledge and understanding is rooted in and ultimately derives from our sense experience. It, therefore, always suffers the limitations imposed on it by its sources.

We cannot perceive spirits through our sense organs. We have no sense experience of anything spiritual. Hence, for us, the only significance we can attach to the word “spiritual” is limited to the negative meaning of “immaterial”— *not* material

In our ordinary daily speech, as well as in much of the literature that we read and understand, there is talk about man’s spirit or about human spirituality. We seldom, if ever, pause to ask ourselves what we mean by this. Certainly nothing positive comes to mind. We have no perception of the human spirit or of the spirituality of man, nor do we have any conception of it derived from our sense experience. To express with maximum precision the very limited understanding we have when we use these words, we would have to confine ourselves, as I have done above, to the negative significance of “immaterial.”

If we were then asked why we attributed any spirit or spirituality to man (i.e., any immaterial component as belonging to his nature), only one answer that is rationally supportable is available to us: because we have intellectual powers that cannot be fully explained by the material, corporeal components of our physical makeup.

Why else do we refrain from speaking of the spirituality of dogs and cats, cows and chickens? Why do we not attribute a spiritual component to the makeup of any other animal organism? Again the answer is the same: they do not have intellect and so there is nothing immaterial in their natures.

If I were to give this book a subtitle, it would be: “The Battle of the Books in Psychology: Ancients vs. Moderns.” I would be borrowing from Jonathan Swift the phrases “battle of the books” and “ancients vs. moderns” but unlike Swift I am focusing on just one part of that quarrel: namely, the battle in psychology.

There are two reasons, not just one, for writing this book. One is the defense of the immateriality of the intellect against the metaphysical materialism that is currently rampant in accounts of man’s constitution and human behavior. The other is the desire to

make available to readers a sounder psychology than the theories available since the seventeenth century.

I am not saying that the theories of the human mind in antiquity and in the Middle Ages were without blemish or error. There was metaphysical materialism in antiquity, notably in Democritus and other atomists. Atomism is not new, though it has become more sophisticated in modern times. There was also a totally untenable dualism of soul and body, or mind and body, to be found in the dialogues of Plato, notably the *Phaedo*. That, too, was revived in modern times with Rene Descartes and, in its train, with all the insolubilia of the mind-body problem.

In these respects, ancient thought can claim no advantage over modern. Both are faulted by the same errors. But ancient theories of human thought, human nature, and human behavior do contain psychological truths not to be found in the philosophical and scientific literature of modern times, especially since laboratory and experimental psychology has come into existence and since the social sciences have had their say about human behavior.

That is the one clear superiority of the ancients over the moderns in the battle of the books in psychology. Hence, here is the second reason for writing this book: to expound some truths in psychology known to the ancients but either denied, neglected, or not remembered in modern times. For whatever reason, they are truths not present in the current books that assail readers from all directions.

I have already pointed out some of the errors to be corrected: the denial of the intellect as distinct from the senses and the imagination, and the denial of the intellect's immateriality. There are, in addition, other errors: the misunderstanding of the role of the will in relation to the passions or emotions, and the denial of its freedom of choice; mistakes about how the human mind, and especially its intellect, functions with respect to an entirely independent reality that it strives to know and understand, about how it produces the experience we have of that independent reality, and about how it confers on all the languages we use the meanings of their words, phrases, and sentences.

The immense diversity of human languages and of human cultures is quite consistent with the truth that the human mind is the same at all times and places, and with the truth that all linguistic and cultural diversities are superficial, the products of differences in nurturing, as compared with the underlying sameness of human nature and the human mind since the origin of the species *Homo sapiens*

45,000 years ago. These last two truths are generally denied or rejected by leading scientists and philosophers in this century.

The most important and noteworthy of the scientific books are written in a style that makes them inaccessible to the general reader. Their vocabularies abound in the technical jargon of their authors' specialized disciplines. They are academic books for the most part, written by professors for other professors, not for the general public. The contributions they make to the subject, especially their most important insights, remain obscure for the ordinary reader and need to be clarified.

What I have just said about the scientific books written in this century applies as well to philosophical books. Like every other academic discipline, philosophy, too, has become highly specialized. Its professors write their books for other professors to read, in the same way that they write articles in the learned journals of the philosophical profession. On the moot questions concerning the mind, about which there have been disputes down through the ages, contemporary philosophers also disagree and engage in controversy with one another. But the general, the nonacademic, reader needs help to disentangle the lines of argument and to discover on which side of the major issues the truth lies or is likely to be found.


I would like to mention one twentieth century contribution to psychology that fits perfectly with an ancient and medieval truth: the truth about the unobservability of the mind itself. I am here referring to the contribution made by methodological behaviorism in its attack on the long tradition of modern introspective psychology, both British, German, and French, which dominated the teaching of psychology in American universities in the first quarter of this century. I was very careful to refer to the contribution of behavioristic, anti-introspective, psychology as *methodological, not metaphysical*. The latter is simply a revival or persistence of the materialistic error in psychology that reductively identifies mind with brain.

Finally, a word about myself as its author. I spent about thirty years in universities, teaching experimental psychology at Columbia University and philosophy at the University of Chicago, as well as conducting seminars on the great books that are central to philosophical thought.

Both before and after leaving academia, I have written a large number of philosophical books. With one exception, those written up through 1976 were still to a certain extent academic. Though

my intention was to deal with difficult philosophical questions in a manner that was thoroughly accessible to the general reader, I did not learn how to do that effectively until after 1976. In addition, I must confess that until that time I still thought I could manage to write books that would be not only intelligible to the general reader, but also might win the attention and respect of my former academic colleagues—professors of philosophy in our universities.

Through painful experience, I finally came to realize that that double-barreled aim was impossible to achieve. Beginning with a book entitled *Aristotle for Everybody*, all the philosophical books I have written since 1977 have been aimed only at the general reader, with no concern whatsoever for the academic audience. I am not at all dismayed to report that my lack of interest in gaining the attention and respect of professors of philosophy has been met by an equal lack of attention on their part to the books I have written.

At the same time, I am pleased to report that those books have managed to attract an ever-widening circle of general readers who are interested in basic ideas and fundamental issues. I have succeeded in writing about difficult subjects and thorny problems in a manner intelligible to them. Though none has become a best seller to the extent achieved by *How to Read a Book* in 1940, most of them have reached a substantial audience. 

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