THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART ONE: BASIC ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

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COMING TO TERMS

In daily speech, most of us use the words "mind" and "intellect" in ways which indicate that an intellectual mind is our unique possession. Other animals may have minds, but they do not have intellects.

No one is given to saying that dogs, cats, horses, pigs, whales, dolphins, and chimpanzees lead intellectual lives. Nor do we say, as we often say of some human beings, that they are anti-intellectual, that they value their emotions more highly than their power of thought.

Other animals have intelligence in varying degrees. In a very general sense of the word "mind," they have minds of various capacities. But intellects? No, not in the least degree.

Intellect is man's highest power. In Roman law, that man alone has an intellect, and with it free will, is what makes human beings persons rather than things. The body of law that applies to persons is radically distinct from that which applies to things.

In Christian theology, intellect and free will are not only the foundation of human personality, but the possession of an immaterial intellect is also the one characteristic of hu- man beings that explains the passage in the opening chapter of Genesis in which it is said that man and man alone is made in God's image, for in the entire cosmos only God and the angels are pure spirits and man, among created material things, is the only living creature that has even a trace of spirituality.

In Christian theology, moreover, if there is any philosophical argument to support or lend some credibility to the dogma of the immortality of the human soul, it lies in the spirituality—that is, the immateriality—of the intellect.

Of all the serious misfortunes that can befall us while we are alive and not threatened by terminal illness, the most grievous is loss of mind or, more specifically, loss of our intellectual power our power of rational thought.

The explanation individuals frequently give for their gravest mistakes, or even for criminal misconduct on their part, is, "I must have lost my mind. I would not have done that had I not temporarily lost my mind."

Other animals have minds, especially the vertebrates, and among them especially the higher mammals. But what hu- man beings mean when they try to excuse themselves or explain their conduct by saying "I must have been out of my mind" or "I temporarily lost my mind" does not seem applicable to other animals. They do not appear to suffer from temporary insanity, at least not in the wild, though domesticated animals may sometimes throw fits, temporarily reverting to a savagery that their domestication was sup- posed to eliminate or diminish.

Deprivation of sight or hearing, partial paralysis of muscles, loss of limbs, even the conceptual blindness that is agnosia—all these misfortunes, however disabling, still al- low us to live on the distinctly human plane. By resolute willpower and the exertion of mind over matter we can somehow manage to surmount the obstacles they present. But deprived of our intellectual minds, we are deprived of our humanity.

The word "intellect" has clarity and precision in the vocabulary of philosophers up until the seventeenth century when Spinoza writes of the intellectual love of God as man's highest good. It even persists a little later in the language of the poets, as in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." But after that it slowly passes out of philosophical and poetic speech. The word "mind" takes its place.

Essays are written about the human "understanding" (which is the English translation of the Greek word "nous," the word for intellect), but as that word is used it refers mainly to the operation of our sensitive faculties, not to the processes of our intellectual life.

In the literature of nineteenth- and twentieth century psychology and in recent books about the philosophy of mind, the word “intellect” is rarely if ever used. “Intelligence” is the word that takes its place in books about the behavior of men and other animals, and what is thus referred to is found in varying degrees throughout the world of living creatures from the lowest to the highest.

When the word “mind” is now used in the behavioral sciences, it refers to what is operative in all forms of intelligent and learned behavior. It also always refers to the power and action of the senses, the imagination, and the memory, and almost never to a faculty that is solely a power of conceptual thought.

Although thought is attributed to the minds of animals other than man, their thinking is entirely circumscribed by what their sensitive powers can perceive, imagine, or re- member, and never rises above their senses to move in spheres unreachable by sense. The nearest they come to being like humans is in their power of perceptual, not conceptual, thought.

In the life of all other animals, mind is embodied completely. Mind is found entirely imbedded in physical organs. Mind is in matter. Only in man does mind rise above matter or over matter, by virtue of man’s having a mind that has intellectual as well as sensitive powers, conceptual as well as perceptual thought, the power to think about what is un- perceived and totally imperceptible.

In the vocabulary of common speech, there are a number of words that cluster around the word “mind.” None of them is a precise synonym for it. Each has a somewhat different connotation and a different range of application.

Take “consciousness,” for example. We realize that we are conscious by virtue of our having a mind, but we also realize that when we are asleep and not dreaming, we have a mind without being conscious. The notion of an unconscious mind carries with it the supposition that activity may go on in our minds even when we are unaware of it, activity that may manifest itself in subsequent behavior.

At the same time that we recognize that having a mind and being conscious are not identical, we also recognize that total deprivation of mind is tantamount to total lack of consciousness. But we may or may not have varying degrees of doubt about the correlation that exists between having a mind and being conscious.

In the realm of living organisms, how far down in the scale of their complexity do we go before we reach organisms that we regard as totally deprived of mind and conscious- ness? Is the whole realm of plants or vegetables mindless and unconscious? What about micro-organisms and the in- vertebrates? Among the invertebrates, insects manifest the most complex pattern of behavior; yet if all of it is completely determined by instinct, and if they manifest no capacity for learning and, through it, for modified behavior, we would not attribute even the slightest degree of intelligence to them.

We have just met another word in the cluster that surrounds the word "mind": "intelligence." Certainly, whatever has mind in any degree also has intelligence, but is the reverse true? If our use of the word "mind" is colored by our sense of our own mental abilities, we are likely to be hesitant about affirming the presence of mind in animals to which we attribute intelligence for the sole reason that they show some capacity for learned or modified behavior.

Having a mind, we are inclined to think, involves more than just the ability to learn. There is experimental evidence that amoeba and paramecia among micro-organisms can be caused to modify their behavior. They have no nervous systems, not even the very simple nervous apparatus possessed by insects. Is that fact alone sufficient to deny their possession of intelligence, consciousness, and mind? If so, how complex must an organism's nervous apparatus be to justify us in affirming that organism's possession of mind, intelligence, and consciousness?

Fortunately, we do not need to know the answers to these difficult questions, even supposing that they are answerable with some degree of assurance. Within the limits of our present concern with the human mind, we can proceed to use the three words we have been considering with meanings that justify us in attributing mind, consciousness, and intelligence to higher mammals other than man. That, in turn, is sufficient for the purpose of asking the question whether intellectual mind differs in kind or only in degree from the nonintellectual minds of other mammals, apes and dolphins, elephants and horses, lions and tigers, dogs and cats.

Before we turn from the consideration of these three words, one more, closely related to these three, deserves a moment's attention. It is the word "experience." Does the con- notation of that word make it synonymous with "consciousness"? If there is no sense in speaking about our having experience in the absence of consciousness, then it would appear to follow that the range of experience

en- joyed by an organism is coextensive with the range of things of which that organism is conscious.

We now come to two words in the vocabulary of our speech about mind that have critical significance for our comparison of human and nonhuman minds. They are “sense” and “intellect.”

The word “sense” is generic. It covers a whole set of specific, sensitive powers, such as sight, hearing, smell, touch, and so on. It also covers certain other abilities we possess, which are dependent on the operation of our senses namely, sense perception, sensitive memory, and imagination.

Like “sense,” the word “intellect” is also generic. It also covers a number of specific powers the ability to conceive or understand, the ability to make judgments, and the ability to reason or make inferences. The exercise of these powers constitutes the range of human thought.

These two words “sense” and “Intellect” raise a host of thorny problems. Are the sensitive and the intellectual powers radically distinct, so that it is possible to possess the first set without possessing the second, even though it is not possible for corporeal organisms to possess the second without possessing the first? To this question diametrically opposite answers have been given in the history of thought on the subject.

Earlier in that history, the two sets of powers were regarded as radically distinct. Later, beginning in the seventeenth century, and especially in this century, the sensitive powers came to be regarded as sufficient for the performance of all mental activities. Given the senses and with them sense perception, memory, and imagination it was held to be possible for an organism to perform all the activities of thought, at least to some degree. The opposite view holds that without the intellectual in addition to the sensitive powers, either conceptual thought itself is impossible or what is peculiarly characteristic of human thought is impossible.

The introduction of the word “thought” requires us to spend a moment more on this last point. Like other words we have been considering, it has a kind of systematic ambiguity. If that were not so, we could not attribute thought to other animals as well as to human beings and we could not speak of thinking machines.

Cautioned about the ambiguity of the word “thought,” we must not let the fact that we attribute thought to other animals as well as to

machines lead us to the conclusion that they and we possess exactly the same powers. Animal thought and machine thought are sufficiently unlike human thought that it is necessary to attribute certain powers to the human mind not possessed by other animals or by ma- chines.

Only if that is the case are we led to the conclusion that the human mind involves both sensitive and intellectual powers and that a distinctive intellect confers upon human beings powers not possessed by other animals or by machines.

So far, we have considered words that, while not synonyms for the word "mind," have closely associated connotations. Now let us turn to words that are more like antonyms. We use the word "matter" in sharp contrast to "mind," and the word "physical" in sharp contrast to "mental. This common usage suggests that mind and matter, the mental and the physical, constitute two distinct realms, the one irreducible to the other.

This view, which in its extreme form affirms an unbridgeable gulf between the two realms, was stoutly defended in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and in early modern times. The opposite view, which in its extreme form asserts that mind and brain are identical and that the mental can be reduced to the physical, has much more currency in later centuries and especially in the present one. In between the two extremes, as we shall see, there are more moderate positions.

Since we will deal in detail with this problem later, the only point to be made here is that the resolution of this issue concerning mind and matter, the mental and the physical, is closely connected with the resolution of the issue about the difference between human minds and the minds of other animals and of machines.

The consideration of mind in relation to matter calls up two more words for consideration in this preliminary clarification of terms and issues. One is the word "soul," the other the word "spirit."

In antiquity, the word "soul" (in Greek, psyche; in Latin, anima) was used to signify whatever it was in living organ- isms that made them alive, active without being acted upon. Since plants are living organisms, they, too, have souls, conferring on them the vegetative powers of nourishment, growth, and reproduction. Animals have souls that confer upon them additional powers—the powers of sense, of ap- petite or desire, and of locomotion. In addition to endowing man with all the vital powers possessed by plants and other

animals, the human soul gives man his distinctive power— that of the intellect and, with it, the power of conceptual thought, the power of judging and reasoning, and the power of making free choices.

As we have just seen, the word "soul" and the word "mind" are not coextensive in their connotations. According to the ancient doctrine being considered, all living organisms have souls, but not all have minds—vegetables, for example.

In the Christian era, theologians tended to restrict the use of the word "soul" to humans. Rejecting the doctrine of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls as heretical, Christian thinkers were concerned with the immortality of the human soul. Christian philosophers in early modern times followed suit. For them, having an intellectual or rational mind was identical with having a soul that could, as a matter of either faith or reason, be deemed immortal, which meant regarding it as capable of existing apart from the perishable body.

What does the introduction of the word "spirit" add? As I have already pointed out, it is impossible for us to say what a spirit is except in negative terms. It is the very antithesis of matter. The spiritual is the immaterial.

Plants may have souls but there is nothing spiritual about them if they are simply living bodies. The same can be said of animals, and it can also be said of human beings if the human soul differs only in degree from the souls of plants and other animals. However, when it is held that there is something spiritual about man that is not present in other living organisms, some measure of immateriality must be found in man, and it is usually found in his possession of intellect and free will.

In modern times, and especially in this century, the line that divides persons (with intellects and free will) from things has been obliterated by a predominant number of scientists and philosophers. With its removal also goes the elimination of any claim for the presence of spirituality in human nature, and in consequence the word "soul" also drops out of use. If any consideration of immateriality remains, it re- mains in whatever solution of the problem of the mind's relation to the body that does not go to the extreme of completely identifying the mind with the brain, thus reducing the mental to the physical.

The antithesis between bodies and minds, souls, or spirits raises the question of what is observable and what is not. If we use the word "observe" to mean that which we can perceive through the use of our senses, then minds, souls, and spirits are not observable, nor are mental powers and acts.

With regard to other organisms, whether they are brute animals or human individuals, I can observe that they have sense-organs, for these are bodily parts susceptible to sense-perception on my part; if I were a brain surgeon, I could also observe that they had brains. But still using the word "observe" for what is within the range of unaided sense-perception, I cannot observe the operations of their sense-organs, their brains, and their spinal columns. Microscopic lenses are required for that. Even with microscopes, other minds and their mental activities are not perceptually observable by us. But, you may say, that leaves one other possibility to consider. Cannot each of us observe his or her own mind and its acts?

To answer this question, it is first of all necessary to use the word "observe" in some sense other than by means of sense perception. It is also necessary to distinguish four or five possible objects of observation. The mind itself is one of those possible objects; another is its powers; still another is whatever habits the mind forms; and, finally, we have mental acts themselves and the mental products of those acts, such as perceptions, memories, images, and thoughts.

The special kind of observation that is thought to occur when individuals are supposed to be able to observe the objects mentioned above has been called introspection. All five of those objects are certainly objects of thought on my part; otherwise I could not be considering them at all. But three of them are just as certainly not objects capable of being observed introspectively—the mind itself, its powers, and its habits. What I have to say about them is a result of inference on my part, not introspective observation.

Two objects remain: the various acts of the mind, and the products of these acts. I can say, as a matter of my own experience (as you probably can, too), that I am reflexively aware of the actions of my mind when and as I perform them. I am aware that I am perceiving when I perceive; of remembering when I remember; of imagining when I imagine; and of thinking when I think. This much, at least, would appear to fall within the bounds of introspective observation.

But, as I will explain at length later, what is beyond my introspective observation are the products of these activities, products that are sometimes referred to as the contents of the mind. With one exception that I will mention later, the contents of my mind are totally beyond observation, certainly by you and even by me trying to observe introspectively.

The reason I broach this point before I can enter into a satisfactory discussion of it is in order to point out the only method available to us in all our dealings with the human mind. Apart from the reflexive awareness that each of us has of his or her own mind's activity, all the rest, with the one exception mentioned above, comes to us by inference. With regard to the minds of other human beings, we do not have even reflexive awareness. We only have what can be culled by inference from our observation through sense- perception of their bodily behavior and from our interpretation of their speech. In the case of brute animals, we do not have even speech as a basis for inference about their minds, or their mental powers and acts.

In the next chapter, I will try to explain at length why, like the behaviorists of this century, beginning with John B. Watson, I reject the whole tradition of introspective psychology that had its beginnings in early modern times with Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

In chapter 3, I will try to defend the uniqueness of the hu- man mind by virtue of its having an intellect and thus being different in kind from the minds of other animals. In chapter 4, I will explain the immateriality of the intellect and argue against its nonidentity with the brain. In chapter 5, I will give reasons for thinking it improbable that intelligent machines will ever be constructed with the power to do everything that an intellect can do. In chapter 6, 1 will con- sider the possibility of intelligent creatures elsewhere in the universe and, if they exist, what kind of minds they might have.

The questions that we will confront in the set of chapters that follow in Part 11 are of a different order: in chapter 8, the question about the mind's relation to reality; in chapter 9, the question about the relation of our experience of reality to reality itself; in chapter 10, the question about the in- fluence of language upon the operations of our minds; and in chapter 11, the question whether cultural differences are due solely to differences in the way the human mind is nurtured.

I would like to close these preliminary clarifications with one comment on the chapters of Part I as outlined above. Here the views I shall be expressing and the positions on disputed issues

that I shall be defending may or may not strike ordinary readers as being in agreement with the commonsense views they themselves hold as a result of their common experience.

However, in Part 11, beginning with chapter 7 on philosophy and common sense, I will try to show that the views I am expressing are, I think, the views held by most of my readers as their commonsense convictions in the light of common human experience. It is here that I will be most at pains to argue for the commonsense view that all human beings live in one and the same world, that our experience of that world's reality is the same in its character and operations as are the minds of every human being alive now or in the past and future. 🕮

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