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SOULS, MINDS, BODIES & PLANETS

Mary Midgley

What does it mean to say that we have a mind-body problem? Do we need to think of the relation between our inner and outer lives as business transacted between two separate items like this, rather than between aspects of a whole person?

‘Mind’ and ‘matter’, conceived as separate in this way, are extreme abstractions. These terms were deliberately designed by thinkers like René Descartes to be mutually exclusive and incompatible, which is why they are so hard to bring together now. In Descartes’ time, their separation was intended as quarantine to separate the new, burgeoning science of physics from other forms of thought that might clash with it. But it was also part of a much older, more general attempt to separate Reason from Feeling and to establish Reason (mind) as the dominant partner, Feeling being essentially just part of the body. That is why, during the Enlightenment, the word ‘soul’ has been gradually replaced by ‘mind’, and the word ‘mind’ has been narrowed from its ordinary use (“I’ve a good mind to do it”) to a strictly cognitive meaning.

As part of this civil war between reason and feeling, notions of mind and body were flattened out to look parallel and to give a convenient answer to a vast metaphysical question which we would surely now consider ill-framed. This was still the old pre-Socratic question; “What basic stuff is the whole world made of?”

And the dualist answer was that there was not just one such stuff but actually two—mind and matter.

This sweeping approach was typical of seventeenth century philosophy. Perhaps because of the appalling political confusions of that age, its thinkers were peculiarly determined to impose order by finding simple, final answers to vast questions through pure logic, rather than attending to the complexity of the facts. In philosophy, as in politics, they liked absolute rulings. The grand structures that they built—including this one—supplied essential elements of our tradition. But there are limits to their usefulness. We do not have to start our enquiries from this remote distance. When we find the rationalist approach unhelpful we can go away and try something else.

Now, officially, we English-speaking philosophers have done this already about mind and body. Half-a-century back Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* persuaded us to stop talking in terms of a Ghost in a Machine. But our culture was much more deeply committed to that way of thinking than we realised. Existing habits made it seem quite obvious what our next move must be. We could at last triumphantly answer that ancient, pre-Socratic question—which was still seen as a necessary one—by once more finding a single solution for it. We could rule that everything was really matter. We could keep the material machine and get rid of the mental ghost.

So behaviourist psychologists tried this. Through much of the twentieth century, they successfully vetoed all talk of the inner life. People who wanted to seem scientific never mentioned consciousness or subjectivity at all. But this turned out not to work very well. A world of machines without users or designers—a world of objects without subjects—could not be made convincing. Gradually it became clear that the concept of the Machine could not really function on its own because it had been engineered in the first place to fit its Ghost. Accordingly, some thirty years back, scientists suddenly rediscovered consciousness and decided that it constituted a crucial Problem. But the concepts that were available for dealing with it were still the ones that had been devised to make it unspeakable in the first place.

This is our difficulty today. Colin McGinn has stated it with admirable force in his recent book *The Mysterious Flame; Conscious Minds In A Material World* (Basic Books 1999):

> "The problem is how *any* collection of cells… could generate a conscious being. The problem is in the raw materials. It looks as if, with consciousness, a new kind of reality has been in-

> jected into the universe….How can mere matter generate consciousness?…. If the brain is spatial, being a hunk of matter in space, how on earth could the mind *arise* from the brain?…This seems like a miracle, a rupture in the natural order." (pp.13 and 115)
>
> "One area of human enquiry constitutes an anomaly, a black spot into which the light of reason seems not able to penetrate; the subject we call 'philosophy'….What we call 'philosophy' is a scientific problem that we are constitutionally unequipped to solve… The mind-body problem is the same *kind* of problem as the problems of physics and the other sciences; we just lack the conceptual equipment with which to solve it." (p.212, Author's emphases)

Now it is surely good news to find a respected analytic philosopher recognising that there are limits to our power of understanding. But I think that a great part of this particular difficulty arises from a more ordinary source—namely that our tradition leads us to misstate the problem. We don't need to fall back on McGinn's rather desperate solution of positing a cerebral incompetence. Philosophical problems are not just scientific problems that happen to be rather awkward. They are problems about how to think. And here, as so often happens, the best way of dealing with them is to start again somewhere else, thinking differently.

I suggest that we start by considering the relation between our inner and outer lives—between our subjective experience and the world that we know exists around us—in the context of our lives as a whole, rather than trying to add consciousness as an isolated extra to doctrines in physics conceived on principles that don't leave room for it. The unit should not be an abstracted body or brain but the whole living person.

To see why this is necessary, let's look back for a moment to Descartes.

As I have suggested, one factor that led him to call for dualism was the wish to establish Reason as an arbitrator to deal with disputes between warring authorities in the world. And what made this need pressing at that special time was the advent of a new form of Reason in competition with the older forms—namely, modern physics.

When that impressive discipline was launched into an intellectual world that had been shaped entirely around theology—and where theological opinions were dangerously linked to politics—some device for separating these spheres was needed. That device ought to have been one that led on to Pluralism—meaning, of course, not

a belief that there are many basic stuffs but a recognition that there are many different legitimate ways of thinking about the different patterns in the world. Instead, however, the train of thought stopped at the first station—dualism—leaving many passengers still stranded there today.

For instance, dualistic trouble erupts when people raise the problem of Personal Identity, the question of what a person essentially is. Analytic philosophers have often discussed this, usually setting out from Locke's famous example of the Prince who changes minds with the Cobbler. Their thoughts about this story have produced a striking crop of science-fiction, asking whether various kinds of bizarre beings would count as 'the same person' when they had been metamorphosed in various equally bizarre ways. The answers tend not to be helpful because, when we go beyond a certain distance from normal life, we really don't have a context that might make sense of the question at all. And—as students often complain—these speculations are rather remote from the kind of problems that actually make people worry about personal identity in real life. Those problems mostly arise over internal conflicts within us and we will come back to them presently.

Professional science-fiction writers also have trouble with this topic, because their art is deeply committed to dualism. Their characters keep jumping into other people's bodies, or having their own bodies taken over by an alien consciousness. It even happens in *Star Trek*. But these stories are strangely limited because they proceed on such an odd assumption. They treat soul or consciousness as an alien package radically separate from the body. They go on as if one person's inner life could be lifted out at any time and slotted neatly into the outer life of someone else, much as a battery goes into a torch. But our inner lives aren't actually standard articles designed to fit just any outer one in this way. The cobbler's mind needs the cobbler's body. Two people with different nerves and sense organs are not likely to perceive things in the same way, let alone have the same feelings about them, nor could their memories be shifted wholesale to a different brain. Trying to exchange bodies is not like putting a new battery in a torch. It is more like trying to fit the inside of one teapot into the outside of another, which is something that few of us would attempt.

It is surely interesting that so many writers of science fiction have signed up for this strange metaphysic. It shows how natural dualist thinking still is today. This attempt to simplify the relation between our inner and outer lives by talking as if they were quite separate items makes it even harder to connect them sensibly—even harder to see ourselves as a whole—than Descartes had already made it.

Descartes did occasionally worry that soul and body might be linked in some way. He wrote:

> "*I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel....* I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt." (*A Discourse on Method*, tr. John Veitch, Dent & Dutton 1937 p.135, emphasis mine)

But unfortunately this didn't stop him arguing the rest of the time that the separation is absolute, making the soul a simple, pure, unchanging spark of consciousness. He speaks of the body as something outside it, something foreign that the soul discovers when it starts to look around it. (The pilot wakes up, so to speak, to find himself mysteriously locked into his ship). The natures of these two substances, he says, have no intelligible relation.

This isolated soul is, of course, well-designed to survive on its own after death, which is something that concerned Descartes. *But the after-life is not the first thing we need to consider when we form our conception of ourselves.* The first thing we need is to view them in a way that makes good sense for the life that we have to live now. By making our inner lives so thin and detachable, Descartes put them in danger of looking unnecessary.

With the advance of the physical sciences, matter increasingly looked intelligible on its own. Mind and body did indeed start to look more like ship and pilot, and people began to ask whether the pilot was actually needed. Perception and action were physical processes that could go on very well without him. So the behaviourist psychologists dropped him overboard, leaving a strictly material world of self-directing ships—uninhabited bodies. Descartes' theistic dualism turned into materialistic monism.

This is the awkward background against which everybody now suddenly wants to talk about 'the problem of consciousness'. It

explains why these enquirers often see this as a problem of how to insert a single extra term—consciousness—into the existing physical sciences.

In attempting this, they are trying to revive Descartes' highly abstract soul—his pure spark of consciousness—and to fit it in somewhere in the study of the physical world. Since the whole point of separating it off in the first place was that it couldn't be handled by physical methods, this can't work. Human beings are not loose combinations of two ill-fitting parts. They are whole, complex creatures with many aspects that have to be thought about in different ways. Mind and body are much more like shape and size than they are like ice and fire, or oil and water. Conscious thinking is not, as Descartes said, a queer kind of extra stuff in the world. It is just one of the things that we do.

Both the extreme abstractions that have so far been used are misleading.

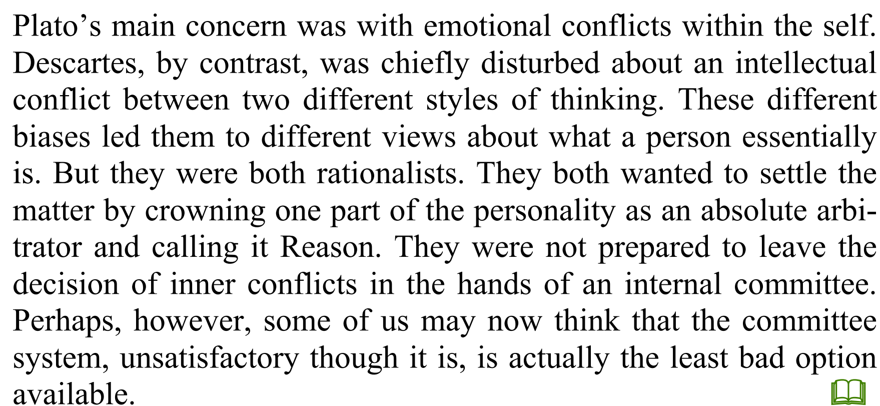
To consider the mental end first—we need to drop Descartes' idea that the inner life is essentially a simple, unified, unchanging entity, an abstract point of consciousness. A thinking being cannot be like this. To think is to deal with the complexities of the world, so whatever thinks must itself have an inner complexity. It needs to grasp conflicting considerations.

Nor can it be, as Descartes said, unchanging. Our changeableness is just what makes our problems over personal identity, and these are very pervasive. We often have to consider, not just "is this man in the dock still the same person that he was?" but "am I myself altogether the same person? Am I (for instance) really committed to my present project?" or again "which of us inside here should take over now?" A friend of mine used to complain that he unfortunately consisted of a committee whose members often disagreed, and all too often, the wrong person got up and spoke. And of course these committees within us are not isolated, like the Cartesian soul, each in its own ivory tower. We are social beings whose inner lives are profoundly shaped by those around us. All this makes our lives much more difficult than we could wish, but it is also what makes them interesting.

Of course it is true that, in a way, each of us is just one person. But such unity as we have is not simple and given. It is a difficult ongoing project, something continuously struggled for and never fully reached. Carl Jung called it 'the integration of the personality' and thought it was the central business of our lives.

Plato, who was a very different kind of dualist from Descartes, thought these conflicts were internal to the soul and constituted its primary business. The soul (he said) is by no means a unity. It is constantly tormented because it is divided into three parts—good desires, bad desires and Reason, who is the charioteer trying to drive this mixed team of horses. This is, of course, primarily a moral doctrine. But it is also an integral part of Plato's metaphysic and the reasons that he gives for it are thoroughly serious.

The difference between these two dualist views shows plainly that there is not just one way of dividing up a human being. No single perforated line marked 'tear here' cuts off soul from body. Different cultures notoriously use different conceptual maps here, dividing the self in different ways. None of these ways of dividing is specially 'scientific'. Each of them is designed to bring out the importance of some special aspect of our life. McGinn's proposal to treat a problem that visibly arises from recent trends in our own intellectual history as something necessarily afflicting the whole human race because of its evolutionary history strikes me as somewhat odd.



Plato's main concern was with emotional conflicts within the self. Descartes, by contrast, was chiefly disturbed about an intellectual conflict between two different styles of thinking. These different biases led them to different views about what a person essentially is. But they were both rationalists. They both wanted to settle the matter by crowning one part of the personality as an absolute arbitrator and calling it Reason. They were not prepared to leave the decision of inner conflicts in the hands of an internal committee. Perhaps, however, some of us may now think that the committee system, unsatisfactory though it is, is actually the least bad option available.

Mary Midgley belongs to the extraordinary group of women philosophers educated at Oxford during the war, when the men who might have bullied them were absent from the university, either defending their country from the Nazis or betraying it to the communists, according to taste. A contemporary of Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Warnock and Philippa Foot, she has not enjoyed the recognition accorded to those illustrious women, despite being a major philosopher whose work has had a far-reaching impact. One reason might be that she was a late developer, publish-

ing her first book, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature,* in 1978, when she was already 59 years old. Another reason is that she has not devoted much attention to the areas of philosophy that are regarded in academic circles as central—language, knowledge and metaphysics and focused instead on the question of the nature of Man. This was, for the Greeks, the central question of philosophy, and remained so until the logical atomists and positivists swept it from the table.

Mary Midgley lectured at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, until the Philosophy Department there was closed down. Among her best-known books are *Beast and Man, Wickedness, The Ethical Primate* and *Science and Poetry.*

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Next week, we will publish Dr. Adler's view of this problem.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Gerald Hoeltge

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