



IS INTELLECT IMMATERIAL?

Mortimer Adler

I will try, as briefly as possible, to summarize the argument that I think supports the view that the intellect is the immaterial factory needed, in addition to the brain, for the occurrence in the human mind of conceptual thought. The argument, as stated, is not to be found in the philosophical writings of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, but its main tenets can be found there.

The argument hinges on two propositions. The first asserts that the concepts whereby we understand what different kinds or classes of things are like consist of meanings that are universal. The second proposition asserts that nothing that exists physically is ever actually universal. Anything that is embodied in matter exists as an individual, a singular thing that may also be a particular instance of this class or that.

From these two propositions, the conclusion follows that our concepts, having universality, cannot be embodied in matter. If they were acts of a bodily organ such as the brain, they would exist in matter, and so could not have the requisite universality to function

as concepts that enable us to think of universal objects, such as kinds or classes, quite different from the individual things that are objects of sense perception, imagination, and memory. The power of conceptual thought, by which we form and use concepts, must, therefore, be an immaterial power, one the acts of which are not acts of a bodily organ.

The reasoning that supports the first of the two foregoing propositions is as follows. Our common or general names derive the meanings they carry from the concepts we have. The meaning of a common or general name is universal. It always signifies a class of objects, never any particular instance or member of the class. Particular instances are designated by proper names or definite descriptions. When we use the word “dog,” we are referring to any dog, regardless of breed, size, shape, or color. To refer to a particular instance, we would use a canine name, such as “Fido,” or a definite description, such as “that white poodle over there lying in front of the fire.” Our concepts of dog and poodle not only enable us to think about two classes of animals, they also enable us to understand what it is like to be a dog or a poodle.

The second proposition about the individuality of all material or corporeal things is supported by the facts of common experience. The objects we perceive through our senses are all individual things—that is, this individual dog, that individual spoon. As I pointed out in the preceding chapter, we have never seen a triangle in general, nor can we imagine one. Any triangle that we can draw on a piece of paper, any triangle we have seen or imagined, is a particular triangle of a certain shape and size. But we can understand what is involved in triangularity as such, without reference to the character of the angles or the area enclosed.

Whatever exists physically exists as an individual, and whatever has individuality exists materially. No one has ever experienced or produced anything that has physical or corporeal existence and also is universal in character rather than individual.

The argument then reaches its conclusion as follows. Our concepts are universal in their signification of objects that are kinds or classes of things rather than individuals that are particular instances of these classes or kinds. Since they have universality, they cannot exist physically or be embodied in matter. But concepts do exist in our minds. They are there as acts of our intellectual power. Hence that power must be an immaterial power, not one embodied in a material organ such as the brain.

The action of the brain, therefore, cannot be the sufficient condition of conceptual thought, though it may still be a necessary condition thereof, insofar as the exercise of our power of conceptual thought depends on the exercise of our powers of perception, memory, and imagination, which are corporeal powers embodied in our sense-organs and brain.

If it can be shown that any other animal, such as the dolphin, has the power of conceptual thought, the argument just stated would lead to the same conclusion about the dolphin: namely, that it has an immaterial power and that the action of the dolphin brain is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of the occurrence of conceptual thought on the part of the dolphin.

I have just summarized the bare bones of the argument, but readers may wish to put its premises to the test.

First, attempt to explain the general significance of the common nouns in our vocabulary, the significance of which is so different from the designative reference of the proper names we use, without appealing to our conceptual understanding of classes or kinds to which perceived or imagined particulars belong. If you cannot do that, then our apprehension of universals—of classes or kinds—is indispensable to our understanding of the meaning of common nouns or names.

Our cognitive sensory powers do not and cannot apprehend universals. Their cognitive reach does not go beyond particulars. Hence, we would not be able to apprehend universals if we did not have another and quite distinct cognitive power—the power of intellect.

Then ask yourself whether the particular individual things you apprehend by sense-perception or imagination are always bodies or the attributes of bodies, never anything the existence of which is incorporeal or immaterial. When you open your eyes and look out the window, what do you see? This or that individual tree; this or that automobile; this or that particular building. Whatever it is, it is always some physical thing, some material embodiment. When you close your eyes and let your imagination roam, what do you then apprehend? The same again: always some individual, physical thing; some material embodiment.

The fact that the world we perceive through our senses and all the things we can imagine and remember are individual physical things or material embodiments gives great credibility to the mate-

rialistic thesis that the world of real existences is entirely material, that nothing immaterial really exists.

The great credibility of that thesis does not make the proposition self-evidently true, nor does it constitute proof of its truth. The proposition, however credible, still remains a postulate that should not be dogmatically asserted as an indubitable truth—true beyond the shadow of a doubt.

What has just been said not only challenges the dogmatism of the materialist; it also, paradoxically, reveals the reasons why the materialistic dogma is so credible to all of us as well as the grounds for asserting the immateriality of the intellect.

Why do we find the materialistic dogma so credible? Because the world of our sense-experience and of our imagination and memory is filled with nothing but individual objects all of which are physical bodies, material things or their attributes.

At the same time, the individual physical things in the world of our sense-experience are also particular instances of certain kinds or classes of things—the kinds or classes to which the common names or general terms we use refer. We could not use those words with their general significance if we were not able to apprehend the objects of conceptual thought—the intelligible, universal objects that only our intellects can apprehend.


Readers are thus led to the conclusion that the power by which we apprehend those intelligible objects, those universal objects of conceptual thought, must be immaterial. For if the concepts by which we apprehend such objects were acts of bodily organs, their material embodiment would prevent them from being apprehensions of anything universal. They would, in this respect, be no different from the percepts and the images that are acts of bodily organs (the sense-organs and the brain) and, therefore, are always apprehensions of individual things or of their particular attributes.

We are not done yet. It was pointed out earlier that the two extreme theories of psychophysical dualism and materialistic monism can both be false, though both cannot be true. We must now acknowledge that the same applies to the two moderate theories: the theory that the brain is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of all mental acts and processes; and the theory that the brain is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of conceptual thought, that an immaterial intellect is also required and must be posited in order to provide an adequate explanation of concep-

tual thought. These moderate theories cannot both be true, but both can be false.

Even if both are false, we are left with one solid conclusion, which is the one point on which both of these moderate theories concur: namely, that there is at least an analytical distinction between mental and physical acts and processes. That being the case, our understanding of the intellectual powers of the human mind can be stated in purely mental terms. It does not depend on our knowledge of the brain, nor does it depend on how we view the intellect's relation to the brain.

Thus, for example, the clear difference between perceptual and conceptual thought, which is so important in understanding the difference between animal and human behavior, remains unchanged by the adoption of one rather than the other of the two conflicting theories. It remains the same whether we view conceptual thought as an act of the brain or of an immaterial intellectual power. What is affected by taking one or another of these alternative moderate views is only whether the difference in kind between human and animal behavior is a superficial or a radical difference in kind.

Lest readers are misled by the foregoing summation, let me clearly reiterate the position that I think I have shown to be demonstrably true: that the brain is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for conceptual thought; that an immaterial intellect is also requisite as a condition; and that the difference between human and animal behavior is a radical difference in kind. 

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