

A compendium of Non-Theosophical Ideas about the Mind, the Brain & Consciousness

RENÉ DESCARTES THE MIND-BODY DISTINCTION

[From: The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP)]

One of the deepest and most lasting legacies of Descartes' philosophy is his thesis that mind and body are really distinct—a thesis now called “mind-body dualism.” He reaches this conclusion by arguing that the nature of the mind (that is, a thinking, non-extended thing) is completely different from that of the body (that is, an extended, non-thinking thing), and therefore it is possible for one to exist without the other. This argument gives rise to the famous problem of mind-body causal interaction still debated today: how can the mind cause some of our bodily limbs to move (for example, raising one's hand to ask a question), and how can the body's sense organs cause sensations in the mind when their natures are completely different? This article examines these issues as well as Descartes' own response to this problem through his brief remarks on how the mind is united with the body to form a human being. This will show how these issues arise because of a misconception about Descartes' theory of mind-body union, and how the correct conception of their union avoids this version of the problem. The article begins with an examination of the term “real distinction” and of Descartes' probable motivations for maintaining his dualist thesis. ...

CHRISTOF KOCH WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

[in Scientific American, June 1, 2018]

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-consciousness/>

Consciousness is everything you experience. It is the tune stuck in your head, the sweetness of chocolate mousse, the throbbing pain of a toothache, the fierce love for your child and the bitter knowledge that eventually all feelings will end.

The origin and nature of these experiences, sometimes referred to as qualia, have been a mystery from the earliest days of antiquity right up to the present. Many modern analytic philosophers of mind, most prominently perhaps Daniel Dennett of Tufts University, find the existence of consciousness such an intolerable affront to what they believe should be a meaningless universe of matter and the void that they declare it to be an illusion. That is, they either deny that qualia exist or argue that they can never be meaningfully studied by science.

If that assertion was true, this essay would be very short. All I would need to explain is why you, I and most everybody else is so convinced that we have feelings at all. If I have a tooth abscess, however, a sophisticated argument to persuade me that my pain is delusional will not lessen its torment one iota. ...

Fierce debates have arisen around the two most popular theories of consciousness. One is the global neuronal workspace (GNW) by psychologist Bernard J. Baars and neuroscientists Stanislas Dehaene and Jean-Pierre Changeux. The theory begins with the observation that when

you are conscious of something, many different parts of your brain have access to that information. If, on the other hand, you act unconsciously, that information is localized to the specific sensory motor system involved. For example, when you type fast, you do so automatically. Asked how you do it, you would not know: you have little conscious access to that information, which also happens to be localized to the brain circuits linking your eyes to rapid finger movements.

GNW argues that consciousness arises from a particular type of information processing—familiar from the early days of artificial intelligence, when specialized programs would access a small, shared repository of information. Whatever data were written onto this “blackboard” became available to a host of subsidiary processes: working memory, language, the planning module, and so on. According to GNW, consciousness emerges when incoming sensory information, inscribed onto such a blackboard, is broadcast globally to multiple cognitive systems—which process these data to speak, store or call up a memory or execute an action. ...

Integrated information theory (IIT), developed by Giulio Tononi of the University of Wisconsin and his collaborators, including me, has a very different starting point: experience itself. Each experience has certain essential properties. It is intrinsic, existing only for the subject as its “owner”; it is structured (a yellow cab braking while a brown dog crosses the street); and it is specific—distinct from any other conscious experience, such as a particular frame in a movie. Furthermore, it is unified and definite. When you sit on a park bench on a warm, sunny day, watching children play, the different parts of the experience—the breeze playing in your hair or the joy of hearing your toddler laugh—cannot be separated into parts without the experience ceasing to be what it is.

Tononi postulates that any complex and interconnected mechanism whose structure encodes a set of cause-and-effect relationships will have these properties—and so will have some level of consciousness. It will feel like something from the inside. But if, like the cerebellum, the mechanism lacks integration and complexity, it will not be aware of anything. As IIT states it, consciousness is intrinsic causal power associated with complex mechanisms such as the human brain. ...

[From *ResearchGate* September 2011]

OP asked: What is the difference between the mind and the brain?

Two responses:

Devraj Wodeyar (Innomono Laboratories (P) Ltd)

Dualism is the concept that our mind is more than just our brain. This concept entails that our mind has a non-material, spiritual dimension that includes consciousness and possibly an eternal attribute. One way to understand this concept is to consider our self as a container including our physical body and physical brain along with a separate non-physical mind, spirit, or soul. The mind, spirit, or soul is considered the conscious part that manifests itself through the brain in a similar way that picture waves and sound waves manifest themselves through a television set. The picture and sound waves are also non-material just like the mind, spirit, or soul.

The alternative concept is materialism. Materialism holds that everything in our universe is made from physical materials including the human mind or brain and that spiritual attributes do not exist in the universe. This concept holds that our mind and brain are one and the same.

If dualism is not true, the mind is limited to the physical brain. Assuming this scenario, what kind of a mind would we expect? We certainly would not expect to have consciousness strictly from materials. Perhaps we could expect to see a mechanical mind similar to a computer that is run by a program. We would not expect things like consciousness, sensations, thoughts, emotions, desires, beliefs, and free choice. Such a mind would behave in a deterministic way based upon the laws of matter. Many scientists and philosophers are now concluding that the laws of chemistry and physics cannot explain the experience of consciousness in human beings.

We would not expect people with such a mind to be responsible for their behavior because everything they do is determined by the attributes of matter. We all know that is absurd. Also, we could not trust our minds since they are just a random collection of materials not produced by an intelligent mind.

Caelin White (Alberta Health Services)

Descartes, although an incredibly brilliant philosopher, got it all wrong and ultimately set us back a thousand years in our perspective of the human brain.

From my strict materialist perspective (which, of course, could ultimately be wrong in the end), questions such as "What is the mind?" or "Where is the mind?" are ultimately meaningless questions. A brain asking these kinds of questions is somewhat analogous to a finger trying to point at its own tip; in my view, the mind is merely an illusion created by one's neural network responding to its own activity. A feedback loop, if you will.

Moving forward from this view, if one wishes to assume that there is a specific location in the brain or body where this neuronal activity is monitored, or where this feedback loop resides, then one is merely talking about the location where "consciousness" is seated. And questions about what creates or determines consciousness are, I think, the fascinating, relevant, and important ones we are facing now.

Homunculus — Wikipedia

A homunculus ("little person") is a representation of a small human being. Popularized in sixteenth-century alchemy and nineteenth-century fiction, it has historically referred to the creation of a miniature, fully formed human. The concept has roots in preformationism as well as earlier folklore and alchemic traditions. The term is also used for an image of a person with the size of the body parts distorted to represent how much area of the cerebral cortex of the brain is devoted to it. For example, the legs are small but the mouth and hands are large.

Homunculus argument — Wikipedia

The homunculus argument is an informal fallacy whereby a concept is explained in terms of the concept itself, recursively, without first defining or explaining the original concept. This fallacy arises most commonly in the theory of vision. One may explain human vision by noting that light from the outside world forms an image on the retinas in the eyes and something (or someone) in the brain looks at these images as if they are images on a movie screen (this theory of vision is

sometimes termed the theory of the Cartesian theater: it is most associated, nowadays, with the psychologist David Marr). The question arises as to the nature of this internal viewer. The assumption here is that there is a "little man" or "homunculus" inside the brain "looking at" the movie.

W. ROBINSON Epiphenomenalism

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Epiphenomenalism is the view that mental events are caused by physical events in the brain, but have no effects upon any physical events. Behavior is caused by muscles that contract upon receiving neural impulses, and neural impulses are generated by input from other neurons or from sense organs. On the epiphenomenalist view, mental events play no causal role in this process. Huxley (1874), who held the view, compared mental events to a steam whistle that contributes nothing to the work of a locomotive. James (1879), who rejected the view, characterized epiphenomenalists' mental events as not affecting the brain activity that produces them "any more than a shadow reacts upon the steps of the traveller whom it accompanies."

Ancient theories of the soul gave rise to debates among Aristotle's successors that have a strong resemblance to some contemporary discussions of the efficacy of mental events (Caston, 1997). The modern discussion of epiphenomenalism, however, traces back to a 19th century context, in which a dualistic view of mental events was assumed to be correct. The first part of our discussion — Traditional Arguments — will be phrased in a style that reflects this dualistic presupposition. By contrast, many contemporary discussions work within a background assumption of the preferability of materialist monism. One might have supposed that this position would have put an end to the need to investigate epiphenomenalism; but, as we shall see under Arguments in the Age of Materialism, such a supposition is far from being the case.

DANIEL DENNETT [Author of *Consciousness Explained* 1991]: The New Epiphenomenalism
Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts University, is a forceful proponent of the idea that consciousness is "no big deal." He claims that it does not exist except in the eye of the beholder. Scientists have shown that information coming into the brain is broken down into separate processing streams. But no one has yet found any "place" where all the information comes together, presenting a whole picture of what is being felt or seen or experienced. The temptation, he said, is to believe that the information is transduced by consciousness. But it is entirely possible that the brain's networks can assume all the roles of an inner boss. Mental contents become conscious by winning a competition against other mental contents, Dennett says. No more is needed. Consciousness is an epiphenomenon, a mere side-effect. [like sweat.]

PHILIP A. PECORINO *An Introduction to Philosophy* (an Online Textbook)**Chapter 6: The Mind-Body Problem**

The topics of this and the next chapter share a few things in common. One of the more interesting things is that most people raised in the last half of the twentieth century are probably carrying two different sets of ideas with regard to both the idea of the human mind and to that of human freedom. Many people are operating with ideas that are inconsistent and some that are outright contradictions of one another. The stories or "myths" concerning "mind" and "freedom" cannot all be true at the same time. In this chapter, and in the next as well, the inconsistencies and conflicts will be noted and then explored. For many thinkers these are some of the most perplexing issues in Philosophy. Certainly these topics are associated with a core list of issues that are termed "perennial." These questions arise within each culture. They have been approached from different perspectives. Answers have been offered. No one answer or solution has gained acceptance by an overwhelming majority of thinkers let alone worldwide acceptance. ... The questions are basic. The answers are very difficult to explain and defend. ...

No doubt about it, we are acculturated with the idea that we have minds. Yes, MIND! We are taught in many different ways that we have both minds and bodies. Very few doubt this and very few think much about the meaning of this belief that we have both a body and a mind. We learn of this view from many sources and as those around us appear to share in the same view, we have no reason to doubt it or question it. However, there are problems with the view and more and more people are changing their beliefs and positions as experience, critical thinking and science appear to provide reasons and evidence that challenge the popular belief.

We believe that we have a body and a mind and that they are somehow different from one another. Our language reinforces this view as well. Many common expressions assume this view that humans have minds. ...

The problem comes about once you really consider what the implications are of believing that minds are not physical objects and that they do still somehow or other influence the physical object that is our brain in order to get our bodies to do what they do. Nothing seems more obvious to most people but that our minds do interact with our bodies. I make up my mind to type something and my mind gets my brain to stimulate the neurons that continue to excite other neurons through my body down to my arms, hands and fingers which strike the keys according to the ideas and the plan that my mind is directing them to follow. It is quite obvious. But wait. Lots of things have been obvious at one time or another and then have turned out not to be true. Could this be one of them? ... More and more people are coming to think so. ...

Think of it this way: a mind, being non-physical, would not be able to contact, touch, move, tingle, excite, push, shove, a physical object such as a brain, a neuron, a synaptic fluid or molecule of any type because they are all physical. ... The mind is not made of matter, the brain is. How can something not made of matter or energy cause something made of matter and energy to do anything????

Descartes thought that it was through the Pineal Gland! (He thought it was the master control unit where the soul contacted the brain (body) because it was singular and not doubled as are other parts of the brain.) Scientific investigation has now proven that the pineal gland does not function as a central control unit for the brain. ...

3 Traditional and Most Logical Options:

- 1. Dualism: Two kinds of substance Mind and Body (brain) that interact or are coordinated in some way.
- Monism: One kind of substance.
 - 2. Materialism - only material substance exists, there is no spirit.
 - 3. Idealism - only spiritual substance exists, there is no matter.

JILL BOLTE TAYLOR “My Stroke of Insight” & the 2006 TED Talk of the same title

starts by trying to work out what makes her brain different from her brother’s – who is schizophrenic. She elaborates by bringing a real human brain to the stage – showing it is divided into 2 distinct halves, with minimal connection between the two. Each half functions differently:

Right Hemisphere is a parallel processor. It focusses on the current moment, using pictures and learns through kinaesthetic movement. It is well connected to senses to build an understanding of what is happening at the moment. It connects us with the world around it.

Left Hemisphere acts as a serial processor. It thinks linearly and methodically, looking at the past and future. It picks through the details of the current time – arranging and sorting these, and connecting them to the events of the past and future. It thinks in language and words. It looks at us as an individual, isolating us from the world.

Jill had a stroke which disabled the left side of her brain – waking up to a throbbing pain behind her eyes similar to ice cream headache. She used an exercise machine while on a stroke, and focussed on how strange her body looked – as if she was out of her body. She noticed that every movement was slower, laboriously focussing to execute every movement. She couldn’t work out where her body ended and the rest of the world began, thinking about the energy of the world around her. Soon her left hemisphere recovered and started to realise that she was in danger, before dropping out again. During the stroke, she was disconnected from her normal brain chatter – the stress and emotional baggage.

When she realised she was having a stroke, she decided to study her brain from the inside. She tried to read her business card, but her vision was broken to ‘pixels’ – and she couldn’t differentiate it from the background. She was having difficulty picking out objects in vision – couldn’t read the numbers, couldn’t keep track of the numbers she had dialled. When she eventually got the phone working, she couldn’t understand the other end, nor speak clearly herself. Eventually an ambulance was called, and she blacked out.

When she woke, she was alive and the stroke was over. She thought back on the stroke as a moment of Nirvana – where she felt connected to the world, and that her spirit was larger than her body. She started to wish everyone could have that moment where their left brain switched off.

Quantum Mechanics and New Age Thought — Wikipedia

The quantum mind or quantum consciousness is a group of hypotheses proposing that classical mechanics cannot explain consciousness. It posits that quantum-mechanical phenomena, such as entanglement and superposition, may play an important part in the brain's function and could explain consciousness.

Assertions that consciousness is somehow quantum-mechanical can overlap with quantum mysticism, a pseudoscientific movement that assigns supernatural characteristics to various quantum phenomena such as nonlocality and the observer effect.

In the early 1970s New Age culture began to incorporate ideas from quantum physics, beginning with books by Arthur Koestler, Lawrence LeShan, and others which suggested purported parapsychological phenomena could be explained by quantum mechanics. In this decade the Fundamental Fysiks Group emerged, a group of physicists who embraced quantum mysticism while engaging in parapsychology, Transcendental Meditation, and various New Age and Eastern mystical practices. Inspired in part by Wigner, Fritjof Capra, a member of the Fundamental Fysiks Group, wrote *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (1975), a book espousing New Age quantum physics that gained popularity among the non-scientific public. In 1979 came the publication of *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* by Gary Zukav, a non-scientist and "the most successful of Capra's followers." The Fundamental Fysiks Group is said to be one of the agents responsible for the "huge amount of pseudoscientific nonsense" surrounding interpretations of quantum mechanics.

See also Fred Allan Wolf *Mind and the New Physics* (1985) and the film *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (2004) Lord of the Wind Films, LLC.

In *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World* (1995), Amit Goswami, PhD, shatters the widely popular belief held by Western science that matter is the primary "stuff" of creation and proposes instead that consciousness is the true foundation of all we know and perceive.

His explanation of quantum physics for lay readers, called "a model of clarity" by Kirkus Reviews, sets the stage for a voyage of discovery through the common ground of science and religion, the entwined nature of mind and body, and our interconnectedness with all of creation. [Amazon]

or as **Nisargadatta Maharaj** (1897 – 1981) said, "You are not in the world. The world is in you."
