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“Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions.”

Letter from Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, May 6/16 1643. – In: The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe), Transl. and ed. by Lisa Shapiro, Chicago University Press 2007, p. 62.

The mysterious nature of the soul/mind

The quote, by Princess Elisabeth, highlights what is perhaps the most prominent argument against dualism. It was written to no other than René Descartes, one of the most famous supporter of dualism in philosophical history. It raises the problem of interaction, the problem of how the soul can affect the body, if dualism is indeed true. In this essay I will examine the argument, and subsequently investigate the materialistic explanation for the nature of the "soul", and examine potential threats to such an explanation.

Princess Elisabeth regards the human soul as a "thinking substance". In Cartesian terminology, that is to say that the human soul is distinct from the materialist world, that it belongs to another realm and of another substance: "thinking substance". Descartes makes this distinction between the material world, where our bodies belong, and of the immaterial world, where the soul belongs, which isn't restricted by the laws of nature, such as our bodies are. Now the argument that Princess Elisabeth presents in the quote is often regarded as the problem of interaction. How can the soul, if it is of a completely different substance than the body, a substance that is in no way influenced by the laws of nature, how can it influence the materialistic body? How can your thinking of raising your arm, which is, according to Descartes an action of the soul, lead to the materialistic body obeying its order and raising your arm? Similarly, how can bodily changes, such as not having eaten dinner, lead to changes in the soul, such as thinking about food, or feeling hunger? It is clear that they interact and influence one another, which should be impossible if they really were of two different substances.

The philosophical attempts of solving the problem of interaction has led to two radical theories. Both theories attempts to solve the problem by resorting to an almighty god. The first one proposes the idea that God is constantly interfering and making sure that the two worlds, of the soul and of the body, are in perfect balance. For example, when it has been a long time since you have eaten and your body is lacking nutrients, God interferes and makes sure that you feel hungry and that you think about going to the fridge, whereas he interferes once again, forcing your body to head for the fridge. The second attempt proposes the idea of the two distinct worlds being perfectly parallel. It argues that God created the two worlds simultaneously, laying

out the complete future of the two, making sure that they are in balance at all time. Similar to two perfectly set clocks that always show the exact same time, even though they don't interact, because they are set with such accuracy. Even though these theories do offer an explanation for the problem of interaction, they depend on an even more controversial philosophical idea, the existence of God. Since replacing one problem with an perhaps even bigger problem does not count as solving the original problem, the dualists are yet to solve the issue.

It seems we must turn for the most accepted theory (at least in philosophy) for answers: materialism. Materialism argues that the mind (the materialistic notion of the soul) and the body are of the same substance, making interaction perfectly coherent. Modern science has sparked a wave of new supporters of this view, by laying out the materialistic explanations for the human mind. Scientific findings has discovered that certain neurons firing in our brains cause certain thoughts or emotions to occur. Many has therefore concluded that since it seems that neurons, being material, can explain mental phenomena, then the mind must also be material. A conclusion that goes strongly against our intuition, which tells us that our thoughts, feelings, and overall experience of the world does not consist of physical material, but rather of an abstract substance.

There are many aspects of the mind that seem unexplainable in materialistic terms, such as thought or intentionality, but in this text I will focus on what I believe to be the most unexplainable one, namely qualia. Qualia is, simply enough, the experience of what it is like to experience something. Neuro-science can explain why we experience red by looking at a red apple, that it is simply photons travelling at the speed of light from the apple to your eyes, causing certain neurons to fire and giving you the experience of seeing red. However, and this is crucial, neuro-science can not explain what the experience of seeing red is like. What wave-lengths the colour red consists of, gives a blind person no further clue of what it is like to see red. Philosopher Frank Jackson emphasises this very point in his hypothetical scenario "Mary the colour scientist". Imagine a person, Mary, that has lived her entire life in a room that consists purely of black and white objects (including her own body). She spends her entire life studying the colour red (the different wave-lengths, etc.), and we must imagine that she knows all the physical facts there is to know about red. One day she leaves the room and sees the colour red. Does she learn something new? Our intuition says yes, surely the physical facts about the colour red and the experience of seeing it are two distinct things. But if that is so, then qualia, and therefore (at least) one aspect of the mind, is not of physical substance, and materialism is false.

I have one main objection to Jackson's hypothetical scenario, namely the phrase "imagine that Mary knows all the physical facts there is to know about red". We are told to imagine something that we have no concept of imagining. Today, we do not know all the physical facts about redness, so how can we know that knowing all the physical facts does not also entail knowing the experience of seeing red? However, one could object that we do know at least some physical facts about red and that these facts gives us no indication whatsoever on what the experience of seeing red is like. Surely, when we find more facts about redness, it will be in the same objective form that our already known facts belong. It is natural to assume that we will simply have more of the same kind of facts, and since these facts tell us nothing about the nature of experience, one might be tempted to conclude that experience is distinct from physical reality. That is at least the conclusion Jackson is arguing for, as a dualist, but it is not an obvious conclusion.

While I grant Jackson that it may very well be the case that experience is distinct from physical reality, it may also be our language, with its limits and social dependency, that gives us the intuition that Mary might learn something new. It seems we must turn to a giant in the philosophy of language: Wittgenstein. While the earliest of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language argued for a picture theory of meaning, that our language, when deconstructed, described reality as it is, he went completely against his own theory in his later years. It is his later works that is the most celebrated, where he lays out his theory of language as a tool for communication. We play language games, he says, so to understand each other and the world which we interact with. The rules of the different language games are granted by their use in conversation and when interacting with others that play the same game. Wittgenstein argued that one should never talk about a topic in a language game that does not fit that topic. For example, to argue against religion by using the scientific language game is missing the point of religion, he argued. It should be talked about only in its own language game. Similarly, when Mary learns about redness by the use of the scientific language game, all she will ever understand is the objective, third-person version of redness, since objectivity is a rule in the scientific language game. She will learn nothing about the subjective experience, to accomplish that she must be dependent on a language game that explains subjectivity, something that is a lot easier said than done.

Since our language, as Wittgenstein points out, is dependent on our interaction with others and its use in the world, it becomes difficult to address subjectivity in language. Qualia, being completely subjective (no one else can know how *you* experience pain), can therefore not be talked about in any language games, at least not in any accurate or meaningful way. And, since language is dependent on rules for making sense, and since the rules are constructed by their use in conversation, Wittgenstein disregards the idea of a private language (that you can think about your experiences in a language that is not dependent on outward criteria). Even though this is a reductive summary of his philosophy, it will do for now, since the most important point is highlighted: language about subjective experience will always be dependent on outward criteria, making it incapable of describing the very thing it set out to describe: the subjective experience.

For Mary to know all the physical facts about redness, she must also know all the physical facts about the experience of seeing red, something our language simply can not describe. If we in the future do, somehow, create a language that capture the subjective experience infinitely perfectly, then perhaps Mary do actually learn about the experience itself when studying redness. An infinitely perfect language that describes subjectivity does however seem like a distant dream, and something we certainly can not comprehend, perhaps even an impossibility. Wittgenstein claimed that there are some things that language simply can not describe, where it falls short, and perhaps qualia is such a thing. In that case the phrase "imagine Mary knows all the physical facts about red" becomes an impossibility, making the hypothetical scenario invalid. If not, the scenario is nonetheless impossible to imagine. Either way, "Mary the colour scientist" should not be used as an argument for dualism.

The hypothetical scenario does raise some serious concerns about materialism, even though it can not be used as an argument for dualism. Thomas Nagel writes about the same topic in his essay "What it is like to be a bat". While we know a lot about how bats function, we know nothing about *what it is like* to function in that very way. When concluding the consequences of this fact, Nagel makes no metaphysical claims, unlike Jackson. Instead of resorting to dualism,

he lets the essay stand as a critique towards the materialists that believe we have figured out the nature of the mind. That certain neurons firing causes certain brainstates, and therefore certain states of mind, does not mean that we have figured out how the mind works. This is what he attempts to show when he uses bats as an example. We know *what* is happening (to some degree) in their brains, but we have no idea *how* it is happening. The same goes for humans. What is needed, is to figure out *how* certain neurons causes subjective experiences, something we are far away from doing.

Both dualism and materialism faces problems when they attempt to fully explain the nature of the soul, or of the mind. Dualism faces (among others) the problem of interaction, the problem raised by Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, which it fails to solve. Materialism faces (among others) the problem of qualia, which we, in materialistic terms, have no way of either describing or explaining. How our subjective experiences makes any sense in a materialistic world is a complete mystery, and on our quest of uncovering this uncharted territory it seems we must attempt to create a language that can explain subjective experience. How to create such a language (if it is even possible) is a task too large for me, but merely acknowledging the need for such a language is a good place to begin. If we do succeed, then maybe we will know what it is like to be a bat and Mary will know what it is like to see red. But then again, maybe not. As of now, the nature of the soul/mind remains a mystery, and until we have better grounds for claiming otherwise, we should remain agnostic about its nature.