AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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Contents

1

Introduction

What is the philosophy of mind? One might be tempted to answer that it is the study of philosophical questions concerning the mind and its properties – questions such as whether the mind is distinct from the body or some part of it, such as the brain, and whether the mind has properties, such as consciousness, which are unique to it. But such an answer implicitly assumes something which is already philosophically contentious, namely, that 'minds' are *objects* of a certain kind, somehow related – perhaps causally, perhaps by identity – to other objects, such as bodies or brains. In short, such an answer involves an implicit *reification* of minds: literally, a making of them into 'things'. Indo-European languages such as English are overburdened with nouns and those whose native tongues they are have an unwarranted tendency to suppose that nouns name things. When we speak of people having both minds and bodies, it would be naïve to construe this as akin to saying that trees have both leaves and trunks. Human bodies are certainly 'things' of a certain kind. But when we say that people 'have minds' we are, surely, saying something about the properties of people rather than about certain 'things' which people somehow own. A more circumspect way of saying that people 'have minds' would be to say that people are *minded* or *mindful*, meaning thereby just that they feel, see, think, reason and so forth. According to this view of the matter, the philosophy of mind is the philosophical study of minded things just insofar as they are minded. The things in question will include people, but may well also include non-human animals and perhaps even robots, if these too can

be minded. More speculatively, the things in question might even include disembodied spirits, such as angels and God, if such things do or could exist.

Is there some single general term which embraces all minded things, actual and possible? Not, I think, in everyday language, but we can suggest one. My suggestion is that we use the term 'subject' for this purpose. There is a slight inconvenience attached to this, inasmuch as the word 'subject' also has other uses, for instance as a synonym for 'topic'. But in practice no confusion is likely to arise on this account. And, in any case, any possible ambiguity can easily be removed by expanding 'subject' in our intended sense to 'subject *of experience*' – understanding 'experience' here in a broad sense to embrace any kind of sensation, perception or thought. This agreed, we can say that the philosophy of mind is the philosophical study of subjects of experience – what they are, how they can exist, and how they are related to the rest of creation.[1]

EMPIRICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

But what is distinctive about the *philosophical* study of subjects of experience? How, for instance, does it differ from the sort of study of them conducted by empirical psychologists? It differs in several ways. For one thing, the philosophy of mind pays close attention to the *concepts* we deploy in characterising things as being subjects of experience. Thus it is concerned with the analysis of such concepts as the concepts of perception, thought and intentional agency. The philosophical analysis of a concept is not to be confused with a mere account of the meaning of a word as it is used by some speech community, whether this community be the population at large or a group of scientists. For example, an adequate analysis of the concept of *seeing* cannot be arrived at simply by examin-

[1] I say more about the notion of a 'subject of experience' in my book of that title, *Subjects of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): see especially chs. 1 and 2.

ing how either ordinary people or empirical psychologists use the word 'see'. Of course, we cannot completely ignore everyday usage in trying to analyse such a concept, but we must be ready to criticise and refine that usage where it is confused or vague. The philosophical study of any subject matter is above all a critical and reflective exercise which – the opinion of Wittgenstein notwithstanding – almost always will not and should not leave our use of words unaltered.[2]

No doubt it is true that good empirical psychologists are critical and reflective about their use of psychological words: but that is just to say that they too can be philosophical about their discipline. Philosophy is not an exclusive club to which only fully paid-up members can belong. Even so, there is such a thing as expertise in philosophical thinking, which takes some pains to achieve, and very often the practitioners of the various sciences have not had the time or opportunity to acquire it. Hence it is not, in general, a good thing to leave philosophising about the subject matter of a given science exclusively to its own practitioners. At the same time, however, it is incumbent upon trained philosophers to inform themselves as well as they can about a domain of empirical scientific inquiry before presuming to offer philosophical reflections about it. A scientific theory of vision, say, is neither a rival to nor a substitute for a philosophical analysis of the concept of seeing: but each will have more credibility to the extent that it is consistent with the other.

METAPHYSICS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

The philosophy of mind is not only concerned with the philosophical analysis of mental or psychological concepts, how-

[2] It is in the *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), § 124, that Ludwig Wittgenstein famously says that 'Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language . . . [i]t leaves everything as it is'. As will be gathered, I strongly disagree with this doctrine, which has, in my view, had a malign influence on the philosophy of mind. At the same time, I readily concede that Wittgenstein himself has contributed much of value to our understanding of ourselves as subjects of experience.

ever. It is also inextricably involved with *metaphysical* issues. Metaphysics – which has traditionally been held to be the root of all philosophy – is the systematic investigation of the most fundamental structure of reality. It includes, as an important sub-division, *ontology*: the study of what general categories of things do or could exist. The philosophy of mind is involved with metaphysics because it has to say something about the ontological status of subjects of experience and their place within the wider scheme of things. No special science – not even physics, much less psychology – can usurp the role of metaphysics, because every empirical science presupposes a metaphysical framework in which to interpret its experimental findings. Without a coherent general conception of the whole of reality, we cannot hope to render compatible the theories and observations of the various different sciences: and providing that conception is not the task of any one of those sciences, but rather that of metaphysics.

Some people believe that the age of metaphysics is past and that what metaphysicians aspire to achieve is an impossible dream. They claim that it is an illusion to suppose that human beings can formulate and justify an undistorted picture of the fundamental structure of reality – either because reality is inaccessible to us or else because it is a myth to suppose that a reality independent of our beliefs exists at all. To these sceptics I reply that the pursuit of metaphysics is inescapable for any rational being and that they themselves demonstrate this in the objections which they raise against it. For to say that reality is inaccessible to us or that there is no reality independent of our beliefs is just to make a *metaphysical* claim. And if they reply by admitting this while at the same time denying that they or any one else can justify metaphysical claims by reasoned argument, then my response is twofold. First, unless they can give me some *reason* for thinking that metaphysical claims are never justifiable, I do not see why I should accept what they say about this. Secondly, if they mean to abandon reasoned argument altogether, even in defence of their own position, then I have

nothing more to say to them because they have excluded themselves from further debate.

Metaphysics is unavoidable for a rational thinker, but this is not to say that metaphysical thought and reasoning are either easy or infallible. Absolute certainty is no more attainable in metaphysics than it is in any other field of rational inquiry and it is unfair to criticise metaphysics for failing to deliver what no other discipline – not even mathematics – is expected to deliver. Nor is good metaphysics conducted in isolation from empirical inquiries. If we want to know about the fundamental structure of reality, we cannot afford to ignore what empirically well-informed scientists tell us about what, in their opinion, there is in the world. However, science only aims to establish what *does* in fact exist, given the empirical evidence available to us. It does not and cannot purport to tell us what *could* or *could not* exist, much less what *must* exist, for these are matters which go beyond the scope of any empirical evidence. Yet science itself can only use empirical evidence to establish what does in fact exist in the light of a coherent conception of what could or could not exist, because empirical evidence can only be evidence for the existence of things whose existence is at least genuinely *possible*. And the provision of just such a conception is one of the principal tasks of metaphysics.[3]

The point of these remarks is to emphasise there cannot be progress either in the philosophy of mind or in empirical psychology if metaphysics is ignored or abandoned. The methods and findings of empirical psychologists and other scientists, valuable though they are, are no substitute for metaphysics in the philosopher of mind's investigations. Nor should our metaphysics be slavishly subservient to prevailing scientific fashion. Scientists inevitably have their own metaphysical beliefs, often unspoken and unreflective ones, but it

[3] I explain more fully my views about metaphysics and its importance in my *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ch. 1.

would be a complete abdication of philosophical responsibility for a philosopher to adopt the metaphysical outlook of some group of scientists just out of deference to their importance as scientists. We shall have occasion to heed this warning from time to time in our examination of the problems which the philosophy of mind throws up.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE REST OF THIS BOOK

I have organised the contents of this book so as to begin, in chapter 2, with some fundamental metaphysical problems concerning the ontological status of subjects of experience and the relationship between mental and physical states. Then, in chapters 3 and 4, I move on to discuss certain general theories of the nature of mental states and some attempts to explain how mental states can have *content* – that is, how they can apparently be 'about' things and states of affairs in the world which exist independently of the individuals who are the subjects of those mental states. In chapters 5, 6 and 7, I look more closely at certain special kinds of mental state, beginning with *sensory* states – which even the lowliest sentient creatures possess – and then progressing through *perceptual* states to those higher-level cognitive states which we dignify with the title *thoughts* and which, at least in our own case, appear to be intimately connected with a capacity to use *language*. This leads us on naturally, in chapter 8, to examine the nature of *rationality* and *intelligence* – which we may like to think are the exclusive preserve of living creatures with capacities for higher-level cognition similar to our own, but which increasingly are also being attributed to some of the machines that we ourselves have invented. Then, in chapter 9, I discuss various accounts of how intelligent subjects put their knowledge and powers of reasoning into practice by engaging in *intentional action*, with the aim of bringing about desired changes in things and states of affairs in the world. Finally, in chapter 10, we try to understand how it is possible for us to have *knowledge of ourselves and others* as subjects of experience existing both in space and through time:

that is, how it is possible for intelligent subjects of experience like ourselves to recognise that this is precisely *what we are*. In many ways, this brings us back full circle to the metaphysical problems of self and body raised at the outset, in chapter 2.