6 Mental states

6.1 The Mind–Body Problem

It is not far from the truth to say that the *Mind–Body Problem* is the problem of understanding the relationship between the mind and the body. But this description is misleading in two different ways. First, we should be aware that philosophers are not that interested in the relationship between the mind and *the body*, at least not the entire body. For example, there are lots of parts of the body (e.g., the appendix) that don't seem to bear any interesting relationship to our minds. Philosophers tend to focus on the relationship between the mind and the brain, the part of the body that is the (proximate) basis for what goes on in the mind. Second, it's not just mental and neurophysiological *objects*, entities like the mind and the brain, that are important. For example, there are other mental entities: mental states (e.g., John's believing now that it's time for lunch), mental events (e.g., John's present pang of hunger), mental processes (e.g., John's current reflection on how best to avoid further pangs), and so forth. There are also other bodily things: brain states (e.g., the C-fibers of John's brain now firing) brain events (e.g., a signal from another part of John's central nervous system to his brain), brain processes (e.g., those processes in John's brain stem currently regulating his heartbeat), and so forth. Our preferred characterization of the Mind–Body Problem is that it is the problem of understanding the relationship between mental phenomena and the bodily basis of those phenomena.

Why is The Mind–Body Problem a *problem*? It deserves this label mainly because it is exceedingly hard to provide the desired understanding. The difficulty starts with the fact that ordinary thought and talk treat our minds and our brains very differently. Our brains have properties that we are reluctant to attribute to our minds: brains are clearly tangible objects,

material substances of some kind. They are grayish in color. The average weight of an adult human brain is about 1.3 kilograms. On average, a brain is over 75 percent water. An adult human brain is about 170 millimeters long. So, according to common sense, our brains are decidedly corporeal. Yet there is a strong inclination to take our minds to be incorporeal. What color is your mind? How much does it weigh? Is any percentage of it water? What's the average length of an adult human mind? All these questions probably strike you as a little odd. In fact, you are probably tempted to either dismiss these questions as confused or to answer them in ways that treat the mind as an intangible object, as some kind of immaterial substance, as not even having color, weight, chemical composition, or length. Conversely, our minds seem to have some special features that we are reluctant to attribute to our brains; Ned's belief that Paris is in France represents the world – it is about Paris – and it is correct. Is there anything in Ned's brain, a neuron, say, that is about Paris? Is there a bit of gray matter that has the property of being correct? These questions can seem just as confused as the questions about the color or the weight of human minds.

Another common-sense difference between minds and brains is the privileged access we seem to have to our own minds, but not our own brains. We have a special way of knowing facts about our minds – the process of introspection – that doesn't seem to provide us with knowledge about our brains. Indeed, introspection seems to provide us with information about our minds that that is more certain than the information that our senses provide us about our brains (or any other part of the external world). We also seem to get information about our own mental life that does not seem to be available to anyone but us, and yet information about our brains is available to anyone willing and able to hammer open our skulls,[1] to perform and assess an electroencephalogram, or to analyze functional magnetic resonance imaging.

Our minds and brains definitely seem to be distinct. This common-sense judgment is reinforced by many religious traditions. For example, many theists believe that after their bodily death, minds or something much like incorporeal minds – souls – will survive even as their brains

[1] Admittedly, it is hard to see how *we* would get much information from hammering open *our own* skulls. So in this peculiar way we are in a *worse* position than others about knowledge of our own brains.

start to rot away with the rest of their bodies. So it looks like there are lots of considerations driving the idea that no mind is a brain and no brain is a mind. But is that right? If it is, then what really is their relationship? Surely they have *some* special relationship.

The difficulty of The Mind–Body Problem is not just that common sense says that mental phenomena and closely connected bodily phenomena are distinct. It is also that we attribute two conflicting sorts of features to mentality itself. Despite treating mentality as something incorporeal, we insist on attributing some properties to the mind that seem better suited to material substances. While it does seem odd to attribute exact spatial dimensions to a mind, we don't hesitate in assigning rough spatial and temporal locations to mental events. Where and when did you decide to go to the concert? Your answer: "Last night, in my room, after listening to that totally groovy album." Even more importantly, we take minds to interact with the material world. Those sound waves coming from the speakers in your room caused certain changes in your brain, and your decision to go to the concert, and that decision will eventually cause you and your car to be heading to the stadium. It is not surprising that what goes on in your brain has causes and effects in the material world; it is so clearly part of that world. But, if your mind is immaterial, it is really rather amazing that your mind got your car to go. Is the mind material or not? If it is not, how does it bring about changes in the material world?

A recent focus of metaphysicians has been on a particular issue about how our minds make things happen. It is sometimes known as *The Exclusion Problem*. It purports to show that, given the scientific nature of our universe, especially the apparent physical nature of our universe, there is no leftover work for our mental states to do. So our focus will be on mental states, where a mental state is understood to be the having of a mental property by an object at a time. The Exclusion Problem is especially interesting because, at first glance, it applies as convincingly to the scientifically up-to-date theories of today's metaphysicians as it does to the seventeenth-century philosophy of René Descartes.

6.2 What is Dualistic Interactionism?

For our purposes, *Dualism* is the doctrine that there are two fundamental kinds of states in our universe, mental states and material states,