

## *Nature of Mind*

In philosophy one problem leads to another, and in modern times it has looked as if most problems converge on the human mind. A large proportion of philosophical discussion involves trying to disentangle the ingredients of our thinking which are contributed by external reality from those which are contributed by the mind itself. Hence to grasp the nature of the mind is the crucial first step towards philosophical understanding. In addition, the mind itself seems to have an odd sort of existence which is challenging for ontology, and the mind gives rise to ideas which take on a life of their own. The status we assign to the mind has effects which ripple through every aspect of the subject.

Ancient discussions of the mind focused on the word *psuché*, which is a broad word covering all aspects of the vitality within a living thing. Hence plants have a 'vegetative' *psuché*, but humans also have a rational aspect to it, and animals have sensations which are another aspect. The location of the liveliest part, what we would call the mind, was often held to reside in the chest. The brain was also a candidate, and eventually (in late antiquity) a combination of dissection and observing the effects of head injuries confirmed that the mind was located in the brain.

Modern studies of the mind are inseparable from studies of the **brain**. The main structures and roles have been identified, but knowledge of the detail is emerging very slowly from research. This knowledge inevitably encourages increasingly physical views of the mind, since thoughts can be stimulated by electrical impulses, and focused thinking can be seen to have effects in specific brain locations. The brain is made of neurons, and its activities concern the connections between them. Since there are an awesome  $3 \times 10^{14}$  connections, our full understanding of the brain will probably never even rival our ability to forecast the weather, and that is always bound to be limited.

In the modern period the focus shifted from *psuché* to what we would call 'consciousness', and since this was often held to be a separate substance from the physical body, it became normal to talk of the mind as a distinct entity, which has properties, just as all objects do. It is only in quite recent times that this treatment of the mind as a non-physical entity has been challenged. Modern views take four forms (roughly): traditional **dualism** is still defended, or the mind is said to be an '**emergent**' property of the brain, or it is an integral aspect of the brain (perhaps seen as a **process**), or the **eliminativist** view says there is really no such thing (it being an illusion produced by the brain). There seems to be a contrast between the mind seen from within, where it has a distinctive character like nothing else, and seen from without, where it may just seem to be a sophisticated management system for the body.

Much discussion focuses on the possibility of **mental causation**. That is, do minds have distinctive causal powers, or are behaviour and thought entirely caused by material that conforms to the physical laws? Dualists say the mind is a separate substance, and so must have its own causal powers. Emergentists say mind is a property of the brain, but has very different properties ('property dualism'), which we detect by their unique causal powers (such as acting for reasons). If the mind is a source of causation (perhaps even with a 'free will') there is a possible problem of 'over-determination', since brain events and bodily movements can also be caused by the physical laws, and the mental and physical causations need to be in harmony. If we deny mental causation then we may wonder why minds exist.

Two significant aspects of the mind have been distinguished. On the one hand it handles information as representations of the external world, and assesses it in a way not unlike computer calculations. This is the feature of '**intentionality**', which is the mind's ability to think 'about' things. Accounts of intentionality inevitably place concepts and language at the centre of the explanation. On the other hand the mind is the location of vivid experiences which cannot be wholly communicated, and give a distinctive quality to everything that is encountered (such as sounds and colours). This is the '**phenomenal**' aspect of the mind, which is said to be characterised by 'qualia', the sheer raw qualities that make up experience. The consensus is that the phenomenal mind is much harder to explain (for philosophers, or for neuro-scientists) than the intentional mind. A recent development is the idea that minds extend beyond the borders of the body, since they cannot be described without referring to contents residing in external facts, or in our culture and language, or in memory and knowledge extensions like books and computers. This '**anti-individualism**' offers a much more communal view of the mind, challenging the basis of traditional discussions.

We talk of minds having parts, such as memory, will, reason, emotions, beliefs, and so on. But philosophers have also been struck by the **unity** of the mind. We talk of the 'self' as the unifier of the mind, so that when 'I will' and 'I reason' they are done by the same self. But there also seems to be a unity to experience itself, and when I am close to a tree my five senses, my memories and reasoning about the tree do not come as separate components, but as one 'experience'. The main role of consciousness may be to achieve precisely this unification.

A simple question to ask of minds is, what are they **for**? Maybe minds are not **for** anything, because the mind is what a person **is**, so minds are for whatever people are for. However, if we consider animal minds and evolution, we may give a different answer. One speculation is that minds emerge in the history of evolution at the point where living things need to navigate. Plants having nothing like brains, and small and simple animals seem to drift amidst their sources of nourishment. An animal with legs or fins or wings has far more scope for movement, and thus for making errors, and significant brains seem to accompany those developments. It may be that the capacity to map or model the world is the main purpose of minds, though in humans our capacity to socialise is at least as important.

There is a notorious problem with knowing about **other minds**, given that we never have direct experience of them. Early arguments were from analogy, saying that I have a mind which matches my behaviour, and you have similar behaviour, so you must have a similar mind. That is, judging by me, mind-possession is the best explanation of you. However, this generalises from a single case, which looks like bad science, and since I know your mind and my own in entirely different ways, that suggests that they are entirely different. We certainly cannot directly experience other minds, but the accumulated evidence of facial expression, shared emotions, a common language and closely similar biology seem to combine into good evidence that other consciousnesses are the best account we have.