



Mind

KEY CONCEPTS IN PHILOSOPHY

ERIC MATTHEWS



continuum

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PREFACE

This book is intended to be an introduction to some (but far from all) of the main philosophical topics connected with mind, written for those with little or no previous acquaintance with formal philosophy. Professional philosophers are not the only people who are interested in these topics: they arise in psychology, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, psychiatry and neuroscience, but also in literature, history and indeed ordinary intelligent conversation. The book has been written therefore in a way which I hope will make it readable and interesting to a wider audience than students of philosophy.

As an introduction, it must at least try to survey some of the main currents of thought on this topic. Reasons of space mean that I have not been able to cover by any means all of the possible points of view, but I hope I have covered enough of them to put readers in a position to explore further for themselves. I have given references to authors and works cited in the text in order to make this exploration easier: full bibliographical details of the works cited are given at the end of the book. As far as possible, I have tried to refer to texts which are more readily accessible, at least in libraries: this means, for instance, that I have preferred to cite the reprinted versions of journal papers in widely available anthologies rather than the original version in a journal which might not be easy for many readers to obtain.

In discussing the various points of view, I have tried to present them critically but fairly: philosophy works by argument, and arguments both for and against are presented in as objective a way as I am capable of. But it would be extremely bland and uninteresting if I did not also present the view which I myself favour, and I have done

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that, starting in Chapter 3. I hope that the arguments for the alternative views are sufficiently well presented to enable readers to make their own judgements about which they find more convincing. The view I favour is not original, in the sense that I am far from the first philosopher to hold it: I have arrived at it partly by simply participating in philosophical discussions with colleagues and students, but partly also under the influence of other philosophers, including those from whom I have learned just because I have disagreed with them so strongly. Some of these influences are apparent in the citations in the text – among these I would mention particularly Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Ryle and Searle. Others who are not cited, or are only briefly mentioned, would certainly include Hilary Putnam, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Hubert Dreyfus, Mary Midgley and the late Stuart Hampshire.

Finally, my thanks are due to my wife Hellen, both for her patience with me while I have been writing this book and for the many conversations we have had about relevant questions. I must also warmly thank my friends Bill Fulford and Martin Wylie for all the good and intellectually stimulating times we have had together.

Eric Matthews
Perthshire
January 2005

CHAPTER 1

MIND AND SOUL

I

What does it mean to be human? Clearly, at its most basic, it means to be a member of a certain biological species, *Homo sapiens*. But the very need which we feel to ask the question suggests that the answer cannot be given in *purely* biological terms: after all, lions don't seem to feel any need to ask what it means to be a lion. Even the standard definition of our species, just referred to, uses the non-biological term *sapiens* (the Latin for 'wise' or 'clever'). Another traditional definition of human beings is that they are 'rational animals', which again neatly combines the biological term 'animal' with the non-biological 'rational'. We *are* certainly animals, primates, like apes and monkeys. But we tend to distinguish ourselves from other primates by our capacity to think things through, to reflect on our own existence and to change our actions in the light of that reflection, to plan and organize our lives, to control our emotions and desires – in short, to be 'rational'. Having these capacities is a large part of what we mean by saying that human beings have 'minds', so we could say that what is distinctive about being human has been held to be that we have minds. It is not surprising, therefore, that central to the Western philosophical tradition has been the attempt to get clearer about what exactly we mean by 'having a mind'. That is what we shall be trying to do in this book: by looking critically at at least some of the central philosophical accounts, we shall seek to give some kind of an answer to the questions: what is it to have a mind? And how is that connected with being human?

To do so requires us to ask a whole set of interlocking questions. Are all 'mental' capacities essentially the same? If so, what is this

common essence? Where do we draw the boundaries of the 'mental'? Does 'mind' include non-intellectual characteristics, like emotion or desire? Are mental characteristics all-or-nothing, or can one have them to a greater or lesser degree? Are they unique to human beings, or can other animals have them too, perhaps to a lesser degree? What is the relation between the biological (or physical) and the mental? Are minds 'things', perhaps of a very special kind, which can exist independently of anything biological? Or are they to be identified with parts of our biological organism (nowadays, we would most likely say, with our brains)? Can non-biological beings, like computers or robots, have 'minds'? We shall examine the answers to some of these and related questions given by some leading figures in Western philosophy. But this examination will not be a simple history of ideas: it will involve a critical assessment of the arguments put forward by the figures in question, with a view to forming our own ideas about the nature of mind.

Answering these questions, as said above, is an important part of our attempt to understand ourselves as human beings. That means that they are not mere intellectual puzzles or brain-teasers: they arouse passions because they have a bearing on such things as our attitudes to religion and morality, our view of the relations between ourselves and other animals, or between ourselves and machines, about our individuality and distinctness from each other and the possible relationships we can have with other human beings. The context in which discussions of the nature of mind have taken place has varied from time to time, in tune with the contemporary preoccupations of human beings with one or other of these issues. Sometimes, philosophers thinking about mind have been more concerned with questions of religion (like 'does the soul survive death?'), at other times with morality ('what is the good for man, and what part is played in it by the human possession of reason?'). At other times, they have been preoccupied rather with distinguishing between human beings and other animals, or alternatively with denying such distinctions. Nowadays, it is very often the question of the difference or similarity between human beings and machines (artificial intelligence), or of the relation between neuroscience and human consciousness, which predominates. The context to some extent changes the terms of the debate, and even the precise meaning of the word 'mind' itself: in order to understand what is said about mind, we may need to see the connection with wider issues. But, as I hope

will become clear in the course of the book, there is a common thread running through the whole tradition, from Plato to the present, which links together these different debates into a continuing discussion.

II

A useful starting-point for this discussion would be to reflect on the ways in which we normally talk about our minds, before we begin to do philosophy (or psychology, or neuroscience). Some things in our experience lead us to think of the mental and the physical as totally separate from each other. This way of thinking is reflected in common attitudes and ways of talking. For instance, we talk of a ‘triumph of mind over matter’, when by a great effort we succeed in overcoming the limitations imposed by our physical nature or by our biologically rooted inclinations. Similarly, we increasingly think it wrong to reduce human beings to their physical characteristics, whether it be the colour of their skin, or their stature, or their gender, their age or whatever. The real person, it seems, is not confined by any such physical limitations, but is expressed in their thoughts, their feelings, their ideals and so on. Sometimes, we even feel detached from our own bodies. Some of these ways of thinking are fairly modern, especially the resistance to stereotyping people in terms of their bodily characteristics, but in other ways this sense of a mind–body distinction has always been present in Western culture, and indeed in many other cultures too.

In the past, though not so much in recent times, this sense of distinction was often expressed in terms of the difference between the ‘soul’, rather than the ‘mind’, and the body. In Ancient Greek, the word usually translated into English as ‘soul’ was *psyche*, from which we derive words like ‘psychology’ and ‘psychiatry’; in Latin, it was *anima*, the source of our words ‘animism’, ‘animated’ and the like. We are most familiar with talk about ‘souls’ in religious contexts, as in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul: the word had that sense in Ancient Greek thought, too, but it also had wider connotations which were not particularly religious.

Psyche or ‘soul’ for the Greeks meant something that included ‘mind’, but extended beyond that. Aristotle wrote a treatise *On the Soul* (usually known by its Latin title *De Anima*), in which he equates having a soul simply with being alive, so that even plants and

non-human animals have souls. He defines the soul, in this wider sense, by 'the nutritive, perceptive and intellective faculties and movement' (Aristotle 1986: 413b). Of these three kinds of faculties, it is the last, the 'intellective', that we should most naturally identify with 'mind', since it is the capacity to think and reason, to reflect and engage in abstract contemplation, to control one's passions by rational principles, and so on. For Aristotle, only human beings had souls which involved these rational capacities, though their souls shared with those of plants and animals the capacity for self-nutrition, and with animals the capacity for movement and perception. Thus, Aristotle equated 'mind' with a part of the human soul, the most important part, since it was what defined our humanity, but nevertheless not entirely separated from our capacities for biological life and movement.

So what was the 'soul' for Aristotle, and how did it relate to the body? To explain that, we need to say a little about Aristotle's general view of reality. According to him, any individual thing which exists, (a 'substance', in his terminology) requires a 'form' and a 'matter' to make it what it is. That is, it has to be made out of something, its 'matter', and this matter has to be organized in a particular way appropriate to its being the relevant kind of thing, which he called its 'form'. To take one of Aristotle's own examples, an axe is a substance, whose matter is the wood and metal out of which it is made, and whose form is the way in which those materials are combined and shaped to make it capable of fulfilling the function of being an axe. Without both form and matter, it would not exist *as an axe*. A piece of wood and a piece of metal do not constitute an axe until they are combined in the appropriate form; but obviously without material to actualize it, that form would not in itself constitute an axe (at most, it would be the idea of an axe).

In these terms, we can say that a soul, in the broad sense, is the form of a living body. As Aristotle puts it, 'soul is substance as the form of a natural body, which potentially has life' (Aristotle 1986: 412a). In particular, what makes each of us a human being is that we have a soul involving not only nutritive and perceptive powers, but also intellectual or rational faculties: that is, we are living creatures of a certain kind, capable of nourishing ourselves, of moving under our own steam, of responding to the world around us, and above all of thinking and reasoning about our experience. The human soul, on this view, is distinct from the body, in the way that an impression on

wax is distinct from the wax (cf. Aristotle 1986: 412b). But it is not a distinct thing or substance from the body: rather, the substance is the human being whose ‘matter’ is the body and whose ‘form’ is the soul. In that sense, as Aristotle says, the soul is inseparable from the body: ‘soul and body *are* the animal’ (Aristotle 1986: 413a).

Aristotle’s view of the human soul cannot be fully understood unless we see it as part of what is known as a *teleological*, or purposive, account of reality as a whole. According to this account, briefly, reality is made up of a number of distinct species, or kinds, of things, each with its own place in the scheme of things, its own purpose for existing expressed in the form which defines it as the species it is. The good for each species is to live in accordance with this purpose (so, for example, a good lion is one which best embodies the form of lionhood). The scheme of things is hierarchical, with the human species at the top of the pile. Humanity is defined, as we have seen, by rationality: so the good for humanity is to live a life guided by reason. In this way, Aristotle’s account of the human soul was part of a theory of human ethics.

The Aristotelian view was taken up by many medieval thinkers, notably St Thomas Aquinas, and expounded with a number of specifically Christian overtones. But it was generally rejected at the beginnings of modern philosophy in the seventeenth century, by such thinkers as Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and Spinoza, essentially because the teleological background just described did not seem to them to fit with the needs of the modern physical science whose foundations they were trying to elaborate. Nevertheless, there are some things in common between Aristotle’s account of the soul and the thinking of some much more recent philosophers about the mind–body problem which we shall be considering in Chapter 3.

We can consider in more detail some of the virtues and vices of this approach in the later chapter, but we need to say something briefly about them here if we are to think critically about Aristotelianism. One of the virtues of the Aristotelian view and its later successors is that it preserves the unity of the human person. Although we do, as was said earlier, have experiences which suggest that we can separate ourselves (our minds) from our bodies – for example, we may be so lost in thought that we do not hear the doorbell ringing – nevertheless, we do not, in non-pathological cases, feel our own bodies to be alien entities, only loosely attached to ourselves, but, as the words themselves imply, *our own* bodies. The fingers with which I am

typing these words are *my* fingers, *I* am the one who feels the pressure of the keys on them as I hit each letter. Aristotle's view seems to fit in with this sense of ownership of our own bodies very neatly. My activity of writing this book is an activity neither of my 'mind', nor my 'body', on its own: I could not write it unless I both had thoughts to communicate and some physical way to express those thoughts, in this case, fingers capable of operating a word-processor.

Aristotle's account coheres with this basic intuition of the unity of the person, and that is a very great virtue in it. But it still leaves unanswered a number of important questions about mind-body relations. First, it is all very well to say that a rational soul is the 'form' of a living human body, but that does not in itself tell us what exactly a soul *is*. Literally, 'form' means 'shape', but that is clearly not what Aristotle means by the word in this technical sense. A rational soul is what defines us as human, in combination with a body of a certain kind (a humanoid kind): thus it is not the same as the characteristically human bodily appearance of members of our species. He seems to think of it rather in terms of certain characteristically human *activities* – those same 'mental' activities of thinking, planning, controlling, etc., which were listed at the beginning of the chapter. But, if so, that raises, at least to a modern mind, a further question: are those mental activities to be identified with the operations of certain specific bodily mechanisms (such as brain-processes), or could they be, at least in principle, detached from any such material basis? If the former, then the soul could still be called the 'form' of the human being, and the body the 'matter', but the view would be indistinguishable, apart from its background in Aristotle's teleological view of reality, from any more straightforwardly 'materialist' account, according to which thoughts, etc., are to be identified simply with brain-processes. On the other hand, if the mental activities are not to be identified with specific bodily mechanisms, then the very basis of Aristotle's account seems to be undermined: he says, after all, that the soul and body cannot exist separately, any more than any other 'form' and 'matter' which together constitute an individual thing as what it is.

Aristotle himself seems more than a little uncertain about this point. After saying that the soul is inseparable from the body, he goes on,

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Not that there are not some parts [of the soul] that nothing prevents from being separable, through their not being the actualities of any body. But it remains unclear whether the soul is the actuality of a body in this way or rather is as the sailor of a boat.

(Aristotle 1986: 413a)

The parts of the soul he seems to have in mind are the rational parts, and the uncertainty he seems to be expressing is whether these parts might be separable because they do not depend on (are not actualized in) any particular part of the body – something which he says is still unclear to him. If the rational soul were separable in this way, the unity of soul and body to constitute a person would be destroyed: as he says, the soul would be in the body ‘as the sailor of a boat’ (this is an image which is very similar to one used by Descartes to convey much the same idea, and we shall come back to it later in the chapter).

III

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD, the foundations of what we now know as modern science were being laid – not only in the form of particular factual discoveries and the detailed theories to explain them, but also in that of an overall framework of ideas (a ‘scientific worldview’) into which these facts and theories could be fitted. One of the major preoccupations of early modern philosophers was to provide the basis in philosophical argument for that worldview. It seemed clear to them that the Aristotelian teleological picture of reality, described above, as elaborated by the medieval ‘scholastic’ philosophers, was quite unsuitable for that purpose. For it depicted a world divided into qualitatively distinct kinds of thing, each with its own ‘form’, which was supposed to explain its detailed functioning. Why did the flames of a fire rise, while stones fell? Because that was the ‘form’ or ‘nature’ of each – that was just how they were, as expressed in their definition. But, the early modern philosophers argued, unless you can specify more precisely what exactly these ‘forms’ are, then this so-called ‘explanation’ tells us exactly nothing: it just says, flames rise because that’s what they do. In one of his comedies, the contemporary French playwright Molière satirizes this ‘scholastic’ way of talking by making one of his characters, a doctor, ‘explain’ the power of opium to put people to sleep by