

Part IA, Paper 1, Question 6b, Where are your thoughts?

Often we tend to think of our thoughts as private, and whilst we do often say that they are “in our heads”, there does seem to be something non-physical about them. I will argue that this picture of mentality is false.

Here, I take ‘thoughts’ to be propositional mental states. That said, I also believe consideration of sensational experiences should also weigh in our answer, as they are both kinds of mental ability.

Descartes argued for the above picture of mentality in the form of substance dualism: he made an ontological distinction between the mental and the physical. The physical is that which exists in space, merely things ‘extended, flexible, changeable’. The mental however is defined negatively: it is simply that which is not physical.

One formulation of Descartes argument rests on Leibniz’s Law of indiscernibility of identicals: essentially, it states that no two distinct things share every property. That is, if you find a property that two things do not share, they are not numerically identical. Descartes argument was:

Premise 1: I can imagine living without my body
2: I cannot imagine living without my mind
3: Leibniz’s Law

Conclusion: Mind \neq body.

However, this argument is open to counter examples: we can imagine David Cameron getting amnesia and doubting that he is the prime minister; thus:

1. Cameron believes he is David Cameron.
2. Cameron does not believe he is the Prime Minister.
3. Leibniz’s Law

Conclusion: David Cameron \neq the Prime Minister.

Furthermore, we might argue that this is a misapplication of Leibniz’s Law: ‘being imaginable by Descartes not to exist’ may not be a property, but a description of the body. Similarly, being a reporter is a description of Clark Kent – which does not apply to superman – however, we do not say that Clark Kent is not superman.

Some philosophers have argued that thought can be analytically reduced to behavioural dispositions. That is, for example, my belief that I will be joined at the pub by my friend just is my disposition to perform clusters of behaviour: e.g. sitting at a table for two; buying two pints. However, I believe this is a mis-characterisation of thought. It is not behaviour but the cause of behaviour. Furthermore, there seems to be an important difference between someone not experiencing pain and a stoic who is, but does not show it. This suggests behaviourism involves an explanatory gap: it cannot account for phenomenal sensations; also known as qualia.

One way of doubting this analytic reduction may be to use a version of Moore’s Open Question Argument: I know that this person is behaving as if

they are in pain/believe that x, however are/do they? This question is meaningless, rather, it is open.

However the fatal problems for behaviourism lies in its reductive analysis. First it seems impossible to analyse someone's belief in terms of their behaviour without referencing another belief. That is, my behaviour of buying 2 pints must also be accompanied by my belief that my friend will want to drink it. And this belief cannot be analysed without reference to my belief that I will be joined by my friend. Thus the analysis is hopelessly circular.

Secondly is the problem of reduction – no belief can be reduced to certain behaviours, no one-to-one reduction is possible. One way of putting this is, given that 'x has a pain', no behavioural statement follows. How this belief manifests itself depends on my other beliefs, all of which themselves are subject to change.

I believe that, in fact, the idea that our thoughts are in our head is in fact closest to the truth. That is, mental states like thoughts and sensations first are brain states (probably neural states). This is the Identity Theory and it holds that science will prove that the mind is contingently identical to the brain.

Two initial points support this claim. First, this theory involves a simpler ontology than dualism, which is its main competitor. There is only one type of 'stuff' – the physical. One reason for dissatisfaction with dualism is its lack of elucidation as to what the mental is – it only says what it is not. As Ryle noted, such a conjunction, of the mental and physical, may not be so simple – 'mental and physical' may be like saying she came home in a flood of tears and a sedan chair'.

Secondly, neural dependence suggests our thoughts are in some way dependent upon our brains: when I get drunk I may be more willing to believe that I can chat up the attractive girl in the corner, for example.

There are two main problems for the identity theory to overcome for it to be viable as a comprehensive account of where our thoughts take place. First there is the idea that thoughts and sensations do not seem to occur in our heads at all – take, for example, a yellow after image I get after staring at the sun. This however, rests on a confusion: first because mental events appear to take place outside our heads, just because they seem to mean different things, does not mean that they refer to different things. It appears as if thoughts are private. However, maybe it would help if we could use a topic-neutral language (topic neutral between dualism and physicalism) as our folk-psychological language is so suggestive of dualism. Thus, instead of saying 'I see a yellow after image', we should say 'there is something going on which it is like when I have my eyes closed.... etc'. The point is, identity theorists should deny that there actually exists such a thing as an 'after-image'. It is like 'the average plumber' – this can be elucidated in terms of actual plumbers. Similarly, there is no actual 'after-image' but there is 'having an after-image'. Whilst there seems something yellow about such a mental event (this is the

problem for identity theorists) this process of having it need not be yellow, and it need not exist outside the brain. It is, in fact a brain process.

Finally, I believe the identity theory can respond to the criticism that it cannot account for qualia: the subjective feel of our mental states.

In response to Jackson's Mary argument, identity theorists have given the ability hypothesis: Mary does not gain new knowledge about colour, only know how. I believe this response is stronger than they are given credit for. Mary learns a new way of experiencing what she already knows. Imagine someone who knows the shape of a vase by sight, but then uses touch to experience the same shape. Or, a better analogy, someone who knows what kinetic energy is, but then feels heat for the same time. It does not follow that heat is not kinetic energy. Qualia is simply subjective interpretation of the objective physical objects. I believe that in the same way science will show that heat just is kinetic energy, thought and sensations just are physical states – brain states.

Therefore, I contend that our thoughts are physically in our head.

2i/2ii borderline: The essay shows some knowledge of the subject but makes some mistakes. It is generally well-organized, though not really tightly enough focused to deserve a first class or solid 2i mark.