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PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

Is Mind Identical with Brain?

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		McGill University, Montreal
Introduced by	Prof. GODFREY VESEY

FILMED IN OXFORD

IS MIND IDENTICAL WITH BRAIN?

FADE UP

1. Problems of Philosophy
A Third Level Arts Course

2. QUESTION MARK ANIMATION

3. Introduced by
Professor Godfrey Vesey


4. MCU VESEY
(standing in front
of window)

VESEY: This is the first of eleven television programmes on the problems of philosophy. In most of the programmes there'll be two people who hold opposing views on the same issue in question, and in twenty-five minutes or so they'll try to come to some agreement or at least make it clear why they can't agree. Not all the people you'll see are philosophers.

B.F. Skinner, for instance, is a psychologist. But they're all people who've thought long and hard about the problems they'll be debating - problems in the theory of knowledge, in metaphysics, in moral philosophy, and in the philosophy of mind.

ZOOM IN to
CU VESEY

We begin with the problem in the mind. It's this: there are mental events such as thoughts and feelings, and there are physical events which include physical events in my brain at the time I'm thinking. Now how is what's going

on in my mind at this moment related to what's going on in my brain? Are they in some sense the same thing? That's the question. And to discuss it - Anthony Quinton of New College, Oxford, and Professor Charles Taylor of McGill University, Montreal. 

5. Is Mind Identical with Brain?

6. A discussion between Anthony Quinton Fellow, New College, Oxford and Prof. Charles Taylor McGill University, Montreal

7. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR (Quinton sitting on settee, Taylor sitting in armchair)

QUINTON: Well, my position is that mental events and brain events - events in the brain and nervous system generally perhaps, are one and the same thing. And there are really two parts to this and both of them have been objected to a good deal. The first of them isn't really a philosophical thesis at all as I see it, though it might be exposed to philosophical objections. And that is that for every discriminatable kind of mental event - every kind of happening that a conscious being is capable of distinguishing as going on within his consciousness - there could be found some regularly correlated kind of happening, state of affairs, in the

8. CU TAYLOR

9. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

10. CU TAYLOR

brain. That's point one. Point two, of course, and this is the more philosophical part, is that the mental event and the correlated physical event - and I've assumed the correlation in point one - are actually identical. Not just partners marching together but they're one and the same thing approached from, known about from different angles.

TAYLOR: Yes.

QUINTON: Now I don't know which of these you object to more...

TAYLOR: Well both these things, I think, both these things can be objected to and I would even question whether one is more philosophical than the other. Because take the case of correlation: I think there is a lot of philosophical confusion as to what kind of correlation you need here. For identity you need a very tight one. You see, people often point out that certain lesions in the brain, for instance, can be correlated with certain malfunctions, and they point out that we need the whole brain to think and we even need certain parts of it to think in certain ways or carry out certain functions, and I think that's

enough to establish correlation. For identity we need something much tighter than that. We need something like this: that for every state, for every particular kind of thought - feeling humiliated about some particular cause, or calculating two plus two equals four, or deciding to make a new offer in a negotiation - for every such type of thought, which is what we explained your behaviour by, you need a specific pattern of firing or chemical state of the nervous system. And we are very, very, very far, even from...

11. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

QUINTON: Well I agree it's tricky - it gets tricky when the mental states in question are complicated, the, when the mental state in question, so to speak, has a broad spread and a lot of internal complexity. But, naturally, here is another scientific enquiry. I think the prudent thing to do is to start with the smallest identifiable items first - and particular twinges of pain might do. Suppose you could localise them, or particular elements in perception...

12. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

TAYLOR: But they might tell you nothing! I mean I'm sure that the twinge of pain when I have toothache can be localised, and indeed my dentist localises it when

he puts his probe in there - and I know very well when he does! But that doesn't say anything or doesn't necessarily predict anything about the very complicated patterns of firing that go on when I suddenly feel that it is my reputation, which I've been ashamed of all these years, and not, not something else which may be very important to what I do next, and I need to know...

QUINTON: But, of course, I entirely agree that you've got to start with the pieces before you can deal with the system. The same is true of a television set: the television doesn't work unless all the valves are working, unless it's plugged in, etc., etc., and yet to understand the work you've got to understand the contribution each individual bit makes to the whole.

TAYLOR: But this is the philosophical issue in a way, isn't it? Because is this whole of my brain functioning really understandable from the parts in that way, I mean, that is read the deep philosophical issue which in a sense in which scientists are also engaged in philosophy which underlines this question.

ZOOM IN to
CU TAYLOR

If we can ~~it~~ understand it bit by bit, and put the bits together like that, then there's some chance that the correlation view will, will stand up. But if the workings as a whole follow laws which can't be derived from the working of the parts then that kind of, that correlation, those correlations just aren't going to be in the works.

13. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: Well, of course, I agree that perhaps some of these things haven't been explained in terms of the systematic working together of parts.

14. CU TAYLOR

But that they can't be is a boldish claim that you're making against my assumption, in defense of my assumption..

TAYLOR: Let's say that it's a counter-assumption I'm making...

QUINTON: It's a counter-assumption...

TAYLOR: Neither of us can be sure - but it's a counter-assumption...

15. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: The thing is that in philosophy, in philosophical discussions of this subject it's not so much that assumption that usually gets questioned, it's the - I suggested more standardly philosophical manoeuvre of saying: well if there's a correlation, as the

assumption suggests, then the two things correlated there's no reason not to say they're one and the same thing.

TAYLOR: Yes.

QUINTON: And the usual analogy here is that a flash of lightening, a familiar object - people have known about flashes of lightening for ages, scientists come along and talk of electrical discharges. Well at first the mode in which you ascertain that there's lightening there is just by looking and seeing. The mode in which you find out about electrical discharges is altogether more complicated. And yet, at the end of the day so to speak, people are quite happy to admit that the electrician's story about an electrical discharge from colliding air masses, or whatever it may be, is a fuller and more detailed and more accurate account of what the ordinary...

TAYLOR: But...

QUINTON: ...landscape painter saw as lightening. //

16. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: ...But a lot of people resist this kind of thing when we're talking about brain events and thoughts.

I mean even people who would admit to speculate that these correlations will be discovered, which I don't really agree with, even people who think that say: well, surely we should rather talk here about just that - correlations between two separate kinds of things - two separate streams of events, rather than the same event under two different descriptions. After all, it's a pretty big claim you're really saying it's the same thing under two names...

17. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

QUINTON: Yes.

TAYLOR: ...That these two names are descriptions of part of the same thing. And I suppose we have here a very deep underlying philosophical tradition first of all which tells against us. We kind of feel, have a feeling that the mind is something different from the body, and a dent in the brain is a dent in the body, and a thought or a feeling is a dent in the mind. And partly it's that philosophical tradition of two separate entities - two separate things - which would allow people to say: all right, events in these two things may be correlated, but how can you possibly say they, that they're the same thing under different descriptions?

18. CU TAYLOR

19. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

QUINTON: But, of course, the things about that is it's certainly, I agree, a philosophical tradition in full flood since Descartes and reaching back in a way to Plato. But a lot of people take the view that not only is it a philosophical tradition but it's also part of the ordinary man's fixed view of the world. Now I quite agree that people who have been brought up in a religious way, who have had religious education early in life, get more or less habituated to the notion of the survival of human persons, or at any rate of their minds even when they're in a totally disembodied state. Yet there's a lot counting in the other direction. In ordinary life we quite freely in many connections replace the word 'mind' by 'brain'... He has a good brain...

20. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Yes, yes.

QUINTON: And there's a general, it seems to me, causal reason for linking the mind at least very closely with the brain in that where the mind is active and involved with the world round it there tends to be a sequence of events, perception, a stimulus comes to the

21. CU QUINTON

22. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

sense organs, something mental happens, an impulse goes from the brain to the muscles and a bodily movement is performed, as it were. The mental element in that is in the middle. And the whole middle part of this story as far as it's physically located at all takes place in the brain.

TAYLOR: But that has never bothered anyone who wanted to believe that there was a mind separate from the body. I mean, after all, Descartes would give very much the same accounts you're giving now, and he believed that there are two separate entities.

23. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

QUINTON: Well, Descartes, of course, put the point of junction between mind and body where the pineal gland was...


TAYLOR: Right...

QUINTON: ...in seeming defiance of present-day physiology...

TAYLOR: But, nevertheless, yes...

QUINTON: But he refused to take the final step of saying: well, the pineal gland is the place of the mind. He merely said it's the place where the body acts on the mind...

TAYLOR: Right, but he...

QUINTON: And this was a kind of extreme squeemishness like a person, the last fig leaf as it were, before admitting that the mind was part of the order of nature. 

24. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: But what is it that makes people believe this? You see, you've mentioned the religious traditions but not all religious traditions are on this particular line. When you think of the Old Testament, of the Jewish conception of man which is not of a body separate from itself. It's a very much, I think, more a Greek one which indeed has worked its way into the Christian tradition, but it's not even universal there.

25. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

QUINTON: No.

26. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Then what is the motivation that makes people want to say that the mind is different from the body?

27. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

QUINTON: Well, there's one thing, of course, has got to be cleared out of the way at the beginning - and that is that the kind of identity claim when one says there is an identity between 'having a feeling of pain' and 'a certain disturbance occurred in such and such

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

fibres in the brain'. One's not saying that these two remarks mean the same thing. The identity isn't as it were logical, a question of 'I am in pain', 'my brain is affected in such and such a way' being synonyms of one another. That's not the suggestion at all. The relation is simply like the identity of Mrs. Jones and the person who stole the silver from the canteen.

28. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Right, well, still if you take this identity, the thing about them is that all the things that are true of Mrs. Jones are true of the woman who stole the whatever it is. It has all the ordinary factual things that you could say about one, you could say about the other, even if not everybody knows that they apply to both. But now, in the case of mind and body, I think that what makes people think they're different is there seem to be things that don't apply like that. I mean, for instance, a mental event, my having an experience, people usually think it's private, only I have that. You don't have it, you can't even see it directly, I can tell you about it, but you can't see it directly. A physical event, even something in my brain is, is public. I mean, you could, in this sense, you could open my skull, but...

29. CU QUINTON

... QUINTON: Well that, I think that one could be coped with because, of course, it is an entirely relevant and appropriate argument when somebody says A is the very same thing as B, not that the name A means the same as the name B, but just the person who's called A is in fact the same as the person who's called, or properly described, as B. It's a perfectly good argument against any claim of that sort. But A has a certain property that B hasn't got and that's the style of these arguments. But the thing about that is you can't put in any old property in here. It's only...if A is the same as B there are some properties that A and B must share but they don't have to share all of them. Now it seems to me that the notion of privacy that we've been talking about - and we'd better be a bit more explicit about, I think, for these purposes - is one of these properties that doesn't show difference. That for completeness for my argument I need to show that if they're any private experiences the fact that they're private doesn't constitute an irremovable obstacle to their being contingently...

30. CU TAYLOR

31. CU QUINTON

32. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Well now, there are other objections like this too.

Perhaps we should go on to some of them, they may be tougher to answer. I mean, another thing that people say to show that mind and body aren't the same, to show that there are things you can say about one but not about the other is this: a physical event, like the firing in certain parts of the brain, is very clearly localised, it's exactly 'these and not those' and that's supposed to be identical with my feeling sorry, or for Aunt Minnie's death for instance. Now where is that localisable?

33. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: We have it, I would say, we have good general grounds of the sort I was talking about earlier, in terms of broadly speaking causal continuity for saying, shall I put it modestly: if anywhere mental events are in the brain and that's already to localise it quite a bit.

34. BCU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: But then that's circular because you see, you're, you're rather assuming the correlation...

35. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: Well, well now that's why I put it 'if anywhere'. That's to say the causal considerations, the immediate causal antecedents and consequence as we have reason to believe of these mental

events are fairly neighbouring ones, fairly close to one another in the brain. So, if it's going to be placed anywhere that's the place to put it.

36. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Yes, well, I think actually those objections can be absolute in the way that you have been doing. I think a good case can be made, given the kind of correlation, that you can speak about identity. But I'd like to get back to

37. CU QUINTON

that question that I raised at the beginning: can we give those kind of correlations? You see up to now we've been talking as though there were two

38. CU TAYLOR

possibilities; there's the Cartesian-type of possibility that we think of two kinds of entity, a mind and a body, and there's another possibility in which there is only one kind of entity. We are in a way, a lot more than in a way, I definitely would agree with the second kind of view that there isn't such a - there aren't two entities: there isn't the mind, which is somewhere else apart from the body. There are two streams of events going on. But that still doesn't mean that you can explain what goes on in the mind, you can explain these kind of events that happen we think of as mental in the same terms that you

explain the physical events even in the same terms in which you explain physiologically the firing of different patterns in the brain. And that would mean that although my thinking about the Mona Lisa would, in some sense of the word, be the same thing as a pattern of firing, it wouldn't be correlated always with exactly the same pattern of firing or in conjunction with the same patterns of firing. You wouldn't be able to explain why I think about the Mona Lisa, and what follows from my thinking about it in terms of what I do and say, by laws which link that particular pattern of firing with other patterns of firing.

39. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: O.K. Well, just about this. Is it that just because they're very complex, or is it something to do with the structure of these mental states? Let me just take up the complexity point because that's perhaps the simplest version of that argument, that the mental states we're most interested in are, well, are such that the physiological correlate if there is one, and you're inclined to think there is one...

TAYLOR: Yes.

QUINTON: I'll say that's just the

40. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

physiological aspect of the very same thing. But the physiological correlate is, the mental state itself is too complicated to have an adequate physiological correlate. Now I think this is a very difficult issue to bring to any kind of effective resolution because, after all, it's very difficult to explain the behaviour of water, say, in ornamental fountains. They adopt, the jets of water adopt the most elegant, fascinating, and complicated, and aesthetically agreeable or disagreeable, shapes...

TAYLOR: Or for that matter the fall of the leaf as it comes off the tree...

41. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: Yes. Just the sheer complexity of factors involved make a total account, in terms of known physical laws and physically identifiable items, practically impossible to produce. And that would be one line of argument. And, of course, there one just says: well, one does what one can, so to speak, to revert to that more or less methodological maxim I propounded earlier, you start with the simplest things you can handle and hope that you'll be able, by combining them systematically, to

account for more complex things. But it wouldn't be just that, would it?

42. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Well, no. You see I think it's stronger. I think that might turn out to be true as well. I'm saying something stronger, admittedly quite speculatively, but it's quite possible that the way in which my mind works in these things can be understood by a set of laws which involve using concepts and referring to entities which don't figure in our language of physics or even in our language of physiology. So it won't just be that it's something terribly complex you can't get at because of the complexity, like the water in the fountain or the fall of a leaf, but something that you can get at but by another set of laws. That is we'd say that...

ZOOM IN to
CU TAYLOR

QUINTON: What would these, what would the distinguishing feature of this other set of laws be?

TAYLOR: Well, I mean, indeed we have the beginnings of that explanation now. Explanations on a psychological level, explanations in in-depth psychology, for instance, will allow us to make certain predictions or cast certain light

43. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

44. CU TAYLOR

on why people said this and did this, and so on. We wouldn't be able to link these in a reductive way with a set of laws dealing with neurophysiological firings, or the movement of quanta, and so on. I mean, in a way the kind of thing that I'm arguing against is the kind of reduction that does exist now when we want to move between phenomenal thermodynamic phenomena: it feels hot or it feels cold on the one hand; and the, the movement of small particles on the other. We really have a reductive relation there. It's because of that reductive relation we really can express all that we know of the one language in the other, and make all the predictions we make of one language in the other - that we want to speak of identity. But supposing we had a situation where we didn't have a separate entity called the mind, there wasn't a separate place where the events went on, that we couldn't operate that kind of reduction. We knew a lot about how to explain and predict, perhaps to some extent even predict what people are going to do, but we couldn't say: well, this state of having a deep internal conflict over unconscious, over something or other,

can't be correlated with any specific list of patterns of firing, we just can't manage to do it. In which case we would have a way of getting at that leaf falling as it were, but it wouldn't be in the language of physics.

45. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: Well, I've got two comments to make here, I think. The first of these is that I, what seems absolutely reasonable is that one can't seriously envisage people dropping our ordinary mental vocabulary, the vocabulary that we use on ourselves when we talk about pain and depression and excitement and so on, and replacing this by the polysyllabic language of neurophysiology.

46. BCU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Yes.

47. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: That's not practically on. I think it's also true, and it is perhaps connected with this, that the language in which we describe our own mental state is, how shall I put it, well, it's as people say 'theory laden' in the sense that when one calls somebody 'angry' this is definitely not just to describe the inward-felt savour of the experience, where that indeed might be straightforwardly reducible to all, correlatable to something physiological,

48. CU TAYLOR

but it implies something about what he's going to do - shake his fist...

TAYLOR: And what, and what, and what caused it...

49. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: ...or go. Take a slightly, an example not straight from our field: the notion of describing a happening, a physical action as a murder. I mean, the bodily movements of two men - one may be committing a murder, the other may be putting the cat out. Broadly speaking the arm movements might be just the same. So when you call it a murder you're locating that particular set of happenings in a whole framework of other human responses, attitudes, institutions, and so forth. But, of course, agreeing to that theoretical extensiveness in that sense of our ordinary vocabulary that doesn't, so to speak, close off the issue because of the things to which this - that are also brought in as well as in the case of murder. I mean there is a legal system and people's attitudes and so forth. Yet I would suppose that even murder was reducible, so to speak, to the psychology in this case of all the people involved in the situation...

TAYLOR: Yes.

QUINTON: ...as well as lawyers, policemen, the habits of the community, and so forth. The responses people were likely to make to this happening. So the fact that the language spreads beyond the, so to speak, intrinsic features of the situation described, or the description spreads beyond it, still doesn't itself imply that correlations can't be done...

50. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Right. But it shows the task of people who believe in such correlations. Because you say, take the cases you mention of anger. It says something about what caused it too - some provocation. It said something about what I'm inclined to do - I'm inclined to strike the person or something of that kind. So it situates it between what causes and what it causes, if you like. It's a very..... concept. That would mean that this whole set of relations would have to be mapped again on the level of neuro-physiology in terms of the provoking events described, in terms of input - the action, striking, as described, in terms of muscular movements - the central state of anger described, in terms of firing and neurochemical states, and so on...

51. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

QUINTON: Well, let me make another point here. I mean, I'm going to start by doing something one shouldn't do in a philosophical discussion, that's to say, imputing a motive - not necessarily to you, but to someone adopting a sort of view you do about the irreducibility of what you might call the higher mental states, the, the things that are most humanly interesting about our mental life, which are things like pursuing a purpose, or working at a theory, or what have you. Let's take something comparatively serious like a mood of depression. Now a lot of people feel it's somehow, you know, hostile to human dignity that taking a pill can cure depression. Now for most of us would be glad to be rid of depression, but suppose one were Schopenhauer, that depression was one's general outlook on the universe - to put Schopenhauer in very short form indeed - one feels that something central and human and important has got demolished by a pill. Now this is, so to speak, a frightening possibility. But I don't think the way of dealing with the frightening possibility is to say it can't be realised. There are other kinds of...

52. CU TAYLOR

53. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR

ZOOM IN to
CU QUINTON

54. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: I just...

55. CU QUINTON

QUINTON: You see why do we want to know about causal laws, after all, fundamentally it's for practical reasons to get things, to make things happen, to prevent them happening. To the extent that we link up higher mental functions with physiological things they become more accessible. / Instead of having to subject you to a flood of propaganda I can give you a pill - and that increases human power in a frightening way. Now I share the fear that I think...

56. CU TAYLOR

TAYLOR: Well, that isn't actually my worry. I mean it doesn't bother me that the person can be cured with a pill, or even doesn't worry me that one day there might be this total control over human beings. For one thing I think human beings have much too much resistance in them to allow that kind of thing to happen. But it's the philosophical point doesn't worry me, you see, it's not part of my case that human beings aren't physical systems. Or, even more to the point, that the whole gamut of motivation that they have isn't founded in the fact that they are the kind of physical organisms they are;

57. CU QUINTON
58. CU TAYLOR
59. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR
60. CU TAYLOR
61. 2-s. QUINTON/TAYLOR
- that they're depressed when they are because of that; that they have sexual desires they have because of that. The real question is: once you accept this, is it the case that everything that they do, and think, and feel, as a result of this can be explained in the same terms of physics and chemistry in which you might involve to explain their being sexual desire in the first place. Is it the case that you can give necessary conditions in terms of body chemistry for a being being a sexual agent, having sexual desires. Is it the case that you can explain the whole gamut of human love, the whole gamut of human culture that flows from that, in the same terms. Now this is a very speculative question, I freely admit. But if we want to put our money somewhere, I frankly would put my money in saying 'no' to this question that men are beings of different levels. That something in them must be explained in terms of physics. Obviously, if I jump out the window I fall to the ground like a stone. But lots of other things that they do, and say, and feel, can't be explained simply in those terms. We need a richer, higher, scientific language to do that.

62. Taking part were
Anthony Quinton
and
Prof. Charles Taylor
63. Introduced by
Prof. Godfrey Vesey
64. Film Cameramen
Ian Hilton
Henry Farrar
Sound Recordist
Andrew Boulter
Film Editor
Adam Dawson
65. Production
Mary Hoskins
66. A Production for
The Open University
BBC
c. The Open University 1972