

Interactionism

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Dualism is the view that humans are composed of the two properties of mind and matter. Cyril Edwin Mitchinson Joad was a thought-provoking British author who wrote speeches, books, and articles on various philosophical topics. An excerpt from his 1947 book, How Our Minds Work, was included in Philosophy and Contemporary Issues by John R. Burr and Milton Goldinger. This writing presented the belief that a biological organism is something over and above the components of the matter that make up its corporeal body. A living organism is therefore more than just a body. That additional component is “an expression of a principle of life” (Burr and Goldinger 382). The idea of life beyond the body is described in many different ways, including as spirit, as essence, and as mind. It is distinct from the body and the brain, and at least in humans, expresses itself through the concept of mind. The two-way interaction of the mind and body, where each affect the other, is called interactionism¹.

The essence of the philosophical view of materialism is that all we are is matter plus motion. Materialists disregard any notion that we have a mind beyond our physical substance. They believe that if there is any type of mind at all, it is simply an as-of-yet undiscovered physical component of the nervous system or of the chemical and biological processes within the body. Physical science currently leaves the mind out of what it tries to explain (Nagel 37). There are obviously many satisfactory explanations of the body and its various functions. In fact, every bodily function has some medical specialty which studies it carefully. For example, chiropodists study the feet, cardiologists study functions of the heart, and otolaryngologists study the ear, nose and throat. There are even oncologists who study cancer when the body turns on itself in a self-destructive manner. But despite many proven traditions of the understanding of the body,

¹ In contrast with interactionism, another dualist theory, epiphenomenalism, maintains belief in only a one-way interaction--- that mental events are caused by physical events. A problem with epiphenomenalism is that it doesn't explain how thoughts routinely precede actions.

there are no satisfactory explanations of what is happening beyond the scope of the body and its functions. There seems to be no satisfactory explanations of the essence of the mind.

Joad suggested that a practical approach would include a look at biological considerations before we can fully appreciate the concept of the mind. Purposiveness is a function of life, and all forms of life express purposiveness in their own creative ways. Purposiveness is the position that all life forms operate, in a sense, toward some purpose, and whether conscious or unconscious, it is still something in the future that the organism strives for. He said that if purposiveness is indeed a characteristic of life, “then we have established a good starting point for our ‘mental’ approach to psychology” (Burr and Goldinger 383). What he meant was that with the concept of purposiveness we have a good starting point for an understanding of mental processes as opposed to physical processes.

Joad identified the impulse to effectuate a change as conation. Examples of conation are our desire to acquire food when hungry, and our movement towards shelter for protection during storms. Migration is a form of conation. It is not easy for northern-breeding geese to migrate south for the winter, but the urge is irresistible. Materialism cannot explain this overpowering urge. Something else is needed to explain the conative impulse of various life forms. The only explanation is that the life form needs to fulfill a purpose of some sort, and each purpose is particular to the species. A bird will build a nest to shelter her eggs. An indoor plant will lean toward the light source. A mesquite tree in semi-arid rangelands will move moisture from soil layers near the surface to lower dry layers through its taproot so that its lower root system will have water.

Besides purposiveness as a biological consideration for the support of the case for the mind, foresight and expectation must also be examined. Joad states that not only do humans

exhibit purposiveness, but they also are “conscious of the nature of the purpose which inspires (their behavior)” (Burr and Goldinger 384). Humans are not only motivated by the past to improve upon a behavior, but are also motivated by the anticipation of future events. Thus we physically live and operate in the present, being ever cognizant of the past and having the foresight to create an expected and desired future. It is this behavior that seems to suggest a mind to possess foresight and the effectuation of expectation(s). It certainly seems to be beyond the scope of the view of the materialists to show that thoughts indicate the presence of a mind.

Besides biological considerations that must be faced, the second major part of Joad’s discussion of the interactionism form of dualism is that we have the ability to comprehend meaning. We understand meaning in symbols and forms. If studying the Japanese language, three symbolic alphabets (Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji) must be learned to gain fluency in reading. Being exposed to an unknown symbol in Hiragana will have no meaning beyond its intrinsic shape. But once we learn its meaning, it can be used to help us understand far more than its shape. It has a meaning of something else that is quite beyond its unique shape. The shape of any Hiragana character is essentially its syntactical representation, and combinations of these characters form the structure of sentences. However, they don’t help us with semantics. Syntax alone is not sufficient for semantics until we associate meaning to the specific symbols and characters.

The idea or concept of something is different than the thing itself, but there is something universal about its meaning (Nagel 42). Different stimuli given to different people will inculcate the same ultimate meaning in all of them. Consider the following different ways to represent a circle. Any mathematician could complete the following definition: “_____ is the locus of all equidistant points from a single central point.” Quite differently would be the programming code

required to make a display of a circle on a computer screen, but anyone skilled in the programming of computer graphics would recognize the code as being representational of a circle. Someone simply reading the word *circle* on a printed page would also understand what it is. Another person hearing the word *circle* spoken will understand its meaning through the auditory medium. An individual seeing only a drawing of a circle will recognize it as such. A blindfolded person holding a perfect cardboard circle will quickly identify its shape. Consider also the word *circle* as translated into all foreign languages, and speakers of those languages understand its meaning. Any person in any of these instances of quite dissimilar stimuli will recognize the meaning to be that of a circle. The stimuli are different, but the common element is the meaning, and the meaning “is immaterial and can be grasped ... only by a mind” (Burr and Goldinger 385). That universal meaning also transcends time as people from various ages understand its meaning.

Joad also noted that we have the ability to synthesize elements into a collective whole. Single musical notes, put together over a finite time frame, and with instrumentation, form a song. The exact same notes and collection of instruments put together in a different combination would result in something that would sound different, perhaps more harmonious, or perhaps atonal and auditorially much worse. We actually understand meaning in a song by appreciating the synthesis of the multiple constituent parts that collectively form a song. We do the same with a wonderful work of art; the meaning is much more than the constituent parts, and a mind operates beyond the function of the brain to process that shape, its colors, and its symbolism.

It must be difficult to conceive of mind as separate from the brain and body, especially since the scientific world believes that only physical force may affect a physical object. But Joad has put forth a plausible argument to show that in addition to a body and a brain, the composition

of a living organism includes an immaterial element which we call mind. Mind is the synthesizing force of what the brain and body experience. Perhaps the senses of the body collect countless bits of information which are then processed by the brain. Each bodily system may have a component to make up that which affects the mind. And the mind, being different from the body and brain, synthesizes as needed. And through interactionism, both mind and body affect each other. Thoughts lead to actions, and actions thereby stimulate new thoughts and new meanings.

Works Cited

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