

CHAPTER IV
IDENTITY THEORY

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The complexities of Wittgenstein's account of mental states are such that, even when one is convinced by the power of many of his remarks one seems to be left at the end without a great deal of general clarity about the matters. Of course Wittgenstein's refusal to theorise and his view that theories in philosophy are essentially misleading and therefore need to be - to use a much later term - "Deconstructed" may have something to do with it.

In this chapter, however, I shall once again consider what can only be termed as a philosophical theory of the mind, namely, The Identity Theory. I shall consider the theory in its version popularised by philosophers such as Smart, Place and Armstrong.

It is an important part of the claim of the identity theorists that the identity it wishes to establish between mental states and physical states is a contingent, a factual identity, not a logical one. The reason given for this is that expressions referring to mental states mean differently from expressions which refer explicitly to physical states. We can distinguish at least three different ways in which this is taken to mean : (1) The descriptive phrases we use in describing mental states differ in meaning from the descriptive phrases we use in describing the corresponding physical states, just as "morning star" differs in meaning from "evening star". (2) Expressions referring the mental states as such have no descriptive content at all,

whereas expressions referring to brain states have. Thus Smart, for example, says that mental states can be characterised no more precisely than as "something going on, which is like what is going on when"¹ where the gap is completed by the description of some physical events.

Armstrong, expressing a similar view says -

"The concept of a mental state is the concept of that, whatever it may turn out to be, which is brought about in a man by certain stimuli and which in turn brings about certain responses. What it is in its own nature is something for science to discover." 2

(3) Mental predicates very often, if not always, have a component of meaning which physical predicates do not have, and this is referred to as "intentionality" of mental predicates. This does not, however, exclude the possibility that mental states are identical with brain states, for Leibniz'

Law of Identity of Indiscernables -

"requires that if two things are identical they have all their non-intentional and non-modal properties in common." 3

The proponents of the identity theory are not clear about which of (1), (2) and (3) they wish to assert when they say mental predicates are different in meaning from physical predicates, and this unclarity reflects an unclarity about

the kind of theory that they are propounding. For (1) and (3) seem to imply that mental states are independently characterizable, describable items, and the identity theorist is presumably wishing to say that these independently characterizable items are in fact identical with physical states of the body which are, of course, also independently characterizable. On the other hand, (2) seems to imply that we have, as things are, absolutely no way of describing mental states except in a trivial and question begging way as some thing or other which takes place in some specified physical situation, and which tends to produce empirically observable bodily changes. Now the Identity Theorist who says (2) is holding a theory which is different from the one which is specified in the last but one sentence : he is saying that an item hitherto unknown to us, is made known to us, identified for us, by Science. He is not saying that two items, X and Y, are in fact identical with each other, but rather that one item, X is made known discovered. Because of this difference he is vulnerable to an objection from which the other type of identity theorist is, at least prima-facie, free. The objection can be stated as follows : Suppose, as is conceivable, scientific methods with its increasing sophistication, were persistently to fail to discover what mental states in themselves are, and scientists were to become doubtful whether such a discovery would be possible at any future date; then the identity theorists under discussion would have to say either that we have, and can have, no knowledge of what mental states are, or that some discipline other than science discover them for us, or that there are, so far as we can reasonably tell, no mental states at all. Now all the three

alternatives would in one way or another be unpalatable to the Identity Theorists. About the first alternative one could justifiably say, no matter what science discovers or fails to discover, we have had and shall continue to have knowledge of mental states at least in so far as we understand and successfully ascribe to ourselves as well as to others predicates implying mental states. The same reply would be appropriate to the second alternative except that one could also rightly demand from the Identity Theorist an account of the kind of non-scientific method which could now allegedly discover the nature of mental states; and it is, to say the least, very difficult to envisage any such method. As for the third alternative, the Identity Theorists cannot even get off the ground at all without the assumption that there are mental states to be discovered.

The other version of the Identity Theory, namely, the version according to which the identity claimed is between two independently characterizable items, escapes the above objection, but an objection frequently urged against it, is that mental states necessarily lack a property, which all physical states necessarily have, and which it is essential that mental states have if there were to be even the logical possibility of their being identical with physical states. Thus Shaffer in his article - "Recent

work in the mind-body problem" says :

"the physical events which are intimately connected with my having particular mental events have some definite location, probably in the brain. However, so far as thoughts are concerned, it makes no sense to talk about a thought's being located in some place or places in the body." 4

Another philosopher Don Locke (Myself and Others) has argued that

"Thinking and preceiving are hidden, silent, internal, incorporeal, ghostly processes."

This, according to him, may mean any or all of three things:

(i) that they do not consist in

"changes or movements of things which are solid in the way that running consists a various movements of legs".

(ii) that they do not consist in

"changes or movements of things which have a spatial location, things like legs, lungs and heads."

and (iii) that they do not consist in

"changes or movements of perceptible items, things which we can perceive as we can perceive legs, lungs, and heads". 5

An Identity Theorist might say that there can be nothing logically wrong with locating mental states (events) because we do, in fact, locate for instance, pain the whole time. The reply to this is that although bodily

sensations like pains, itches and tingles and so on undoubtedly have a place in the body, the logic of the location of such sensations in the body is so vastly different from that of the location of a material object or a physical process, that it would be simply wrong to conclude from the mere fact that we talk of the place of a sensation that the latter therefore is a physical process. As Armstrong says in an earlier work of his:

"It is clear that to say that I have a pain or an itch or a tingle in my hand is not like saying there is bone or blood in my hand. A bodily sensation is not a material object."⁶

Some of the crucial differences are : (i) We - the person currently having the bodily sensation as well as others - do not perceive it in the way that we perceive the bodily wound which causes it, or can perceive the bone inside the flesh or blood, or corpuscles in the blood, (ii) My knowledge of my sensations is different from another's knowledge of my sensations. Although I might have to find the place of my pain by probing for it, just as the doctor might, my awareness of the pain itself is different from the doctor's knowledge of it. No such difference in our knowledge of material objects and processes. (iii) Sensations do not exclude one another from one place as material objects do.

An apologist for the identity theory might say although as things are we do not in fact have a convention

of locating conscious processes there is nothing to prevent us from adopting such a convention whereby we should locate conscious processes, say, in the brain. But this idea seems to be mistaken. It seems that there is something in the nature of conscious processes which would resist the adoption of any convention of locating them, as we locate physical processes in some part or other of the body. This can be seen from the following consideration : Suppose we adopted the convention of locating conscious processes in the brain and agreed with the Identity Theorist that they are identical with the brain processes which occupy the same place as they. Now, it is conceivable that brain could have an existence separately from the body in which it is housed; and it is also conceivable that exactly the same physical processes with which mental processes are identified went on in the separately existing brain. Would we then say that there were conscious processes going on in the independently existing brain ? The idea of ascribing conscious processes to things which are not even remotely similar to the standard human body seems quite beyond our grasp. And yet, if the Identity Theory were correct, and there were nothing wrong with locating mental states in the brain, we ought to be able to have some intellectual grasp on this idea. Armstrong reply to this objection is that processes in a separately existing brain, even if they were

exactly similar to those that were going on in it when inside the body, could no longer be properly identified as mental processes, for

" a mental state qua mental state is nothing but ' a state of the person apt for the bringing about of certain sorts of behaviour".⁷

But the difficulty in fact is not resolved. Armstrong conceives the relationship between a mental state and behaviour as a causal one. That is, to put it crudely, a mental state is supposed to be the cause of some characteristic kind of behaviour. The relationship therefore, however, intimate must be a contingent one, since all particular causal relationships are contingent relationships. Thus Armstrong makes essentially this point when he says -

" By saying only that mental states are states apt for bringing about behaviour we allow for some mental states being actual occurrences, even although they result in no behaviour."⁸

But if this is so mental states must be allowed the possibility of having an existence independently of the behaviour they are apt to produce- and this even if we grant the rather dubious assumption that in spite of the contingency of the relationship mental states cannot be characterised except as something which tends to cause behaviour. And if mental states can occur independently of

behaviour, why -if they are identical with brain processes- can they not occur in an independently existing brain ? After all it is there that according to the identity theorist they did occur, whether or not they were followed by appropriate sort of behaviour. The difference is that while the brain was in the body a mental state which was identical with a state of the brain frequently tended to produce behaviour, but once outside the body it is physically impossible for an exactly similar state to produce behaviour. But since the relationship between it and what it produces is a contingent one, the mere physical impossibility of bringing about the characteristic result cannot deprive it of its very existence. So, it seems the identity theorist is still left with the task of showing that we have at least some hold on the idea of ascribing of mental states to things which do not have even a remote resemblance to the standard human body.

The identity theorists might now concede that it is mistaken to think that we can locate, or at any rate, adopt the convention of locating, mental states in the brain, but he might still insist that this has no tendency to disprove the thesis that mental states are identical with physical states. Nagel, for instance, suggests a way of stating the identity which would not involve identifying a

mental state with a brain state. He thinks that physical side of the identity should be regarded as a "condition of the body" rather than as a condition of the brain, because, as he says, it is doubtful that -

"anything without a body of some conventional sort, could be the subject of psychological States".⁹

The physical side of the identity is -

"my body's being in that state which may be specified as having the relevant process going on in its brain, it has been located as precisely as it can be when we have been told the precise location of that of which it is a state-namely, my body"- 10

This version of the Identity Theory does seem to escape the particular difficulty about location that we have been considering, but, only at the expense of becoming inconsistent or at any rate vague. For one thing, how should we distinguish it from a theory according to which mental processes are distinct from physical process, but that they can nevertheless be identified only as being possessed by somebody or another? It would be quite consistent for such a theory to say that mental states are indeed located. That they are located in the body whose properties they are, and that any more precise specification of their location is impossible. The advantage of such a theory over the version of identity theory that we are now considering is that it can give a very good reason for saying that mental states

cannot be located more precisely, namely, that they are not physical processes; whereas for an identity theorist even to say that mental states can be no more precisely located seems quite inconsistent with its fundamental position that mental states are in fact identical with certain physical processes. He could perhaps say that the mental state at time t is identical with the total physical state of the body at time t. But the notion of the "total physical state of the body at time t" is quite vague; and at any rate changes in the body have very often nothing to do with a currently occurring mental process.

The problem of location is therefore, a genuine one for the identity theory, and one it must solve before it can be regarded as a cogent theory of mind. Another difficulty for the theory which is no less crucial is that because it treats the alleged identity as only contingent, it is incumbent on the theory to give some account of what it would be like for the identity not to hold. And no identity theorist seems to have attempted any such account. Identity theorists would perhaps all agree that mental states are states, they can be identified only as states of something or other. As Armstrong says-

"mental experience, like grins or soporific virtues, require something further to have them".-11

And according to him - it seems rightly - it is the violation of this logical principle that renders any Humean "bundle theory" of mind incoherent. If mental states are incapable of independent existence, one could only hold any of the three theories about what it is that has them:-

(1) With the identity theorist one could say that mental states are identical, though contingently, with certain physical states of the body. (2) Or with the Cartesian one could say that mental states are states of a mental or spiritual substance, and therefore, that they are possessed by this substance which can exist independently of the body. (3) Or, finally, one could say that mental states, though distinct from physical states, can nevertheless be possessed by nothing other than the body itself:- the "requirements of identity" to use Strawson's phrase, rule out the possibility of their being possessed by anything other than the body. Now, since identity theorist holds that the identity between mental and physical states is only a contingent one and rejects (3), it looks as though the kind of contingency he envisages is that mental states instead of being physical states of the body could well have been spiritual states of a spiritual substance.

Indeed Armstrong regards it as a strong point in favour of his theory that it allows for the logical

possibility of a spiritual substance, capable of existing independently of the body. And yet, this alleged possibility is not explored in any detail at all. The only argument one could extract from Armstrong's book in support of his thesis that disembodied existence must be logically possible seems to beg the whole question at issue.

He Says :

"Consider the case where I am lying in bed at night thinking. Surely it is logically possible that I might be having just the same experiences, and yet not have a body at all? No doubt I am having certain somatic, that is to say, bodily, sensations. But if I am lying still these will be not very detailed in nature, and I can see nothing self-contradictory in supposing that they do not correspond to anything in physical reality. Yet I need be in no doubt about my identity."12

Surely this cannot be sufficient to prove the logical possibility of disembodied existence. Certainly there could be bodily sensations which were felt in no part of the body, because, for instance, the part of the body where it seems to be felt is missing. One could hardly claim that from this it follows that there could be sensations where there was no body at all. It may be said that one can easily imagine oneself being without a body just as one can easily

imagine oneself being housed in a body other than one's present body. But perhaps, one can also imagine being two persons at the same time. The point is that unless one can spell out the contents of such imaginings and show that there is no incoherence involved in their detailed statement, mere ability to imagine something is no proof of what is logically possible.

Armstrong's rhetorical question -

"Surely it is logically possible that I might be having just the same experiences, and yet not have a body at all?"¹³

Of course merely states his position. The crucial statement in the passage from Armstrong quoted above is the very last one:

"Yet I need be in no doubt about my identity".

A disembodied substance which is a mind, i.e., has mental states must be a more or less enduring entity. Therefore, in order for it to exist there must be conditions under which it persists, i.e., retains its identity. And in order for us to show that it is possible for a disembodied mind to exist, we must be able to specify the persistence conditions, the conditions of continued identity of such a substance. "I need be in doubt of my identity", is of course extremely vague. When need I be in no doubt of my identity? When I am engaged in the kind of imagining that Armstrong envisages?

But then I know that I am lying in bed, physically relaxed and comfortable; and if I were to be in doubt about my identity I would know what sort of consideration would resolve my doubts. But what Armstrong's statement means perhaps is that my imagined self need be in no doubt of its identity. But this, while it shows that the crucial question is that of the identity of the disembodied self, does not prove anything. Even granted that my imaginary disembodied self need at any particular time, be in no doubt of its identity, doubt cannot be logically ruled out. This follows from the fact that statements identifying the present item with a past item are always corrigible. But if doubt is logically possible, there must be a way of envisaging conditions under which the doubt could be resolved. What this means is that one must be able to specify the conditions under which a disembodied self would persist, so that a doubt about its identity can be resolved by an investigation of these conditions. And Armstrong himself has shown in meticulous detail that it is impossible for us to specify such conditions. Thus he asks whether the dualist theory of mind can "Provide for the numerical difference of spiritual objects".¹⁴ and for "the identity of one spiritual object of ^{it} collection of objects over a stretch of time".¹⁵

As for the first question his answer is that it cannot,

because (i) it cannot consistently appeal to difference in the spatial position of the alleged spiritual entities; (ii) it cannot appeal to the past histories of the entities, because there is nothing logically to prevent them from having the same past histories (from beginning to end; and (iii) "even in a case where this is not so and the spiritual histories are identical in character for a limited time, what differentiates the objects during that time"? ¹⁶

As for the second question his answer is again "No", because failing to appeal to spatial continuity, the dualist can appeal only to resemblance between two spiritual entities at different times, and resemblance is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of identity. The natural conclusion from such considerations should have been at least to cast doubt on the alleged logical possibility of disembodied existence. But Armstrong thinks that this cannot be the correct conclusion, because the dualist can still appeal to some other non-spatial 'principle of individuation' (which, however, cannot be characterised in any way other than as a non-spatial principle of individuation), ¹⁷ and therefore the logical possibility of disembodied existence remains unassailable. But in what does the intelligibility of such an alleged principle consist? The only way one could claim intelligibility for a principle is for one to be able to

spell it out in terms that are intelligible. But if one of the conditions of the principle is that it cannot be spelt out at all, then to insist on its intelligibility seems, to say the least, highly irrational.

Now, if the notion of a disembodied self is an incoherent notion it will have awkward consequences for the Identity Theory. According to the theory, there is only a contingent identity between mental states on the one hand and physical states on the other hand. Since it is impossible for mental states to exist in isolation by themselves, i.e., since mental states must be states of something, it seems to follow from the contingency of the identity between mental states and physical states that if, in fact, mental states were not identical with physical states, then they would have to be states of a spiritual substance. This however, involves the hidden assumption that bodies can have only physical states, that it is impossible to ascribe non-physical states to bodies. But this is an assumption which all Identity Theorists seem to find no difficulty in making. Now, if the notion of disembodied existence is incoherent, then the Identity Theorist, via his assumption that bodies can only have physical states, would involve the logical anomaly of saying that the denial of a contingent statement is not just contingently false, but necessarily false.

It may be said that although the Identity Theorists are unanimous in maintaining that only a contingent identity can be established between mental states and physical states, this is not an essential element of their theory. They could quite consistently - however unplausibly - maintain that the identity in fact is a necessary one. And this would remove the logical anomaly of asserting a contingent proposition whose denial was logically incoherent. The view that mental states are necessarily identical with physical states may be thought to be reinforced by the acceptance of a causal analysis of all mental concepts. Armstrong though he is strictly against the view that mental states are necessarily identical with physical states of the body, offers such a causal analysis of all mental-state concepts :

"The concept of a mental state is primarily the concept of a state of the person apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour". 18

The phrase "apt for bringing about a certain sort of behaviour" is understood in a strictly causal sense. But the concept of a cause of behaviour, it may be said, must be that of something physical. For, on any view of a causation, the cause of any physical event, must be spatio-temporally traceable from the effect; and, therefore, the cause of behaviour must be something spatial, physical,

whether or not this kind of causal analysis is adequate for all mental-state concepts, any causal analysis which takes seriously the suggestion that a cause must be a physical entity or process of some sort, soon runs into a difficulty of a particular kind: it would be agreed by all that our understanding of, our use of, the notion of a mental state is not contingent upon our discovery of any internal physical state or process which is related in a very intimate way to the mental state whatever the nature of the relation might ultimately be. This does not, of course, mean that our understanding of mental concepts will not be enhanced by such a discovery. All that this means is that in so far as we can use the notion of a mental state at all, our failure or success in doing so, does not, as things are, depend upon our discovery of any internal physical state. But if this is so it is logically possible that we should fail, however hard and long we tried, to discover any such states at all, and yet be able perfectly well to use the notion of a mental state. If our failure was persistent, it would at some stage become unreasonable not to say that there were in fact no such internal physical states. But as long as we had bodies which externally looked the same as our present bodies and which behaved externally in the same way, there seems no reason why we should not go on ascribing mental states to ourselves as well as others, in the way that

we have always done. This at least shows that it is impossible to establish a necessary identity between a mental state and physical state via the notion of cause.

I think, enough has been said in the preceding pages, to show that the identity theory in all its variety of incarnations is wrong. There does not seem to be any coherent philosophical route to the thesis that mental states are the same as physical states, in whatever way "this same" is taken. We shall in the next chapter consider, a theory which, while avoiding the logical pitfalls of the identity theory, seems at the same time to be able to be give an adequate account of the role of the body in the intelligible articulation of mental-state concepts. This is the theory of P.F. Strawson as expounded in his famous paper entitled "Persons".

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