

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE MIND IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.36675.73766

### **Abstract**

*This work investigates into the nature of the mind as one of the classical problems in western philosophy. It argues that mind as a philosophical contention has been a philosophical concern from the Pre-Socratics till date. This work argues further that the main thrust of the debate oscillates between the conception of the mind as singularity in nature and mind as contiguous with non-mental phenomena. On these heels, theories and counter-theories have been advanced. The theories advanced arguably have been influenced by reaction to earlier theories of the mind and events of each epoch. The work further argues that scientism has further opened the contention to newer dimensions and nuances. This work concludes that the mind is a perennial philosophical challenge regardless of the massive contributions and theories that have been hypothesized on the subject matter.*

**Keywords:** Mind, soul, mind-body, mental states, non-mental phenomena, scientism

### **Introduction**

The Socratic imperative, "Man know thyself" has become a basis for deep philosophical investigation, especially on what constitutes the nature of man in the western philosophical tradition. This investigation has been the basic

concern of metaphysics and in later philosophical development, the concern of philosophy of mind. The first questions that are raised thereof are always, "what am I?" and "who am I?" The first question asks the stuff out of which one is made of and the other asks about personal identity. In both interrogatives, the term "I" requires clarification. When we refer to "I" what exactly is being talked about? One might reply that "I" means my body. This would mean that you are your body, and I am my body. Kessler opines that the use of *your body* or *my body* seems to give an impression of what one possesses. In this case, there seem to be a distinction between ourselves and our bodies (Kessler 519). This seeming distinction gives the view and impression of something beyond the body when "I" is referred to. Thus, "I" could be used to refer to something that goes on within or to some non-material part of the self. Such inner events or activities may include thoughts, perceptions, sensation, etc. These events cannot be described without referring to them in personal senses of mine and yours. The inner events must have been hosted by a medium. That medium has been referred to as the mind. This understanding leaves the notion of "I" to refer to body and mind. This bifurcation is not as simplistic as it appears. It involves a whole theological enterprise as well as a philosophical problem. It comes with various contentions, like, if the distinction between mind and body is valid. It further opens up the discourse on matter and spirit and the issues that oscillate within them.

Since ancient times, people have tended to make a fairly clear distinction between events, substances, processes, or relations that they are called material, or physical, and those that they have called mental, or psychical. The things so classified are located in space and time and are public in that they are capable of being perceived by an observer. The latter realm comprises of things that are private and not observable. (Nolan 74). What constitutes elements of the material and mental are subjects of deep philosophical contentions and how these determine the human constituents and personal identity have also been differently conceived. Different schools of thoughts have emerged from these theses and counter-theses. The issue of the mind is central to human existence. The ontological status of the mind is a grave philosophical concern since men have always bothered about what becomes of the person when he dies. The mind as the seat of thought determines where and what we were, where and what we are, and where and what we would be (Oyeshile in Owolabi 105).

Further, recent developments in science especially cybernetics have challenged the understanding of man and the mind, as machines now play the

roles of men. These developments have heightened the investigations on mind in western philosophy.

This work, therefore, is set to explore the understanding of the mind, being an essential part for understanding of human constituent and personal identity, in western philosophy. The approach for this research shall be expository and analytic.

### **The Question of the Mind**

The question of the mind is an offshoot of the discourse on the basic stuff of reality. Theses on these oscillate basically between materialism and spiritualism. Spiritualists or idealists hold that spirit is what constitutes all reality and that matter is only a product of spirits or ideas. Materialists on the other hand argue that all is matter; even so-called spiritual things are products of matter (Ikhianosime in Ukagba 217). This dualistic approach to reality is what has influenced understanding of what constitutes the basic stuff of the human person. This dualistic hypothesis has also influenced the understanding of the mind.

In defining the concept of the mind in the history of western philosophy, it has often come in close conflict with other terms which sometimes have been treated as co-referential and at other points regarded as differential. These concepts regardless of their peculiar nuances are "Soul" and "Spirit". While 'mind' is often used in philosophical and modern scientific parlances, 'soul' and 'spirit' are commonly used in religious contexts. When employed either in philosophy, science or religious contexts, they are used to show distinction from the body which is corporeal as different from the incorporeal, when talking of the human person.

The term "mind" and the term "soul" have their precursor from the ancient Greek word, *psyche*, which originally was to mark the difference between things that are alive and things that are dead. Thus, a person was said to be dead when his *psyche* was no more in his body.

The term *psyche* in ancient Greek dates back to the Orphic religion, whereby *psyche* is a "demon", a sort of intermediate being between man and god, which pre-exist the body (Berti 1-2). With the birth of man, it was believed that the *psyche* becomes incarnated into the body and this begins the conflict throughout life till death. At death, the *psyche* leaves the body of the individual and becomes

incarnate in a different body depending on the merits or faults of the individual. This religious position was a great influence to the Greek philosophers in developing their thesis on the mind or soul. The earliest contention by the pre-Socratic philosophers was the soul, and this was discussed as distinct from the body and as an element of existence or reality. Thales (c. 625- c. 547 BCE) and Anaximenes (585-582 BCE) maintained that the soul was made of tenuous matter such as air. Thus, it was popular to say, "he breathed his last", to mean, the soul has departed the body or the *psyche* has departed the body. Thus, it was believed that the soul was made of tenuous matter basically constituting of air. The discourse on the soul was a tributary discourse on the problem of *one and many* amongst the Presocratics.

Anaxagoras, however, was the first to talk about mind in a direct way. He referred to the mind as '*Nous*' (Oyeshile in Owolabi 105). He argued further that the world comprised of "an infinitely divisible portions of elements that are set in motion by a cosmic Mind" (Fieser, The History of philosophy...). Anaxagoras' theory of the mind did not directly liken mind with the soul, but he argued that it performed the same function that the soul performed, what Empedocles had argued was the function love and strife performed. In his thesis, Anaxagoras however argued it was a force of physics and that it has a partly divine function; but to the extent that it is divine, it is not an anthropomorphized god like Zeus or some other divine being of religious devotion" (Fieser, The History of Philosophy...).

Amongst the Greek Philosophers, Plato was the most famous philosopher to have talked about the mind in an intricate way. His proposition on the mind was a corollary of his discourse on the soul. This he dealt with in his *Phaedo*. In the *Republic*, Plato identifies three distinct parts of the soul- reason (*nous*), passion (*thumos*), and appetite (*epithuma*) and posits that these are the source of conflicting desires. (IV, 439d-e). Plato's theory of the mind reinforced the dualistic hypothesis which conceives man as composed of two substances: a spiritual and a material; body and soul. His thesis on the mind was influenced by Orphism, hence, he maintained that the mind or soul pre-existed the body and would outlive the body. This understanding is tailored in his theory of recollection, wherein he argued that knowledge is reminiscence. Mind in Plato was an aspect of the soul that functions as reasoning faculty. In *Phaedrus*, Plato deepened thoughts on the reason by likening it to a charioteer trying to control two conflicting horses. (253d-254e). On the other hand, Aristotle in his *De Anima* gave a less speculative direction to the study of the mind when he divided the

soul to three powers: Vegetative powers (concerned with nutrition), sensory powers (hearing, touch, smell, etc) and intellectual powers (understanding and thinking) (412b4). Aristotle further provoked the substance dualism thesis highlighted by Plato. He argued that the soul is the first actuality while the body is the second actuality. Aristotle's intellect however, is a perfection of the organic unity of body and soul. His claims proceed thus:

In the whole of nature each kind of thing has something as its matter, which is potentially all the things in the kind, and something else as the cause and producer, which produces them all - for instance, the craft in relation to its matter. These differences, then, must also be found in the soul. One sort of intellect corresponds to matter, since it becomes all things... (430a10-15)

In the claims above, Aristotle comes close to explaining one of the powers of the soul with the causal actions performed by the mind as understood in neuroscience or psychology; functions like thinking, reasoning, willing, etc. Further, he argues for a material principle in this sort. Thus, he inadvertently shifts the dualism claim from a religious perspective to a more philosophical one, and from a soul-body dualism, he preps us for the mind-body dualism. The seeming irreconcilability of Aristotle's dualism with the attention given to the intellect as the main function of the soul, a vast range of interpretation and counter interpretations have emerged to the mind-body problem largely from the Aristotelian tradition.

The use of the mind interchangeably with the soul in the early history of western philosophy compounded the understanding of the mind. However, they are two distinct terms. Omoregbe argues, "the mind is not the soul, nor is it the spirit. In fact, it is not an entity. Rather, it is a faculty, the cognitive faculty, the power to think and to know. Thus, any being that has the power to think has a mind, therefore, the best evidence of the existence of a mind is thinking or evidence of thinking" (32). The definition of mind however is not as simplistic as given.

There seems to always be a difficulty in conceptualizing the mind. The first difficulty is that mental phenomena seem so different from everything else. The things around us normally have spatial characteristics, such as size, shape and location. By contrast, it makes no sense to think of mental events in spatial senses and they are events that remain private, yet, mental states play a central role in the things that give meaning to our lives (Rosenthal 3). The second aspect of the

difficulty is that our commonsense conception of mind suggests a different picture, that is, mental functioning as we have it is intimately bound up with biological make up. Thinking and its related function suggests a well-developed brain. This action is not proper to lower animals. These two commonsense pictures of the mind present the idea of mind being pulled in opposite direction. In the first, "mind is a singularity in nature, discontinuous with all other natural processes; the other points instead to a conception of mind as intimately bound to, and dependent on, various non-mental processes" (Rosenthal 5). The most fundamental problem in defining or understanding mind is how to reconcile these two aspects or pictures of the mind. Any attempt to advance an explanation of the mind, ends up aligning with either stand; mind as independent and singular on the one hand, and mind as contiguous with other non-mental phenomena on the other hand. Within this divide, there are monists and dualists. Thus, we have advocates who conceive mind as singular, yet, distinct from the body (dualism) like Descartes, Locke and Thomas Reid and those who maintain the singularity of the mind and still maintain an idealistic monism like Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. There are also those who align mind with non-mental phenomena who are dualists like Gilbert Ryle, Carl Hempel, Ludwig Wittgenstein, G. E. M. Ascombe. The consequences of these bifurcations are different theories of the mind, with new grouping and re-groupings, some of these involve the mind and other minds, mind and cybernetics, etc. We therefore shall attempt a synoptic sketch of mind understood from the singularity of mental phenomena and from those that are bound with non-mental processes.

### **The Mind as Singularity in Nature**

Rene Descartes (1569-1650) perhaps provides the best-known statement of the separateness of the mind from the body or its singularity in nature. Descartes thesis stems from his classic *Methodic Doubt*. Starting however with the experience of his own mental existence, he asks which features of himself as a mind; he cannot conceivably lack- these being the essential features of a mind. He concludes that *thought* is the only feature essential to being a mind (Beakley and Ludlow, 4). *Thought* in Descartes involves conscious experience including sensation, imagination, etc. For Descartes, therefore, Mind is consciousness. Descartes arrived at this conclusion because it was impossible to doubt that he was thinking. Thinking was essential to establishing a mind, for Descartes therefore, all forms of mental activity are kinds of thinking (Rosenthal 16). To involve in doubt or doubt that one is doubting for instance or a related idea,

means, there is a common centre for this function, which he has attributed to the mind, and it can only be by a principle of consciousness. For him, it makes no sense to divide the mind into different parts, but it was clear to him, that there is a striking difference between the mind and the body. While the mind is characterized by thinking, the body is characterized by extension (Omoregbe 3). In Cartesian understanding, thinking defines existence or is the principle of individuation, for "I think, therefore, I am". The mind in Descartes is singular and separated from the body.

John Locke (1632-1704) thesis is similar to that of Descartes in some respects. He maintained with Descartes that the mind is transparent to itself. In his critique against innate ideas, he says that we aren't aware of any such possessions and couldn't have them without being aware of them: 'To imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it seems to me hardly intelligible' (I.ii.5: 49; see also II.i.11). Also, Locke agreed that there is a radical separation between the mental and the physical aspects of man. Locke however departs from Descartes in holding that all mental states and activities as forms of thinking. He recognises sensing as something distinct from thought. Locke maintains that "the two great and principal actions of the mind. . . are these two: Perception or Thinking, and Volition or Willing' (II.vi.2; see also xxi.5,6). By this distinction, Locke seems to leave out two large mental matters: (i) emotions, feelings, passions, and (ii) sensory states, sense-data, qualia, phenomenal states, or the like. The nearest Locke gets to a treatment of (i) is in II.xx, 'Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain', in which he says that 'pleasure and pain. . . are the hinges on which our passions turn' and (ii) he treats under the topic 'ideas' (Bennett in Chappell 90). However, making exclusion for these states leaves the notion of the mind very beggarly, as these are elemental to common understanding of mental states and the mind. His notion of the mind is limited to the volitional and intellectual aspects. Locke believes that there is nothing in the nature of matter that can give rise to thoughts and sensation and nothing in the nature of matter that enables us to see how a bodily system can think or sense, even though that may well be what happens (Rosenthal 18).

George Berkeley (1685-1753) espouses an idealist approach amongst advocates of mind as singular in nature. Berkeley argues that everything in the universe is made up of the same substance and that one substance is *mind*. He argues that all we know about physical objects is what we perceive- our entire concept of a table for instance involves the qualities of a table that we can touch and feel, etc. Thus, he concludes that the table is nothing more than what is in the sensory

perception, things exist only in so far as they are perceived - "*esse est percipi*" (to be is to be perceived). For Berkeley physical substances do not exist, only spiritual substance exists, and only the mind is the substance that exists. Mind in Berkeley therefore is the only substance that exists and the principle of perception. He claims further that we know the existence of our mind by intuition and about other minds by inference (Omoregbe 7).

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) has a similar theory to that of Berkeley even though he claimed to be critical of his ideas. He developed his understanding of the mind by advancing his thesis on *monads* which is the theory of pre-established harmony of the world. For Leibniz, the fundamental unit of reality are called *monads*. Lawhead captures this understanding simply noting that "the term is derived from *monas*, a Greek word meaning "unity" or "that which is one". Leibniz holds that the universe consists of an infinity of simple, nonmaterial substances or monads" (265). To better understand Leibniz's monad, is to understand that the mind is one and minds cannot be extended. The world is made up in Leibniz's view of nonphysical minds or monads that are indivisible and unified atoms. Leibniz monads are mental atoms. The chief activity of monads is perception. Each monad is closed and does not interact; monads are windowless. This understanding of monads is what he used to explain his concept of the mind. Minds in Leibniz are simply monads.

In a later philosophical development on the mind, there is a materialist conception of the mind from a singularity approach. This is the offshoot of dialectical materialism which is part of Marx-Engels-Lenin doctrine known as Marxism. Consciousness, according to Lenin, is the product of matter at its highly developed stage (Omoregbe 12). In this understanding, Lenin holds that everything in the universe is matter in motion and that the human mind is matter. He denies spiritual force and that the only force in nature is material force. All activities of the mind like thinking, willing, loving, etc he regards as activities of the brain. This materialist claim was foundational to the materialist approach that equates mind to the brain and the foremost development of this position is Central-State materialism advanced by British philosopher, U.T. Place, American philosopher Donald Davidson, etc.

### **Mind as continuous in character with non-mental phenomena**

There is yet in the second divide, different philosophers who do not deny the mind, yet, do not maintain it is logical for the mind to exist singularly in nature. For them, if the mind is singular in nature, how can mental phenomena

interweave so seamlessly with bodily process? It is argued that mental phenomena casually interact with non-mental phenomena and only this interaction gives proof to the existence of the mind, since the mind is a non-material phenomenon. The most common strand of this thesis is the logical behaviorist school or theory. This is a product of the 20th century Analytic tradition that gave birth to the logical positivists. The analytic tradition was forerun by the rapidity with which major movements suddenly appear, flourish, lose their momentum, become senescent, and eventually vanish" (Popkin Ed. 604). Example of movements that suffered abatement included neutral monism, idealism in its absolutist variants, sense-data theory, etc. There was the rise of new scientism and this gave rise to logical positivism. This school adopted that scientific method and the method of verification as the only way of knowing. Only those things that can be shown to be true or false are meaningful. This impacted on the conception of the mind, and thus birthed the logical behaviorist school on the mind. This school argues that mental states are continuous to non-mental states through behaviour. For instance, if a person is having pain or depression (mental state) the behaviour and reaction are what exactly seem to confirm this. The contributions of Gilbert Ryle revolutionized the understanding of the mind and demystified the Cartesian dogma on the mind.

Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) is well known for his book, *The Concept of Mind* (1949). In this work, he advocated a logical behaviourist dimension for understanding the mind. Rosenthal captures Ryle's intent thus;

(he) argues that the distinction between mental and physical is not a distinction between two distinct kinds of entity or process, but between two ways of describing creatures with psychological abilities. It is therefore a conceptual mistake to hold that nonphysical processes take place in the mind that interact with various bodily processes, a mistake that results from holding that psychological descriptions refer to processes in the very same way that bodily descriptions do. (20)

For Ryle, the Cartesian model of the mind is a categorical mistake (16). The mind, Ryle argues is not an entity the way the body is, and attempting to give the mind an ontological status the way the body is, is perpetuating the dogma of *ghost in a machine*. He points that the confusion with understanding the mind arises from our misuse of language which has created an unwarranted dichotomy. Ryle understands the mind therefore as not different from those mental states describe like thinking, imagining, believing, perceiving, deciding, etc. These are externalized in behaviour. Any mental states that cannot be externalize in

behaviour he dismisses, such internalized mental state like introspection, he dismisses as not a mental state. To talk of mind therefore, "is to talk of a repository... It is to talk of the person's abilities, liabilities, and inclinations to do and undergo certain sort of things, a way of doing and undergoing of these things in the ordinary world" (Ryle 199).

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) argues in similar contiguous terms on the mind with Ryle. His argument took its cue from the analysis of ordinary language. His point is that there is no such thing as private language. Language is public and so it is that, our experiences are public. There is no private sensation. For him, our experiences express themselves externally without language. We cannot say we have pain and cannot show it. So, mental states cannot be private. They are those that are observable externally. For Wittgenstein, the Cartesian model of the mind presents a problem. The model identifies "the mental world with what is private and the private with what is hidden from others" (Popkin 640). The problem with this is the challenge of interaction. Wittgenstein's conception of the mind comes from his refutation of this Cartesian model that leaves an "egocentric predicament" when it comes to the interaction of mind and body. Thus, for Wittgenstein like Ryle, the mental states are those observable states. The mind is nothing more than those public observable mental states; as Wittgenstein puts it, "inward phenomena stand in need of outward criteria" (Popkin 641). There are no such things as private mental states just like the way private language is a misnomer. His thesis on the mind follows that of the logical- behaviourist approach.

### **The Understanding of the Mind: New Directions**

The opposite poles of understanding the mind, either as singularity in nature or as contiguous with other non-mental phenomena; coupled with developments in science and new philosophies have led to further explosion of interest on the mind, with new theories and doctrines to explain same concept. Thus, the concept of mind in western tradition is an old, yet, an ever-new philosophical problem. Earlier understandings have elicited a number of theories in the mind-body debate. In explaining the concept of mind, philosophers have often met with the challenge of explaining how it can interact with the body which arguably it resides. Such theories oscillate between a monist thesis and a dualist theory. Such theories include Descartes thesis of interactionism, logical-

behaviourism pioneered by Gilbert Ryle, Psycho-physical parallelism, double aspect theory, Leibniz pre-established harmony theory, Occasionalism championed by Malebranche, physicalist dualist thesis of epiphenomenalism, etc. In recent developments influenced by modern science, there are three important philosophical movements that maintain that the mind is in principle explainable and susceptible to philosophical explanations. These are identity theory, functionalism and eliminativism. This appears to be the new direction to conceptualizing the mind in western tradition.

The *identity theory* which is also called "reductive materialism" and sometimes physicalism asserts that mental states are physical states of the brain (Popkin 658). Simply put, this doctrine holds that mind states are brain states. This theory has two variants: (1) the type-type identity theory and (2) the token-token identity theory. The first argues that "each type of mental states or processes is numerically identical with some type of neural state or process within the brain or the central nervous system". The second on the contrary asserts that the relation of identity hold particular mental states and particular neuro-physiological states. This second position is the canonical version of the theory (Popkin 658). The major proponents of this are J.J. C. Smart and U. T. Place. This theory is a scientific development or response to the weaknesses of logical-behaviourism.

*Functionalism* on the other hand was invented by Hilary Putnam and later disavowed it fifteen years later. Functionalists argue that mental states are determined by their functions and not by what they are made of. Putnam argued that "mental states are functional states like the states of an abstractly defined Turing machine rather than physical states like the states of a human brain" (Davies, *Mind and Brain*). David Lewis later critiqued the machine functionalism of Putnam and thus, proposed an analytic functionalism, which maintains that "commonsense specifications of the interconnected causal roles of mental states can be taken as interlocking analyses of mental state terms" (Davies, *Mind and Brain*). The claim here is, for every physical being with a mind, there is a physical state playing the causal role of the mental state.

The third view of the mind devoted to scientism is *Eliminative materialism*. This view is chiefly championed by Paul and Patricia Churchland. This view maintains that there are no such things as thoughts, beliefs and intentions, but only neural activity (Popkin 662). This view totally eliminates the possibility of any such claim as mind since it is scientifically unverifiable. This position criticizes earlier mind-brain reductionist theories of attempting to reduce

nothing to something. Developments in science especially in cybernetics or Artificial intelligence arguably influenced this thought the most. Man by this is comparable to nothing but a machine and the brain is just but the engine.

## Conclusion

The preceding part of this work has been devoted to the understanding of the mind and its development down the epochs. It has argued that the concept of the mind evolved from an understanding of the concept of the soul. Philosophers at different times have devoted attention to what constitutes the essential feature of man, and what makes man function beyond the physical body. Since the time of Descartes, however, the debate has been incensed with the mind-body polarization. Till date, philosophy has not been able to capture a commonly acceptable account of the mind. Each thesis meets an antithesis which helps to reach a synthesis and this, begins a new thesis. This dialectic has continued on a philosophical rollercoaster till the point of equating mind with the brain and even to outright denial of the mind. Despite these trends, the issue of the mind remains a philosophical

quandary. While religion attempts to explain, science tries to investigate, philosophy attempts a rational interpretation of these accounts. All theories, however, have semantic properties; either they are true or false, consistent or inconsistent, supported by observational data or not, etc. The challenge in this semantic opposite is finding the criterion on what translates each of the semantic concept to be the truth. As long as this cannot be reached, the problem of the mind continues to remain a philosophical puzzle. Our conclusion is; the failure to attain a robust, certain, acceptable and valid account on the mind is an indication of the limitation of human knowledge and the problem of the mind will continue to be one of the ghosts of philosophy.

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