Subjects of experience

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Introduction

The central topic of this book is what would traditionally be called the 'mind-body problem'. In my view, however, part of what has historically generated a problem of this name is the very choice of these terms, 'mind' and 'body', to denote entities whose relationship to one another supposedly calls for explanation. I would prefer to speak of the *self*-body problem, for I do not wish to reify the 'mind' as an entity on a par with the body. Selves or persons 'have' both minds and bodies – but 'having' is not to be understood univocally for both cases. Selves 'have' minds inasmuch as they are essentially subjects of mental states – of thoughts, experiences, intentions and the like. But they 'have' bodies in a quite different and genuinely relational sense: for persons and their bodies are each distinct kinds of entity in their own right. Bodies (in the sense of the term now relevant) are organized material objects, capable of undergoing growth and change in their material parts, subject to the retention of certain basic characteristics of form and function. However, neither they nor their parts are genuine subjects of mental states: it is *persons* or *selves* who think, feel and act intentionally, not their bodies or their brains. This, if true, is enough to establish the non-identity of selves with their bodies, though by no means implies that selves are wholly *im*material and separable from their bodies. I myself may still be, strictly and literally, the bearer of certain physical properties and the occupier of a location in physical space, even though I am not identifiable with that organized material object which serves as my physical body, and through which I exercise my capacities of perception and agency.

The picture that I am recommending, though I think it accords well with common-sense ways of talking, is not without difficulties. If I am not the same as my body, nor yet an essentially immaterial thing, how *am* I related to my body, and what makes my body peculiarly

mine? Could I survive a change of my body for another, perhaps radically different in form or material constitution? Again, if it is I and not my body or brain that have thoughts and feelings, how are those thoughts and feelings related to events and processes going on in my body and brain? How is it that, through a mental decision, I can make my body move in a desired way; and how is it that through the neural processing of optical information in my eye and brain I can experience my physical environment as a three-dimensional arrangement of coloured surfaces? Finally, how could mentally endowed beings like ourselves have evolved naturally, given that we are more than just the biological organisms which constitute our bodies?

I attempt to answer, or at least to begin to answer, all of these questions and many related ones in the course of this book. But a fundamental assumption of my approach throughout is that satisfactory answers to questions in the philosophy of mind presuppose a satisfactory metaphysical framework of ideas. It is to that framework that I shall now turn, and more particularly to the notion of *substance*, which is pivotal to much of what I have to say about mind, self and body.[1]

1. WHAT IS A SUBSTANCE?

What do we – or, more to the point, what *should* we – mean by a 'substance'? I am prepared to defend what I take to be a more or less Aristotelian conception of this notion. That is, I shall follow the Aristotle of the *Categories* in taking a 'primary' substance to be a concrete individual *thing*, or 'continuant'.[2] Paradigm examples are such entities as an individual horse (say, Eclipse) and an individual house (say, the one I live in). If, as some commentators believe,[3] Aristotle changed his mind about this between composing the

[1] A very much fuller account of my metaphysical position can be found in my book *Kinds of Being: A Study of Individuation, Identity and the Logic of Sortal Terms* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). What follows is only an outline sketch.

[2] See further my chapter on 'Substance', in G. H. R. Parkinson (ed.), *An Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 255-78. The term 'continuant' was coined by W. E. Johnson: see his *Logic, Part III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), ch. 7.

[3] See, e.g., Alan Code, 'Aristotle: Essence and Accident', in R. E. Grandy and R. Warner (eds.), *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), and Michael Frede, 'Substance in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*', in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Categories and the *Metaphysics*, then so be it; I am really only interested in the doctrine, not in whether or when Aristotle held it.

Such substances (henceforth I shall drop the word 'primary') belong to kinds, that is, to species and genera (which Aristotle, in the *Categories* but not elsewhere, called 'secondary' substances). The kinds to which substances belong I shall call *substantial* kinds. Not *all* kinds are substantial kinds, of course, since there are kinds of non-substantial individuals: for example, kinds of events and kinds of sets. Events, though concrete individuals, are not substances by the 'Aristotelian' account because they are not entities capable of persisting through qualitative change – indeed, they just *are*, broadly speaking, the changes which substances undergo. Sets are not substances because – assuming indeed that they really exist at all – they are purely abstract entities.[4]

Substantial kinds may be *natural* (like the kind *horse*) or they may be *artefactual* (like the kind *house*). This distinction is mutually exclusive and perhaps also exhaustive – though arguably there genuinely exist substantial kinds, like perhaps the culinary kind *vegetable*, which are neither natural nor artefactual.[5] But to call a substantial kind 'natural' is not to imply that individual exemplars of it could not be artificially synthesized. Rather, the characteristic feature of natural substantial kinds (henceforth, simply 'natural kinds') is that they are *subjects of natural law*. This requires some expansion. Obviously, it is not that an artefact, such as a watch, is not subject *to* natural law: if a watch is dropped, its fall will be governed by the law of gravity, quite as much as will the fall of a tree. The point rather is that there are no natural laws that are distinctively *about* watches or other human artefacts of comparable kinds: artefactual kinds are not subjects *of* natural law. By contrast, there *are* laws about plants and animals and stars and atoms and all other such natural kinds.[6] The laws in question belong to the

[4] A more detailed presentation of the ontological scheme I favour, and the place of substances within it, may be found in my 'Primitive Substances', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), pp. 531-52.

[5] See T. E. Wilkerson, 'Natural Kinds', *Philosophy* 63 (1988), pp. 29-42. It must also be acknowledged that animal artefacts, such as the bee's honeycomb and the beaver's dam, are quite as 'natural' as the creatures which make them – but they differ for that very reason from the products of intentional human design, such as houses and watches, with which I am presently contrasting exemplars of 'natural' kinds.

[6] It might be objected that one needs to be able to identify which kinds are *natural* kinds (as opposed, say, to various 'gruesome' or 'gerrymandered' kinds) in order to identify which

various special sciences: biology, astronomy, nuclear physics, and so forth. Each of these sciences is about substances of certain appropriate natural kinds. The kinds that are proper to one science are not, in general, proper to another: thus astronomy has something to say about stars but not about starfish, while the reverse is true of biology. Furthermore, I see no good reason to believe that all laws about natural kinds are even 'in principle' reducible to, or wholly explicable in terms of, laws about some privileged set of 'basic' or 'fundamental' natural kinds – such as sub-atomic particles. That is to say, I consider the various special sciences to be for the most part relatively autonomous, despite numerous theoretical interconnections between them.

One reason why I reject reductionism about laws is that I reject it about substantial individuals of the kinds which are the subjects of laws. For instance, I reject the view that a biological entity such as a tree can simply be regarded as being nothing over and above an assemblage of sub-atomic particles, even though we now believe that the ultimate constituents of trees (and of everything else material) are indeed such particles. (I am inclined to take the same non-reductionist view of artefacts, but would still insist that these differ from members of natural kinds in lacking an associated network of natural law.) It may perhaps be true that the existence of a tree in some sense 'supervenes' upon that of its constituent particles at any given time (though saying this is no clearer than the somewhat obscure notion of supervenience permits it to be). But that these particles constitute a *tree* rather than an entity of some quite different non-biological kind crucially depends upon their organization (that is, in Aristotelian terms, upon their realizing the 'form' of a tree). And this organization can only be appropriately described (I would contend) in distinctively *biological* terms. Thus, what is crucial as far as the presence or absence of a *tree* is concerned, is that the particles in question should be so organized as to subserve the characteristic life-sustaining functions of the various typical parts of a tree – respiration, photosynthesis, nutrition, and so forth. (By a tree's 'typical' parts I mean such parts as its leaves, branches and roots, all of which play distinctive biological roles in its overall structure and economy.) Saying what these typical

generalizations are to count as natural laws. But my view is that our knowledge of laws and our knowledge of the sortal structure of the world develops in tandem, by a process of continual mutual adjustment: see the last three chapters of my *Kinds of Being*.

parts and characteristic functions are, and explaining their proper interrelationships, are precisely matters for the science of biology, and will involve the recognition of various distinctively biological laws. Biological laws are laws about living organisms *qua* living organisms (rather than, for example, *qua* material bodies), and since talk of living organisms is not reducible to talk of assemblages of sub-atomic particles, neither are biological laws reducible to the laws of nuclear physics.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SELFHOOD

I take *persons* or *selves* (terms I use interchangeably) to be subjects of experience, and hence consider theories of the self to be absolutely central to the concerns of this book. It will be helpful, then, if I say at this point what I take a theory of the self to be a theory *of* – but my characterization of the self for this purpose should be neutral as between various rival views of the self's ontological status. By a *self*, then, I mean a possible object of first-person reference and subject of first-person thoughts: a being which can think that *it itself* is thus and so and can identify itself as the unique subject of certain thoughts and experiences and as the unique agent of certain actions. Such a being may well also be able to recognize itself as the unique possessor of a certain body, but it cannot plausibly be insisted that a capacity for such recognition is a logically necessary condition of selfhood, even if it can be argued – which I do not say it can – that embodiment itself is a logically necessary condition of selfhood. (A fuller exposition and defence of this account of selfhood will be found in chapter 7.)

When I characterize the self as a being which can identify itself as the unique subject of certain thoughts and experiences, I mean that it is a logically necessary condition of selfhood that a self should know, of any concurrent conscious thought or experience which is its own, that it *is* its own thought or experience and no one else's. For instance, if a certain presently occurring pain is mine, then I must now know of that pain that it *is* mine and mine alone – a thought which I might express in words by means of the sentence '*This* pain is *my* pain' (although I do not insist that a self be capable of articulating such thoughts). That is why I believe we cannot really render intelligible the curious reply of Mrs Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, when asked on her sick bed whether she was in pain: 'I think there's a pain somewhere in

the room, but I couldn't positively say that I have got it.'[7] I should stress, however, that I only insist that a self must know of its *conscious* thoughts and experiences that they are its own, and only insist that it must know this *at the time at which they are occurring* (though it is arguable that it must know this of at least *some* of its past thoughts and experiences as well).

It may be suspected that even these qualified claims are threatened by the existence of such clinical disorders as schizophrenia and multiple personality. Though I shall touch on these disorders later in the book, I do not have space to discuss their implications for our conception of the self in any detail. However, I am willing to allow – since this is all I really need for my purposes – that it is strictly only psychologically *normal* selves that fully meet my condition for selfhood, and that other cases only approximate to it in varying degrees. I should add, though, that it may be possible to have *de re* knowledge of two experiences, e_1 and e_2, that each is mine, without necessarily having *de dicto* knowledge that e_1 and e_2 are both mine – and this might permit even the psychologically disordered selves to meet my condition fully.

3. SUBSTANTIVAL VERSUS NON-SUBSTANTIVAL THEORIES OF THE SELF

With these remarks on substance and on selfhood in place, let us turn to the following question: How could the *self* be a *substance*? A student of the history of philosophy might well answer that this could be so only if the self were either identifiable with a certain physical body or else identifiable with an immaterial Cartesian ego or soul. And neither view is easily defensible. The first (material substantivalism) is not because it seems to get quite wrong the conceptual connection between the self and its body. The self is necessarily conceived to be the owner or subject of its experiences and actions in a primitive sense in which the body is apparently quite ineligible for that role. That *these* experiences are *my* experiences is arguably known to me as a necessary truth; but that these experiences are associated with this body, though perhaps known by me, does not seem to constitute a necessary truth. And the obvious explanation for the contingency of

[7] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 224.

the association is that while these experiences are *necessarily mine*, this body is only *contingently mine*. Thus the contingency of the association of these experiences with this body is explicable – and I think only explicable – as a consequence of a contingency in the relationship between me and my body, a contingency which material substantivalism cannot countenance.[8]

A rejoinder which the material substantivalist might make here is that the reason why '*These* experiences are *my* experiences' is a necessary truth is that it is just analytic, on the grounds that 'I' just means 'the subject of these experiences' (so that 'These experiences are my experiences' just means 'These experiences are experiences of the subject of these experiences', which is as good a candidate as any for the status of analytic truth). This would then allow the material substantivalist to insist, none the less, that I – that is, the subject of these experiences – am identical with this body, even though 'These experiences are experiences of this body' is *not* an analytic truth. For, of course, analyticity is not necessarily preserved under the substitution of co-referring expressions.

But such a rejoinder is quite unsatisfactory, not least because it fails to account for the unity of consciousness that is characteristic of selfhood and the privileged access which the self has only to its own experiences. If 'I' just means 'the subject of these experiences', what is to guarantee that it in fact picks out a unique entity at all? Why should all these experiences be assignable to the *same* subject? Why should not *this* pain and *this* itch be assigned to *different* subjects? The obvious answer is that they cannot be because they are both necessarily *mine*: but this is clearly not an answer that is available to the material substantivalist who resorts to the strategy now under examination, nor does it seem to me that he has any viable alternative answer. To say that the experiences are assignable to the same subject because they are 'co-conscious' or 'co-presented' not only gets the cart before the horse, but also reduces the self's unity of consciousness to an analytic triviality. (I shall deal with these issues in much greater depth in chapters 2 and 7.)

So let us turn to the traditional alternative to material substantivalism – Cartesian or immaterial substantivalism, according to which the

[8] I present other arguments against identifying the self with its body in my *Kinds of Being*, ch. 6.

self is not identifiable with the body but is seen rather as an immaterial substance wholly distinct and separable from the body, albeit intimately causally related to it. The trouble with this view is that to the extent that it goes beyond a mere rejection of material substantivalism it rests on pure speculation without either *a priori* sanction or, seemingly, any hope of empirical confirmation. From the fact that I am not identical with my body it by no means follows that I am wholly distinct and separable from it, much less that I am endowed with no physical characteristics whatsoever.

Since I have nothing to say in defence of immaterial substantivalism and have rejected material substantivalism, it might seem that I should be willing to reject altogether the notion that the self is a substance. But I am not, because the alternatives are in my view untenable. What are these alternatives? In essence there are two, one more radical than the other. The less radical position is 'Humean' psychological constructivism (exemplified in modern times by the view of philosophers such as Derek Parfit), according to which the self – the object of first-person reference and subject of psychological states – is nothing *over and above* the states of which it is the subject, but is not therefore *nothing at all*, since it is a perfectly respectable entity whose identity and persistence conditions are entirely expressible in terms of relationships between those states. In short, the self is a 'bundle of perceptions'.[9] The deepest problem with this sort of view is that the entities out of which it attempts to construct the self – psychological states and processes – are themselves quite generally not individuable and identifiable independently of the selves that are their subjects, so that fatal circularity dooms the project. I shall discuss this point much more fully in chapter 2, so I shall say no more about it here.[10]

The more radical of the two alternatives to substantivalism is what I call the non-entity theory – the view that there is literally no such thing as the self, as philosophers have attempted to conceive of it, and indeed that there is *no* object of first-person reference, because 'I' is not really a referring expression at all.[11] But this view falls prey to the

[9] See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I, IV, sect. VI, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), and Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[10] See also my *Kinds of Being*, pp. 131-3.

[11] See, e.g., G. E. M. Anscombe, 'The First Person', in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

same general objection levelled at psychological constructivism, namely, that psychological states (whose existence the non-entity theory is not, wisely, attempting to deny) are necessarily owned by subjects whose individuation is quite generally presupposed by any tenable account of the identity-conditions of such states. Since, then, the existence of subjects of experience is not to be denied, it is preposterous to deny that these are the intended objects of first-person reference or indeed that there is such a phenomenon as first-person reference. And that being so, the existence of selves, as I have defined them, is not to be disputed, however much one may dispute their precise ontological status and underlying nature.

So far I have rejected what are, as far as I can see, the only two serious rivals to substantivalist theories of the self – psychological constructivism and the non-entity theory – but have also rejected the best known versions of substantivalism itself, material and immaterial or Cartesian substantivalism. Thus we are left looking for a distinctive and defensible version of substantivalism. As I see it, the two main problems that a viable substantival theory of the self has to face are these. First, how can one and the same self persist identically through time even though its persistence-conditions are not those of the body? And, secondly, how is it that the self, though not identical with the body, can support the various psychological states and processes that make up its mental life and which qualify it (rather than the body) as a subject of thought and experience and agent of deliberative actions? I hope to throw light on these problems in the remaining chapters of this book, though I do not claim entirely to solve them.

4. A LOOK AHEAD

In what remains of this introductory chapter, I shall briefly outline what I hope to accomplish in the rest of the book. (Readers who do not like the plot to be revealed in advance should skip this section.) I begin chapter 2 by discussing in much more detail than I have so far the ontological status of the self, examining the attractions and difficulties of three mutually opposing views. Two of these views have in common that they treat selves or persons as *substances* – that is, as enduring bearers of successive states and in no way reducible to mere successions of those states. Another two of the views have in common that they treat the concept of the self or person primarily as a

psychological one. I argue in favour of the view that belongs to both of these pairs, that is, the view that the self is a *psychological substance* – though I reject the Cartesian version of this view in favour of a version which permits the self to be a bearer of physical as well as psychological states. The rival views that I dismiss have their historical roots in the philosophical thought of Aristotle and Locke respectively, but also have many modern adherents, whence I call the modern versions the neo-Aristotelian and neo-Lockean views of the self. The former treats persons as *biological substances* (that is, as a kind of *animal*), the latter treats them as *psychological modes* (that is, as appropriately unified successions of psychological states). I argue against the neo-Aristotelian view that it is excessively anthropocentric in its conception of persons, and against the neo-Lockean view that it suffers from a fatal circularity through its failure to accommodate the fact that psychological states are only individuable by reference to the selves that are their subjects.

In the later sections of chapter 2, I attempt to develop in some detail a positive account of the self consistent with my view of its ontological status as a psychological substance. I argue that the self is a *simple* substance, that is, a substance possessing no substantial parts. On this view, parts of the self's body are not literally parts of the self, though the self may still consistently be said to possess certain physical characteristics which supervene upon those of its body. Moreover, the self's substantial simplicity is in no way incompatible with its manifest psychological complexity, though that simplicity does help to explain its psychological *unity*. The simplicity of the self is seen to imply that its diachronic identity – its persistence through time – is irreducible and ungrounded, and hence criterionless. Towards the end of the chapter various physicalist objections to this picture are answered, notably the objection that it is inconsistent with a naturalistic account of the evolution of human persons. Persons or selves are argued to be quite as much a product of cultural as of biological evolution.

Chapter 3 begins with an examination of the charge, traditionally levelled by physicalists against dualists ever since the time of Descartes, that dualist interactionism conflicts with the fundamental laws of physics, particularly the conservation laws. This charge is shown to be quite unfounded. Even so, I concede that the 'Cartesian' model of psychophysical causation is unsatisfactory for a number of other reasons, but sketch an alternative interactionist scheme which escapes these difficulties. This new approach is developed in more detail later

in the chapter, where I draw a distinction between 'initiating' and 'facilitating' causes and argue that the mental causes of bodily behaviour fall into the latter category. I explain how such mental causes could play an independent role supplementary to that of the neurological causes of behaviour, and indicate what sort of empirical evidence would support the claim that they do indeed play such a role. This theory presents an 'emergentist' picture of mental powers, but one which appears to be perfectly consistent with a naturalistic, evolutionary account of their origin. I should add that a good deal of this chapter is devoted to demonstrating the inadequacies of so-called non-reductive physicalism – the majority view amongst philosophers of mind at present – and thus to cutting away the supposed middle ground between a robust dualism of the sort I favour and the more extreme forms of physicalism, such as eliminativism, which at best lack plausibility and at worst threaten to prove wholly incoherent.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the development of a comprehensive theory of sense perception which emphasizes the indispensable role of conscious, qualitative states of experience both in perceptual processes themselves and in associated processes of belief-formation. I begin by arguing that perceptual processes involve a quite distinct class of mental states – perceptual experiences – which can occur even in the absence of their normal extra-mental causes. I contend that perceptual experiences are distinguished by their possession of both intentional or representational content and qualitative or phenomenal content, with the latter reflecting the sensuous or sensational element in perception. Certain uses of words such as 'look' and 'appear' are shown to be devices for capturing aspects of the qualitative content of perceptual experience, rather than just means of describing the objects of perception as such. With these distinctions in place, I next go on to give a detailed account of the way in which systematic causal dependencies between the qualitative features of perceptual experience and the properties of environmental objects enable human subjects to extract environmental information from their sensory stimulations – an account which presents a distinct alternative to both the 'ecological' and the 'computational' theories of perception currently in favour amongst philosophical psychologists. Another issue examined in this chapter is the relationship between the role of qualitative experiential states in perception and the ability of human subjects to form conceptually structured beliefs and judge-

ments amenable to rational evaluation and revision. This issue is explored with the aid of thought-experiments envisaging extensions of the phenomenon of 'blindsight' to other sensory modalities.

In the last section of chapter 4 the focus of inquiry shifts from the qualitative or phenomenal content of perceptual experience to its intentional or representational content, though also to the question of how these two kinds of content are related. I hold that the intentional content of a perceptual experience is best characterized in terms of the belief-content that it is typically apt to induce in its subject, and that its aptness to induce a given belief-content is a product of the role which experiences with similar qualitative content have played in that particular subject's history of perceptual learning. Such an account serves to connect a subject's ability to form beliefs about environmental objects with his or her perceptually acquired knowledge of what such objects 'look like' (or otherwise 'appear' to other sensory modalities), and thus confirms the conclusions of the 'blindsight' thought-experiments discussed earlier on. More generally, though, the purpose of chapter 4 is to assemble all the ingredients of a causal theory of perception which is at once a 'representative' theory of perception and a 'direct realist' theory (surprising though such a combination may seem to those who assume that theories of these kinds are mutually incompatible).

Chapter 5 returns to the topic of voluntary agency which was one of the central concerns of chapter 3. A 'volitional' theory of such agency is defended, according to which a distinctive class of mental states – volitions – play an indispensable role in the genesis of voluntary behaviour. Volitions are shown to be distinctive not least in respect of their intentional content, which is self-referential but not propositional in character. Though beliefs and desires are amongst the causal determinants of volition, a philosophy of action which appeals only to states of the former kinds is inadequate. In other words, 'conative' or 'executive' mental states must be invoked in addition to cognitive and appetitive or motivational states in any satisfactory account of human agency. The theory of chapter 5 does not, however – unlike some other recent approaches – simply equate 'willing' with 'trying', or attempt to eliminate the former notion in favour of the latter, because the concept of trying, though apt enough for everyday purposes, cannot bear sufficient weight for theoretical deployment in an account of the aetiology of human action.

In chapter 6, I develop the thesis, initially advanced in chapter 4, that our capacity for thought is intimately related to our capacity to enjoy qualitative experiences of environmental objects in sense-perception. I argue that thought at its most basic is a non-discursive process of imaginative (re)construction akin to, and ultimately dependent upon, processes of perceptual recognition, and that higher-level linguistic thinking is only rendered possible by these more basic psychological processes. To some extent this serves to restore the credentials of Locke's unjustly vilified 'ideational' theory of linguistic signification.

In the last chapter, chapter 7, I expand on the claim made in section 2 above that certain kinds of self-knowledge are definitive conditions of selfhood – notably a knowledge of the identity of one's own present, conscious thoughts, experiences and actions. This sort of reflexive self-knowledge is shown to be compatible only with a substantival theory of the self of the kind defended in chapter 2. At the same time, I explain why it is that, even though the self is not to be identified with its body, the specially intimate relationship in which it stands to its own conscious states is in some respects extensible to certain parts of its own body, namely, those over which it can exercise direct voluntary control and those in which it can phenomenologically localize bodily sensations. These considerations help to fill out an account, already begun in chapter 2, of what it is that qualifies a particular physical body as peculiarly *mine*.

It is my hope that, collectively, the chapters of this book present a rounded picture of human subjects and their mental powers which is at once non-reductive, naturalistic, metaphysically coherent and consistent with our own subjective intuitions concerning ourselves.