

MIND IS MINDING¹

LESLIE A. WHITE

We should have a great many fewer disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, signs of our ideas only, and not for things in themselves.—
LOCKE, *Essay on the Human Understanding*.

THE problem of the relation between body and mind has occupied philosophers and scientists since the dawn of thought, and to many it appears no nearer a solution now than then. It has been named the central problem of all philosophy, fundamental alike in the theory of knowledge, in ethics and in religion. Not less fundamental, however, is it for psychology and for physical science. . . .

These are the opening words of the article 'Body and Mind' in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* by James Lewis McIntyre, Anderson lecturer in comparative psychology to the University of Aberdeen. Hundreds of books and thousands of lectures and articles have been devoted to the 'mind-body' problem. How is it possible for the body to have a mind? How can the mind have a body? Which is the reality, the body or the mind? How are body and mind articulated with each other? These are some of the questions which have plagued

¹EDITOR'S NOTE: This brief statement of the non-elementalistic point of view toward the problem of 'mind' is reprinted, with the kind permission of the author and the editors, from *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. XLVIII (February, 1939), pp. 169-171. Leslie A. White is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

us for many a century. And 'to many they appear no nearer to solution now than then.'

Why has the 'solution' not been reached? Where is the difficulty?

It is the thesis of this essay that the 'solution' has not been reached because the problem is a false one, somewhat like the paradoxes of Zeno. The difficulty is one of verbal origin; it is of our own making. By rewording the problem the 'problem' disappears: use the word mind as a verb instead of a noun and no 'problem, fundamental either to the theory of knowledge, ethics, psychology, science' or to anything else, remains. Mind is minding; it is the behaving, reacting, of a living organism as a whole, as a unit.

Once upon a time, in a far-off land, a people was concerned with the problem of Golshok. No one knew *exactly* what Golshok was, but every one agreed that he (she or it) was very important and that their existence and welfare depended in large measure upon Golshok. Many of the best minds of this people devoted their lives to the study of Golshok. Their lucubrations were recorded and their pronouncements carried great weight. It was decreed that all social life was to be conducted in accordance with the principles of Golshok as set forth by the wise men. Of course it was necessary to put people to death occasionally because of their failure to comply with these principles. This was usually done by burning them alive. This went on for centuries. But not all people were content.

Some were bent upon discovering just what Golshok really was—if anything. But they never got any farther than words, save for an occasional burning of a rebel.

Finally some one broke a way out of the impasse. He declared in plain language that the whole Golshok business, from start to finish, was nothing but 'words, words, words,' that the wise men had been chasing their tails for centuries, with 'the solution no nearer now than then.' He declared, moreover, that if people would conduct their lives upon human principles instead of Golshok principles they would be much better off.

Of course the wise men had him burned to death and his ashes scattered to the four winds. But they were too late. The secret was out. The common people went around saying, 'There ain't no Golshok.' And they lived happily ever after.

And so it has been with 'Mind.' 'Mind' is a noun. A noun is a name of something. Therefore there must be something in the cosmos that *is* mind. A person has a mind; it is possible for him to 'lose' it. Thus 'mind,' an entity, a 'thing-in-itself,' was created and projected into the cosmos. Then people set about trying to find it as they have been searching for truth, the good and beauty, these many weary years. One might as well search the cosmos for $\sqrt{-1}$. Philosophic tail chasing, nothing more.

Organic phenomena are distinguishable from inorganic phenomena: the former have a cellular structure, they appropriate items in their environment and assimilate them into their own cellular structure. Organic bodies move, react, behave. We may distinguish two categories of reactions of living beings—

- (1) the reactions of parts of the organism with reference to other parts, and
- (2) the reaction of the organism as a

whole, as a coherent unit, to its environment. The reactions of the first category constitute the field of the physiologist; those of the second category the province of the psychologist. The reacting, behavior, of any living organism as a whole, as a coherent unit, with reference to its environment, is *minding*, or *mind*.

This commits us to such statements as 'An oyster has a mind.' Similarly, a paramecium, a radish, a lichen, have 'minds.' It may sound ridiculous to say that a radish has a mind. But it sounds much less ridiculous to say that a radish *minds*, *i.e.*, reacts to its environment, behaves, does something as a unit. So much are we at the mercy of words that even so slight a change as one from noun-use to verb-use makes the whole world look different. All living creatures possess the property of reacting to external stimuli as coherent, organic units. Mind is coextensive with life.

We come now to kinds of *minding*, kinds of reacting or types of mind. Obviously organisms behave differently as their structures differ. The mind of man is not the same as the mind of ape or starfish or radish. There are patterns or types of *minding* or mind, just as there are patterns or types of structure. This does not mean, however, that a classification of patterns of reacting would correspond, point for point, with a classification of structures; classifications may vary legitimately with point of view and purpose. The classification of types of reaction, of mind, has not been well worked out as yet.²

To return to our starting point: what is mind? How can a mind have a body?

² In 'The Mentality of Primates' (*Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 34, January, 1932) the present writer set forth a brief and preliminary sketch of types of mind. He has since refined and amplified this earlier statement, and plans to publish his results soon.

The solution: mind is minding, the reacting of an organism as a whole, as a coherent unit (as distinguished from the reacting of parts of the organism with reference to other parts). Mind is a function of the body. The 'organ' of the mind is the entire organism functioning as a unit. Mind is to body as cutting is to a knife.

But Alexander merely *cut* the Gordian knot; he did not untie it. Neither have we 'solved' the mind-body problem, for in the form in which it has plagued the reflecting portion of mankind, it is insoluble. But we have disposed of it. We have not proved, nor can it be proved, that there is no cosmic entity, mind, which has an existence independent of bodies. We have not proved that the 'fundamental reality' is not mind, of which bodies are but material expressions. So far as the present writer knows, there is no convincing proof for the non-existence of Santa Claus. Mankind progresses, often, not by disproving propositions but by outgrowing them.

The 'Mind-Body' problem is of one piece with the Vitalism-Mechanism controversy. No one has ever 'disproved' the theory of Vitalism, but scientists, and many philosophers, are agreed that the time has come when it should be ignored as obsolete, outgrown and, above all, sterile. It is not that the philosophy of Mechanism is True (with a capital T)

and that of Vitalism False. It is that Mechanism has been fruitful, productive; Vitalism barren and sterile. Vitalism as 'a view is exactly opposite to those which have led to all the scientific progress that has been made,' declares Professor H. H. Newman.³ Biologists have 'clung to the materialistic or mechanistic explanation of life, simply because it was the only way in which progress could be made' (emphases ours), declares the distinguished paleobiologist, Professor Ermine C. Case.⁴ The philosopher Bertrand Russell declares: 'To invoke a vital principle is to give an excuse for laziness . . . the opposite view [mechanism] is, scientifically, a more fruitful working hypothesis.'⁵

And so, while we have not proved that mind is not some cosmic entity, or proved that it is not the 'real reality,' we have shown that this view is barren and sterile at its best and confusing and paralyzing at its worst. The opposite view, that mind is minding, or behavior, that mind is a function of the body, releases us from the verbal bondage of a sterile and a paralyzing metaphysics, and sets us free to sow and reap in a field that will bear fruit.

³ In an essay, 'The Nature and Origin of Life,' in *The Nature of the World and Man* (H. H. Newman, ed.), p. 164, Chicago, 1926.

⁴ In *The Michigan Alumnus*, p. 3, March, 1934.

⁵ *Philosophy*, p. 25, New York, 1927.

But' . . .

PROFESSOR LESLIE A. WHITE, in the February (1939) number of THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, has attempted to con-

vince the philosophical world that the so-called 'mind-body problem,' which has been a chief concern of the greatest think-

⁶ EDITOR'S NOTE: Professor Jared S. Moore of the Department of Philosophy, Western Reserve University, Professor White, and the editors of *The Scientific Monthly* have courte-

ously permitted us to reprint this discussion of 'Mind is Minding.' The discussion appeared in *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. L (April, 1940), pp. 365-366.

ers since time began, may be shown to be no problem at all by the simple device of substituting the participial form 'minding' for the more familiar substantive, 'mind.' This is as bold a step on the part of a scientific anthropologist as would be the endeavor of a philosopher to prove by some linguistic legerdemain that the problem of the origin of the human species has no meaning.

As a matter of fact, Professor White's suggestion is at least as old as Aristotle, and his analogy that 'mind is to body as cutting is to a knife' was actually used by the Stagirite himself. And to-day the world is full of psychologists and philosophers who have been saying practically the same thing for years. These facts do not make the theory true, however, and all who try to explain away the mind-body problem in this cavalier fashion overlook some important considerations.

There are two distinct parts to Professor White's thesis, between which, however, he fails to discriminate; and yet only confusion can result from such a failure. We need not quarrel with the assertion of his title that 'mind is minding,' an activity rather than a thing; but when he goes on to identify 'minding' with behavior ('Mind is minding, or behavior')—with reaction to environment—we must demur. It is perfectly allowable either to consider 'minding' a *variety* of behavior, or to restrict the term 'behavior' to overt acts and treat 'minding' as a quite different kind of activity, but

it is simply fallacious to identify the two types.

Under 'minding' are included such activities as thinking, remembering, feeling, desiring, etc.; for as mind is minding, so thought is thinking, memory is remembering (or a name for the capacity of remembering), etc. But such overt acts as walking, talking, climbing, approaching, retreating, etc. belong to an entirely different category from the former. Walking, indeed, is a 'function of the body,' and so are the other activities in the second list; but it is simply nonsense to speak of thinking, remembering or 'minding' as 'functions of the body,' as do Professor White and others of his school. Both these sets of activities are functions of one *ego*, it is true—I think, I walk, I desire, I act—but they are two entirely different kinds of functions. For one of these sets the word 'behavior' is especially appropriate, and for the other set some such word as 'mentation' (or 'minding,' if one prefers); and the words 'body' and 'mind' respectively refer to that aspect or part of the *ego* which is especially concerned with the corresponding one of these two kinds of activity. Whether these should be described as 'parts' or 'aspects' of the self is precisely one of the points at issue between different theories of the mind-body relation; but no amount of verbal gymnastics can possibly eliminate the *problem* of that relationship.

JARED S. MOORE.

Still...

PROFESSOR MOORE'S criticism of my paper raises two points: (1) Are 'mind' and 'matter' two different kinds of reality, different entities, or is mind merely a property of matter in cellular (living) form? (2) What class of phenomena

shall we label with the word 'mind'?

(1) As indicated in my article, all scientific progress in biology and psychology has been made on the basis of the materialistic, mechanistic assumption that 'life' and 'mind' are merely proper-

ties of matter-organized-in-cellular-form, just as iron or 'iron-ness' is a property of one kind of organization of protons, electrons, etc., while 'goldness' is the property of another kind of organization of the same sort of particles. How 'matter'—carbon, iron, calcium, etc.—can come to have cellular form and manifest those properties which we call 'life' and 'mind' is, however, a real problem—to the solution of which 'linguistic legerdemain' can not, of course, contribute anything. But neither can the philosopher. This is a task for the scientist—the physicist, the biochemist, the biologist.

(2) To what class of phenomena shall we attach the label 'mind'?

The behavior of any living organism has two aspects: intra-organismal and extra-organismal, *i.e.*, processes whose locus is within the organism, and reactions between the organism and the environment. 'Intra-' and 'extra-' are merely aspects (not parts) of the integral process which is living. Thinking, remembering, desiring, etc., belong to the within-the-organism category; walking, climbing, etc., to the reaction-to-the-environment category. Now the question is, To which category shall we apply the word 'mind'? Professor Moore wishes to restrict it to the within-the-organism category. I wish to restrict 'mind' to the reaction-to-the-environment category—with one exception which will appear in a moment. All definitions are arbitrary. But some definitions are better than others, better in the sense that one tool is better than another for a given purpose. I believe that my definition is the more fruitful one for science.

We agree with Professor Moore when he declares that thinking and walking belong to 'entirely different categories.' We agree also that it would be 'fallacious to identify the two.' *But*, there

is an important point which Professor Moore overlooks. Although logically distinct, 'mind' and '(overt) behavior' are *biologically inseparable*. Furthermore, the *only way* in which the scientist can observe thinking, desiring, etc., in all the lower animals and in all human beings except himself, is in terms of overt behavior—such as 'walking, talking, climbing.' The limited and defective observation of one single mind (*i.e.*, one's own, through introspection) is not sufficient for the scientist. Thus, the scientific study of mind (thinking, desiring, etc.) is and must be—except for the meager and dubious contribution of introspection—the study of the reactions of organisms to their respective environments.

The scientist, like the philosopher, insists that his categories be logically valid. But mere logical validity is not enough; his categories must be useful, fruitful, as well. To insist, as Professor Moore does, upon keeping 'mind' and 'behavior' separate and apart is to render the study of mind sterile and to leave the phenomena of behavior unintelligible. It is precisely because the scientist freely employs the data of the one category to illuminate and render intelligible the other—in a sort of cross-fertilization process—that his labors become fruitful. Far from being 'simply nonsense,' the interpretation of mind as overt behavior has shown itself to be the most effective way of studying mind that we have at our disposal to-day. Also, it provides the most satisfactory way of disposing of—if not of 'solving'—the mind-body problem.

To cherish the 'mind-body problem' upon which the 'greatest thinkers' have lavished their genius 'since time began' without having brought the solution 'any nearer now than then' may be dear to

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the hearts of some philosophers. But to-day, when science yields such abundant and much-needed returns for intelligent endeavor, it seems a waste of time to continue to wrestle with a problem that has

defeated 'the greatest thinkers' for ages. How long should a hen brood on a hard, roundish, white object before she concludes that it is not an egg but a door knob?

LESLIE A. WHITE

That is precisely what common sense is for, to be jarred into uncommon sense. One of the chief services which mathematics has rendered the human race in the past century is to put 'common sense' where it belongs, on the topmost shelf next to the dusty canister labeled 'discarded nonsense.'

E. T. BELL, *The Queen of the Sciences*

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If you have had your attention directed to the novelties in thought in your own lifetime, you will have observed that almost all really new ideas have a certain aspect of foolishness when they are first produced.

A. N. WHITEHEAD, *Science and the Modern World*

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The empiricist . . . thinks he believes only what he sees, but he is much better at believing than at seeing.

G. SANTAYANA, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*

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Fourthly, another great abuse of words is the taking them for things. This, though it in some degree concerns all names in general, yet more particularly affects those of substances. To this abuse those men are most subject who confine their thoughts to any one system, and give themselves up into a firm belief of the perfection of any received hypothesis; whereby they come to be persuaded that the terms of that sect are so suited to the nature of things, that they perfectly correspond with their real existence.

LOCKE, *Concerning Human Understanding*

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We can classify the things of which we have any knowledge in two groups as *living* and *non-living* matter. A piece of chalk or a motor bicycle are examples of non-living matter. A frog or a university professor are examples of what is called living matter. Biology is the study of things which belong to the latter class. It is sometimes defined as the science of Life. This is misleading. Science is not the study of abstract nouns. The practice of dealing with facts instead of words is what distinguishes science from metaphysics.

LANCELOT HOGBEN, *Principles of Animal Biology*