Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through Those Pearly Gates

Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein: pg. 103-108

The nineteenth-century Darwinist T. H. Huxley said the mind is merely a *side effect* of bodily functions, an "epiphenomenon" like shadows on the ground. Physical brain states can cause changes in mental states, said the epiphenomenalist, but mental states can't cause anything, even other mental states. So while our bodies, brains included, go about their business, our minds simply show the pictures.

The "logical behaviorists," including the twentieth-century British philosopher Gilbert Ryle, took it a step further. Ryle ridiculed Descartes's view that mind and body are two different kinds of beings, with the mind somehow "inhabiting" the body. Ryle called that idea "the ghost in the machine." He said Descartes had led us in a centuries-long detour trying to define what sort of *entity* this ghost is, when in fact the mind is not an entity at all. To have a mind isn't to possess a certain *thing;* it's simply to have certain capacities and dispositions. We go around thinking that mental states, such as beliefs and desires, *cause* our behavior. In fact, our behavior is caused by dispositions to behave in certain ways, and our mental states simply reflect those dispositions. That doesn't seem to leave anything to be immortal; it's hard to picture immortal capacities and dispositions. But then again, who knows? Lots of us find it hard to picture an immortal mind or soul of any kind.

The development of computer technology has raised interesting questions in the mind-body debate. In 1950, A. M. Turing, one of the founders of computer science and a celebrated British World War II codebreaker, asked the question whether it is theoretically possible for a large enough computer to answer questions in such a way as to fool us into thinking that it is a human being – like Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey.* If we could be fooled by Hal, what does that tell us about the role that our mental states may or may not play in determining our behavior? Maybe, like Hal's, our behavior is caused by sophisticated programming, and our impression that we are mentally in charge is an illusion. Buddhist meditators and experimenters with psychedelic drugs have described the realization that our minds are always a half-step behind our behavior, perpetually running to catch up.

MINDLESS CREATIVITY

If mental states don't *cause* anything, where do the mind's creations come from? Are all of our creations just outputs of our brain's hard-wiring? If so, shouldn't a sophisticated computer system be able to create a first-rate joke? You be the judge. Programmers gave this challenge to the supercomputers at Edinburgh University, and here is the kind of gag the machines generated:

"What kind of line has sixteen balls? A pool cue!"

Using a five-knee-slap scale, what do you think? Well, okay, then consider this one:

"What kind of murderer has moral fiber? A cereal killer."

Sure, it'd go over better in the middle-school cafeteria than on *Saturday Night Live,* but, hey, your brother-in-law has told worse, are we right?

As the mind-body debate has continued in our own day, it has gotten subtler and more complex, but its basic terms have not changed. There are still dualists of various stripes who claim that the mind is something different from the neuroelectrical impulses of the brain. And there are the physicalists who claim that mental states are identical to neural states. And then there are the functionalists, who are basically neutral on the issue, so who needs them?

ENTER ZOMBIES, LAUGHING

One entertaining philosophical contribution to the debate about what a mind might be is the so-called zombie problem. It seems particularly relevant to death, you know?

The zombie problem is a challenge to the physicalists, who say that after we describe the brain and how it works electrically, there's nothing left to describe. The workings of our "minds" –sensations, thoughts, intentions—are all subject to the laws of physics, and all our "changes of mind" are the result of physical, neuroelectrical causes.

The twentieth-century American philosopher Saul Kripke posed the ultimate physicalist question this way: Imagine a God who brings into existence a world that looks exactly like ours that operates purely by the laws of physics. Would the Creator have to do anything further to provide for human consciousness?

Ludwig Wittgentstein put it like this: "What is left over when I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?" (You may have to read that one twice. We did.)

Enter the zombists. Zombies, presumably, are human beings without consciousness, yet they move around and do all the things that other human beings do. So if zombies exist, that rules out physicalism, because if physicalism were true, the zombies would have consciousness!

ALL TOO HUMAN ZOMBIES

But wait one minute. Maybe zombies don't exist. (Personally, we've never seen one, and we've been to some really slow cocktail parties.) No problem, say the trickier zombists. If it's even *possible* that zombies exist, that's good enough to challenge physicalism. So the zombists dream up *conceivable* scenarios. Says contemporary British philosopher Robert Kirk, we can conceive of micro-Lilliputians inside Gulliber's head who disconnect both his receptor nerves (input/perception) and his motor nerves (output/action). These little tricksters now receive all the inputs into Gulliver's brain and intiate their own signals to his muscles. Gulliver will seem to an observer to be just his ordinary self, but he will have no consciousness. He will be, in effect, a zombie. So, says Kirk, because we can conceive of this scenario, consciousness must be something different from just the physical inputs.

But wait, cry the physicalists! Being conceivable isn't the same thing as being possible! You can *conceive* of these nano-Lilliputians, but they're not really possible in the real world.

At this point the argument gets too wiggy for words, and our mind—or brain, you choose which—shuts down.