

Response to “The Mind Is Immaterial”

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I have space to discuss just two of the claims that Charles Taliaferro makes in his essay. I will start with a claim that, happily, we both accept, before moving on to a claim that I reject.

We Know Our Own Mental States

Taliaferro claims that “we are self-aware persons who have experiences, act, feel, think, and so on” (p. --). A very few materialists deny this claim, but I’m not one of them. I quite agree that not only do we think and feel things, we also *know* that we think and feel things. And the *way* we know that *we* think and feel things is quite different from the way we know that *others* think and feel things. We know our *own* thoughts and feelings “from the inside,” as they say. We don’t know anyone *else’s* thoughts and feelings “from the inside.” To know what *others* are thinking and feeling, we need to look at their outward behavior—their bodily movements, their posture, their facial expressions, their speech—and the circumstances they’re in. For example, if *we* stub a toe and then feel pain in it, we know directly that we’re in pain: we have no *evidence* from which we *infer* that we’re in pain. But if *others* stub a toe and then feel pain in it, we *do* have evidence from which we infer that they’re in pain: the fact that their toe struck a door frame, and that they’re now wincing, groaning, and hopping about.

Am I *entitled*, as a materialist, to accept this first claim of Taliaferro’s? Is it consistent with materialism? I think so. Our knowledge of the shapes and colors of objects around us arises

from *vision*, a process by which we gain information about the outside world. Somewhat similarly, our knowledge of our own mental states “from the inside” is often said to arise from *introspection*, a process by which we learn directly about what’s going on inside our minds. According to materialism, of course, human vision is a purely physical process: our capacity for vision is simply a matter of innumerable neurons of the right kinds in certain parts of our brains being organized into networks and sub-networks and feedback loops and so forth that can take patterns of light falling on our retinas as inputs and yield visual beliefs—representations of the scene before our eyes—as outputs. Materialism can say that introspection is purely physical too: our capacity for introspection is simply a matter of innumerable neurons of the right kinds in certain parts of our brains being organized into networks that can take mental activity (= appropriately organized neuronal activity in one part of the brain) as input and yield beliefs about that mental activity (= differently organized neuronal activity in another part of the brain) as output. In effect, introspection is one part of your brain monitoring another part of your brain, in something like the way that your laptop computer keeps track of everything (else) that it does.

However, the materialist view of introspection entails that our mental states are purely physical states¹ that are utterly unique in a certain way. *Your* mental states are the only purely physical states in the universe that *you* can learn about in two quite different ways: first, in the same way anyone else can, using microscopes or CT scanners or MRI machines; but also, second, in a way unique to you that requires neither fancy scientific instruments nor even your five senses, using introspection. Indeed, *each* of us has a special route to knowledge of certain purely physical states: those that are our *own* mental states. But our mental states are still just purely physical states.

Why The Knowledge Argument Fails

Taliaferro claims that “we ourselves with all our experiences, intentions, and so on, are not (strictly speaking) identical with our material or physical bodies or some part of our bodies such as our brains” (p. --). This is the claim of Taliaferro’s that makes him *not* a materialist. A materialist must say that anything mental is *identical* with—is one and the same thing as—something purely physical. For example, a materialist must say that you, a thinking, feeling person, are *one and the same thing as* a certain animal with a properly functioning brain. That is, that you are *nothing over and above* a certain member of the species, *Homo sapiens*, whose brain is working as it should.² In the quoted claim, Taliaferro is denying this mental-to-physical identity claim. A materialist must make other mental-to-physical identity claims too, such as the claim that *being in pain* is one and the same thing as *being a system composed of parts so organized as to form a subsystem that (i) has the job of detecting damage to the containing system, and of getting it to respond appropriately, and that (ii) is currently activated*. I’m sure that Taliaferro would deny these other mental-to-physical identity claims too.

Do note that the word “identical” in English has two different meanings. We can say that twin sisters are identical, or speak of two peas in a pod, or two electrons; but in these cases we are saying, of *two* things, that *one* of them is *exactly similar* to the *other*. But we use “identical” in a different sense when we say that Superman is identical with Clark Kent. We mean that Superman is *the very same man as* Clark Kent. In these cases, we are talking about just *one* thing, namely, Superman (or Clark Kent). Each thing has two *names*, of course; but we must not confuse a name with the thing it names. The name “Boston” consists of six letters, but the city it names doesn’t consist of letters at all. When materialists make a mental-to-physical identity claim, they mean to be talking about *one* thing with *two* names.

The mental-to-physical identity claims that materialists make are modeled on identity claims made in the sciences, such as the claims that alcohol is identical with C_2H_6O , that water is identical with H_2O , that genes are identical with segments of the DNA molecule, or that having consumption (the disease) is identical with being infected with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. But these scientific identity claims weren't discovered by abstract logical reasoning or by reflecting on the meanings of words; they were discovered *empirically*, inferred from observational evidence. It's the same with materialists' mental-to-physical identity claims. They shouldn't be expected to be discoverable *a priori* (i.e., independently of sensory experience) by performing logical deductions or by reflecting on the meanings of words like "pain" or "belief" or "think." Rather, mental-to-physical identity claims must be inferred from what we observe. Suppose we find that people are introspectively aware of being in a particular mental state, say, pain, when, but only when, their brains are in a particular purely physical state; we *never* find one without the other. Suppose, moreover, that this purely physical state plays the sort of causal role that we know that pain plays; toe stubbing causes it, for example, and in turn it causes wincing and groaning. Then the most reasonable conclusion to draw is the economical one that pain simply *is* that purely physical state.

We're now ready to examine Taliaferro's "knowledge argument" for the non-identity of mentality with anything purely physical. I quote:

If you are the same thing as your body, then to know your body and bodily states would be to know your thoughts, emotions, intentions, desires, and so on. But it is possible for me or any number of scientists to know all about your body without knowing these

mental states. Therefore, your mental life is not identical to your body or bodily states.

(p.--)

But Taliaferro's knowledge argument fails to establish its conclusion, because its first premise is not true. Even if having a mind is, in actual fact, one and the same thing as having a properly functioning brain, to know (i.e., to know all about) someone's properly functioning brain is *not* automatically to know (i.e., to know all about) someone's mind. To see why not, consider an analogous case. Alcohol is the very same substance as C_2H_6O . But perhaps I first heard of alcohol and first heard of C_2H_6O in very different settings; perhaps I first heard of C_2H_6O in a chemistry class, and first heard of alcohol in a sermon condemning the demon drink. But it's not *a priori* that alcohol and C_2H_6O are the very same thing, as we noted above; and I could easily fail to discover the identity claim empirically. In that case, I could then know that the bottle on the shelf contains C_2H_6O (I chemically analyze its contents, or perhaps the label just says " C_2H_6O ") *without* my knowing, or even suspecting, that the bottle contains alcohol.³

There's a similar explanation of how we can know all about a person's properly functioning brain without automatically knowing all about the person's mind. Presumably, it's through introspection of our own mental states that we become aware of mental states in the first place; and we renew our acquaintance with them in the same way daily. Only much later, if we take a class in cognitive neuroscience, say, do we first hear of brain states and the functional organization of neurons into networks capable of various cognitive tasks. But even if a mind just is a (properly functioning) brain, we can't discover this identity claim *a priori*. And we may well not in fact discover it empirically. So, if a reliable authority gives us an accurate and complete description of Dr. Taliaferro in the specialist vocabulary of cognitive neuroscience, we won't

know that he is wondering where the aspirin is—even if the description says that he’s in a purely physical state that is, in fact, identical with wondering where the aspirin is.

I noted that the mental-to-physical identity claims that materialists make are modeled on identity claims made in the sciences. But there’s also a major difference between the mental-to-physical identity claims that materialists make and identity claims familiar from the sciences. When we learn *any* (non-trivial) identity claim, we come to realize that we have *two* (or more) perspectives on—two ways of thinking about and finding out about—*one thing*. For identity claims familiar from the sciences, *both* these two perspectives are perceptual or inferential (or both). For example, when we learn that having consumption (the disease) is identical with being infected with *M. tuberculosis*, both our perspective on consumption (e.g., seeing patients breathless and coughing up blood) and our perspective on *M. tuberculosis* (e.g., seeing the bacteria under a microscope) are perceptual-cum-inferential. But with mental-to-physical identity claims, while our perspective on the purely physical states of our brains is perceptual-cum-inferential (e.g., seeing an fMRI scan or reading a textbook in cognitive neuroscience), our prior perspective on our mental states is not. When we’re aware of our own mental states through introspection, we neither *infer* them nor *perceive* (i.e., see, hear, touch, taste, smell) them. We are aware of them in an entirely different way unique to (those purely physical states of ourselves that are identical with) mental states.

NOTES

¹ In the special sense of “purely physical” explained in my first essay.

² Your brain must be functioning properly because to the extent that it isn’t, you won’t be thinking and feeling. Materialists should identify thinking and feeling people not with human *bodies*, which can be dead, but with living animals.

³ Sometimes “know” means “be acquainted with.” And, arguably, if X is identical with Y and you’re *acquainted with X*, then you *must* be acquainted with Y too (even if you don’t *know* that you are). On this construal of “know,” Taliaferro’s first premise may therefore be true. But his argument still fails. Now it begs the question against materialism—with its premise that scientists who know all about your body are *not* acquainted with your mind. If materialism is true, they *are* acquainted with your mind; they just don’t *know* that they are.