Is “Pain” the Sensation of Pain? 
Metaphysical Biases in the “Identity Theory” of Mind

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U. T. Place’s article “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” introduced a new, plausible theory of the relationship between mind and body, the “Identity Theory.” Place argued that all mental terms or states are identical to physical, brain terms or states; that is, mental states are nothing “over and above” physical states. Place intended his theory to be a “reasonable scientific hypothesis” that was “not to be dismissed on logical grounds alone;” his student, J. J. C. Smart, among others, argued that although the identity theory was, indeed, an empirical hypothesis, the identity of mind and brain could be proven logically. Every proponent suggested that the identity relation between mind and body was not necessarily true—as none could see a contradiction between the terms “mind” and “body” being separate—but was a contingent identity, one that happens to be true, but could have been false. In his collection of lectures, Naming and Necessity, Saul Kripke argues that identity statements, if true at all, must be necessarily true. Names are what Kripke calls “rigid designators,” a term that refers to the same object in all “possible worlds,” and if two names really refer to the same object, they could not possibly be different because objects are always themselves in whatever scenario they might be described in. Given these considerations, Kripke believes the Identity Theory cannot hold because there are no contingent identities; if the identity theorist wishes to maintain his position, he must explain away the intuition that mind could be separate from body. While Kripke’s argument certainly poses a considerable challenge to the Identity Theory, there is an escape route: deny the “Cartesian” intuition that mind could be separate from


2. Place, “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” 44.


body. If the identity theorist does this, Kripke’s argument and semantic tools could be used to help the Identity Theory as opposed to knocking it down. One cannot, however, deny the intuition off-hand or she will simply be begging the question; yet the same follows for accepting the intuition. So, the Identity Theory will stand or fall depending on someone’s metaphysical prejudices. This paper will argue that this is an inescapable dilemma for the identity theorist—and his opposition, the dualist—and that any advancements in the debate will require a “physicalist attitude,” while taking serious consideration of dualist critics.

Smart’s article, “Sensations and Brain Processes,” attempts to improve on Place’s earlier article by suggesting that the identity between mind and brain can be logically demonstrated using other contingent identities that empirical, scientific studies have produced. Lightning is one of these examples. Lightning, Smart says, is a kind of electrical discharge that occurs when there is an ionization of water-vapor in the atmosphere; however, we have identified lightning in the past by a flash in the sky. When we see a flash in the sky, we would be correct in saying “That is lightning” but we would not be correct in adding “And there is a kind of electrical discharge that occurs when there is an ionization of water-vapor in the atmosphere.” The flash in the sky is the electrical discharge in the atmosphere, and nothing more. In the same way, mental states are nothing more than the physical states in the brain; that is, we would be correct in saying “I am having a pain” but we would not be correct in adding “And the nerves in a certain area of my body are firing.” The mental state of experiencing pain is the physical state of nerves firing, and nothing more. Another example, that Kripke will address in his lectures, is the identification of the “morning star,” Phosphorus, with the “evening star,” Hesperus. Smart argues that there is no contradiction in denying the proposition “Phosphorus is Hesperus” but that it is a true statement nonetheless. Two different cultures just happened to name the same “star”—which is actually the planet Venus—different names. So, the description “the star that occupies a certain position in the sky” which is named “Phosphorus” and “Hesperus” could have been different than it is, which means that Phosphorus and Hesperus are not necessarily identical. These two examples provide Smart and other defenders of the Identity Theory plausibility by showing that contingent identities are sometimes legitimate.


In the second lecture of Naming and Necessity, Kripke discusses the “Hesperus is Phosphorus” case by using the concepts “fixing a reference” and “rigid designators” in the context of “possible worlds.” A possible world is a way the world might have been and does not imply, at least according to Kripke, the reality of said worlds: it is merely a semantic tool to discuss possibility. If a proposition is merely possibly true, or contingently true, it is true in some possible world and false in another; if a proposition is necessarily true, it is true in all possible worlds. In other words, a necessarily true proposition could not have been false while a contingent proposition could have been false. Descriptions “fix” or “point” to a referent. The descriptions “born in Stagira, studied under Plato, and wrote the Nicomachean Ethics” all point to the man Aristotle. The name “Aristotle” necessarily refers to the man that did those things attributed to him, but does not mean those things; we can, after all, speak of that man doing something else, such as following his father into medicine. Names, then, are what Kripke calls “rigid designators;” rigid designators refer to the same object in all possible worlds. There is not a possible world where the man named Aristotle was not himself. As Smart pointed out, it was a discovery in the empirical sciences that Hesperus is Phosphorus. If Hesperus and Phosphorus are used as names, then they cannot possibly be different because names are rigid designators, which refer to the same object in all possible worlds. As it turns out, Hesperus and Phosphorus are actually other names for the planet Venus. So, Hesperus and Phosphorus both refer to the planet Venus; and, since they are names, they necessarily refer to Venus. Therefore, if Hesperus is Venus, and Phosphorus is Venus, then Hesperus must be Phosphorus because Venus is always identical to itself.

The significance of Kripke’s argument cannot be understated: empirical discoveries, at least those of identity, are necessarily true if true at all. As Kripke will argue in the third lecture, natural kind terms will also be necessarily true if true at all. One of the clearest examples that Kripke gives is “gold” and the atomic number 79. Scientific discoveries in physics and the atomic model have decided that the metal that has a yellowish appearance and has been traditionally used as currency, which we call “gold,” has the atomic number of 79 (it has 79 protons). Is there a possible world in which “gold” does not have the atomic number 79? Kripke answers in the negative. There is a possible world where people discover a shiny metal that has a yellowish appearance and use it as currency, but that

substance’s atomic number is not 79 but some other number; we would not call this substance gold, but something else. In another possible world, there is a dull metal that is not used as currency, is blue in color, but has the atomic number 79. We would be forced to call this metal gold even though it has none of the properties we normally attribute to it, but that is because “gold” does not mean those descriptions, but *that thing* which has the atomic number 79.8

There are no contingent identities, whether the identity is discovered *a posteriori* or through reasoning *a priori*. Therefore, if the relationship between mental states and physical states is one of identity, then it must be necessary. Yet, all identity theorists have conceded that the identity, if true, would be contingent; so, the Identity Theory must be false. The widely-used example of “pain” and “C-fibers” illustrates this point well. Pain is not a name of C-fibers, but is the name of the sensation and experience of “having a pain” while C-fibers name a certain nerve cluster. If pain is the stimulation of C-fibers, then it must be necessarily true; however, it is perfectly conceivable that someone could have the sensation of pain without having any C-fibers because “pain” does not refer to the stimulation of C-fibers, but necessarily refers to *that sensation* that one feels when they are in pain. Given that “experiencing a pain” is a mental state, it follows that every mental state term would have the same fate. Since the sensation “pain” can be spoken of independently, it must be something in itself; that is, it must not be dependent on anything else. All mental state terms are like this: pleasure is the feeling of pleasure, joy the experience of euphoria, and so on. Special credence is given to this position by the fact that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to even speak of these sensations apart from their names, yet it is understood. It may be the case that the stimulation of C-fibers fixes the reference, or points to, the sensation of feeling pain but the stimulation of C-fibers is contingent in its role or description: some other nervous stimulus, or perhaps no nerve stimulus at all, could have fixed the reference to that sensation. To use Kripke’s enlightening example, if the identity theory were true, it would seem that God need only create beings with C-fibers capable of the appropriate type of physical stimulation . . . it would seem, though, that to make the C-fiber stimulation correspond to pain, or be felt as pain, God must do something in addition to the mere creation of the C-fiber stimulation; He must let the creatures feel the C-fiber stimulation as *pain*, and not as a tickle, or as a warmth, or as nothing, as apparently would have been

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within His powers . . . the relation between the pain God creates and the stimulation of C-fibers cannot be identity.\(^9\)

The identity theorist, however, should point out that this picture is entirely backward: the name “pain” does not refer to that sensation—which is confusingly called “the feeling of pain”—but the stimulation of C-fibers; the contingent description of the stimulation of C-fibers would be that sensation. Indeed, the identity theorist should point out that this picture is the same as thinking that “gold” is what we experience when we see gold: a shiny, yellowish metal. Of course, that is not what “gold” is, but that is how we fix the referent to the atomic number 79. Pain, then, does not name our subjective experience—that sensation—but the stimulation of C-fibers: our experience just happens to be that sensation, but it might have been different. Our experience could have been the feeling of pleasure, or no feeling at all; our experience of gold could have been a blue metal, or perhaps gold would have had substance, but would have been invisible to the human eye. A familiar difficulty arises for the identity theorist with this response: assuming this picture is correct, how can a physicalist talk of experiences separately without positing mental states independently of any physical grounding? The physicalist response must be that mental states are reducible to physical groundings, or causes, necessarily. That is, he must argue that all sensations and the subsequent “awareness” of said sensation must be physical or he must deny that the awareness is illusory; neither of these options is an easy task, but it is not, prima facie, impossible.

Deciding which picture is correct—the Kripkean dualist picture or the physicalist picture—boils down to a metaphysical bias. On the one hand, if one accepts the Cartesian intuition that mind might be (or could be) separate from body, then Kripke’s picture must be correct. This is certainly an appealing option given that philosophers, and people generally, talk of “experiences” and “sensations” as they are in themselves; on the other hand, if one denies the Cartesian intuition, the physicalist picture must be correct. This option, too, is appealing for the sake of ontological parsimony and for the promise of understanding the mind in empirical terms. Neither option, however, can be settled a priori for a very simple reason: there is no apparent contradiction between the terms “mind” and “brain” because the meaning of one term is not understood, namely, “mind.” Accepting or denying the Cartesian intuition, then, is begging the question. Answering the question “What is the mind?” with a

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Pyrrhonian “suspension of judgment” would result in skepticism, which is unacceptable for most people, but would also leave any person pursuing the question with no direction to turn toward; it does, however, seem like the only logical possibility if the question is left to *a priori* reasoning.

In her 2008 paper, “Physicalism as an Attitude,” Alyssa Ney argues that physicalism should not be considered as a view that is either true or false, but an attitude that determines how one looks at the world. Given that affirming or denying the Cartesian intuition is begging the question, and is a real concern, then physicalism as an attitude is the only way forward in the mind-body debate, and, especially, in the area of consciousness and experience. Ney addresses the concern that this view seems trivial in that it provides nothing of value to thought or understanding of the world by suggesting that it provides a *methodology* for discovering truths about the world: a physicalist will look toward neuroscience and psychology for answers about experience and consciousness, while a dualist will respect her own intuitions and introspection about the nature of the mind by positing irreducible mental entities. One may accuse Ney of begging the question in another way: why not accept the dualist attitude? Is it not arbitrary? The physicalist worldview does promise empirical support, evidence that can be verified or falsified, while the dualist cannot offer this when speaking of the mind. This picture fits nicely with Place’s original proposition in “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?”: “the thesis that consciousness is a process in the brain is put forward as a reasonable scientific hypothesis, not to be dismissed on logical grounds alone.” While Ney’s “physicalist oath” may be too strong, in that oaths suggest required obedience, an attitude disposed to physical explanations of the world that can be verified through the sciences, at least in principle, while acknowledging the seriousness of the criticisms put forward—Kripke, as an example—provides a way forward from the impasse posed by the Cartesian intuition (and *a priori* reasoning) in the hopes that the empirical sciences will one day either verify a complete explanation of the mind, or be forced to posit irreducible, mental entities.

12. Place, “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” 44.
Bibliography


