

Mind Body Debate

by [Saul McLeod](#)  published 2007

The mind is about mental processes, thought and consciousness. The body is about the physical aspects of the brain-neurons and how the brain is structured. The mind-body problem is about how these two interact.

One of the central questions in psychology (and philosophy) concerns the mind/body problem: is the mind part of the body, or the body part of the mind? If they are distinct, then how do they interact? And which of the two is in charge?

Many theories have been put forward to explain the relationship between what we call your mind (defined as the conscious thinking 'you' which experiences your thoughts) and your brain (i.e. part of your body).

However, the most common explanation concerns the question of whether the mind and body are separate or the same thing.

Dualism

Human beings are material objects. We have weight, solidity and consist of a variety of solids, liquids and gases. However, unlike other material objects (e.g. rocks) humans also have the ability to form judgments and reason their existence. In short we have 'minds'.

Typically humans are characterized as having both a mind (nonphysical) and body/brain (physical). This is known as **dualism**. Dualism is the view that the mind and body both exist as separate entities.

Descartes / Cartesian dualism argues that there is a two-way interaction between mental and physical substances.

Descartes argued that the mind interacts with the body at the pineal gland. This form of dualism or duality proposes that the mind controls the body, but that the body can also influence the otherwise rational mind, such as when people act out of passion.

Most of the previous accounts of the relationship between mind and body had been uni-directional.

Monism

There are two basic types of monism:

- **Materialism** is the belief that nothing exists apart from the material world (i.e. physical matter like the brain); materialist psychologists generally agree that consciousness (the mind) is the function of the brain. Mental processes can be identified with purely physical processes in the central nervous system, and that human beings are just complicated physiological organisms, no more than that.
- **Phenomenalism** (also called **Subjective Idealism**) believes that physical objects and events are reducible to mental objects, properties, events. Ultimately, only mental objects (i.e. the mind) exist. Bishop Berkeley claimed that what we think of as our body is merely the perception of mind. Before you reject this too rapidly consider the results of a recent study.
- Scientists asked three hemiplegic (i.e. loss of movement from one side of the body) stroke victims with damage to the right hemispheres of their brains about their abilities to move their arms. All three claimed, despite evidence to the contrary in the mirror in front of them, that they could move their right and left hands equally well. Further, two of the three stroke victims claimed that an experimental stooge who faked paralysis (i.e. lack of movement) of his left arm was able to move his arm satisfactorily.

Psychology & the Mind Body Debate

The different approaches to psychology take contrasting views to whether the mind and body are separate or related. Thinking (having freedom of choice) is a mental event, yet can cause behavior to occur (muscles move in response to a thought). Thinking can therefore be said to make things happen, "mind moves matter".

Behaviorists believe that psychology should only be concerned with "observable actions", namely stimulus and response. They believe that thought processes such as the mind cannot be studied scientifically and objectively and should therefore be ignored. Radical behaviorists believe that the mind does not even exist.

The biologists who argue that the mind does not exist because there is no physical structure called the mind also follow this approach. **Biologists** argue that the brain will ultimately be found to be the mind. The brain with its structures, cells and neural connections will with scientific research eventually identify the mind.

Since both **behaviorists and biologists** believe that only one type of reality exists, those that we can see, feel and touch; their approach is known as monism. Monism is the belief that ultimately the mind and the brain are the same thing. The behaviorist and biological approaches believe in materialism monism.

However biologists and behaviorists cannot account for the *phenomenon hypnosis*. Hilgard and Orne have studied this. They placed participants in a hypnotic trance and through unconscious hypnotic suggestion told the participants they would be touched with a "red hot" piece of metal when they were actually touched with a pencil.

The participants in a deep trance had a skin reaction (water blisters) just as if they had been touched with burning metal. This is an example of the mind controlling the body's reaction. Similar results have been found on patients given hypnosis to control pain. This contradicts the monism approach, as the body should not react to unconscious suggestions in this way. This study supports the idea of dualism, the view that the mind and body function separately.

In the same way **humanists** like Carl Rogers would also dispute materialism monism. They believe that subjective experiences are the only way to study human behavior. Humanists are not denying the real world exists rather they believe it is each persons unique subjective approach to defining reality that is important. In the area of mental illness a Schizophrenic might not define their actions as ill, rather they would believe they had insight into some occurrence that no one else had. This is why humanists believe the study of how each person views themselves is essential.

However the problem of the relationship between consciousness and reality from a subjective view has problems. The paranoid schizophrenic who believes the postal service "are agents for the government and trying to kill him" is still mentally ill and needs treatment if they are not to be a danger to themselves or the public.

Recent research from cognitive psychologists has placed a new emphasis on this debate. They have taken the computer analogy of Artificial Intelligence and applied it to this debate. They argue that the brain can be compared to computer hardware that is "wired" or connected to the human body.

The mind is therefore like software, allowing a variety of different software programs: to run. This can account for the different reactions people have to the same stimulus. This idea ties in with cognitive mediational (thinking) processes. In computer analogies we have a new version of dualism which allows us to incorporate modern terms such as computers and software instead of Descartes "I think therefore I am"

The specious present

The term ‘specious present’ was first introduced by the psychologist E.R. Clay, but the best known characterisation of it was due to William James, widely regarded as one of the founders of modern psychology. He lived from 1842 to 1910, and was professor of philosophy at Harvard. His definition of the specious present goes as follows: ‘the prototype of all conceived times is the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible’ (James 1890). How long is this specious present? Elsewhere in the same work, James asserts ‘We are constantly aware of a certain duration—the specious present—varying from a few seconds to probably not more than a minute, and this duration (with its content perceived as having one part earlier and another part later) is the original intuition of time.’ This surprising variation in the length of the specious present makes one suspect that more than one definition is hidden in James’ rather vague characterization.

There are two sources of ambiguity here. One is over whether ‘the specious present’ refers to the object of the experience, namely a duration in time, or the way in which that object is presented to us. The second is over how we should interpret ‘immediately sensible’. James’ words suggest that the specious present is the duration itself, picked out as the object of a certain kind of experience. But ‘immediately sensible’ admits of a number of disambiguations. So we could define the specious present as:

1. the span of short-term memory;
2. the duration which is perceived, not as duration, but as instantaneous;
3. the duration which is directly perceived — i.e. not through the intermediary of a number of other, perhaps instantaneous, perceptions;
4. the duration which is perceived both as present and as extended in time.

If James means the first of these, that would certainly explain his suggestion that it could last up to a minute. But this does not seem to have much to do specifically with the experience of *presentness*, since we can certainly hold something in the short-term memory and yet recognize it as past. James may be thinking of cases where we are listening to a sentence: if we did not somehow hold all the words in our conscious mind, we would not understand the sentence as a whole. But it is clear that the words are not experienced as simultaneous, for then the result would be an unintelligible jumble of sounds. (2) is illustrated by the familiar fact that some movements are so fast that we see them as a blur, such as when we look at a fan. What is in fact taking place at different times is presented as happening in an instant. But this is not standardly what is meant by the specious present. (3) is a construal that is found in the literature (see, e.g., Kelly 2005), but it is not obvious that that is what James had in mind, since James is concerned with the phenomenology of time perception and whether or not an experience constitutes a direct or indirect perception of an interval does not seem to be a phenomenological matter. (Besides which, as Kelly points out, we might think it odd to suppose that past parts of the interval could be directly perceived.)

That leaves us with (4): a duration which is perceived both as present *and* as temporally extended. This present of experience is ‘specious’ in that, unlike the objective present (if there is such a thing — see [The metaphysics of time perception](#) below) it is an interval and not a durationless instant. The real or objective present must be durationless for, as Augustine argued, in an interval of any duration, there are earlier and later parts. So if any part of that interval is present, there will be another part that is past or future.

But is it possible to perceive something as extended as a present? If we hear a short phrase of music, we seem to hear the phrase as present, and yet — because it is a phrase rather than a single chord — we also hear the notes as successive, and therefore as extending over an interval. If this does not seem entirely

convincing, consider the perception of motion. As Broad (1923) puts it, 'to see a second-hand moving is quite a different thing from "seeing" that a hour-hand has moved.' It is not that we see the current position of the second hand and remember where it was a second ago: we just see the motion. That leads to the following argument:

- (1) What we perceive, we perceive as present.
- (2) We perceive motion.
- (3) Motion occurs over an interval.

Therefore: What we perceive as present occurs over an interval.

Still, there is more than an air of paradox about this. If successive parts of the motion (or musical phrase, or whatever change we perceive) are perceived as present, then surely they are perceived as simultaneous. But if they are perceived as simultaneous, then the motion will simply be a blur, as it is in cases where it is too fast to perceive as motion. The fact that we do not see it as motion suggests that we do not see the successive parts of it as simultaneous, and so do not see them as present. But then how do we explain the distinction to which Broad directs our attention?

One way out of this impasse is to suggest that two quite distinct processes are going on in the perception of motion (and other kinds of change). One is the perception of successive states as successive, for example the different positions of the second hand. The other is the perception of pure movement. This second perception, which may involve a more primitive system than the first, does not contain as part the recognition of earlier and later elements. (Le Poidevin 2007, Chapter 5.)

Past, present and the passage of time

The previous section indicated the importance of distinguishing between perceiving the present and perceiving something *as* present. We may perceive as present items that are past. Indeed, given the finite speed of the transmission of both light and sound (and the finite speed of transmission of information from receptors to brain), it seems that we only ever perceive what is past. However, this does not by itself tell us what it is to perceive something as present, rather than as past. Nor does it explain the most striking feature of our experience as-of the present: that it is constantly changing. The passage (or apparent passage) of time is its most striking feature, and any account of our perception of time must account for this aspect of our experience.

Here is one attempt to do so. The first problem is to explain why our temporal experience is limited in a way in which our spatial experience is not. We can perceive objects that stand in a variety of spatial relations to us: near, far, to the left or right, up or down, etc. Our experience is not limited to the immediate vicinity (although of course our experience is spatially limited to the extent that sufficiently distant objects are invisible to us). But, although we perceive the past, we do not perceive it as past, but as present. Moreover, our experience does not only appear to be temporally limited, it is so: we do not perceive the future, and we do not continue to perceive transient events long after information from them reached our senses. Now, there is a very simple answer to the question why we do not perceive the future, and it is a causal one. Briefly, causes always precede their effects; perception is a causal process, in that to perceive something is to be causally affected by it; therefore we can only perceive earlier events, never later ones. So one temporal boundary of our experience is explained; what of the other?

There seems no *logical* reason why we should not directly experience the distant past. We could appeal to the principle that there can be no action at a temporal distance, so that something distantly past can only causally affect us via more proximate events. But this is inadequate justification. We can only perceive a spatially distant tree by virtue of its effects on items in our vicinity (light reflected off the tree impinging on our retinas), but this is not seen by those who espouse a direct realist theory of perception as incompatible with their position. We still see *the tree*, they say, not some more immediate object. Perhaps then we should look for a different strategy, such as the following one, which appeals to biological considerations. To be effective agents in the world, we must represent accurately what is currently going on: to be constantly out of date in our beliefs while going about our activities would be to face pretty immediate extinction. Now we are fortunate in that, although we only perceive the past it is, in most cases, the very recent past, since the transmission of light and sound, though finite, is extremely rapid. Moreover, although things change, they do so, again in most cases, at a rate that is vastly slower than the rate at which information from external objects travels to us. So when we form beliefs about what is going on in the world, they are largely accurate ones. (See Butterfield 1984 for a more detailed account along these lines.) But, incoming information having been registered, it needs to move into the memory to make way for more up to date information. For, although things may change slowly relative to the speed of light or of sound, they do change, and we cannot afford to be simultaneously processing conflicting information. So our effectiveness as agents depends on our not continuing to experience a transient state of affairs (rather in the manner of a slow motion film) once information from it has been absorbed. Evolution has ensured that we do not experience anything other than the very recent past (except when we are looking at the heavens).

To perceive something as present is simply to perceive it: we do not need to postulate some extra item in our experience that is 'the experience of presentness.' It follows that there can be no 'perception of pastness'. In addition, if pastness were something we could perceive, then we would perceive *everything* in this way, since every event is past by the time we perceive it. But even if we never perceive anything as past (at the same time as perceiving the event in question) we could intelligibly talk more widely of the experience of pastness: the experience we get when something comes to an end. And it has been suggested that memories—more specifically, *episodic memories*, those of our experiences of past events—are accompanied by a feeling of pastness (see Russell 1921). The problem that this suggestion is supposed to solve is that an episodic memory is simply a memory of an event: it *represents* the event simpliciter, rather than the fact that the event is past. So we need to postulate something else which alerts us to the fact that the event remembered is past. An alternative account, and one which does not appeal to any phenomenological aspects of memory, is that memories dispose us to form past-tensed beliefs, and is by virtue of this that they represent an event as past.

We have, then, a candidate explanation for our experience of being located at a particular moment in time, the (specious) present. And as the content of that experience is constantly changing, so that position in time shifts. But there is still a further puzzle. Change in our experience is not the same thing as experience of change. We want to know, not just what it is to perceive one event after another, but also what it is to perceive an event as occurring after another. Only then will we understand our experience of the passage of time. We turn, then, to the perception of time order.

Dualism : Mind and Brain are separate.

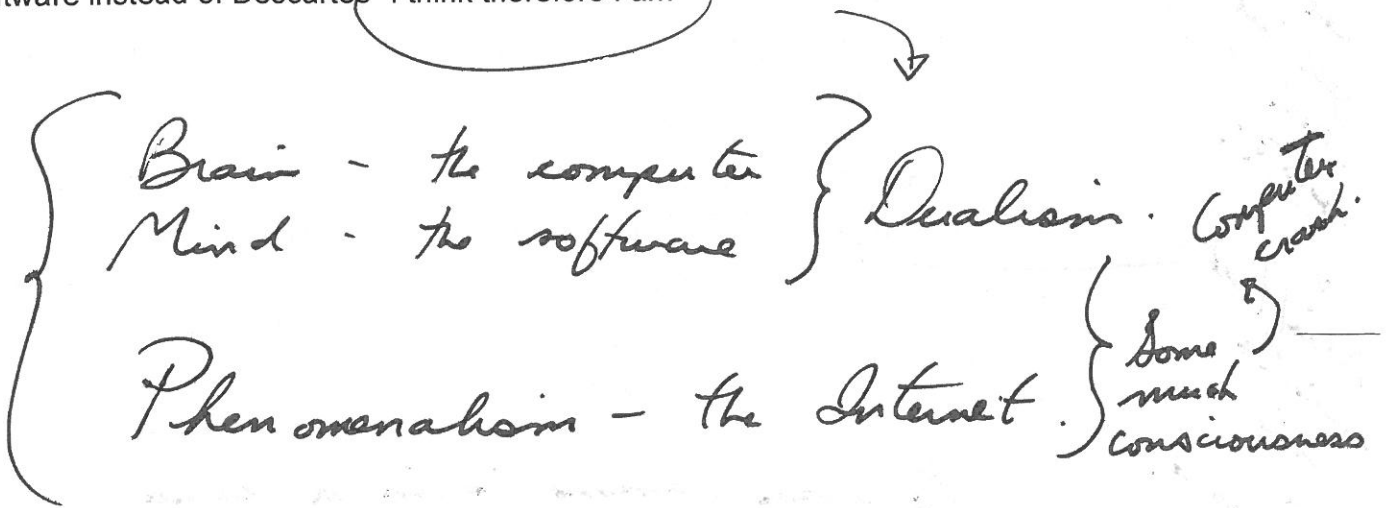
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Our brains are hard-wired to not understand our brain?!



The Host - 'spirits.' - various spirits inhabit hosts (bodies).

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} Interesting
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MONISM
we only can see feel and touch exists.
Belief that mind & brain are the same

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- I am doubtful that this happens

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So when someone is in a coma, are they not without mind, but with a brain?