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PERSONS IN RECENT THOUGHT

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This is a very wide topic. It is, however, in my view, altogether central to our main concerns to day, especially as they are focused for us at this conference and its like. It will therefore not be inappropriate to direct attention to the main issues involved in our thought about persons and outline what I take myself to be most important in the way we should think about persons.

First of all there is the long debate about dualist and monist views of persons. Are we two things, or perhaps two streams of events, in some peculiar relation, or is there just the one type of reality which may be viewed in some respect mental and in another material or physical - or perhaps even more simply just one mode of being, as far as we are concerned and perhaps the entire universe?

All these views have been held. Indeed, they have a long and fairly continuous history from as early as we have records of reflective and speculative thought - and they figure in diverse cultures. The most popular form of monistic view - that is the doctrine that there is only one type of being - in our times is materialism. All reality must be thought to be material or physical, including our thoughts and purposes. But while this is a highly fashionable doctrine in our times we do well to remember that this has come about by a very massive swing of opinion early in this century. The philosophical thinking, and with it related attitudes, which dominated almost every aspect of thought, not only in the English-speaking world but elsewhere including the Orient, at the turn of the century and for some decades before that, was idealism, which, in an astonishing variety of ways, proclaimed the view that in one way or another all reality was thought or mental, usually along the lines of the many variations on the Hegelian theme of the one absolute being appearing in many forms. 'The real is the rational' was the famous text, and for many this was understood to mean that all existence is mental or some kind of experience. The confidence with which this view was held at one time, the strong belief that all future philosophy must be some variation on it, may seem astounding today, but it is salutary to recall it when we note the surprising assurance with which some other fashionable views have since been held.

There are other forms of idealism, some to my mind more attractive, than post-Hegelian idealism, much though we have to learn from the latter and much though we appreciate the revival of Hegelian studies pioneered by John Findlay, H.B. Acton, W.B. Walsh, T.M. Knox and a host of others in many countries. There is the idealism of Berkeley and the monadology of Leibniz,

to name some of the obvious examples, and some forms at least of recent phenomenalism.

The fashionable monism today is some form of materialism, although it was not from that quarter, but from the very different realism of Cook Wilson and G.E.Moore, that the initial drastic inroads were made on nineteenth century idealism. There are many forms of materialism, and not all exponents of it favour the term, but they are all agreed in maintaining that there can be no mental existence which is altogether distinct from physical reality or wholly real in its own right.

The more outright form of this is what is usually known as 'old-fashioned' materialism. This took the extraordinary line of maintaining that all that we are apt to take as distinct mental reality, thoughts, sensations etc. are states or processes in our bodies conditioned solely by material events in the world around us. Thought itself is just movements in our vocal chords and hopes and fears are tensions in our breasts or stomach. It is a constant source of wonder to me that highly intelligent people should have adhered seriously to this view. Yet at one time it was strongly held, not only by ingenious behaviourists like J.B.Watson but also as a cardinal feature of communist philosophy.

My own reaction here is a very simple one. If nothing exists other than these dispositions of our bodies, almost everything to which we attach importance loses its significance. The attitudes of many highly intelligent adherents to strictly materialist communist philosophy, which is not the same thing as saying that material needs are basic or decisive in human responses - a more modest though still very questionable form of materialism - is often ambivalent. They stress the advantages which, in their views at least, follow from communist systems, better living conditions, better education, art and music. But even if all this could be established, what would it matter if this new happiness or more creative existence could be reduced to purely physical states.

The materialist in more recent times is more subtle. He insists that he holds nothing to bring into question or discredit the obvious facts of everyday existence, that we do think and purpose and feel pain and other sensations. What he claims is somehow to dissolve the difference, in Gilbert Ryle's famous terms, between the dualist and the materialist account of

thought and existence, Ryle, with his exacting standards in thought and expression, would not want to say that we never think and that it does not matter how sound and clear is our thought and its expression. He could not have been one of the most famous editors of our time if he held such a view. At the same time, when we look carefully at what Ryle, and his many followers, actually hold it is very hard to see what difference, in essentials, there is between their ingeniously held positions and the simpler less ambiguous materialism of J.B. Watson. So strongly entrenched in some quarters is the 'corporeal' view of persons that many do not seem to think it necessary even to argue for it, and such people include some of the ablest and most scholarly writers. Thus Mr. Jonathan Barnes, of Oriel College, Oxford, after one of the most learned and incisive survey of the many ingenious forms of the famous 'ontological argument',¹ disposes, in direct consideration, of the idea of God on the ground that 'Gods are persons' and it is 'becoming increasingly clear that persons are essentially corporeal'.² All the same, however ingenious the defences, or however firm and widespread the conviction, nothing seems more certain to me, as a matter of obvious immediate experience, than that thoughts, purposes, sensations etc. have a character as experience which is quite radically different in essential nature, a quite different mode of being altogether, from all corporeal or physical or observable reality. I also hold that recognition of what seems here a simple fact of common sense and immediate apprehension is vital for all good sense in the treatment of all other major issues and our basic attitudes. In practice, it all may seem to make little difference. Corporealists live and argue like the rest of us, but in the long run I cannot but believe that failure to recognise the distinctness of mental states and processes will lead to an impoverishment and enervation of all our distinctive activities and the very will to live as civilized communities.

There is one point that needs to be very much stressed here. The essential appeal in these matters must be to the immediate awareness we have of what it is like to have thoughts or sensations. Defenders of materialism are apt to confront us with the need for argument, and they vigorously reject the view that we can appeal to 'private access' or 'private detection'.³ We must not be dogmatic and just lay down the law, we must provide a proper argument. This is the ploy, disconcerting enough in its way, to which

¹ The Ontological Argument. Macmillan 1972

² op.cit. p.84

³ Cff. Roger Squires in 'Zombies V Materialists' in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society supp.vol. XLVIII p.162-163

Mr. Roger Squires has recourse in his very gifted and spirited defence of materialism in the paper from which I have just quoted. But this is the issue which I have also discussed at length in my own paper 'Ultimates and a Way of Looking' originally prepared for the Oxford International Symposium arranged by the late Professor Ryle and first published under his editorship as Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy (Oriel Press) and now reproduced in my own book Persons and Survival of Death (Macmillan 1978). In this paper, as in other essays in this volume, I insist that philosophers must be prepared to recognise the limits of argument. It is hard for us to do so, for at once we seem to be opening the door to dogmatism and blind assertion - what is philosophy without argument? Nonetheless I think Wittgenstein, with whom I do not often agree, was altogether right in insisting that 'philosophers must know when to stop'. There is a point beyond which further argument is not possible, and there are certain 'given' features of experience, however baffling, which we must simply recognise as being the case. This is a delicate and tricky issue which I cannot discuss as carefully here as I have done in my book. It seems to me all the same of quite crucial importance for good sense in philosophy, and, however easily abused, indispensable for a sound understanding of ourselves and the world around us. We have to cultivate the sense of when we have reached this kind of ultimate, and the flair for this appears to be one of the major requirements of sound philosophy.

In my own writings on these subjects, in The Elusive Mind and The Self and Immortality for example, I have tried to come closely to terms with an array of formidable arguments from Ryle, Passmore, Hampshire and others, but in the last analysis, when all the ground has been cleared in this way, we come down to our claim to recognise, or fail to recognise, the inherent distinctness of mental existence, for man and brute, and the radical difference between it and the reality about which we learn in sensible observation. If this appeal to what we seem to find to be the case is denied us, there is nowhere else to which we may turn. I can only invite those who disagree to think again or look again. When Ryle, for example, declares that the surgeon's skill lies in his hands making the correct movement, I cannot but remain convinced that something vital is left out here from the total picture. Nor will dispositions supply the defect. There is something going on all the time besides the work of the 'skilled hands' as such. And there I must leave this matter as far as this short paper is concerned.

There are not in fact many who would persist today in denying that mental processes are inherently different from physical ones, and that we have in this way an 'inner life' to which we have some sort of immediate access.

So far the battle has swung round fairly firmly in favour of the dualist. But this is only half the battle. Two main things in particular may be maintained. Firstly, it will be argued that while mental states and processes are not strictly reducible to states of the body, they are conditioned throughout or at least essentially dependent on physical states, ultimately the brain. That there is a peculiarly close dependence on the body will not, I think, be in serious dispute. Any change in my bodily state, most of all some serious malfunctioning, immediately brings about a corresponding change in my state of mind, a fever or brain damage seriously disrupts my thinking and experience in general. These obvious facts of experience need not be amplified. But it does not at all follow, as some suppose, that the state of the body is the sole determinant of my mental states. Sensitivity and understanding prescribe their own course and reactions, subject, normally at least, to physical conditions. I answer the telephone because I hear and understand what is said. To deny the influence of our own apprehension of meaning in the course of our activities is again to run against the plain evidence of normal experience.

A more plausible position is to hold that, in view of the close correlation of mental and physical events, it cannot be allowed that mind can function at all without its bodily correlate. This does not seem to me, however, in any way inevitable. Under present conditions of existence the dependence on the body is close, but that does not preclude the possibility of mental existence without the present physical correlates. How this may be conceived, and how communication etc. would be possible is one of the main topics of my The Self and Immortality (Macmillan).

There is however a second major submission which the critics of dualism are apt to make, and this is the one to which most importance would be ascribed today. It is the real crux in these matters in the present state of the discussion. This is the question of ownership of experience and continued identity. Critics of my own view (see my forthcoming Persons and Life After Death - Essays by Hywel Lewis and his Critics (Macmillan) are apt to stress especially the difficulty of accounting for personal identity without bodily continuity. In my own replies the following points are made.

Firstly, I accept the substance of the Kantian argument that our awareness of an objective world around us presupposes a subject which transcends our passing experience and gives us a unified world which we can understand

and within limits change. But I take the argument further than this and maintain that the Kantian argument itself would be very hard to understand without some more direct awareness of oneself as subject and agent. My second main contention then is that, at any time, everyone is aware of himself as the being that he is, unique and irreducible. This is very different from the more specific knowledge that I have of myself as the particular kind of person that I am, my likes and dislikes, my aptitudes, skills and dispositions etc. I am better placed in many ways to know these than my friends, but in some ways they may know me better at this level (and so might a psychiatrist if I consulted him). But all these properties characterise me, and no other, and it is this me (being me is Professor Roderick Chisholm's recent phrase) that I know, so I claim, immediately as the being that I am essentially and which at this level cannot be characterised further. Self-awareness in this sense is one of the ultimates to which I give prominence in my forthcoming book.

But there remains the question of continued identity. How do I know that the distinct being I am now is the same as the being who came into this room and started to write an hour ago? Very briefly, and this is the third point I am noting now, the Kantian argument will take us a long way here. But I supplement and strengthen it by recourse to what I have elsewhere called 'strict memory'. Most that we may be said to remember about ourselves and the world around us, depends on elaborate evidence and extends well beyond the sphere of our own immediate experience - sometimes to remote times - I remember that Plato lived from 427 to 347 B.C.. But I do not strictly remember this - I was not alive at the time; I do not remember the battle of Arginusiae because I was not there. But I remember coming into this room in a sense which would not be intelligible if I had not actually done this myself. My claim is that there are cases where we do directly, and independently of supporting evidence, remember such things as coming into the room, visiting places in Israel a few weeks ago and some things very early in my life. If this is so, then the being that I know myself to be, having these experiences now, just has to be the being who experienced other things and did certain things in the past, however much I may have changed in other ways, physical appearances, skills and interests etc. This does not apply to all that has happened to me or which I have done. I am very far from strictly remembering all my life. But if there are cases and I think they are extensive, when we strictly remember our past, then we have very firm assurance of continued identity around which we may build the other things we know less directly about ourselves. The question of the fallibility of memory presents difficulties with which I have tried to cope elsewhere.

We have thus, in outline here, the notion of persons as essentially non-corporeal and continuing as the distinct beings that they are, ultimate and irreducible, through changes of circumstances and fortune, including physical appearance. Such persons do not of necessity outlive the destruction of the body, they are no more inevitably immortal or indestructible than other finite existences. God alone exists by necessity of his nature. But there is no inherent reason why we should not exist and be the same persons essentially without the present body - or indeed any body at all. I have indicated elsewhere¹ what reasons I think there are for believing that we shall so exist.

Personal identity, on this view is absolute and not relative. This contrasts sharply with positions, like those of post-Hegelian idealists like T.H.Green and Bosanquet, who find the identity of persons in partial continuity of characteristics and circumstances. If a tree is cut down into logs and burnt, the ashes (or what grows out of them) would not be regarded as the same entity as the tree. Just where we draw the line is arbitrary in the last resort, though not independent of continuities in the course of events. Location and spatial contiguities play an important part here. A suit that is so patched over the none of the original material remains might still be said to be the same suit. But this is relative and arbitrary. In the case of persons the identity is strict and not partial, however completely we may change. A man who is converted and abandons erring or evil ways is the same being as the one he was before, although we may say at another level, or for rough and ready purposes, that he is 'not the same person' anymore. This is where I differ radically from an idealist, like Bosanquet at one extreme, and many fashionable thinkers of today at the other, for they would say that after a lapse of time I cease to be responsible for what I did long ago - or at least my responsibility is much diminished - because it is not the present 'I' who did what I am to be praised or blamed for in the past - I am no longer the same person. My submission is that I am essentially the same person through all changes of circumstance and fortune and in all my actions.

This distinct being that I am is normally dependent on physical conditions, and the experiences that I have are extensively, though by no means wholly, conditioned by physical factors, especially the state of my brain, but it also acts upon the world around us, normally and perhaps always through the brain and the body - causation at a distance, if it happens, as some maintain, would make an exception. What we have therefore is an essentially mental entity, which has a unique and final identity, which is none the less in

1. Persons and Survival of Death

continuous interaction with the physical world, mainly at least through one's own body. The relation with the body is peculiarly close, as I have also stressed (see the chapter in 'The Importance of the Body' in The Self and Immortality), but we are not essentially corporeal beings, however much we may for rough and ready purposes, identify ourselves as or through our bodies.

This is an essentially Cartesian position, with antecedents from Socrates through Plato and Augustine and Kant and many others, in Eastern as in Western thought. To establish it seems to me of first importance for all our major concerns and issues today.

I had meant to take up most of my space on the implications of holding this notion of the distinct and ultimate identity of persons. In the little that remains to me I can only make the briefest reference to what I take to be the significance for us of this doctrine today. Some of the matters of the greatest importance here have been reflected in some things I have already said. For example the question of moral responsibility. In terms of the view I have advanced it is possible to conceive of some of our actions as being cases of genuinely open choice where our action is in no sense at all determined. To reinstate the sense of our own ultimate and unquestioned responsibility is, in my view, a matter of the utmost importance - and on this I have also ventured to say much in other writings.

Then there is the question of life after death and the genuineness of our identity in any postmortem existence which we may have reason to expect. Many aspects of personal relationships, and the values which centre upon them, are affected in the same way - to recognise the 'other' as genuinely other and have due regard to what Bertrand Russell, in somewhat surprising terms for him, described as 'our sombre solitude, the genuine inner existence and essential privacy of everyone, is one of the major conditions of healthy personal and social relations'.

Likewise, in religion, much that is travestied and distorted in traditional doctrine, like the notion which some have seriously held, of an angry God who sentences sinners to eternal torment, comes to be seen in its right meaning and context when we reflect on the consequences for our inner existence and solitude of much that we actually do. There is no need for trivialising or attenuation of traditional doctrine but the terms of it have to be thought out afresh and its meaning, in times past as today,

properly appreciated on the basis of a sound understanding of what makes us the creatures we actually are. So also, for the vexed question of mysticism, and the claims often made for it. There is no doubt of the profound spiritual experience reflected in mystical writings and the lives of the mystics. But the sense in which this involves the extinction of the self is a further moot point. There are few things more central in contemporary religious and metaphysical thinking than this matter of the possible fusion of persons as against the view that, even in the finest and holiest relationships, each remains the person he is and no other. The real divide, in the great religions, begins here, and if we are to find what I have elsewhere called 'the points of convergence' in modern thought and civilized existence, we just have to face up to this basic question of how we are to think of individual existence. This is where it is hardest to find agreement, and it is for this reason above all that I direct attention to it in this paper. My view is that nothing important is lost, for any of the great religions, if the finality of the distinctness of persons is allowed. On the contrary, it is in the light of this, I would contend, that we can properly grasp what is vital in the main traditions, appreciate differences where they remain, and rethink our way to the appreciation of the most creative ways in which religious traditions may correct and enrich one another. This seems to me the most urgent concern for our times, and I regret that exposition of my own stance, for those not familiar with it, has been allowed to take up most of my space. In the discussion we can perhaps advert more to these implications and significance of the issues I have raised and the view of them I have outlined.