



What is the Mind?

George Stuart Fullerton

PRIMITIVE NOTIONS OF MIND

The soul or mind, that something to which we refer sensations and ideas of all sorts, is an object that men do not seem to know very clearly and definitely, though they feel so sure of its existence that they regard it as the height of folly to call it in question. That he has a mind, no man doubts; what his mind is, he may be quite unable to say.

We have seen (section 7) that children, when quite young, can hardly be said to recognize that they have minds at all. This does not mean that what is mental is not given in their experience. They know that they must open their eyes to see things, and must lay their hands upon them to feel them; they have had pains and pleasures, memories and fancies. In short, they have within their reach all the materials needed in framing a conception of the mind, and in drawing clearly the distinction between their minds and external things. Nevertheless, they are incapable of using these materials; their attention is engrossed with what is physical,—with their own bodies and the bodies of others, with the things that they can eat, with the toys with which they can play, and the like. It is only later that there emerges even a tolerably clear conception of a self or mind different from the physical and contrasted with it.

Primitive man is almost as material in his thinking as is the young child. Of this we have traces in many of the words which have come to be applied to the mind. Our word “spirit” is from the Latin *spiritus*, originally a breeze. The Latin word for the soul, the word used by the great philosophers all through the Middle Ages, *anima* (Greek, *anemos*), has the same significance. In the Greek New Testament, the word used for spirit (*pneuma*) carries a similar suggestion. When we are told in the Book of Genesis that “man became a living soul,” we may read the word literally “a breath.”

What more natural than that the man who is just awakening to a consciousness of that elusive entity the mind should confuse it with that breath which is the most striking outward and visible sign that distinguishes a living man from a dead one?

That those who first tried to give some scientific account of the soul or mind conceived it as a material thing, and that it was sufficiently common to identify it with the breath, we know from direct evidence. A glance at the Greek philosophy, to which we owe so much that is of value in our intellectual life, is sufficient to disclose how difficult it was for thinking men to attain to a higher conception.

Thus, Anaximenes of Miletus, who lived in the sixth century before Christ, says that “our soul, which is air, rules us.” A little later, Heraclitus, a man much admired for the depth of his reflections, maintains that the soul is a fiery vapor, evidently identifying it with the warm breath of the living creature. In the fifth century, B.C., Anaxagoras, who accounts for the ordering of the elements into a system of things by referring to the activity of Mind or Reason, calls mind “the finest of things,” and it seems clear that he did not conceive of it as very different in nature from the other elements which enter into the constitution of

the world.

Democritus of Abdera (between 460 and 360 B.C.), that great investigator of nature and brilliant writer, developed a materialistic doctrine that admits the existence of nothing save atoms and empty space. He conceived the soul to consist of fine, smooth, round atoms, which are also atoms of fire. These atoms are distributed through the whole body, but function differently in different places—in the brain they give us thought, in the heart, anger, and in the liver, desire. Life lasts just so long as we breathe in and breathe out such atoms.

The doctrine of Democritus was taken up by Epicurus, who founded his school three hundred years before Christ—a school which lived and prospered for a very long time. Those who are interested in seeing how a materialistic psychology can be carried out in detail by an ingenious mind should read the curious account of the mind presented in his great poem, “On Nature,” by the Roman poet Lucretius, an ardent Epicurean, who wrote in the first century B.C.

The school which we commonly think of contrasting with the Epicurean, and one which was founded at about the same time, is that of the Stoics. Certainly the Stoics differed in many things from the Epicureans; their view of the world, and of the life of man, was a much nobler one; but they were uncompromising materialists, nevertheless, and identified the soul with the warm breath that animates man.

THE MIND AS IMMATERIAL

It is scarcely too much to say that the Greek philosophy as a whole impresses the modern mind as representing the thought of a people to whom it was not unnatural to think of the mind as being a breath, a fire, a collection of atoms, a something material. To be sure, we cannot accuse those twin stars that must ever remain the glory of literature and science, Plato and Aristotle, of being materialists. Plato (427-347, B.C.) distributes, it is true, the three-fold soul, which he allows man, in various parts of the human body, in a way that at least suggests the Democritean distribution of mind-atoms. The lowest soul is confined beneath the diaphragm; the one next in rank has its seat in the chest; and the highest, the rational soul, is enthroned in the head. However, he has said quite enough about this last to indicate clearly that he conceived it to be free from all taint of materiality.

As for Aristotle (384-322, B.C.), who also distinguished between the lower psychical functions and the higher, we find him sometimes speaking of soul and body in such a way as to lead men to ask themselves whether he is really speaking of two things at all; but when he specifically treats of the *nous* or reason, he insists upon its complete detachment from everything material. Man’s reason is not subjected to the fate of the lower psychical functions, which, as the “form” of the body, perish with the body; it enters from without, and it endures after the body has passed away. It is interesting to note, however, an occasional lapse even in Aristotle. When he comes to speak of the relation to the world of the Divine Mind, the First Cause of Motion, which he conceives as pure Reason, he represents it as *touching* the world, although it remains itself *untouched*. We seem to find here just a flavor—an inconsistent one—of the material.

Such reflections as those of Plato and Aristotle bore fruit in later ages. When we come down to Plotinus the Neo-Platonist (204-269, A.D.), we have left the conception of the soul as a warm breath, or as composed of fine round atoms, far behind. It has become curiously abstract and incomprehensible. It is described as an immaterial substance. This substance is, in a sense, in the body, or, at least, it is present to the body. But it is not in the body as material things are in this place or in that. *It is as a whole in the whole body, and it is as a whole in every part of the body.* Thus the soul may be regarded as divisible, since it

is distributed throughout the body; but it must also be regarded as indivisible, since it is wholly in every part.

Let the man to whom such sentences as these mean anything rejoice in the meaning that he is able to read into them! If he can go as far as Plotinus, perhaps he can go as far as Cassiodorus (477-570, A.D.), and maintain that the soul is not merely as a whole in every part of the body, but is wholly in each of its own parts.

Upon reading such statements one's first impulse is to exclaim: How is it possible that men of sense should be led to speak in this irresponsible way? and when they do speak thus, is it conceivable that other men should seriously occupy themselves with what they say?

But if one has the historic sense, and knows something of the setting in which such doctrines come to the birth, one cannot regard it as remarkable that men of sense should urge them. No one coins them independently out of his own brain; little by little men are impelled along the path that leads to such conclusions. Plotinus was a careful student of the philosophers that preceded him. He saw that mind must be distinguished from matter, and he saw that what is given a location in space, in the usual sense of the words, is treated like a material thing. On the other hand, he had the common experience that we all have of a relation between mind and body. How do justice to this relation, and yet not materialize mind?

What he tried to do is clear, and it seems equally clear that he had good reason for trying to do it. But it appears to us now that what he actually did was to make of the mind or soul a something very like an inconsistent bit of matter, that is somehow in space, and yet not exactly in space, a something that can be in two places at once, a logical monstrosity. That his doctrine did not meet with instant rejection was due to the fact, already alluded to, that our experience of the mind is something rather dim and elusive. It is not easy for a man to say what it is, and, hence, it is not easy for a man to say what it is not.

The doctrine of Plotinus passed over to Saint Augustine, and from him it passed to the philosophers of the Middle Ages. How extremely difficult it has been for the world to get away from it at all, is made clearly evident in the writings of that remarkable man Descartes.

Descartes wrote in the seventeenth century. The long sleep of the Middle Ages was past, and the several sciences had sprung into a vigorous and independent life. It was not enough for Descartes to describe the relation of mind and body in the loose terms that had prevailed up to his time. He had made a careful study of anatomy, and he realized that the brain is a central organ to which messages are carried by the nerves from all parts of the body. He knew that an injury to the nerve might prevent the receipt of a message, *i.e.* he knew that a conscious sensation did not come into being until something happened in the brain.

Nor was he content merely to refer the mind to the brain in a general way. He found the "little pineal gland" in the midst of the brain to be in what he regarded as an admirable position to serve as the seat of the soul. To this convenient little central office he relegated it; and he describes in a way that may to-day well provoke a smile the movements that the soul imparts to the pineal gland, making it incline itself in this direction and in that, and making it push the "animal spirits," the fluid contained in the cavities of the brain, towards various "pores."

Thus he writes:[1] "Let us, then, conceive of the soul as having her chief seat in the little gland that is in the middle of the brain, whence she radiates to all the rest of the body by means of the spirits, the nerves, and even the blood, which, participating in the impressions of the spirits, can carry them through the arteries to all the members." And again: "Thus, when the soul wills to call anything to remembrance, this volition brings it

about that the gland, inclining itself successively in different directions, pushes the spirits towards divers parts of the brain, until they find the part which has the traces that the object which one wishes to recollect has left there.”

We must admit that Descartes’ scientific studies led him to make this mind that sits in the little pineal gland something very material. It is spoken of as though it pushed the gland about; it is affected by the motions of the gland, as though it were a bit of matter. It seems to be a less inconsistent thing than the “all in the whole body” soul of Plotinus; but it appears to have purchased its comprehensibility at the expense of its immateriality.

Shall we say that Descartes frankly repudiated the doctrine that had obtained for so many centuries? We cannot say that; he still held to it. But how could he? The reader has perhaps remarked above that he speaks of the soul as having her *chief* seat in the pineal gland. It seems odd that he should do so, but he still held, even after he had come to his definite conclusions as to the soul’s seat, to the ancient doctrine that the soul is united to all the parts of the body “conjunctly.” He could not wholly repudiate a venerable tradition.

We have seen, thus, that men first conceived of the mind as material and later came to rebel against such a conception. But we have seen, also, that the attempt to conceive it as immaterial was not wholly successful. It resulted in a something that we may describe as inconsistently material rather than as not material at all.

MODERN COMMON SENSE NOTIONS OF THE MIND

Under this heading I mean to sum up the opinions as to the nature of the mind usually held by the intelligent persons about us to-day who make no claim to be regarded as philosophers. Is it not true that a great many of them believe:—

- (1) That the mind is in the body?
- (2) That it acts and reacts with matter?
- (3) That it is a substance with attributes?
- (4) That it is nonextended and immaterial?

I must remark at the outset that this collection of opinions is by no means something gathered by the plain man from his own experience. These opinions are the echoes of old philosophies. They are a heritage from the past, and have become the common property of all intelligent persons who are even moderately well-educated. Their sources have been indicated in the preceding sections; but most persons who cherish them have no idea of their origin.

Men are apt to suppose that these opinions seem reasonable to them merely for the reason that they find in their own experience evidence of their truth. But this is not so.

Have we not seen above how long it took men to discover that they must not think of the mind as being a breath, or a flame, or a collection of material atoms? The men who erred in this way were abler than most of us can pretend to be, and they gave much thought to the matter. And when at last it came to be realized that mind must not thus be conceived as material, those who endeavored to conceive it as something else gave, after their best efforts, a very queer account of it indeed.

Is it in the face of such facts reasonable to suppose that our friends and acquaintances, who strike us as having reflective powers in nowise remarkable, have independently arrived at the conception that the mind is a nonextended and immaterial substance? Surely they have not thought all this out for themselves. They have taken up and appropriated unconsciously notions which were in the air, so to speak. They have inherited their doctrines, not created them. It is well to remember this, for it may make us the more willing to take up and examine impartially what we have uncritically turned into articles of belief.

The first two articles, namely, that the mind is in the body and that it acts upon, and is

acted upon by, material things, I shall discuss at length in the next chapter. Here I pause only to point out that the plain man does not put the mind into the body quite unequivocally. I think it would surprise him to be told that a line might be drawn through two heads in such a way as to transfix two minds. And I remark, further, that he has no clear idea of what it means for mind to act upon body or body to act upon mind. How does an immaterial thing set a material thing in motion? Can it touch it? Can it push it? Then what does it do?

But let us pass on to the last two articles of faith mentioned above.

We all draw the distinction between *substance* and its *attributes* or *qualities*. The distinction was remarked and discussed many centuries ago, and much has been written upon it. I take up the ruler on my desk; it is recognized at once as a bit of wood. How? It has such and such qualities. My paper-knife is of silver. How do I know it? It has certain other qualities. I speak of my mind. How do I know that I have a mind? I have sensations and ideas. If I experienced no mental phenomena of any sort, evidence of the existence of a mind would be lacking.

Now, whether I am concerned with the ruler, with the paper-knife, or with the mind, have I direct evidence of the existence of anything more than the whole group of qualities? Do I ever perceive the substance?

In the older philosophy, the substance (*substantia*) was conceived to be a something not directly perceived, but only inferred to exist—a something underlying the qualities of things and, as it were, holding them together. It was believed in by philosophers who were quite ready to admit that they could not tell anything about it. For example, John Locke (1632-1704), the English philosopher, holds to it stoutly, and yet describes it as a mere “we know not what,” whose function it is to hold together the bundles of qualities that constitute the things we know.

In the modern philosophy men still distinguish between substance and qualities. It is a useful distinction, and we could scarcely get on without it. But an increasing number of thoughtful persons repudiate the old notion of substance altogether.

We may, they say, understand by the word “substance” the whole group of qualities *as a group*—not merely the qualities that are revealed at a given time, but all those that we have reason to believe a fuller knowledge would reveal. In short, we may understand by it just what is left when the “we know not what” of the Lockian has been discarded.

This notion of substance we may call the more modern one; yet we can hardly say that it is the notion of the plain man. He does not make very clear to himself just what is in his thought, but I think we do him no injustice in maintaining that he is something of a Lockian, even if he has never heard of Locke. The Lockian substance is, as the reader has seen, a sort of “unknowable.”

And now for the doctrine that the mind is nonextended and immaterial. With these affirmations we may heartily agree; but we must admit that the plain man enunciates them without having a very definite idea of what the mind is.

He regards as in his mind all his sensations and ideas, all his perceptions and mental images of things. Now, suppose I close my eyes and picture to myself a barber’s pole. Where is the image? We say, in the mind. Is it extended? We feel impelled to answer, No. But it certainly *seems* to be extended; the white and the red upon it appear undeniably side by side. May I assert that this mental image has no extension whatever? Must I deny to it *parts*, or assert that its parts are not side by side?

It seems odd to maintain that a something as devoid of parts as is a mathematical point should yet appear to have parts and to be extended. On the other hand, if we allow the image to be extended, how can we refer it to a nonextended mind?

To such questions as these, I do not think that the plain man has an answer. That they can be answered, I shall try to show in the last section of this chapter. But one cannot

answer them until one has attained to rather a clear conception of what is meant by the mind.

And until one has attained to such a conception, the statement that the mind is immaterial must remain rather vague and indefinite. As we saw above, even the Plotinic soul was inconsistently material rather than immaterial. It was not excluded from space; it was referred to space in an absurd way. The mind as common sense conceives it, is the successor of this Plotinic soul, and seems to keep a flavor of what is material after all. This will come out in the next chapter, where we shall discuss mind and body.

THE PSYCHOLOGIST AND THE MIND

When we ask how the psychologist conceives of the mind, we must not forget that psychologists are many and that they differ more or less from each other in their opinions. When we say “the psychologist” believes this or that, we mean usually no more than that the opinion referred to is prevalent among men of that class, or that it is the opinion of those whom we regard as its more enlightened members.

Taking the words in this somewhat loose sense, I shall ask what the psychologist’s opinion is touching the four points set forth in the preceding section. How far does he agree with the plain man?

(1) There can be no doubt that he refers the mind to the body in some way, although he may shake his head over the use of the word “in.”

(2) As to whether the mind acts and reacts with matter, in any sense of the words analogous to that in which they are commonly used, there is a division in the camp. Some affirm such interaction; some deny it. The matter will be discussed in the next chapter.

(3) The psychologist—the more modern one—inclines to repudiate any substance or substratum of the sort accepted in the Middle Ages and believed in by many men now. To him the mind is the whole complex of mental phenomena in their interrelations. In other words, the mind is not an unknown and indescribable something that is merely inferred; it is something revealed in consciousness and open to observation.

(4) The psychologist is certainly not inclined to regard the mind or any idea belonging to it as material or as extended. But he does recognize implicitly, if not explicitly, that ideas are composite. To him, as to the plain man, the image held in the memory or imagination *seems* to be extended, and he can distinguish its parts. He does not do much towards clearing away the difficulty alluded to at the close of the last section. It remains for the metaphysician to do what he can with it, and to him we must turn if we wish light upon this obscure subject.

THE METAPHYSICIAN AND THE MIND

I have reserved for the next chapter the first two points mentioned as belonging to the plain man’s doctrine of the mind. In what sense the mind may be said to be in the body, and how it may be conceived to be related to the body, are topics that deserve to be treated by themselves in a chapter on “Mind and Body.” Here I shall consider what the metaphysician has to say about the mind as substance, and about the mind as nonextended and immaterial.

It has been said that the Lockian substance is really an “unknowable.” No one pretends to have experience of it; it is revealed to no sense; it is, indeed, a name for a mere nothing, for when we abstract from a thing, in thought, every single quality, we find that there is left to us nothing whatever.

We cannot say that the substance, in this sense of the word, is the *reality* of which the qualities are *appearances*. In Chapter V we saw just what we may legitimately mean by

realities and appearances, and it was made clear that an unknowable of any sort cannot possibly be the reality to which this or that appearance is referred. Appearances and realities are experiences which are observed to be related in certain ways. That which is not open to observation at all, that of which we have, and can have, no experience, we have no reason to call the reality of anything. We have, in truth, no reason to talk about it at all, for we know nothing whatever about it; and when we do talk about it, it is because we are laboring under a delusion.

This is equally true whether we are concerned with the substance of material things or with the substance of minds. An “unknowable” is an “unknowable” in any case, and we may simply discard it. We lose nothing by so doing, for one cannot lose what one has never had, and what, by hypothesis, one can never have. The loss of a mere word should occasion us no regret.

Now, we have seen that we do not lose the world of real material things in rejecting the “Unknowable” (Chapter V). The things are complexes of qualities, of physical phenomena; and the more we know about these, the more do we know about real things.

But we have also seen (Chapter IV) that physical phenomena are not the only phenomena of which we have experience. We are conscious of mental phenomena as well, of the phenomena of the subjective order, of sensations and ideas. Why not admit that these *constitute* the mind, as physical phenomena constitute the things which belong to the external world?

He who says this says no more than that the mind is known and is knowable. It is what it is perceived to be; and the more we know of mental phenomena, the more do we know of the mind. Shall we call the mind as thus known a *substance*? That depends on the significance which we give to this word. It is better, perhaps, to avoid it, for it is fatally easy to slip into the old use of the word, and then to say, as men have said, that we do not know the mind as it is, but only as it appears to us to be—that we do not know the reality, but only its appearances.

And if we keep clearly before us the view of the mind which I am advocating, we shall find an easy way out of the difficulties that seem to confront us when we consider it as nonextended and immaterial.

Certain complexes of mental phenomena—for example, the barber’s pole above alluded to—certainly appear to be extended. Are they really extended? If I imagine a tree a hundred feet high, is it really a hundred feet high? Has it any real size at all?

Our problem melts away when we realize what we mean by this “real size.” In Chapter V, I have distinguished between apparent space and real space. Real space is, as was pointed out, the “plan” of the real physical world. To occupy any portion of real space, a thing must be a real external thing; that is, the experiences constituting it must belong to the objective order, they must not be of the class called mental. We all recognize this, in a way. We know that a real material foot rule cannot be applied to an imaginary tree. We say, How big did the tree seen in a dream *seem*; we do not say, How big was it *really*? If we did ask such a question, we should be puzzled to know where to look for an answer.

And this for a very good reason. He who asks: How big was that imaginary tree really? asks, in effect: How much real space did the unreal tree fill? The question is a foolish one. It assumes that phenomena not in the objective order are in the objective order. As well ask how a color smells or how a sound looks. When we are dealing with the material we are not dealing with the mental, and we must never forget this.

The tree imagined or seen in a dream seems extended. Its extension is *apparent* extension, and this apparent extension has no place in the external world whatever. But we must not confound this apparent extension with a real mathematical point, and call the tree nonextended in this sense. If we do this we are still in the old error—we have not gotten

away from real space, but have substituted position in that space for extension in that space. Nothing mental can have even a position in real space. To do that it would have to be a real thing in the sense indicated.

Let us, then, agree with the plain man in affirming that the mind is nonextended, but let us avoid misconception. The mind is constituted of experiences of the subjective order. None of these are in space—real space. But some of them have apparent extension, and we must not overlook all that this implies.

Now for the mind as immaterial. We need not delay long over this point. If we mean by the mind the phenomena of the subjective order, and by what is material the phenomena of the objective order, surely we may and must say that the mind is immaterial. The two classes of phenomena separate themselves out at once.

NOTES

1. “The Passions,” Articles 34 and 42.

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