

Materialist view of the mind-body problem analysis



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Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the materialist view of the mind-body problem.

The mind-body problem within the study of consciousness is exactly as it sounds – the difficulty with connecting the mind with the body. The mind is about mental processes, consciousness and thoughts, and the body is about the physical aspect of the brain (McLeod, 2007). This problem is known as the explanatory gap and there are many theories which attempt to understand the extent of this gap. One theory which is very popular amongst current researchers is materialism. This approach is the idea that consciousness can be completely explained by physical matter and leaves no room for the ‘ non-physical’ mind (Blackmore, 2010). Materialists believe that it is only our brain functions that are important and not our subjective experiences, otherwise described as ‘ matter over mind’. The opposing approach to materialism is dualism, which is the idea that our mind is more than just our brain, a. k. a. ‘ mind over matter’ (“ Dualism,” 2014). However, there are very few dualists today. Most philosophers nowadays are materialists, although it cannot be denied that materialism is also not without its flaws (Blackmore, 2010).

There are two main versions of materialism. One is eliminative materialism which proposes that subjective experiences do not exist and that by knowing enough about biology and the nervous system, we can also understand consciousness and therefore, it can be completely explained by neuroscience (Blackmore, 2010). The other version is reductive materialism which suggests that our mental states are identical to our physical states of the brain, meaning that subjective experiences do exist but they are not

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distinguishable from physical processes in the brain (Churchland, 1988).

Materialism denies that it is our conscious decisions that cause us to act the way we do and instead believes that it is physical causes (Blackmore, 2010).

There are strengths and weaknesses of materialism. Searle (2000) believes it is very outdated and does not explain what consciousness is, but neither does dualism and by rejecting one, it does not mean adopting the other. One strength of materialism is that it avoids the problem of dualism which is that consciousness and physical matter are thought of as two separate substances, meaning that the interaction between them cannot be explained. Materialists argue that if our minds are the same as our brains and not two separate substances, then there is no need to explain how one causes the other. For dualism to be correct, the interaction between the two substances would have to work both ways, meaning that any change in consciousness must be accompanied by a change in the brain, and any change in the brain must also be accompanied by a change in consciousness. However, the latter is not true which suggests that dualism does not work (Blackmore, 2010).

Materialists believe that consciousness is identical to brain states. However, according to Leibniz's law, if two entities are to be identical, they must have the same properties (Blackman, 2008). For materialism to be correct, all properties of the brain would also have to be properties of consciousness, which is not true as mental states have properties that brain states do not, such as subjective experiences.

Materialism believes that our subjective experiences cannot be studied in an objective way as they are not a physical entity and non-entities cannot be studied by science (Blackman, 2008). However, Searle (2000) argues that they can. He believes that by asking people about their subjective experiences, for example, how it feels to experience pain, that we can study this objectively. One weakness of materialism is that it ignores the aspect of how it feels to be conscious by denying that subjective experiences exist or that they are not distinctive from functions in the brain (Blackmore, 2010). Patterns of brain activation cannot explain how it feels to be conscious and aware of experiences.

Miller et al. (2009) demonstrated how we cannot tell what someone is experiencing by looking at images of their brain activation. This was shown by strong individual differences in patterns of brain activation amongst participants while they were all doing the same memory task. Materialists believe that by doing the same memory task, all participants are experiencing the same thing and therefore the patterns of their brain activation should all be the same. However, as this is not the case, it provides evidence that eliminative materialism does not work and that subjective experiences do exist as participants must have had different experiences from one another even though they were doing the same task. This also suggests that reductive materialism cannot work as the variation within participants shows that our subjective experiences must not be identical to our brain states.

Nagel (1974) explains how subjective experiences are such a crucial aspect of being conscious by comparing humans to bats. We could never know what
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it would really be like to be a bat because we could never share the same subjective experiences as them. Even if we were magically transformed into a bat, we would still have our own memories and intelligence, meaning we would not have the same experience that normal bats do (Blackmore, 2010). He makes the point that in order to even begin to form an idea of what it is like to be a bat (or even another person) we must adopt their point of view. The same applies to Searle's argument about pain - it seems impossible that anyone would ever be able to have the same experience of someone else's mental state as their perceptions of the same experience could be entirely different (Churchland, 1988). This stresses how important subjective experiences are as we all have our own different viewpoints meaning that we experience things differently and therefore these experiences cannot be understood from looking at a brain scan. This also suggests why materialism is not the answer to the mind-body problem. However, it also argues against Searle's theory that subjective experiences can be studied objectively as, even after asking about them, we still do not know exactly what it is like to experience it ourselves.

Materialism's main strength is that it proposes that consciousness is not different from the brain, meaning that how one causes the other does not have to be explained and therefore, eliminates the problem of the explanatory gap. However, this can also be viewed as a major weakness of the theory - the two cannot be identical as our mental states have properties that our brain states do not share. Materialism does not sufficiently account for the role of our subjective experiences in consciousness. It either

completely eliminates their role or it claims that they are simply the same as our physical brain states.

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