

Freedom, Emotion and Mind

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(1)

[original pagination 191]

What we find when we reflect upon the nature of the mind depends upon the range and nature of the experience we bring to the task in the first place. Thus we might derive our conclusions about the mind from the nature of our present conscious awareness, without ever realising that that consciousness might be fragmentary, partial and ‘unhappy’ by contrast to what it *could* be. So we might develop a picture of the mind in ignorance of the direction of unconscious strivings which, if we had explored them and allowed them to develop, would have given us a different picture entirely.

Reflection upon the nature of the mind can also fall victim to the distorting influence of language. These two facts are not unrelated to one another, as I shall try to explain. Thus, not only does the language we inherit mirror the common experience and inherited culture of the community we are born into, it also tends to reinforce the forms of that experience, and can stand in the way of our becoming *aware* of other possibilities. Notice that I do not say that *language* does this, as though it were in the very nature of language to distort or conceal. It is rather that a particular received language may do this, and it does so because, in reality, it is the expression of the inherited practices, attitudes, and habitual perceptions of a whole culture, and it is these that may distort or conceal, or alienate us from ourselves and each other.

[192] Moreover, to make matters worse, it is possible for us to become confused, or even *bewitched* by the *grammar* of language itself. We can be misled by its surface form into large errors.

Thus the word ‘mind’ functions grammatically in the same way as the word ‘body’, and we can as a result be deceived into thinking that the mind is some kind of *thing*, or *stuff* in just the same way as the body is; whereas, if we look more closely at the way that language works, at the way we actually talk about mind, we shall find that the phenomena that we characterise as ‘mental’ show that the mind is better understood in terms of *activity* than in terms of *substance*.

Despite this, in modern western philosophy there has been a strong dualistic tradition, coming down from Descartes, that the mind is a sort of substance, and that the world is composed of two sorts of substance, one of them physical and the other mental, mind and matter: two kinds of stuff, together making up the universe.

But these twin concepts of mind and matter do have some connection with our common reflections and experience. If we think in terms of our ordinary, mundane experience of what we might call the macro-world, we are certainly aware of two kinds of phenomena, the physical, material world, of stones and flesh, of plants and water, extended in space and time, solid, heavy bodies, and we are also aware of thoughts and feelings, volitions and perceptions. These latter seem to belong to a quite different domain from the world of bodies, and so it is easy enough to see how people might have formed the notion that there are these two kinds of ‘things’ in the universe. Nowadays, of course, it is much more difficult to think in such crude and simple categories, at least if we are in any way aware of the state of the sciences. Physics makes it impossible to stay very long with a flesh and blood notion of Bodies and Matter. We think instead of atoms and subatomic

particles, we think of energy and mass, and so forth, and it is clear that our fundamental concept of *matter* has changed and will presumably continue to change.

Nevertheless there are still great difficulties facing philosophers and scientists about the *relation* between the material world, as we presently understand it, and *the mind*, as we presently understand *that*. Cartesian dualism has been [193] relegated almost to the status of folk psychology, and the increasingly dominant view that has replaced it is *physicalism*, the doctrine that the phenomena that we have until now categorised under the concept of *mind* can be ultimately explained by reference to the laws of physics.

What we don't yet know, however, is what the laws of physics will look like that are eventually able to account for the phenomena that we now describe as mental. Some people are afraid of *reductionism*, afraid, that is, of the idea that the mental should thus be reduced to the physical, as though we already knew what the real nature of the physical world was. But what we don't yet know is whether it is really possible to carry out such a reduction. It might turn out that the future physical theory that is capable of accounting for mental phenomena will have changed its character beyond recognition, in such a way that what appear now to be essentially non-physical features will be incorporated into a new conception of the physical. We have to wait to see whether we can eventually integrate our crude conceptions of mind and matter into a single theory, incorporating both, in such a way that our pre-theoretical awareness of flesh and blood, thought and feeling will be brought into a single picture of the universe.

(2)

We are, however, as a matter of common experience, aware of *connections* between mind and body: we see how they affect one another, how physical states affect our mental functioning or mental states our physical functioning.

In particular our awareness of an apparent *unity* of mind and body becomes clear in our experience of the *emotions*, which seem to have as much a physical aspect as they do a mental. And the emotions are fundamentally related to *action* and *conduct*. So let us pay particular attention to them. For one thing, our emotional lives show us that we cannot really talk about the mind for very long without also talking about the *body*. First though, we need to establish a connection between the emotions and *freedom*.

When the western philosophers of the early modern period developed their picture of mind and body, and the relation between these two separate entities, as they saw them, they did so against a cultural and religious background [194] which heavily reinforced the acceptability of such a distinction between the mental on the one side, and the physical on the other.

To be more accurate, they inherited a tradition which distinguished the physical, the mental and the *spiritual*. The latter category became more and more attenuated, however, in a way which relates to my earlier comment, that the way we reflect upon the nature of mind already depends upon the range of our experience; if our experience provides us with no cause for applying such a term as 'spiritual', then, of course, we shall drop it. We shall also be inclined to think that those who do use it are actually talking nonsense. And sometimes we shall be right.

In the great Scale of Being, stretching down from God, through the angels, and down to animals, plants and stones, the *human being* was thought of as the Great Amphibian, the being who uniquely inhabited the two worlds. The human person was at once a creature of the physical world and also an inhabitant of the spiritual, a little less than the angels. But as science developed, as the corpuscularian and mechanical philosophy grew more confident and successful, it became clearer to

men like Descartes that human beings in their material aspects at least were as susceptible as any other part of the physical world to physical, causal, explanation. And so limits were set on this domain of physical determinism by concentrating on a central feature of consciousness which was thought to be distinctive of our common humanity. This feature was *freedom*. The mind is not a physical substance, it is a mental substance. Therefore it is free from the causal determinism to which physical substance is susceptible. Unfortunately for this way of thinking, however, it does not follow that the mind is free from causal explanation altogether. But the idea was that human behaviour could not be explained entirely in physical and mechanical terms. Human *conduct*, human *action* was the product of a *free* and undetermined *will*.

Such a sense of *freedom* remains a popular belief, even though it has been constantly subverted with the discovery of forms of psychological determinism, in particular the apparent success of *psychoanalytic explanation* seemed to show that we were not as free as we thought. Not that psychoanalysis has itself been immune from attack, on the grounds, for instance, that it is a pseudo-science, unwilling to submit itself to the possibility of falsification, [195] and, of course, it has been subtly criticised on another front by Jean-Paul Sartre, who proposed a form of existential psychoanalysis to replace it, a proposal that has had a great influence on humanistic psychology. Even so, psychology and evolutionary biology seem to be capable of giving causal explanations of human behaviour in ways which make the idea of a distinctive arena of free human action less and less tenable.

Metaphorically speaking, the point of intersection between mind and body, I said, lay in the domain of feeling or emotion. I say ‘metaphorically speaking’ because it is important not to beg the question of the real relation between what we experience as mental and what we experience as physical. But that apparent point of intersection, where the body and the mind seem most integrated into a single experience, is the domain of the emotions. Now how can we establish a connection between the emotions, on the one hand, and our sense of human freedom on the other?

In the first place, we shall, as I have just suggested, probably have to abandon the idea that human freedom is to be understood as *a freedom from determinism or causal explanation*. We shall have to abandon the idea that what distinguishes mind from body is the former’s immunity from causal explanation. No doubt there are many forms of causal explanation which are not appropriate to the mind, but it does not follow from this that the mind is free from *any* form of causality at all, or that there are any little pockets of indeterminism. Indeed one of the greatest European philosophers, Baruch Spinoza, actually defined human freedom *in terms* of determinism: ‘that being alone is free’, he said, ‘which is determined by its own inner necessity’.

But can we perhaps understand the idea of freedom in a different way, by relating it to the emotions?

To understand how this might be possible, we need to be aware of another fundamental aspect of the mind, its directedness towards objects. Philosophers call this the ‘intentionality thesis’, and what it means, as far as the emotions or feelings are concerned, is that our emotions are *focused* on the *world as we take it to be*. The way we respond and act within the world is a function of the way we *read* the world. We are only frightened, for instance, if we perceive or sense *danger*. We rejoice at good news, we grieve when we perceive loss, and so on. What happens in the world, to the extent that we are aware of [196] it, makes a difference to our emotional responses, makes a difference, in other words, to how we are disposed to *act*.

That is one aspect; the way the world appears to us makes a difference to the way we respond. But there is another, vitally important aspect. This is that the way we respond to the world as we take it to be also depends on *the way we are*, on the way we human beings are *constituted*.

There is only danger in the presence of a bull, for example, because of our physical vulnerability; if we were differently constituted, and knew that we were, there would be no danger, and, consequently, no fear.

Here we can start to insert a different concept of human freedom from the one we were operating with earlier. There is a tradition which claims that human freedom is not properly contrasted with *determinism*, as though an action's being free was a matter of its being uncaused; on the contrary, human freedom is to be contrasted with *constraint*.

A person is typically *free* when they are *unconstrained*. This simple idea allows in another, viz., that freedom is something that has to be *achieved* or *won*, which implies, of course, that some people are more free than others, or that we may be freer at one stage of our lives than we are at another. However, there is more than one way of being constrained. We can be physically constrained without being mentally constrained. But the important question is, how can we be *mentally* constrained, in a way which makes clear that this amounts to a loss of freedom? One way is to have too narrow a view of the world, and too narrow a view of ourselves within it, since after all, our *field of action* is the world as we take it to be. If the world opens up for us, and we, correspondingly, open up to it, then we have, as it were, a *larger space* to move around in, we have a new freedom of movement, a new possibility of being what we are, a larger 'house of being', to use a relevant phrase from Heidegger. Indeed, to the extent that we *feel* constrained, to that extent we are already feeling the discomfort of cramped quarters, and this sense of *unsatisfactoriness* impels us towards change, towards growing into our real being, towards making ourselves free.

(3)

[197] Reference to a sense of unsatisfactoriness brings us to the Buddhist concept of *dukkha*. I have already mentioned that the way we respond to the world (and this includes our responses to each other) depends partly on the way we are constituted, and partly on the way the world is. However, it is much more complicated than this, for the way the world is does not always correspond to the way we take it to be, and the way *we* are does not always correspond to the way we take ourselves to be. But now, a fundamental idea in the Buddhist tradition is that the way we are *presently* constituted is by no means to be identified with how we *really* are, and a related idea is that there is a *path of transformation* from the one to the other. If we ask how, on this view, we are *presently* constituted, the answer is given in unambiguously ethical terms. We have to say that our perspective on the world, the perspective which determines the general nature of our responses, is itself governed by *craving, aversion and delusion*.

These are to be understood as fundamental features of our ordinary mental states, dominating our outlook on the world. Consciousness is thus understood, from the very beginning, in ethical terms, with an implicit contrast between this unflattering account of our ordinary mind, and the account of the Enlightened mind, which is characterised by wisdom and compassion, and by forms of community which reflect this.

Our own forms of community, by contrast, reflect the state of our own unregenerate minds. In talking about human emotions, as I have said, we have to take into account the fact that our emotional responses depend upon the way we see the world, or, even better, upon those features of the world that we are predisposed to notice. That formulation admits two ideas: the first is that there are features of the world that we are not disposed to notice, and the second is that it is possible, indeed probable, that in the grip of certain feelings, in the grip of certain passions, we are liable to misconstrue, misread, misrepresent the world. Hence the idea of delusion.

But what this means is that delusion *constrains our being*, because delusion undermines our freedom to act within the real world, in accordance with our real dispositions. [198]

But what about craving and aversion? There is much to be said, but let us concentrate on a single aspect, which derives from a Tibetan tradition. Aversion includes aversion from what tends to undermine our sense of identity, and craving includes craving for what tends to reinforce our sense of identity. There is a thought of Spinoza's that is relevant here: he tells us that every being strives to maintain itself in its own being. As far as we *human* beings are concerned, we strive to maintain ourselves in our being *as we conceive it to be*, and, as I have already implied, we tend to conceive it *wrongly*. We strive to maintain ourselves in our being as we conceive it to be, and we are attached to what reinforces this self-view, and hate what tends to undermine it. So there is a built-in tension, and the prospect of struggle, in the gap between how we conceive ourselves and how we really are, since, after all, we take it that our self-view is correct, and we do not abandon it without a fight. Nevertheless, what we are fighting against, in such circumstances, are precisely those impulses towards growth and greater being that are stimulated by the experience of *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness.

Now this becomes extremely interesting. I alluded just now to the idea that we can misconstrue the world we take ourselves to live in. But our sense of our own identity is also something about which we can be deluded, is also something we can misconstrue. Our ideas about what the world is like include our ideas about what *we* are like, since we are, after all, part of the world. I also referred to the idea that there are features of the world that we are not disposed to notice, and it is clear also that there are features of our own selves that we are not disposed to notice.

I am not simply referring here to what Carl Jung called 'the Shadow', those parts of our behaviour and attitude that we avoid because they do not fit into our preferred self-image. Of course, coming to terms with this shadow is an important part of the process of integration by which human beings are able to transform themselves. But it is not the only part. In order to see what else is involved we need to reflect upon another aspect of the Buddhist tradition which is directly related to what we have just been talking about.

If Buddhism talks about delusion it presumably does so because it intends to make a distinction between the way things appear to us, as we are presently constituted, and the way things really are. But if there is a relation between [199] mere appearance and a particular constitution of our being, then there is going to be a relation between *reality* and an *altered* state of our being, that state of our being which provides the conditions under which the disclosure of reality becomes possible. Indeed that is an important feature of most schools of Buddhism. The description of Enlightenment as 'knowledge and vision of things as they are' presupposes that knowledge and vision of things as they are is not *available* to us in our present condition. Knowledge and vision of things as they are is not, in other words, a matter of *belief*, of having all the right beliefs and opinions, and nor is it something that one can be *told*. The point of saying this is profoundly related to a real difficulty about traditions of religious *belief*. One could say that one's mind is not fundamentally altered by the arrival of a new belief or opinion; one is not transformed away from a mind still rooted in craving, aversion and ignorance. It is possible to have all the right beliefs, as it were, without undergoing the path of transformation that, according to Buddhism, is the necessary condition for becoming what one really is. Even having New Age views about the Nature of Mind, or being in tune with the Age of Aquarius, or being politically correct, or ideologically sound, does not bring about the kind of transformation upon which Buddhism insists as a necessary condition of knowledge and vision of things as they are. What Buddhists call 'knowledge and vision of things as

they are' already includes a reference to a transformation of the person. Such knowledge, if it genuinely exists (and we might doubt that it does if we fail to meet the conditions under which it is disclosed), is not available to us because we have not *become the being who knows*. There is a necessary relationship, in other words, between being and knowledge, and we will have our freedom, and be finally unconstrained, only when we have become that being.

I said earlier that Buddhism makes a distinction between the way we presently are, and the way we really are. So there is a connection between this idea of the possibility of transformation, and the idea of knowing things as they really are. The key Buddhist notion at this point is that of *samadhi* or 'concentration'. In Buddhist texts there are frequent references to the idea that 'one who is concentrated sees things as they really are'. So the process of transformation is also a process of *concentration*. Again, there is an implicit contrast here, between concentration and its absence. Our ordinary [200] mind, that is to say, is precisely *unconcentrated*, so that our energies are scattered and undeveloped, our focus blurred, our mind fragmented, in ways that have obvious implications for our capacity, or incapacity, for ethical action. I said at the beginning that the way we reflect upon the nature of mind depends in part upon the range of our experience. It is beginning to look as though our ordinary, mundane experience will provide us with only very inadequate information about the real nature of mind. The idea of *samadhi* or 'concentration' itself is an idea that can only be explained by pointing to the phenomena of meditation and the development of more ethical mental states than those governed by craving, aversion and ignorance. In other words, if we take what Buddhism says seriously, we shall have to conclude that there is no insight into the nature of mind available unless one undertakes the path of transformation upon which it is said to depend, and out of which it is said to grow. To put it another way, we shall only discover the nature of mind by learning how to embody and realise its progressive intimations, which involves a movement away from egocentric self-enclosure towards what happens when freed minds meet.

This is the text of a lecture delivered in Valencia in 1992.