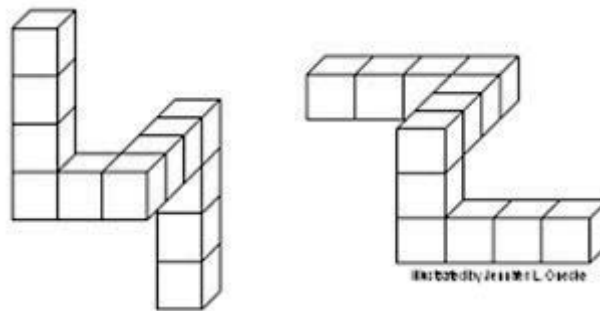


Matter and Consciousness

A critical examination, by Andy Blunden

I want to use figures used in the experiments by [Shepard and Metzlar](#) to clarify a couple of really simple, but invariably very confusing distinctions about mind and matter. Shepard and Metzlar showed subjects pairs of figures like those below and asked people whether the two solid shapes depicted were the same, or mirror images of each other, by mentally rotating one so that they could ‘see’ the two side by side. (Try it!) The surprising thing about the experiment was that the time taken to solve the problem reflected the magnitude of the angular and linear moves required, as if they were real solid objects. But that is not our concern here.



Now I want to ask you, the ‘solid objects’ which you manipulated in your imagination, are they *material*? If you say “yes” I would be asking what you mean by “material” and if these mental objects (which are not even images of really existing objects) are “material,” then what in your way of speaking is *not* material? If you were to answer “everything is material,” then all you have done is transformed “material” into a meaningless word. So the claim that they are material is equally meaningless. No, if we are going to use the word “material” in a meaningful way, then we have to indicate by it *some* distinction, some property of things which they may or may not have, or at least have in a great or lesser measure. (But to say your mental images are “partly material” would hardly be satisfactory, would it?)

Perhaps you will argue that the mental objects are “material” because they are the product of a material process, namely, the activity of a human brain. There is no doubt that the human brain is a material object – if has a weight and a volume and a location in space and is connected by gravity, radiation and other natural processes to every other material object in the universe. Likewise, all the processes taking place in the brain are also material processes, obedient to all the laws of biology and physics and instantiated in the movement of material objects – albeit very small ones. But to be the *product* of a material process is not the same as to *be* a material object or process.

Now, I am not talking about “material” or “matter” in the sense the word is used in modern physics, as distinct from “wave.” I am interested in “material” as a philosophical category. Waves or particles, all natural processes, I take to be material. So let’s turn the question around: what could *I* mean by “material” and “not material”?

I mean by material *everything that is outside of my consciousness*. That seems to be the wrong way around, defining matter relative to consciousness, and *my* consciousness, to boot. But it makes sense. Whatever may have caused me to have a thought, my

consciousness is the only starting point I have for *any* act of thought I do. If I were to start with the material world, and then define consciousness, for example, as derivative of material processes, and subject to its laws, not only would I be faced with explaining how consciousness manifests Free Will in apparent defiance of natural law, but I would have made no progress in explaining conscious awareness, the essential property of consciousness which makes it possible to even discuss it.

The important thing is to know the difference between what is just in my mind and what really exists outside of my mind, independently of my consciousness. So, sure, matter, the material world is always the important thing, it is what we want to know about, but for that very reason, I have to be able to distinguish between what only exists in my consciousness, and what exists outside of my consciousness, that is, the material world.

What marks something as material is that it is interconnected with every other material thing in the universe. That is the central property of matter that is *not* a property of my consciousness. But those objects, the Shepard-Metzlar blocks I am rotating in my mind, are not material, they are not subject to the laws of mechanics, despite discoveries of Shepard and Metzlar which showed how our ability to manipulate them in our mind was still tied to our experience with moving material objects around. Being interconnected and existing outside of my consciousness, matter moves and changes in ways which we have found to be regular and even predictable, and through Natural Science, it has been possible to get to know these regularities, called “laws of Nature.” The objects in my mind are *not* bound by the laws of Nature – I can think anything I wish to. All *other* objects, all material objects are.

Let’s just clear up some difficult questions which arise from this. Are unicorns material objects? For that matter, are Mr. Henchard, Father Christmas and God. Yes, all these are material, in the precise sense that they exist independently of *my mind*; I didn’t make them up, I learnt about them from other people. But there aren’t any horses with pointy horns running around anywhere and there never were. Unicorns do not exist, they are not real. All these kind of things are *ideals*, that is to say, they exist only in and through the actions of people who give reality to them through their actions. Like Melbourne University or the price of a cinema ticket. These are material things whose existence is only implicit in human activity. But they are not *mental*, they are not phantoms or illusions or dreams I am experiencing. They are *material*. Some ideals have a more substantial basis in reality than others, but they are all material.

What I’m thinking at the moment; that is not material. But as soon as I say a word, or make a gesture or produce a trace on a brain scan betraying this thought – these actions *do* exist, they *are* material, and as material things they give both you and me the opportunity to see something of what I was thinking. It is a very limited class of things which are not material – just those things which exist only in my mind.

So what about *your* thoughts? This is where it gets tricky. Being material or not is actually *relational*. From my point of view *your* thoughts are material. If I want to understand your actions, then I absolutely have to take account of your consciousness, what may have motivated you to do this or that; I have to take account of your past experience, your prejudices, and so on, which has formed your consciousness. I have

to have a theory of mind. And in that respect, I have to go on the theory that your consciousness is the product of material processes, and inasmuch as it is responsible for further actions by you, continues to be part of a material process, your activity. If I'm on the jury and you're accused of a murder, I take into account your lousy upbringing, your failure to understand certain social norms and so on. I may come to the view that you ought to be given a minimum sentence because of extenuating circumstances. But in treating you like that, as just part of a chain of cause and effect, for all my honourable intentions, I am actually de-humanising you. I am denying your free will, your moral responsibility for your actions. I am putting myself on a higher level and you on a lower level. And if you are a human being you will not be extending to yourself those extenuating circumstances. You will take moral responsibility for your actions and not simply ascribe them their *causes*.

So by taking the world as being material, but setting my own thoughts aside as not material, I am not setting up a dualist world. Everything outside my own consciousness is interconnected and material, and in that very strong sense *unitary*. But I cannot take my own thoughts in the same way. I cannot step out of my mind and look at it as if it were under the microscope. My thoughts are not *caused* by my experiences, even though my experiences are the basis for my thinking. I cannot regard my thoughts and therefore my actions as simply the effects of material causes, that is to say, the effects of processes outside of my consciousness (even though you may think so!) because I still have to decide on every action I take and I can be capricious. But if I understand the world well, then indeed I will have no choice; I will know what I *have to do*, but I still have to decide to do it.

But also, my thoughts are nothing like the material processes which led me to them. The images I have of those Shepard/Metzlar figures are nothing like a bunch of neurons. If you ask me what I am thinking now, I am not going to give you a description of the relevant neuronal activity – and indeed I could not, and nor could anyone else! The blocks I have in my mind have no neurons in them, any more than an image of me in the mirror weighs 85 kg or has any weight at all for that matter. I may have a location in mind for these blocks (for example, in my hand 500cm in front of my eyes), but they are not there in my hands. Just as when my cat looks behind the mirror to find the other cat, he is surprised to find nothing there. And the images are not located in my head either, any more than a mirror image is located in the mirror. We cannot mix up the reflecting device with the image it produces. No, these images simply *do not have a location*.

This relation between the mental and the material, between what is in my mind and what exists outside of my mind, between mind and matter, is an *ontological* relationship. It is a *necessary premise* for a theory of knowledge, recognising that the thinker, or subject, is an individual human being, who can know the world only by means of his thinking body. But it is not in itself a theory of knowledge. It sets up the basis for scepticism, for a rational and sceptical attitude to the world. Unless I recognise that my thoughts are just thoughts, and I enquire into what basis they have in the world outside my mind, unless I recognise that the laws governing the behaviour of material processes may have little relation to my ideas of them, and start from what I

find has a firm basis in the material world and not what I find inside my head, then there can be no science.

Now, a lot of confusion arises from the conviction that such a sharp division, such a *dichotomy* between the mental and the material, just *has* to be wrong. Even if the world beyond my own consciousness is all one, it is still a dualism. There can't be such a sharp line between the mental and the material! After all, everything in my consciousness arose through material processes, both physiological and behavioural (through experience). How can I say that there is one room out here in the material world, and another room there in my mind, etc.? That is a dualism! Duplicate worlds, one inside the head and one outside. Surely this is the most naïve and outrageous dualism!

No, no, no. I am not saying this at all. The *ontological* relation I put forward, takes account of the fact that I am a thinking human being, and draws a line between my ideas and the material world *as a whole*. The *epistemological* problem of the relation between what I take a certain process or object to be and what it is *in itself*, so to speak, that is to say, *the subject-object relation*, is a different matter entirely.

Vygotsky (1928) [cites](#) the Danish philosophy Høffding: “We must not mix up the relation between subject and object with the relation between mind and body, as Høffding splendidly explains. The distinction between mind and matter is a distinction in the content of our knowledge. But the distinction between subject and object manifests itself independently from the content of our knowledge. ‘Both mind and body are for us objective, but whereas mental objects are by their nature related to the knowing subject, the body exists only as an object for us. The relation between subject and object is an epistemological problem, the relation between mind and matter is an ontological problem’.”

The subject-object relation is not a dichotomy. The conception of subject and object is that of a relation between two material systems (be they human beings, organisations, a camera or even a computer) interacting with one another, each reflecting properties of the other within its own system of activity, each interpenetrating and constituting one another. The subject-object relation is not primarily about individuals, but rather about systems of activity by means of which we all come to know the world. It expresses the epistemological problem.

My idea of the thing is indeed just an idea and not a material thing. But the epistemological problem is that there is no sharp line between what I take that thing to be, and what it is in itself, or what someone else takes it to be, for that matter. In the process of investigating something, we “peel off the layers of the onion,” so to speak; our first impression is replaced by a different view which is in turn replaced by a still deeper view. Equally, there are many points of view about any given object, and we don't claim that there some real “material” object out there somewhere which belongs to a different realm of reality. *No!* The epistemological problem is not that of the distinction between mind and matter, but how very object is constituted by a multiplicity of different forms of activity in relation to it, a multiplicity of subjects, each constituting an object uniquely for itself.

What is *objective*, that is to say, beyond any *particular* stance, which transcends all difference, is ultimately only the materiality of the object, that the object is part of the material world, and all its processes. But that may not tell us very much. In connection with the life of a given community, that is objective which is not subject to transformation by that community. But in general, that is not very much. Every concept we have is in some degree objective and in some degree subjective; nothing material is just subjective. Every idea or theory we come across has *some* basis in the material world, is to *some* degree objective. But equally no idea or theory or conception is completely objective, completely free of a subjective component.

So all the work of science takes place in respect to the subject-object relation, continuously transforming what was unknown into something known and malleable to our purposes, discovering behind appearances what something really is, its essence, and again, discovering that essence to be nothing but an appearance. But at each end of this epistemological process is the ontological position. That the subject is a thinking individual, and that all the processes of the natural world are an interconnected whole, a material world, which goes on independently of us.

Andy Blunden,
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