

The Nature of Mind

by David M. Armstrong (1926-)



Armstrong's Goal



- ◆ Armstrong interprets mental states as causes of behavior. (like Dualists)
- ◆ He also believes that mental states are linked to behavior (like Behaviorists)
- ◆ Armstrong attempts to bridge the gap and find a theory of mind which could accommodate both the internal states of mind and science. His aim is to “give an account of man in purely physico-chemical terms. (p295)”
- ◆ A Materialist/Physicalist account of the mind- mental process can be explained and identified using the physico-chemical

The Mind

- ◆ We all have a mind
 - ◆ perceptions
 - ◆ sensations
 - ◆ emotions
 - ◆ beliefs
 - ◆ thoughts
 - ◆ purposes
 - ◆ desires
 - ◆ What is it to have a mind?
- ◆ Armstrong states that the best clue we have to the nature of the mind comes from modern science. We have nothing better to go on as of right now.



Why Science?

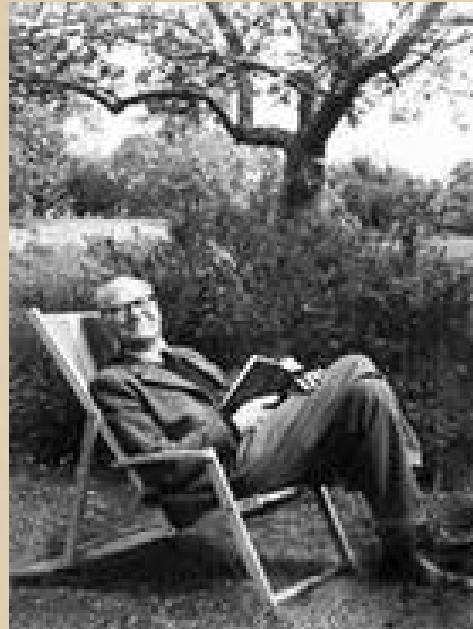
- ◆ It is only through science that people can reach an agreement about disputed ideas.
- ◆ A consensus is vital to coming to conclusions about ideas, and Armstrong argues that as a result of scientific investigation, a consensus about the mind can be achieved.
- ◆ “Science has provided us with...a raft of truths, to bear us up on the sea of our disputatious ignorance. There may have to be revisions and refinements...but what science has given us will not be altogether superseded. (p296)”



Behaviorism

- ◆ Behaviorists- identify mental states with behavior
 - ◆ no notion of the mind as a “spiritual object”
- ◆ Behaviorists find fault with the Cartesian view of the “ghost in the machine”.
 - ◆ Anger is not a result of an inner soul or spirit, but the actual outward act of angry behavior itself
 - ◆ “The mind is not an inner arena, it is outward act”

Rylean Behaviorism



- ◆ However, we can easily imagine a case where someone feels a certain emotion or sensation without showing any outward signs of it.
- ◆ Also, there can be a mental process without a behavior that expresses it.
- ◆ Rylean Behaviorism- Introduces the notion of having a “disposition to behave”

Dispositions

- ♦ Brittleness is a disposition possessed by materials like glass.
 - ♦ Brittle materials are those that shatter with little force
- ♦ Breaking easily is not brittleness. It is a manifestation of brittleness.
- ♦ A disposition to behave is a tendency to behave in a certain way under certain circumstances.
- ♦ In order to meet the objection that there can be a mental process without the person engaging in a relevant behavior, Behaviorists argued that although a subject was not behaving in any relevant way, they were still disposed to behave in some relevant way.
 - ♦ A glass is still brittle whether or not it actually ever breaks. It will always maintain that disposition to easily break.

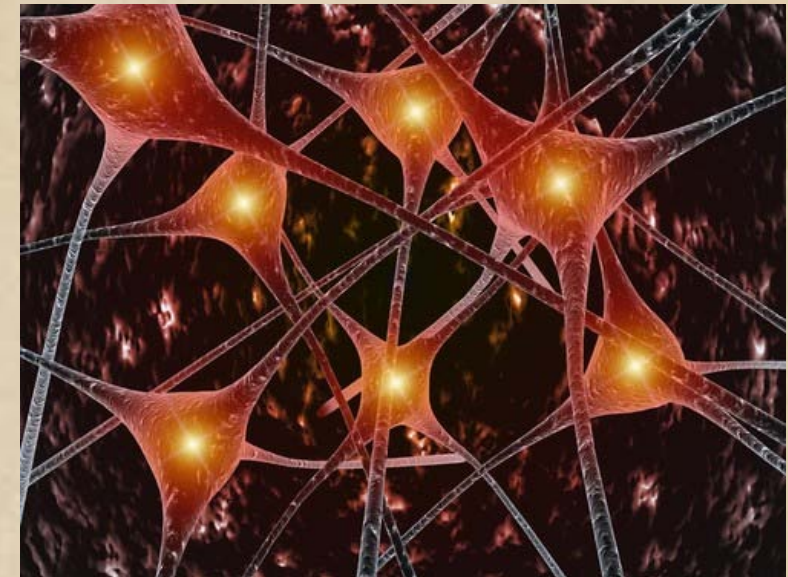


However...

- ◆ Armstrong argues that there is something in us that constitutes thought, even if there is no action
 - ◆ “Something is currently going on in the strongest and most literal sense of going on , and this something is my thought” (p298)
- ◆ Behaviourism is an unnatural way to try to comprehend the mind.
- ◆ Someone’s behavior is the reason we have for attributing a mental processes to them, but the behavior is not the mental process itself
- ◆ Mental state- a state of a person which brings about certain behaviors
 - ◆ mind is not behavior, but the inner cause of it

Purely Physicalist View

- ♦ If the mind and mental states are nothing but the cause of certain behaviors, then it becomes a scientific question what the nature of that cause is
- ♦ Modern science states that this cause is actually the physico-chemical Central Nervous System
- ♦ Scientists view “states” of objects as having dispositions
 - ♦ Brittleness is a state of the glass because it causes the characteristic manifestations of brittleness
 - ♦ So it follows that it is possible for there to be something in the molecules of glass that is responsible for its brittleness
- ♦ A mental state is a state of the person apt for producing certain ranges of behavior



Synthesis

- ◆ Thesis: Classical philosophers thought the mind was an “inner arena”
- ◆ Antithesis: Behaviourism, and the notion of the mind as outward behavior
- ◆ “The mind is properly conceived as an inner principle, but a principle that is identified in terms of the outward behavior it is apt for bringing about. “(p299)
- ◆ It is most commonly believed that man is nothing but a physical mechanism. Therefore, mental states are nothing but physical states of the central nervous system.

The Problem Of Consciousness



- ◆ Consciousness is an “other person” point of view and never a “first person” one in Behaviourism
- ◆ We cannot simply say that to be conscious is to have something going on within us that causes behaviors
- ◆ Long distance car trip example
 - ◆ Some mental process is still going on, but something mental is also lacking
- ◆ So how do we deal with the consciousness that we experience everyday?



Perception



- ♦ Green and Red light example
- ♦ A behaviorist would say the regular selection of the green light is the perception of the color difference.
- ♦ We have the capacity for selective behavior which, like dispositions, are inner states of us.
 - ♦ We can then say that the animals perception is a state within the animal that allows for selective behavior between the red and green paths.
- ♦ “Perceptions are inner states defined by the sorts of selective behavior that they enable the perceiver to exhibit, if so impelled” (p301)

Perception and Consciousness

- ◆ Consciousness is the perception or awareness of the state of our own mind.
 - ◆ We cannot directly observe other peoples minds, but we can both observe ours and perceive what is going on there
- ◆ “Consciousness of our own mental state may be assimilated to perception of our own mental state, and that, like other perceptions, it may then be conceived of as an inner state or event giving capacity for selected behavior, in this case selective behavior towards our own mental state.” (p301)

Conclusion

- ◆ Armstrong says that his argument is only meant to be a logical analysis of consciousness and does not mean that a purely physicalist account is definite.
- ◆ However, he believes that if we go along with the general scientific consensus of a physicalist account, then his argument can be used to support it.
- ◆ Mental states can be identified as physical states of the Central Nervous System.
- ◆ Consciousness would be the scanning of one part of our Central Nervous System by another.
- ◆ This is compatible with a purely Physicalist account of mind.

Discussion Questions

- ◆ Armstrong's reasoning for using science to prove his theory is that "it is only as a result of scientific investigation that we ever seem to reach an intellectual consensus about controversial matters." Is this true, or are there other ways that this consensus can be achieved?
- ◆ Does Armstrong accomplish his goal of showing that it is possible to have a purely pysics-chemical view of the mind?