

The Mind-Body Problem in the History of Psychology Essay

Introduction

The mind-body problem is a very old one. In Western culture, its roots go back in history to the philosophical theories of Ancient Greece. The crux of the problem is evident from its name: what is the relationship between the mind and the body? How do they correlate and work together? The reasons for the problem's emergence are not hard to imagine. There is a large qualitative gap between what we see as our physical bodies, and what we experience happening in our heads. And, once the question was asked, numerous thinkers attempted to answer it.

In this paper, we will briefly describe the history of the problem by discussing what various prominent philosophers and physicians thought about it. After that, we will discuss the views of the most important schools of psychological thought on this problem. We will also state what the author of this paper believes regarding this problem.

The Views of Philosophers

Ancient Greek philosophers already were trying to answer a question similar to the mind-body problem. However, for them it was formulated in different terms; they asked not about the mind, but rather about the soul (ψυχή, psyche), something that made a thing alive. The soul was perceived as something extremely light and associated with breath. For instance, Thales associated it with air, while Heraclitus thought of it as of fire (Copleston, 1993).

More complicated theories emerged with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates' opinions are known to us only thanks to the writings of other philosophers; in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates talks to his friends and convinces them that a human's soul is immortal. Plato believed that the soul is an immortal substance which is, in fact, imprisoned in the body (Plato, n.d.). Aristotle paid somewhat more attention to the problem of the soul. His treatise, *On the Soul*, discusses the issue. Aristotle believed the soul to be a principle of all the living things; even plants had souls.

However, unlike Plato, he thought it to be dependent on the body (Aristotle, n.d.). For a well-known Neo-Platonist Plotinus, who somewhat combined the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, the universe consisted of the One, a source of everything in the world, the Mind, all the eternal truths, and the Soul, which was a manifestation of the Mind in living beings (Copleston, 1993). Therefore, the Ancient Greek philosophy already associated the soul and the mind.

The medieval philosophy, strongly aligned with Christian theology, paid much attention to the issues of the soul. A prominent medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas ties the issue of the body and the soul to the issue of the matter and form. For him, the body and the soul are united – as much like the seal and the wax are; the mind does not interact with the body, because they are

one. Regardless, the soul is immortal and capable of existing without the body (McInerny & O'Callaghan, 2014).

Rene Descartes, one of the most prominent representatives of the 17th-century rationalism, had strictly distinguished the soul and the body. His expression, "cogito ergo sum," "I think, therefore I am," is known to many. He believed that the soul is an immortal substance created by God, completely immaterial, responsible for all the cognitive activity of a person. At the same time, he believed the soul to interact with the body by pushing a part of the pineal gland in the brain (Lokhorst, 2013).

John Locke was the one to bring the notion of consciousness as an important one, defining a person as a conscious, thinking thing. He believed that, at birth, a person's mind was a tabula rasa, but then it was filled with numerous ideas coming from our experience. The body, however, was also important, and it interacted with the mind (Uzgalis, 2012).

For David Hume, the mind's contents came from perceptions, but a priori ideas were also possible. The mind was apparently a set of perceptions. However, the mind existed within the body, and without the body, there was no mind. This dualism is incomplete, however; for instance, he asked what led people to the very conviction that the body exists (Flage, 1983).

For Immanuel Kant, the mind perceived the outer world through the prism of innate, a priori forms of sensibility, such as space and time. The body was a spatial object, but, given that space was a form of sensibility, any spatial object, including the body, was a phenomenon, and it could never be known whether this object really existed and what it was like; it remained an inaccessible thing-in-itself (Rohlf, 2010).

The Views of Physicians

It is also important to consider the attitudes of influential physicians towards the mind-body problem. A prominent Ancient Greek physician, Galen, believed that the mind and the body were a single unit, not separate things. He was convinced that individual parts of the body were responsible for different functions and that the mind was among such functions (Hankinson, 1991).

Hermann von Helmholtz, an influential German physician and physicist of the 19th century, had a strictly materialistic view on the mind-body problem. He, along with his colleagues, believed that a living body was a machine that only worked according to the laws of physics. For him, no distinct types of energy were responsible for the existence of life (Bowler & Morus, 2005, p. 177-178). Another important figure of the 19th century, an English biologist Thomas Huxley, had rather similar views.

He was an epiphenomenalist, i.e., he believed that the mind was produced by the brain, so all the emotions, wishes, feelings were reflections of the needs of the physical body (Huxley, 1874). A prominent Russian physician of the 19-20th centuries Ivan Pavlov also aligned towards the

monistic solution of the mind-body problem, believing that the mind and the body were identical and that the mind originated in the higher nervous activity (Windholz, 1997).

The Views of Psychologists from Various Schools of Thought

The establishment of psychology as an academic discipline is associated with the creation of a laboratory in Germany in 1879 by Wilhelm Wundt. Wundt began the psychological school of voluntarism. Voluntarists believed that consciousness could be broken down into separate components without the whole being lost. For them, the mind interacted with the body, but the nature of this interaction was difficult to grasp (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014).

Edward Titchener, a Wundt's student who created the school of structuralism, believed that the mind was comprised only of experience gathered throughout a person's life and that this experience was organized into a structure of some kind; he wished to describe its elements. Titchener and structuralists also adopted the voluntarists' stance on the mind-body problem, holding to dualism, a view that the mind and the body are two different entities. However, they were not interested in studying the relationship between them (Wertheimer, 2012).

Another school of psychology, functionalism, was interested in the study of the functions of the mind and consciousness. For them, the mind was a set of functions, and the mental states were performed by the body. Therefore, they did not hold to the traditional mind-body dualism (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014).

The representatives of the school of behaviourism believed that a person's (or, in fact, any organism's) behaviour was a response to the physical stimuli they received from the outside. In fact, they rejected the need to study consciousness at all. The mind-body problem was not relevant to them, for they believed consciousness was a physical process accompanying behaviour (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014).

Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is interested in studying the human's subconsciousness to help the mentally ill. They believe the unconscious mind to be the cause of behaviours and mental conditions. For psychoanalysts, bodies "cannot be reduced to mere collections of chemicals"; mind and body are mutually permeating entities (Brearley, 2002, p. 442-443). However, the mind still remains the main area of psychoanalysts' interest.

The school of humanistic psychology emerged in the 1960s to combine the problems researched by deterministic psychoanalysts and behaviourists while leaving space for free will and the spirit. For them, mind, body, and spirit were aspects of a single person, and no split between mind and body existed (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2015, p. 656-657).

The school of psychobiology combined the principles of behaviourism and psychoanalysis and developed the idea that the mind and psychological phenomena are grounded in the physiological causes. The representatives of this school realize the mutual dependence of mind and body and strive to exactly determine the relationship between the two by using both

psychological and biological variables in their studies (for instance, see Kemeny (2003) or Stein (2009)).

Finally, the school of cognitive psychology, one of the newest schools of thought, studies the cognitive processes of the brain (such as attention, memory, concept formation, reasoning, etc.), and employs the achievements of numerous academic disciplines such as neuroscience, information technologies and artificial intelligence, linguistics, philosophy and anthropology. Their view on the mind-body problem can be called similar to that of psychobiology; the mind is grounded in the biological causes (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2014).

The Author's Views

The author of this paper is inclined towards the point of view of the schools of psychobiology and cognitive psychology. We believe that the mind is grounded in the body. In fact, it is our opinion that they are a single entity, even though it is not (yet) understood how exactly mental processes emerge from the body. Distinguishing between mind and body is required because it is necessary to denote different aspects of this entity.

Conclusion

As it was possible to see, the mind-body problem was studied as early as in the times of Ancient Greece. Ancient Greek philosophers relied on speculative reasoning alone to explain the nature of ψυχή, the soul that was responsible not only for the mind but was believed to make a creature alive. The philosophers of the Middle Ages perceived the issue through the prism of Christian theology. Descartes and the rationalism of the 17th century proclaimed a strict mind-body dualism; still, the notions of consciousness and perceptions were made important by Locke and Hume.

The psychologists adopted different stances towards the problem; for voluntarists and functionalists, mind and body were two different entities that interacted, but the nature of this interaction was not interesting to them. Behaviourists and psychoanalysts had almost opposing views, believing that either the body and behaviour or the mind and the unconscious were of primal importance, respectively. Humanistic psychologists believed that mind, body, and spirit were a single entity. Finally, psychobiology and cognitive psychology perceive the mind as emerging from the body but believe that essentially they are one.

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