

THE IMMATERIALITY OF 'ABSTRACT OBJECTS' AND THE MENTAL

By IRVING THALBERG

SUPPOSE each one of us somehow 'has' or 'is' in a mind, which shelters various entities or events: pains or bouts of discomfort; thoughts or episodes of pondering; desires or surges of longing. Mind-body dualists consider these all to be non-physical. Materialists demur. Yet few debaters on either side have asked what these mental items or events would be like if they *were* incorporeal. The scant information we've culled sounds irreducibly negative. Our mind and its denizens are said to have *no* location or other spatial attributes, to be *indivisible*, *not* accessible to or ever shared with another person, *not* perceptible by means of our sense organs, but known *infallibly*, *non-inferentially*, *without* evidence, and to *no one* but ourselves.

Two October 1984 journal articles address this neglected topic. Writing in *American Philosophical Quarterly* (xxi, pp. 367-70) G. J. Reid complains:

The ... materialist attack upon the category of the immaterial ... has taken the form of claiming that we have no need of [it] ... whatever it might amount to in detail ...

The materialists ... have not been much concerned to articulate [it before excluding it].

More significantly, Reid asserts that 'the immaterial' is not doomed to be 'negatively defined (as the non-extended, for example)'. In fact Reid has 'three positive accounts' of it.

Before we plunge into that, we should take note of the other recent discussion, in *Mind* (xciii, pp. 556-9). Its author, Peter Glassen, seems happy with a negative account. He says

we ... mean by 'non-physical' ... 'lacking one or more of the defining characteristics of the physical' ... [F]or our ... purposes ... 'physical' objects and events are [defined as] those that *occupy space*, that are *publicly observable*, and that *may enter into causal relations* ...

This proposal generates fascinating side-issues. First, *could* any object or event lack just 'one ... of the defining characteristics of the physical'? For instance, might it lack a habitat, yet be observable — and also figure in causal transactions? Alternatively, could something be unaffected by its surroundings, and causally powerless itself — hence incapable of stimulating our senses — but publicly perceptible? A second puzzle is that even if such conglomerations of present and absent 'defining' traits of 'the physical' occur, will they always rank as non-physical?

Glassen would avoid both difficulties if he required that non-physical things lack *all* the characteristics he mentions. But that

will create a third problem: won't interactionist dualists flatly *deny* that mental – and by hypothesis non-physical – events *lack* the characteristic of being able to affect and be affected by physical happenings? Some parallelists and epiphenomenalists will object too, that at least *mental* occurrences interact.

There is a similar hitch about lacking the characteristic of extension: how should we classify the visual images, pictorial 'mental representations' and sense data which many dualists say we inwardly contemplate? Allegedly these items are located *within* our mental sanctuary, and have shape, colour and relative size – all of which involves space. How then can they, and the mind housing them, qualify as immaterial? Glassen displays some cognizance of this fourth puzzle. He admits it is a mystery 'what could be going on in something . . . that does not occupy space'. But he reassures us that it is *meaningful* to say 'what goes on [there is] imaging and perceiving'. And generally a 'dualist's claim that the mental is non-physical in that it lacks . . . [the characteristic] of occupying space, is perfectly meaningful'.

Now forget my misgivings towards Glassen's analysis of what 'we . . . mean by "non-physical"'. Assume that we *can* meaningfully speak of extensionless minds and of the imaging that takes place within them. How has Glassen enlightened us about the immateriality of mental objects and events? We had found it uninformative to be told what immaterial things are *not*. Are we better off hearing which attributes they *lack*? Someone should reveal what attributes are *left*. I doubt that the central question is 'What do terms like "immaterial" and "extensionless" *mean*?', or 'Are they meaningful?' Instead we should ask: What are *any* features – 'defining', normal, accidental, even idiosyncratic – that a bodiless thing might exhibit? Naturally if a dualist answers by ascribing to a non-physical item features which define or typify 'the mental', that will make her or his claim, 'the mental is non-physical', an empty tautology.

If we were inquiring what everyday negatively described things are like, would our task be so arduous? Glassen thinks it would, and offers three down-to-earth examples. He says that apparently

[a] 'non-prescription' remedy can be *defined* in positive terms as one that one is legally permitted to buy 'over the counter' . . . [T]his seems to be a *definition* in positive terms; but is it really? Doesn't it *just mean* 'without a doctor's written authorization . . . '? If it *means* anything other than this, I don't know what it is . [Similarly, an] 'immobile' object is one that 'stands still' . . . But what does 'stands still' *mean*? The *only sense* I can make of [it] is: 'does not change its position . . . ' [Again,] I list the ingredients of a number of refreshments. What do I *mean* when I say . . . these refreshments are non-alcoholic? Why surely that not one ingredient is an alcohol (some italics added).

Once more I doubt that the issue is whether 'non-physical' – or humbler negative expressions – are meaningful. Even *what they*

mean, strictly speaking, and how we should narrowly *define* them, may be irrelevant. In this regard, 'non-prescription' and its workaday kin are on a par with 'non-physical' and its noble cognates. Maybe we should only define, or articulate the exact *sense* of, both species of negative expression in further negative phraseology. Yet a vital difference remains. We *can* portray, in lavish detail, various non-prescription medicines, immobile house-hold items such as bathtubs, and familiar non-spirituuous beverages like V8 juice. By contrast, when Glassen and others tell us that dualists claim 'the mental lacks defining characteristics of the physical' — above all the 'characteristic of occupying space' — our progress is minimal. What else is there for the mental to do?

For his part, Glassen thinks we are not really in the dark about what it is for 'the mind and its events' to be bodiless and 'not occupy or occur in space'. He argues that *numbers* are clearly immaterial entities, and that we 'understand . . . what it would mean to say that a number had no spatial position'; we should moreover agree 'on the necessity of [numbers] not occupying space'. In response I'm tempted to invoke Wittgenstein's comparison of two negative statements, 'A goose has no teeth' and 'A rose has no teeth' (PI, pp. 221f.). Isn't the second statement necessarily or 'obviously true', even 'surer' than the first? Wittgenstein decides this is 'not so clear. For where should a rose's teeth have been? The goose has none in its jaw. And neither . . . has it any in its wings; but no one means [or asserts] that when he says it has no teeth'. By analogy, I am dumbfounded as to how things would be if some number — or all numbers — had spatial attributes. Consequently I'm altogether uncertain what we are declaring impossible when we say they have 'no spatial position', and call this a 'necessity'.

Suppose I'm deluded, and relatively rational inquirers like myself can understand what it is for *bona fide* non-physical entities of one sort (numbers) to lack extension. Will this serve as a model for clarifying the putative non-spatial and non-physical character of 'the mind and its events'?

Reid's 'three positive accounts of the immaterial' should come in handy at this juncture. They are, nearly *verbatim*:

(i) 'Whatever can be shared without diminishment is immaterial'. In other words: 'whatever can be multiplied without loss of identity' or singleness will be non-physical. Reid says 'abstract objects', including numbers and 'universals' like 'a shade of red', all pass this test; 'trees and stones' do not. Reid further claims that 'knowledge is immaterial', perhaps failing to discriminate between (A) *what* several researchers at different times know to be true — which might be a single 'abstract' proposition — and (B) the myriad of events, none of them 'abstract', which constitute each person's acquiring knowledge of it.

(ii) 'Whatever is intentional is immaterial'. Reid explicates 'intentionality' by distinguishing now 'between content and occurrence'.

The content of an occurrence would be what the occurrence of 'of' or 'about'. My example would be the proposition which is what a researcher's knowledge is knowledge of. Reid's illustrations are '[a]n impression of red' and 'statues of something'. Reid asserts that 'statues [of something] are intentional', but wisely neglects to combine this with the major premise above, 'Whatever is intentional is immaterial'. Of course the premise should have been: whatever is intentional has an abstract *content* which is not a material object or event. Then neither a stone sculpture nor an 'impression of red' must be incorporeal.

(iii) 'Immaterial items, unlike material items, have clean cut identity features'. A single 'daffodil bulb' can split 'into two ... each of which has an equally good claim to be [identical with] the previous [*sic*] bulb'. Yet 'whatever empirical multiplicity we ... encounter cannot be explained as two different ... number 9s'. I suspect all this was implied by account (i) of 'whatever can be multiplied without loss of identity'.

At least Reid's (i)-(iii) furnish positive information about one species of 'the immaterial'. All the non-bodily items Reid surveys are 'abstract objects': numbers, universals, contents of sensory 'impressions' and other mental states, along with contents of representational artefacts. But Reid has not shown or illustrated how psychological events – much less our 'statues of something' – might be incorporeal too. Thus Reid's account (i) misclassified the mental state of knowing. The mixup becomes glaringly evident when Reid announces that 'items ... as common ... as ... books ... are ... immaterial'. Isn't a book's content a likelier candidate? I react similarly to Reid's insinuation that 'consciousness' is 'not material' by (i)-(iii). In fact (i)-(iii) only provide that contents of awareness – what we are conscious of – are abstract, reproducible yet one, and so non-physical.

(i)-(iii) make it obvious that the characteristics which endow abstract objects with their non-physical standing cannot belong to minds and their states. According to almost any conception of the mental – dualist, materialist, whatever – there is no analogue to the sharing and multiplication 'without diminishment' that typifies abstract objects. By the same token abstract items seem not to be the right sort of things to have, *or to lack*, features which distinguish the mental. Your mind, and your state of expecting a rain-storm, must be uniquely yours; they begin and cease to exist in time, and undergo alterations; many theorists say they are introspectible, perhaps unerringly. How could a number be owned or unowned, have or not have a beginning and ending, change or resist change? A number seems unsuited for introspection, accurate or inaccurate, and also for public observability or invisibility.

But isn't the mental, as Glassen said, like numbers and other abstract entities in being deprived of extension? I think the analogy is dubious. Perhaps numbers are as ill suited to be *lacking* an abode

in space as to be a tenant. They may be of the wrong category to have extension *and* to be extensionless.

This analysis seems not to carry over to minds and psychological happenings. Materialists from antiquity to the present have sometimes identified our minds with a bodily organ. Once the heart was a favourite, but for centuries now the brain has taken over. Most often, materialistically inclined theorists have equated mental events – such as episodes of musing, processes of deliberation, and outbursts of hostility – with a person's relevant behaviour and whatever neural events are needed. No doubt publicly recognized practices and rules must also be in the background. However, this crude sketch is enough to indicate that minds and psychological states, unlike numbers, are at least *eligible* to have or to lack extension.

Of course dualists and their interpreters, including Reid and Glassen, have not told us how things would be if the mental were extensionless and therefore non-physical. Yet that is secondary. What strikes me is this. We have moderately positive accounts of abstract entities and the characteristics which differentiate them from every material particular. But because they and the mental are so heterogenous, our study of their immateriality has failed to advance our understanding of a dualist's war cry, 'the mental is non-physical'.

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CHURCHLAND ON DIRECT INTROSPECTION OF BRAIN STATES

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PAUL Churchland has recently argued that the phenomenal features of our experiences are not a barrier to psycho-physical reduction (P. Churchland, 'Reduction, qualia and the direct introspection of brain states', *Journal of Philosophy*, February 1985, pp. 2-28). His position is that introspection of qualia is introspection of brain states; with the conceptual framework provided by a mature neuroscience we can learn to achieve 'direct, self-conscious introspection' of such properties as spiking frequencies of neural pathways.

I am in sympathy with Churchland's general goal of showing that phenomenal qualities of experiences can be accounted for in a physicalist philosophy, and I am also in sympathy with his