

More Than Matter? by Keith Ward

Mark Vernon asks what the matter is with Keith Ward.

The notion that all that exists is material stuff is pervasive these days. From this idea follow various beliefs, not least that human beings are merely a product of genetic copying mistakes and enjoy no more free will than a rock. But it's an aberrant view when set against what most philosophers in history have held. They were mostly not materialists, but *idealists*.

Idealism is the theory that the type of things that exist are fundamentally mind-like in nature, such as the mental entities experienced as thoughts, feelings, etc. In his latest work of accessible but penetrating philosophy, characteristically laced with entertaining asides, Keith Ward seeks to defend a form of idealism.

The book is brief compared with the immensity of the subject, and often sketches a plausible case rather than filling it out, but it is also timely. Ward believes the inadequacies of materialism are becoming increasingly apparent in areas of scientific investigation such as quantum physics and consciousness. Further, there is a major intellectual battle underway about what it is to be human, and Ward is squarely on the side of a humanism which holds that "human persons are not accidental mistakes in a pointless perambulation of fundamental particles. They are a window into the inner reality, value, and purpose of the cosmos."

Professor Ward studied at the feet of the two leading twentieth century Oxford philosophers implicated in this debate, A.J. Ayer and Gilbert Ryle, and Ward uses them as reference points. In part the book is a respectful refutation of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, a classic critique of Cartesian dualism – the notion that mind and matter are distinct substances. Ryle famously characterised Descartes' view of consciousness as a "ghost in the machine." That said, Ryle was not a materialist: he was against *any* metaphysical theory, calling such theories "logical howlers." Ryle also thought it was possible to defend human freedom without having a belief about mind as somehow over or more than matter. Ward came to the conclusion that this is not possible to do. Ward argues that Ryle succeeded in providing a good account of the social reality of what it is to be human, but failed to provide an adequate account of the mental life of people, and also of what it means to act responsibly.

Further, Ward argues that Ryle's characterisation of Descartes did the Frenchman a major disservice. What's ironic is that Ryle claimed to be a commonsense philosopher, and yet he rejects many of the most commonsensical things about being human in order to critique Descartes. For example, Ryle objects to Descartes' notion that 'minds are not in space'. But, Ward asks, is it not obviously the case that memories, images, perceptions and the like are not located anywhere specifically [physically]? It might be retorted that they are in the brain, but that'd be a mistake. What neuroscientists see in the brain is electrical activity and blood flows. These brain phenomena are no more thoughts and feelings than the current coming out of an electric socket is a thought, or the blood that rushes from a cut is a feeling. The only entity that can directly detect the content of mental activity is the person experiencing it. Or, to put this objection another way, I know what I'm thinking (more or less), even though I've never once inspected my brain – and I hope I never have to. Ryle "had privileged access by introspection to his own thoughts," Ward writes in one of his witticisms, "even when he was thinking that there was no such thing as introspection or privileged access. Yet that, it seemed to me, was a self-refuting thought to think!"

A.J. Ayer differed from Ryle, not least in believing that he did have private experiences, which he called 'sense-data'. In fact, Ayer proposed he had nothing *but* sense-data. So, when he met other people, he gained new sense-data – concerning shapes, colours and sounds – and it was from the sense-data that he inferred that he was encountering other people. Ward argues that this stance makes a nonsense out of Ayer's *logical positivism*. Logical positivism holds that statements are only true when based on evidence, not theories; yet Ayer's convictions about sense-data meant that when he encountered other people, he had to make an inference that they were other people – which is to say, he had to apply a theory about his sense-data.

For such reasons, and although it is a bad word in contemporary philosophy, Ward makes the case for dualism over various versions of materialism. Unlike materialism, what dualism doesn't have to do, is explain away the experience of every human being. However, Ward doesn't stop with dualism, but moves next to the philosophy of idealism.

Immanuel Kant is the key transitional figure here. Kant was a 'critical idealist'. What he showed, or claimed to show, is that far from

mind being a material thing, it is in fact partly the creator of material reality, in that it creates the way material reality appears to us. For example, we don't hear discrete notes when the piano is played, but music; the interpretation of the sound-waves is done by a mind. Kant also implies that 'naïve naturalism' doesn't work, because underneath the way the material world appears to the mind is a deeper reality which is veiled and unknown to it.

There's a third element of materialism which Kant undermines: he argues that human beings must assume they are free to act in the world if they are also to assume that they are genuine moral agents. We set ourselves moral goals, such as pursuing the happiness of others. According to Kant, goal-setting is done by reason. So if you believe that the happiness of others is a rational goal – as any decent morality surely does – then you must also believe that reason has a causal role in the world. To put it another way, our moral commitments, which are so much a part of what makes us human, proceed on the basis that although beyond-appearance reality is veiled from us, it is nonetheless rationally structured.

That said, Ward argues that Kant's view doesn't hold together. It leads to a separation between a deterministic *phenomenal* world of appearance, and a *noumenal* world of veiled reality which Kant takes to be free. But our free actions clearly take place in the phenomenal world. To Ward this implies that the Kantian description of reality is much more like the dualism Ryle so loathed than any dualism Descartes proposed. Kant's view "is worse than a ghost in a machine," Ward concludes: the mind "is something completely invisible inside the appearance of a machine."

Ward inclines, then, to an idealism which gives priority to mind – what he calls 'dual-aspect idealism': minds are the inner aspect of an apparently-material person, living in an apparently-material world. "What the reality underlying those appearances may be in detail we do not know," he continues. "But since minds are the only sorts of reality we know to belong to the world of things-in-themselves, it is reasonable to think that reality does not exist without mind and consciousness, evaluation and intention, understanding and action ... Minds are not illusory ghosts in real machines. On the contrary, machines are spectral, transitory phenomena appearing to an intelligible world of minds." This leads Ward to further reflections on issues such as whether the universe can be said to have purpose, the nature of what it is to be a person, and whether minds can exist in disembodied forms.

Critics of dualism will want to know how Ward links the (inner) mental and the (apparently) physical. The short answer is that he offers suggestive possibilities, often via process philosophy. His fuller response would first point out that there's an assumption hidden in the search for such a linkage which could be a mistake. It's the *reductive* assumption, that things need to be broken down into their smallest parts in order to be best understood, and then reassembled. What if, instead, simple elements are sometimes best explained in terms of the wholes of which they are part? On this view, the cosmos is more like an evolving organism than an assembled machine; and in the same way that a person is commonsensically thought of as a psychosomatic unity, so the universe is some kind of unity too. Only it's (unsurprisingly) hard to describe exactly in what way it is a unity – and so materialist or dualistic language tend to be our default positions, in the modern West, at least.

Even if inclined towards some kind of idealism, not all readers will want to follow Ward to his final conclusion, which defends a religious understanding of things. But, nonetheless, he offers a powerful challenge to the prevailing, although perhaps shaky, orthodoxy. The basic mistake made by materialists, following the explanatory successes of science, is to presume that science's methodological materialism implies an underlying ontological materialism [ie, that all that exists is matter]. What is forgotten in this slippage is that science merely observes reality, whereas humans *participate* in reality, with values and purposes. Moreover, participation is, in fact, prior to the ability to make observations, as mind is prior to material appearances. All in all, it's simply more commonsensical to hold an idealist view of reality, which includes values and purposes.

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