Never Mind the Need to Mind

Review of The meaning of mind: Language, morality, and neuroscience.

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Capturing and killing the mind

Inquiries into philosophic issues, especially moral issues, within the field of social science are sparse and generally limited to the discipline of philosophy where they remain inaccessible to social scientists despite their importance to the field. Even rarer are philosophic inquiries that are conducted by social scientists themselves and presented in a language accessible to the general social scientist. This parsimonious style is what makes The meaning of mind: language, morality, and neuroscience such an important book to begin exploring certain philosophic dimensions of social science.

Szasz sets out to probe one of the most conceptually difficult ideas in social science--the mind. Clarifying this crucial concept has plagued scientists for centuries and will indubitably do so for many more. Nonetheless it is vitally important that we understand what we mean when we utilize the "mind" in our investigations into human phenomena.

To Szasz the mind originates in the Hellenic civilization. The Greeks utilized the mind as a verb meaning to heed and as such was characterized as an observable property. Hence, one minded the baby or was told to never mind. Over time the concept changed and assumed a dual identity, that of both verb and noun. As a noun the mind initially characterizes a soul. With the increasing importance of the institution of science came another change in the conceptualization of mind. The secularization of the mind removed the soul and replaced it with thought which entails our beliefs, desires, and wants. Further transformations have since relegated the mind to the brain.

Depositing the mind in the brain carries several repercussions for the human sciences that are rarely attended to and this is what alarms Szasz. As a verb the concept mind explicitly contains agency, that is responsibility. According to Szasz, relegating the mind to the brain deprives the mind of this critical human component. This occurs through the process of reification. Reification is regarding something [End page 25] abstract as a material or concrete thing. By locating the mind in the brain organic dysfunctions eliminate intentional actions. Therefore the brain causes all human actions. If this is so, one is no longer responsible for their actions because said actions originate in the brain and not in one's beliefs, desires, and wants.

Clearly this is troublesome for several reasons. First, it is an iniquitous mistake to reify such a blatantly non-material concept. Projecting an observable reality to the mind violates Descartes' claim that the mind is a different substance than the rest of nature. Descartes argued this because we can't doubt the existence of the mind, whereas we can doubt the existence of the body and the brain. We can imagine waking up and missing a finger, but we can't wake up and doubt that we have a mind, because who would make this assessment if one had a mind?

If Descartes is right, and the mind is not matter, then causal relations can't exist because spatial connections are a necessity of causality (Rosenberg 1988, Chapter 2). Another problem is that for the mind to be the brain, the brain must then have intentional content, i.e. coded representations of our beliefs, desires, and wants. How can thoughts have physical representation? If my belief that a gun is dangerous is encoded somewhere in the brain how does this physical arrangement become interpreted? Someone or something must then interpret these codes engrained in our brain, that is provide the meaning (i.e. intentional content) contained in my belief that guns are dangerous. These questions can't be answered today, perhaps ever, but should we proceed down this path with only the faint hope that somehow in the future we can logically connect the mind to the brain?

A second problem also arises by putting the mind in the brain, we remove responsibility from being human, and that in turn is dehumanizing. It eviscerates the very core of being a human, which is, exerting influence over one's own life. As the underground man in Dostoevsky's Notes from underground so eloquently decries: "One's own free, untrammeled desires, one's own whim, no matter how extravagant, one's own fancy, be it wrought up at times to the point of madness--all of this is precisely that most advantageous of advantages which is omitted, which fits no classification, and which is constantly knocking all the systems and theories to hell" (p. 28). If the mind is encoded in the brain the effervescent spirit that has marked the mind since its conception as a noun is killed. We also kill Aristophanes' beautiful verse in The birds, "By words the mind is winged" (Line 1447) because how can an encoded existence be altered by ethereal words.

For example, someone who repeatedly gets drunk and behaves immorally can't be punished if we locate the mind in the brain because they are not responsible [End page 26] for their actions; instead it is the fault of synaptic misfiring or excessive levels of serotonin. Their immorality is not immoral because a determined action is morally neutral; thus they are not responsible. Only if free will or intentionality marks such behavior can a moral assessment be made. In fact, our laws explicitly demand that if one is not responsible for one's actions we can't punish them, instead we must treat or habilitate them.

To Szasz this is a catastrophic mistake because we supplant moral discourse with a medical discourse that convincingly solves moral problems. Moral issues are troublesome and messy but inherent in all realms of human life. Szasz correctly asserts that it is impossible to solve moral problems, we must instead focus on "re-solving" them (p. 38). However by putting the mind in the brain we confer an all- explanatory cause to a physical substance (p. 108). The brain becomes God, omnipotent in all the realms of human life as each of us follows our determined and Fated existence.

Now it would be unfair to characterize the mind as being outside the realm of influence by the body. We do know that certain processes in the brain exert influence on the mind, whatever it is. We know that our moods can be influenced by neurochemical reactions. However, the influence is at best of minor significance. The problem is putting sapient and sentient creatures under the total influence of the brain. Like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, those that locate the mind in the brain spuriously impute a function where a function is unlikely to exist.

If the mind, at this time, can't be logically connected to the brain, why does this conception persist?

Medicine's will to power

Thomas Szasz in, The meaning of mind: Language, morality, and neuroscience, painstakingly illuminates the scientific and political turmoil that develops when definitional discipline is abandoned. This absurd condition of the human sciences, treating humans as anything but human, has become conventional in certain facets of the human sciences and even more problematic in ordinary discourse. While Szasz excellently describes the malady of the mind guiding most human research nowdays, he presents no explanation of how such a condition could arise within the scientific realm. An adequate characterization of this movement away from considering morality imperative for understanding humans resides within the voluminous body of work by Friedrich Nietzche.

In the puritanical rush towards emulating the technologically efficient sciences, the human sciences [End page 27] exenterate what is exactly at the core of being a human being; morality, responsibility, and accountability. To be human means to be able and willing to function as a responsible member of society and society must be able and willing to ascribe such a status on them. A human being without moral agency is not a "true" human being. Since the human sciences inquire into humans, it cannot seriously escape moral issues. The claims for a morally neutral science are difficult to attain in the human sciences and may not be desirable in the first place. To treat a value as a fact is one of the most fundamental mistakes science can make.

Of the several deleterious side effects that arose from the positivistic movement in science, of which we are now in the midst of handling the repercussions, one of the most catastrophic in the human sciences was the casting away of morality as a scientific concern. Science thrust the discarded remains of morality into the esoteric domains of philosophy and religion where they have generally languished for the last century or so. Free from the constraint of treating a "subject" as a "human" the human sciences blindly set about to "deconstruct" humans. Ironically, this "deconstruction" of humans centers primarily on setting up the framework for "re- constructing" bad, faulty, sick, or mis-constucted humans. And to consider something as sick, bad, or faulty is to make a normative claim, which by definition is value laden. Hence, the concern is moral, but with "morality" never able to enter the scientific dialogue.

The brilliant and unabashed philosopher Nietzche prophesized, (and cheerfully advocated the fulfillment of such a movement), that humanity had surpassed a crucial juncture in its "moral" history and its "moral" future. This juncture marked the battle for life, a battle beyond good and evil because life is beyond good and evil. Life that is living, and not dying, exhibits what Nietzche labels a "will to power." This "will to power" is the organisms' striving to master their environment in a manner suitable to themselves, and in principle only themselves. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on where you reside in this web of power, Others are out there.

These Others are also willing themselves to power. This "will to power" is never equal, so it greatly varies across individuals, groups, nations, and cultures. To Nietzche, this "will to power" undergirded the necessity of assembling groups, nations, and other collectivities to provide either safety from Others "will to power" or an avenue to gain power from Others.

In The genealogy of morals, Nietzche also argues that a master-slave relationship is the [End page 28] fundamental substratum of all societies. Thus, domination and exploitation are the basic principles binding all of us together. So all unions of Others exhibit this basic structure. Each, master and slave, resides within a separate existential realm but is always fated to meet at a point of fundamental conflict--who and what is morally desirable. The struggle over whom wears the hat of master and who wears the hat of slave is the primordial battle over the shaping of society's moral attributes. That is, morality, which in itself is unnecessary and artificial because it fluctuates over time and space; is therefore un-natural, arising as a side-effect out of the "political" battle between masters and slaves. In this view, political power equates with psychological superiority. Hence, the will to power is a will to shape morality. Nietzche's immortal apothegm, "God is dead," perfectly marked the rupture with mankind's past. Morality was no longer external to man--it was in man.

God's death was but temporary though, and as Nietzche insisted; God would hide in various caves around the world. God has come out of hiding. The urge to assign order and chaos outside ourselves persisted until a gentle, so subtle, transmogrification occurred. God wasn't recognizable at first but he was alive. A new, but familiar, master was resurrected. The new God, our new master, born from our own sweat and blood, was science and medicine.

By viewing the mind as the brain within Nietzche's generalization of humankind's path to the future brings to light the political and moral entrepenuership of the medical field as they exert their will to power. (The medicalization of human frailties has been well documented elsewhere, see Conrad and Schneider's, The medicalization of deviance, for an excellent exploration of medical interpretations supplanting moral ones.) By increasing the body of human actions, within their purview, medicine's stature as a power broker in morality increases exponentially. The question is whether society would desire such a will to power? Maybe David Rothman was correct in his argument that certain problems in society are best dealt with by removing them from our conscience because that is the most expedient resolution to the problem (Conscience and convenience: The asylum and its alternatives in progressive America). Nonetheless, the issue is whether we want to be slaves to the medicine master?

Let the debate begin

Thomas Szasz does an excellent job of setting up the foundation of a healthy and necessary dialogue on how we define the mind and the effects of defining it within the language of neuroscience. No matter how we conceive of the mind philosophic problems arise. It [End page 29] is our duty and obligation as scientists to probe the definitional clarity by which we operate in producing viable knowledge. Since the knowledge social science produces is used to guide human behavior, we must be careful not to present contaminated or flawed knowledge. If social science inevitably is moral knowledge, we can't escape delineating the moral choices we have taken. Therefore, social science can't escape philosophy and philosophy can't escape social science.

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