



Mind-Brain Duality Per Stevenson

Professor Ian Stevenson, Ph.D., spent several decades doing first-hand investigations of cases in which people – mostly younger than 8 years – claimed to recall previous lives as other people. His numerous books are generally recognized as the gold standard of thorough, unbiased, and important research into cases that suggest the reality of reincarnation. In 1997, Stevenson published his monumental opus (two volumes, over 2,000 pages) titled *Reincarnation and Biology*.¹ This was a presentation of cases involving physical characteristics and marks on children that corresponded to characteristics and marks on the deceased persons whom the children claimed to have been in a past life. In the concluding chapter of this work, the professor addresses the question: Is the mind separate from the physical brain?

Stevenson begins by pointing out that reincarnation entails belief in an “interactionist dualism with regard to the relations between mind and brain.”² This is opposed to the theory of mind/brain identity, sometimes called epiphenomenalism, which, he avows, is “the reigning orthodoxy today among nearly all philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists.” This is of critical importance because the views of mental scientists affect other educated people so, as H. H. Price has pointed out, “it is assumed by the majority of modern Western educated

people that in some form or other the materialistic conception of human personality must be the right one.”³ But, Stevenson claims, as shown by the cases he has investigated and by many others, the materialistic conception is *not* correct. He then discusses some of the deficiencies of the theory of mind-brain identity.

He begins with the concept of consciousness being that of which we are directly aware. “*Percipio, ergo sum,*” he says, and quotes Eddington: “Mind is the first and most direct thing in our experience; all else is remote inference.”⁴ Eddington’s use of the word *mind* corresponds to what Stevenson means by *consciousness* because he links it with awareness. Yet much of the contents and most of the processes of our minds are not conscious. The principal ingredients of the unconscious levels of our minds are our memories, which are private and unique to the person having them. This makes memories “the best, perhaps the only, criterion of personal identity.”⁵

“Observations of persons whose brains have been damaged through injury or illness show how much we require a healthy brain in order for certain mental events, such as recovering memories, to occur. They show, however, only that for such events a healthy brain is necessary; they do not show that it is necessary and sufficient.

“The problem of how we access our

¹ Stevenson, Ian, *Reincarnation and Biology*, Vol. II, Praeger Publishers, 1997.

² _____, p. 2070.

³ Price, Henry Habberley, “Psychical research and human nature” in the *Journal of Parapsychology*, vol. 23, 1959, p. 187.

⁴ Eddington, Arthur Stanley, *The Nature of the Physical World*, 1929, p.37 (Kessinger reprint 2005).

⁵ Stevenson, p. 2070.

memories is one of the most difficult in psychology. Neuroscientists and psychologists cannot tell us either how we store memories or how we retrieve them. Suggestions that experiences leave "traces" in the brain (whether in altered neural networks or otherwise) have not so far led to further understanding."⁶

Stevenson claims that the identity theory also fails to explain our perceptions of colors and shapes, which cannot correspond to anything in the brain. He quotes Mundle: "The data of our sense-experience ... have qualities not possessed by brain processes. When one sees something which looks yellow, the causally relevant brain processes are not yellow, so what is it that is yellow?"⁷ The identity theory, Stevenson says, is equally useless in comprehending "the lack of isomorphism between our perception of, say, a three-dimensional chair and the by no means chairlike array of cerebral neurones that assist that perception."

The answer Stevenson favors is that "the yellow and the chair shape that we perceive are in the mind. During lifetime under ordinary conditions the mind is tuned to the brain so that when the brain is properly stimulated the mind perceives colors and shapes. A useful analogy here is that of a television set; it shows colored forms when appropriately tuned to receive on its screen electrons released by the electromagnetic waves emanating from a transmitting station that has its camera focused on corresponding objects."

Stevenson thinks that the theory of mind-brain duality "will ultimately prevail

when the evidence of telepathy and other paranormal processes becomes sufficiently persuasive." For himself, "the existing evidence suffices, and I think it would prove so to many other scientists, if they would examine it carefully. Unfortunately, most of them have ignored the evidence of such phenomena or dismissed it as insubstantial."⁸

Stevenson points out that skeptics often object that we still have no satisfactory theory of how minds can interact directly without brains." He refers them to Charcot's sage remark: "Theory is all right, but it does not prevent something from happening." Neither, Stevenson states, should the lack of a theory prevent the acknowledgement of what Mundle called "strange facts in search of a theory."⁹

"The idea that the brain is an instrument of the mind is, in the West, at least as old as Hippocrates, who said "to consciousness the brain is the messenger." William James and Henri Bergson were in modern times among the first to advance the same idea. Although they were both fully convinced of the occurrence in some circumstances of paranormal cognition, neither developed a coherent theory of a mind/brain relationship that would take account of telepathy and clairvoyance. Later, however, Thouless¹⁰ and Wiesner did just that. They suggested that minds normally receive information by reading brains and normally influence events by instructing brains to carry out muscular activities; abnormally, however, minds may receive information directly from other minds and may also occasionally influence events directly without cerebral and muscular mediation.

⁶ _____, p. 2071.

⁷ Mundle, Clement W.K., *Perception: Facts and Theories*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 160.

⁸ Stevenson, p. 2072.

⁹ Mundle, "Strange Facts in Search of a Theory," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. 56, No. 207, January 1973, p.1.

¹⁰ Bartlett, F. C., M. Ginsberg, E. J. Lindgren, and R. H. Thouless, *Study of Society Methods & Problems*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1946.

The title of the paper by Thouless and Wiesner included the word *paranormal*, which I have myself repeatedly used in this work. I regard this word as previously useful, but now handicapping. It derives from a negative definition of the events to which it refers, such as direct communication between minds *without the known sensory organs*. When such communications become widely accepted as actually occurring, even though rarely, we shall pass beyond a negative definition of such events and can stop using the word *paranormal*.

“To assert that present knowledge of the brain cannot explain either normal memory or paranormal cognition is not to provide evidence that minds might survive the deaths of

bodies. The cases reported in this work, and some other types of cases also, however, do provide such evidence, and readers need to decide for themselves to what extent they find this evidence convincing.”

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“If during our familiar life our minds are already in a mental space, as I believe, we might say that at death our bodies leave us, while we continue to exist in our mental space.”¹¹

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Miles Edward Allen, 27 December 2013

¹¹ Stevenson, p. 2074.