

Mind in Objectivism

A Survey of Objectivist Commentary on Philosophy of Mind

Diana Mertz Hsieh (diana@dianahsieh.com)

11 January 2003

Philosophy of Mind

Philosophy of mind is the branch of metaphysics that studies the basic nature and capacities of the mind. The primary issue of philosophy of mind is the “mind-body problem,” described in Anthony Flew's *A Dictionary of Philosophy* as the “problem of how the mind is related to the body, and of what properties, functions, and occurrences should be regarded as, respectively, mental or physical” (Flew 1984, 232). In the preface to *Philosophy of Mind* (an excellent and comprehensive anthology of the classics of philosophy of mind), David Chalmers lists some of the “central questions” of philosophy of mind (as conceived of within analytic philosophy) as:

What is the mind? What is the relationship between mind and body? Is the mind the same thing as the brain? How can the mind affect the physical world? Could a purely physical system be conscious? Can we explain subjective experience in objective terms? Does the mind represent the world? What is the nature of belief and desire? What is the relationship between consciousness and representation? Is the mind in the head or in the environment? What can we know about other minds, in humans, animals, and machines? What is the self? (Chalmers 2002, xi)

Although philosophy of mind has been a hot topic in analytic philosophy in recent decades, Objectivism currently has no well-developed account of the ontology of mind. Nevertheless, a survey of the comments on philosophy of mind by Objectivist philosophers reveals an unexpected wealth of published material, presented here by author in semi-chronological order.

Ayn Rand

Ayn Rand never published any substantial commentary on philosophy of mind, but her writings nonetheless offer clues to her views. Early entries in the *Journals of Ayn Rand* contain unambiguous assertions of the metaphysical unity of mind and body. In a 1947 entry she writes,

And, to go to the roots of the whole vicious error, blast the separation of man into “body” and “soul,” the opposition of “matter” and “spirit.” Man is an indivisible entity, possessing both elements—but not to be split into them, since they can be considered separately only for purposes of discussion, not in actual fact. In actual fact, man is an indivisible, integrated entity...” (Rand 1997, 551).

Rand reiterates this view in a undated passage eventually cut from Galt's Speech which states “man is an entity of mind and body, an indivisible union of two elements: of consciousness and matter” (Rand 1997, 663).

Rand also has some helpful comments on the mind in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, written between 1967 and 1968. In a discussion in Chapter 5 on ostensive definitions, she speaks of both sensations and axioms as irreducible epistemological simples in writing,

Sensations are the primary material of consciousness and, therefore, cannot be communicated by means of the material which is derived from them. The existential causes of sensations can be described and defined in conceptual terms (e.g., the wavelengths of light and the structure of the human eye, which produce the sensations of color), but one cannot communicate what color is like, to a person who is born blind. To define the meaning of the concept “blue,” for instance, one must point to some blue objects to signify, in effect: “I mean this.” Such an identification of a concept is known as an “ostensive definition.”

Ostensive definitions are usually regarded as applicable only to conceptualized sensations. But they are applicable to axioms as well. Since axiomatic concepts are identifications of irreducible primaries, the only way to define one is by means of an ostensive definition e.g., to define “existence,” one would have to sweep one’s arm around and say: “I mean this.” (Rand 1990, 40-41).

Thus consciousness, as one of the axioms of awareness, is clearly an irreducible concept according Rand. (I do have some reservations about Rand’s use of “sensation” here, but the basic point about irreducibility stands regardless.)

In the “Philosophy of Science” Appendix of *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (based upon workshops given between 1969 and 1971), Rand addresses the limits of philosophy of mind, essentially arguing for a more restricted role for philosophers than generally found in analytic philosophy (Rand 1990, 289-90). When asked whether “the relation of conscious activity to brain activity” is “a scientific question,” Rand simply replies “Yes” (Rand 1990, 290). Then, after apparently agreeing that philosophy should offer science “certain provisos... such as that consciousness is causally efficacious and that free will is possible,” Rand argues that philosophers must also “define the terms of [the] question” because “in asking what’s the relationship between ‘mind’ and ‘brain,’ scientists have to know what they mean by the two concepts” (Rand 1990, 290). Rand is thus applying her general principle that philosophy must “be based only on that which is available to the knowledge of any man with normal mental equipment” without any assistance from “special knowledge or special instruments” (Rand 1990, 289).

Rand’s most important commentary on philosophy of mind is very likely her praise for Aristotle’s basic view of consciousness in a review of Herman Randall’s book *Aristotle* published in *The Objectivist Newsletter* of May 1963 (Rand 1963, 18-9). Although Randall only briefly touches upon Aristotle’s views on life and mind in that book, he does clearly highlight Aristotle’s rejection of both the mysticism of dualism and the mechanism of materialism (Randall 1960, 59-72). He summarizes Aristotle’s conception of psyche (“power of living and knowing”) as “not an additional ‘thing’ besides the living body, but the body’s power to do what the living body does, its function (ergon), its operation (energia), its culminating end (entelechia)” (Randall 1960, 64). Rand approvingly echoes these sentiments in her review:

For Aristotle, life is not an inexplicable, supernatural mystery, but a fact of nature. And consciousness is a natural attribute of certain living entities, their natural power, their specific mode of action—not an unaccountable element in a mechanistic universe, to be explained away somehow in terms of inanimate matter, nor a mystic miracle incompatible with physical reality, to be attributed to some occult source in another dimension. For Aristotle, “living” and “knowing” are facts of reality; man’s mind is neither unnatural nor supernatural, but natural—and this is the root of Aristotle’s greatness, of the immeasurable distance that separates him from other thinkers (Rand 1963, 19).

Such positive (albeit general) regard for Aristotle’s view of consciousness is a common theme in Objectivist commentaries on the mind, such as Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* and Branden’s *Psychology of Self-Esteem* (Peikoff 1991, 34; Branden 2001, 10). (I was delighted to discover this review just a short time after finishing a paper entitled “The Soul of Aristotle” sympathetic to Aristotle’s philosophy of mind (Hsieh 2002a).)

Robert Efron

Robert Efron published a four-part article (approved by Rand) entitled “Biology without Consciousness—And Its Consequences” in the February to May 1968 volumes of *The Objectivist*. The article offers a strong critique of the reductionist assumption in biology (particularly with respect to consciousness) as arbitrary and self-contradictory (Efron 1968, 409-13). Efron also warns that adopting a Humean view of causality with respect to the mind (such

that “the cause of any event is the occurrence of a preceding physical event”) results in epiphenomenalism (Efron 1968, 411).

Efron's central argument is that reductionists have “camouflaged” the contradiction of reductionism through “definition-switching” (Efron 1968, 413). He writes,

The reductionist attacks the definition and usage of every word which has historically referred to an action of a living [and perhaps conscious] entity: “memory,” “reflex,” “free will,” “cognition,” etc. He then redefines that same word so that it will be applicable to the action of an inanimate [or perhaps non-conscious] entity. By using this epistemological technique, he deludes himself into thinking that inanimate [or non-conscious] entities have the same properties found in living [or conscious] organisms, that a common denominator has been found, and that the problem of reduction is “solved” (Efron 1968, 413).

Efron uses the concepts reflex and memory as illustrations of this trend, which is certainly still entrenched in philosophy of mind today.

Nathaniel Branden

The first chapter of Nathaniel Branden's 1969 book *Psychology of Self-Esteem* offers some fairly detailed and helpful remarks on philosophy of mind that are likely the best statement of Rand's own views (Branden 2001, 7-10). After distinguishing between consciousness as a state of awareness and as a faculty of awareness, Branden argues that consciousness (qua state) is a “primary” in the sense that “it cannot be broken down any further or defined by reference to other concepts” (Branden 2001, 8). In other words, consciousness is irreducible because of its status as an axiomatic concept (Branden 2001, 8). Branden does not deny that “mental processes are correlated with neural processes in the brain,” but rather disputes that such correlation indicates that “mental processes are 'nothing but' neural processes” (Branden 2001, 9). Against such reductionism, Branden offers long quotes from Blanshard's *Nature of Thought* and Pratt's *Matter and Spirit* explicating the standard phenomenological objection to identity theory, i.e. that mental states and brain states cannot be identical because they have radically different properties. In other words, water, revenge, and France might be on the mind but cannot be on the brain.

In keeping with Rand, Branden's final comments on the substance of philosophy of mind are an homage to Aristotle combined with a backhanded critique of both dualism and materialism. He writes,

In the writings of Aristotle, one finds a treatment of consciousness (and of life) that is signally superior to the approach of most “moderns.” There are many respects in which, when one studies the history of philosophy, moving from Aristotle to Descartes to the present, one feels as though history were moving backwards, not forwards—as if most of Aristotle's successors down through the ages have been pre-Aristotelians. Aristotle is neither a mystic nor a “materialist”; he does not regard consciousness as supernatural, as an incomprehensible and irksome presence in a mechanistic universe, to be banished by reduction to the blind motion of inanimate particles, like an exile whom the authorities found discomfiting. To Aristotle, consciousness is a natural fact of reality, the characteristic attribute of certain entities. In this issue, his approach is far more “empirical” than of most “empiricists.” His example should serve as a lead to those who desire to pursue a genuinely scientific study of conscious living organisms (Branden 2001, 10).

Branden's praise for Aristotle could hardly be more effusive. (As a fan of Aristotle's approach, I don't object!)

In something of a strange (but not entirely inconsistent) twist, in his 1997 book *The Art of Living Consciously* Nathaniel Branden tentatively suggests a form of protopanpsychism (à la David Chalmers). After briefly objecting to materialism and reductionism, Branden offers the following analysis of the mind-body problem:

Metaphysically, mind and matter are different. But if they are different in every respect, the problem of explaining their interaction seems insuperable. How can mind influence matter and matter influence mind

if they have absolutely nothing in common? And yet, that such reciprocal influence exists seems inescapable...

Without going into details, I will suggest a possible way out. There is nothing inherently illogical—nothing that contradicts the rest of our knowledge—in positing some underlying reality of which both matter and consciousness are manifestations. The advantage of such a hypothesis is that it provides a means to resolve a problem that has troubled philosophers for centuries—the “mind-body problem,” the problem of accounting for the interaction of consciousness and physical reality. If they have a common source, then they do have a point of commonality that makes their ability to interact less puzzling. How we would test this hypothesis, or provide justification for it, is another question (Branden 1991, 201-2).

Although protopanpsychism seems like a promising alternative to materialism, the complete lack of evidence for it (and the question of what might possibly ever constitute evidence for it) is deeply problematic, particularly from an Objectivist perspective. Additionally, I worry that protopanpsychism is merely (property) dualism with an account of mental causation tacked on. So although the most glaring error of dualism is fixed in such an approach, the plethora of other errors is left intact.

Roger Bissell

Roger Bissell's paper “A Dual-Aspect Approach to the Mind-Body Problem” (published in the Fall 1974 *Reason Papers*) defends the view that “a mental process and the physical brain process correlated with it are one and the same brain process, as viewed from different cognitive perspectives” (Bissell 1974, P4). Thus the brain has two distinct, irreducible aspects: a mental aspect and a physical aspect (Bissell 1974, P29, P47). And “mental processes are actually mental physical brain processes” distinguishable “from all other physical brain processes by virtue of their introspectable, mental aspect” (Bissell 1974, P47).

The basic problem with dual aspect theories is one of circularity, in that concepts of consciousness (like perspective and appearance) are used to explain the basic nature of consciousness itself. (Binswanger has a clear discussion of this problem in the first lecture of *The Metaphysics of Consciousness*, while Kelley has a more confusing comment in response to a question after the second lecture on free will in *The Foundations of Knowledge* (Binswanger 1998; Kelley 1986.) Bissell's theory certainly seems to suffer from circularity in speaking of consciousness as our introspective awareness of brain processes, as seen in this comment:

The Dual-Aspect theory holds that mental processes are actually certain physical brain processes as we are aware of them introspectively, i.e., that “mental” refers to the fully real, introspectable aspects of those particular physical brain processes. Our awareness of them is the form in which we are aware of certain brain processes introspectively, just as our awareness of the physical aspects is the form in which we are aware of those brain processes extrospectively. (Bissell 1974, P45)

Here and elsewhere, Bissell inverts the hierarchy of concepts by explaining the lower-level concept of consciousness in terms of the dependent, higher-level concept of introspection. Consequently, the meaning of “introspective awareness” is rendered completely unclear, given that it usually refers to awareness of our own mental states, not awareness of our brain states. Additionally, by describing consciousness as awareness of brain states, Bissell seems to have provided a theory of mind more consistent with idealism or representationalism rather than the realism espoused by Objectivism.

Despite these critiques, Bissell's arguments are often interesting and compelling—and deserve more attention than given here.

David Kelley

In his two 1986 lectures on free will from *The Foundations of Knowledge*, David Kelley focuses on the issue of mental causation in order to refute the claim that free will contradicts the law of identity (Kelley 1986). As a result, many of his discussions in these two lectures are extremely relevant to philosophy of mind.

Kelley identifies the source of the apparent conflict between causality and free will as the Humean view of causality, in which events cause other events. As a result of this error, philosophers generally regard causality dependent upon the passage of time, such that to be caused is to be determined by “antecedent factors.” This view of causality obviously conflicts with free will.

In contrast, Kelley argues that the Aristotelian/Objectivist account of causality, in which “causality is a matter of the nature or identity of the objects which act,” does not limit causality to antecedent factors. Rather, it allows for “many different modes of causality in nature,” including simultaneous causality between the levels of organization that emerge in complex systems, such as in conscious organisms. Kelley discusses two basic forms of such simultaneous causality: upward causation and downward causation. In upward causation, entities acting at a lower level of organization simultaneously cause effects on the entities in a higher level of organization. Downward causation is simply the reverse, such that entities acting at a higher level of organization simultaneously cause effects on the entities in a lower level of organization. For Kelley, consciousness is “a higher level phenomenon distinct from the electrical activity of specific parts of the brain.”

Unfortunately, Kelley leaves implicit perhaps the most critical point about such simultaneous causality within complex systems, namely that these lower and higher levels are equally real, with causal powers of their own. Modern analytic philosophy, in contrast, tends to be deeply reductionistic about such levels of organization, such that the higher levels are seen as really “nothing but” the lower levels, such that everything eventually reduces to the microphysical. Consequently, higher levels of organization (including the perceptual level) are seen as less real (if real at all) and the existence of downward causation is denied. The rejection of this “collapsing levels” metaphysics is clearly critical to Kelley's account of causation, even though never explicitly discussed.

Based upon this rich understanding of causality, Kelley argues that both upward and downward causation are involved in consciousness through an example of an animal seeing a predator and fleeing. After tracing the “antecedent factor” causality in both the brain (the lower level) and the mind (the higher level) in this situation, Kelley turns to the connections between these levels of organization. In upward causation, the brain causes changes in consciousness. Thus the visual cortex might upwardly cause perception and the limbic system might upwardly cause recognition and fear. In downward causation, consciousness causes changes in the brain. Thus perception might “affect the visual cortex by keeping its activities centered on the appropriate object” and fear might determine “which particular set of neural impulses gain control of the motor cortex.” Such simultaneous upward and downward causation, on Kelley's account, is an integral part of any conscious process.

Kelley then specifies the role of all three forms of causality (upward causation, antecedent factors, downward causation) with respect to free will. The “capacity to focus” is an instance of upwards causation because it owes its existence “the nature and structure of the brain.” A person's “specific knowledge,” “hierarchy of values,” and “thinking skills” are all antecedent conditions which “set limits on what it is possible ... to focus on.” But within those

limits, the choice to focus or not, to raise or lower one's level of consciousness or not is “pure downward causation.”

The theory of mind Kelley sketches in these lectures is far from complete, but nevertheless promising. His detailed explanation of the Objectivist/Aristotelian alternative to Humean causality and his non-reductionistic view of levels of organization seem indispensable for accounting for mental causation in an Objectivist theory of mind.

Leonard Peikoff

Leonard Peikoff's only discussion of the ontology of mind and body in his 1991 book *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* occurs in a section entitled “Idealism and Materialism as the Rejection of Basic Axioms” (Peikoff 1991, 33-6). Unfortunately though, Peikoff's few positive proposals on the subject are overshadowed by his exaggerated and often inaccurate polemics against materialism.

After explaining the Objectivist rejection of the supernatural in the opening of this section, Peikoff turns his attention to the other half of the “false alternative of consciousness versus science,” namely materialism (Peikoff 1991, 33). Peikoff inaccurately summarizes materialism as the view that “consciousness... is either a myth or a useless by-product of brain or other motions,” thereby inaccurately limiting materialism to either eliminativism or epiphenomenalism (Peikoff 1991, 33). Peikoff critiques such views as “the advocacy of existence without consciousness” and “the denial of man's faculty of cognition and therefore all knowledge” (Peikoff 1991, 33).

Even more frustratingly, Peikoff's more detailed critique of materialism misses the mark of contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, as the (uncited) arguments he attributes to materialists are largely strawmen (Peikoff 1991, 34). The first such argument is “that consciousness is unnatural on the grounds that it cannot be perceived by extrospection, has no shape, color, or smell, and cannot be handled, weighed, or put in a test tube” (Peikoff 1991, 34). While the extrospection argument was certainly advanced once upon a time by behaviorists, it was discredited, along with behaviorism, by other materialists. But oddly enough, the argument that the mental does not have the same properties as the physical is actually a common objection to one form of materialism (identity theory), not an argument for it. In any case, Peikoff's response to this argument accurately enough points out that “it makes no more sense to arbitrarily legislate the features of matter as the standard of existents and then deny consciousness, than to do the reverse” (Peikoff 1991, 34).

The second argument Peikoff attributes to materialists is similarly dubious: that “the concept of 'consciousness' is unscientific on the grounds that it cannot be defined” (Peikoff 1991, 34). While such an argument is hardly central to materialism, Peikoff's response to this strawman allows him, in agreement with Rand's comments in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, to connect the axiomatic status of the concept consciousness to its irreducibility (Rand 1990, 40-41). He writes that in order to avoid an “infinite regress of definitions” there must be “certain primary concepts” defined ostensively to which other definitions reduce, but that cannot be reduced themselves (Peikoff 1991, 34). Axioms, including the axiom of consciousness, are such primary, irreducible concepts.

Despite Peikoff's two materialist strawmen, he does correctly identify and dispute the materialist presumption that “their viewpoint is the only scientific or naturalistic approach to philosophy” (Peikoff 1991, 33). This presumption is a result of the false alternative, shared with idealists, of “consciousness versus science” (Peikoff 1991, 33). (Peikoff later identifies the

hidden premise underlying this false alternative as monism, which he characterizes as “groundless” (Peikoff 1991, 35).) By rejecting this false alternative, a genuinely naturalistic account of consciousness, in the tradition of Aristotle, could be developed (Peikoff 1991, 34). Such a theory would recognize consciousness as being “a faculty possessed under definite conditions by a certain group of living organisms,” as having “a specific nature, including specific physical organs,” and as acting “lawfully” (Peikoff 1991, 33). Such a description, however, tells us little about the actual relationship of mind and body, even in light of Peikoff's later claim that consciousness might be “explained scientifically as a product of physical conditions” if we study it with “methods and techniques suited to its nature” (Peikoff 1991, 35).

In his discussion of the presumption of monism in philosophy of mind, Peikoff does explicitly deny that Objectivism endorses dualism. He writes:

A philosophy that rejects the monism of idealism or materialism does not therefore become “dualist.” This term is associated with a Platonic or Cartesian metaphysics; it suggests the belief in two realities, in the mind-body opposition, and in the soul's independence of the body—all of which Ayn Rand denies (Peikoff 1991, 35).

This passage is significant in light of Binswanger's rather misleading (albeit extemporaneous) comments on the subject, to be discussed shortly.

Eyal Mozes

A number of articles published in the journal *Objectivity* concern philosophy of mind, particularly free will. The most relevant and consistent with the basic Objectivist view of mind is Eyal Mozes' 1994 (Volume 2, Number 1) essay “Reality of Mind,” which reviewed John Searle's book *The Rediscovery of the Mind*.

Mozes begins by commending Searle's identification of “the false dichotomy of mind and body” as “the root of all problems with modern philosophy of mind” (Mozes 1994, 93). According to the dichotomy, Mozes quotes Searle, “if something is mental, then it cannot be physical; ... if it is a matter of spirit, it cannot be a matter of matter” (Searle 1992, 14). Contrary to common understanding then, materialism is not “a rejection of dualism, but ... a consequence of dualism” because “materialists accept the mind-body dichotomy” (Mozes 1994, 95). As a result of this commitment, materialists regard “consciousness and mental phenomena, if they exist, [as] separate from matter and beyond the realm of natural science” (Mozes 1994, 95). So in order to be scientific, materialists are “led to deny consciousness or try to explain it away” (Mozes 1994, 95).

Mozes also argues for a connection between Searle's views on the irreducibility of consciousness and Rand's axiom of consciousness (Mozes 1994, 96-97). His analysis of the strengths of weaknesses of Searle's “appearance versus reality” argument notes some of the same problems identified in my blog entry “Hsieh on Searle on Reductionism” (Mozes 1994, 97-8; Hsieh 2002b).

The major defect in Searle's theory of mind, Mozes correctly argues, is his inadequate treatment of mental causation (Mozes 1994, 99-100). Searle's explicit rejection epiphenomenalism means little given his lack of a positive account of mental causation (Mozes 1994, 99). Mozes argues that the root problem is Searle's “false separation of ontology from causation,” i.e. distinction between what something is and what it does (Mozes 1994, 100). Mozes argues that this separation only makes sense within the “Humean artifice” where events are causally connected to other events (Mozes 1994, 100-1). In contrast, identity and causality are deeply connected in the Aristotelian-Objectivist metaphysics, as the actions of an entity are

determined by its nature (Mozes 1994, 100). Thus Mozes echoes Efron's important warning about the connection between Humean causality and epiphenomenalism.

Harry Binswanger

Perhaps the most in-depth discussion of philosophy of mind by a prominent Objectivist philosopher is found in Harry Binswanger's 1998 three-tape course *The Metaphysics of Consciousness* (Binswanger 1998). In the first lecture, Binswanger explicates his understanding of the metaphysical nature of mind in discussing “six self-evident facts” about the nature of consciousness:

- Fact 1: “Every state of consciousness is a consciousness by someone (the subject) of something (the object).”
- Fact 2: “Consciousness is some organism's awareness of something that exists or that derives from existence.”
- Fact 3: “Consciousness is an action or an interaction between the organism and the object, between the subject and the object the subject is aware of.”
- Fact 4: “Consciousness is irreducible.”
- Fact 5: “Consciousness has causal efficacy.”
- Fact 6: “Free will.”

Binswanger only briefly discusses Facts 1 and 2, as they mostly serve as the “primacy of existence” background to his theory of mind.

In discussing Fact 3, Binswanger rightly emphasizes action (and interaction) as a central feature of consciousness. He quotes Rand's argument in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* that “awareness is not a passive state, but an active process,” one that is “achieved and maintained by continuous action” (Rand 1990, 29). (In contrast, I would add, analytic philosophers generally speak of “mentality” as a passive property of something, in part due to their ambivalence about Facts 1 and 2.)

Binswanger spends most of his time and attention on Fact 4, the irreducibility of consciousness. He starts by asking, in light of Fact 3, “What kind of action or interaction is [consciousness]?” This question, Binswanger argues, is “unanswerable.” Consciousness is an “irreducible primary,” so it is its own unique type of action. (Of course, we can “subdivide conscious actions” into types, like vision, imagination, and conceptualization, just as we can subdivide existence into types like fire, chairs, and electrons. But such subdivisions are not reductions, any more than the descriptions or metaphors we use to describe consciousness are.) In keeping with other Objectivist commentaries on the mind, Binswanger notes that the irreducibility of consciousness is a consequence of its status as an axiom.

Undoubtedly the most valuable aspect of Binswanger's discussion of reduction is his example-based explanation of the nature of reduction. Using a wooden box as his illustration, he first argues that a reduction might consist of reducing the box to its parts (the six sides) or to its compositional material (the wood). But consciousness cannot be so reduced, given its lack of parts or compositional material. Binswanger then entertains the idea that perhaps the problem with such attempted reduction is that consciousness is an action, not an entity. So he explicates the reduction of an action through the example of a stadium wave. That wave can be broken down into a series of non-wave movements by individual fans properly ordered in time, movements consisting of standing up, raising the arms, lowering the arms, and sitting down. This breakdown constitutes a reduction because it analyzes “the overall wave into stages that are not themselves waves.” In short, Binswanger claims that “to reduce an action is to identify its

constituents” where those constituents are “the entities that are acting and the stages of their individual changes.”

Using this understanding of action-reduction, Binswanger argues that consciousness is not “composed of non-conscious constituents in the way that the wave is composed of non-wave constituents.” A conscious action (like hearing a sentence) can only be reduced to conscious sub-actions (like hearing words or syllables), not to non-conscious actions (like brain events). Binswanger certainly recognizes that brain processes underlie consciousness, but argues that “small little brain events add up to a big brain event,” not consciousness.

In a somewhat confusing argument, Binswanger continues his critique of reductionism by disputing the idea that the brain is the entity underlying conscious action. He argues that the two possible answers to the question “If consciousness is an action, what is the entity that acts?” are (1) “the mental entity, the self” and (2) “the man, the organism.” Neither answer will assist the reductionist, as the former cannot be reduced to “component parts” only “aspects” and the physical parts of the latter aren’t “parts of the awareness.”

Thus, Binswanger concludes, we cannot avoid the irreducibility of consciousness. Consciousness “can never be shown to exist—at any scale—of subactions that are themselves non-conscious.” The only function of science of mind is to “name the physical conditions that produce [consciousness],” but such an explanation would not be a reduction. Binswanger summarizes his views on reductionism thusly,

Conscious experience is correlated with and does require a brain process, but there are still two irreducibly different things: the state of awareness and the brain process. Yes, man does have a mind and a body, but neither can be reduced to the other... Consciousness exists and matter exists. Each is what it is and neither is a form of the other.

My primary concern, which may or may be valid in the end, is that Binswanger moving beyond the unproblematic point that the axiomatic concept consciousness cannot be reduced to the more dubious metaphysical claim of consciousness being a separate and distinct sort of existent.

Before turning to Fact 5, Binswanger discusses one of the common errors of materialism and AI, namely the idea that computers can and do process information. Our commonplace talk of computers adding, spell-checking, and so on, while unproblematic in a loose, colloquial sense, is completely false and misleading in a strict philosophical sense. Computers (and brains, Binswanger later adds), being purely physical devices, do not and cannot process information in and of themselves, separate from a mind. Rather, computers are tools conscious beings like ourselves use to process information by “using the physical state of switches to represent numbers,” in much the same way that we can use our fingers as tools in counting. As Binswanger memorably says, “you can count on your fingers but your fingers can’t count.” The exact same principle applies to computers.

This argument against AI is very similar to Searle’s more technical argument in *The Rediscovery of the Mind* against the mind as a digital computer (Searle 1992, 197-226). Searle correctly notes that the syntax of the digital computer (i.e. the association of 1s and 0s to particular physical states) is not “intrinsic to physics” but rather “always relative to an agent or observer who treats certain physical phenomena as syntactical” (Searle 1992, 208). Thus in the end, computation is radically dependent upon consciousness.

Binswanger doesn’t linger long on Fact 5, mostly arguing that mental causation (that consciousness can cause bodily motion) is self-evident, while epiphenomenalism (which denies mental causation) is self-contradictory.

In his discussion of Fact 6, free will, Binswanger argues for the “startling but inescapable conclusion” that “consciousness must have the power to move matter around in our brains.” In

particular, the choice to focus or not must impact our brain states. Given this thesis, Binswanger speculates that scientists will eventually find “a new force of nature”, i.e. “the physical force exerted by consciousness on its own brain.” The only alternative to his hypothesis, Binswanger claims, is epiphenomenalism.

In the Q&A period, Binswanger also offers some interesting elaborations on his views. He argues that the entity-action relationship is different when applied to consciousness than to the physical world. On an Aristotelian theme, he claims that both a person's physical body and consciousness are abstractions from the “whole person... given in perception.” In response to a question on emergentism, Binswanger argues that the simple form of emergentism (where the complexity of the organism gives rise to consciousness) is true but unhelpful, whereas the complex form (where the properties of the whole are not predictable from the properties of the parts) would be helpful were it not false. He also offers an explanation of conservation of energy with respect to his idea of mental force and theorizes that the subconscious is just the brain.

My most basic worry about Binswanger's theory of mind is his tendency to reify the mind, if not into a separate entity, then into a semi-disconnected, independent action or existent of some kind. This worry is particularly salient in light of Binswanger's explicit endorsement of dualism in response to a question after the third lecture. Let me quote the question and answer in its entirety, so as ensure accuracy:

Question: This is a question asking for clarification on some basic concepts. I'm having a hard time formulating the question precisely, but it concerns the concept of irreducibility. I understand why consciousness is an irreducible concept, but I'm having difficulty distinguishing that from what I know is a false view of consciousness, which would be a Cartesian metaphysical dualism that there exists some thing called consciousness and then there's the material world and consciousness can exist separate from that. Clearly that's wrong, yet...

Answer: Well, can I just stop you there because it's not really wrong. It depends upon how you interpret it. What's called dualism is the bogey of philosophy. Since Descartes is wrong in regard to the primacy of consciousness, people smear him that anything he ever said is wrong. And one thing that he said was there's a mind and a body. Now that's right. What's wrong is that he thinks the mind is actually a separate substance. He thinks there are two entities: the mind, which can then survive your death, for instance, and your body which is unrelated to it.

Dualism is a dangerous term because of its being used for a strawman. But if you mean: Do we believe there are really two existents? Yes! The mind exists and the brain exists—and neither is the other. As I said, shape exists and color exists—and neither is the other. There are many cases of two attributes of the same entity, neither of which can be reduced to the other.

Then people ask: Well, if the mind is some separate phenomenon... (I don't mean by separate 'disembodied' because it depends upon the brain.) But if the mind really is something in its own right, then how could it interact with the body? All this goes back to a book by a philosopher known as Gilbert Ryle in 1949 I believe called *The Concept of Mind*. He was a behaviorist, but he hid his behaviorism under slippery terminology. And he wrote a book to attack the idea of consciousness. And the way he did it was lampoon a strawman. He just snickered at Descartes and snickered at dualism and called it “The Ghost in the Machine,” he called consciousness.

One of the closest things he [Ryle] has to an argument is: Well how could a non-spatial, non-physical thing, consciousness, causally interact with a physical, spatial thing, a brain? And the answer is: Why not? It does. There's no principle of philosophy that says: One entity that's a cause has to resemble another entity that is acted upon. You could say: How can a man, who is solid and not sweet-tasting, interact with a cake, which is soft and sweet-tasting. It's impossible! It's inconceivable! I mean that would be the human causally interacting with the non-human. Impossible! You can make anything sound like a dilemma. (I mean, this is the F. Lee Bailey of philosophy.) There's absolutely no reason why a non-spatial thing can't

interact with a spatial thing, or a non-conscious thing interact with a conscious thing, or any non-X interact with an X.

So, yes, I'm a dualist. Or as Leonard [Peikoff] says in OPAR, because the term dualism is not one we have to fight to save and it's so associated with Descartes, the proper word for it is: Objectivism, not dualism. We have our own distinct view here. But if you had to put it in the historical classification, yeah, we're not monists. We believe that both consciousness and matter exist and neither is reducible to the other.

Binswanger's advocacy of dualism is strange and startling not just because it stands in opposition to all other Objectivist commentary on philosophy of mind, but also because it destroys the foundation of the mind-body integration so central to the Objectivist epistemology, ethics, and politics. Much of the problem, I suspect is simply Binswanger's unfamiliarity with the terminology of modern analytic philosophy of mind. (Such an error would not be unprecedented, as he did also falsely equate materialism with eliminativism in the lecture.)

But perhaps Binswanger's comments on dualism reveal a more substantial error in his theory of mind. In my philosophy of mind class with Robert Hanna last semester, we often spoke of the apparently unavoidable contradiction created by the attempted combination (by both materialism and dualism) of three ideas:

- Mental Causation: Changes in the mental can cause changes in the physical.
- Principle of the Causal Closure of the Physical: All physical events are fully determined by other physical events.
- Fundamentalism: If something is fundamentally physical, then it cannot be fundamentally mental and vice versa.

(Epiphenomenalism escapes the contradiction by denying the only self-evident fact of the three, namely mental causation.)

In arguing for a “new force of nature” that would allow consciousness to “move matter around in our brains,” Binswanger is clearly rejecting the Principle of the Causal Closure of the Physical. His answer to the question about dualism, however, seems to indicate an acceptance of the equally dubious premise of Fundamentalism.

In contrast, the Aristotelian conception of the mind so often lauded by Objectivists (including Rand herself) clearly rejects Fundamentalism. The denial of Fundamentalism is central to the view that materialism and dualism constitute a false alternative. These philosophers don't specifically address the Principle of the Causal Closure of the Physical, but I suspect that Rand would have regarded it as similar to the principle of reduction, i.e. an unjustified and arbitrary presumption given our present state of knowledge.

These issues, I should add, are further complicated by the fact that we have a number of semi-related concepts associated with the word “physical.” Sometimes we use the term “physical” to refer to the tangible rather than the intangible, sometimes to the real rather than the imaginary, sometimes to the external world rather than the internal world, and so on. Given these multiple meanings, any account of the mind must be very clear the meaning of the term “physical,” which Binswanger unfortunately is not. (These thoughts on the concept physical were crystallized by Barbara Montero's articles “The Body Problem” and “Post-Physicalism” (Montero 1999; Montero 2001).)

Overall, Binswanger's theory of mind is compelling, fascinating, and worthy of serious attention by Objectivists interested in philosophy of mind. His basic approach to the subject, in which fundamental, self-evident facts about consciousness are used to ground an ontology of mind, is a fruitful one. My primary concern is that Binswanger does not identify and question all of the problematic premises hidden in modern analytic philosophy of mind.

Conclusion

To my knowledge, these are the only substantial sources on philosophy of mind from an Objectivist perspective. (If anyone knows of others, by all means, let me know!) Although none of these sources deals with the questions of philosophy of mind both fully and satisfactorily, many clearly offer some promising suggestions.

Additionally, a few important themes in philosophy of mind do clearly emerge from this survey, such as:

- The metaphysical unity of mind and body in certain living organisms.
- The false alternative of materialism versus dualism.
- The concept of consciousness as an axiom, i.e. an irreducible primary.
- Humean event-based causality as leading to epiphenomenalism.
- Materialism as pseudo-scientific.
- The reality and causal efficacy of lower and higher levels of organization.
- The need for a richer concept of causality than antecedent physical conditions.

The precise nature of a theory of mind compatible with Objectivism, however, has yet to be established.

References

- Binswanger, Harry. 1998. *The Metaphysics of Consciousness*. Gaylordsville, CT: Second Renaissance.
- Bissell, Roger. 1974. "A Dual-Aspect Approach to the Mind-Body Problem." *Reason Papers*. Fall 1974. No 1. 18-39. Also available at <http://hometown.aol.com/REBissell/indexmm3.html>.
- Branden, Nathaniel. 1991. *The Art of Living Consciously*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Branden, Nathaniel. 2001 [1969]. *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. 32nd Anniversary Edition. New York: Jossey-Bass.
- Chalmers, David. 2002. "Preface." *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Edited by David Chalmers. New York: Oxford UP.
- Efron, Robert. 1968. "Biology Without Consciousness—And It's Consequences." *The Objectivist*. Feb to May 1968. Vol 7, Nos 5-8. 405-14, 423-7, 441-7, 457-61.
- Flew, Anthony. 1984. *A Dictionary of Philosophy*. Revised 2nd Edition. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hsieh, Diana. 2002a. "The Soul of Aristotle." Available at <http://www.dianahsieh.com/papers/tsoa>.
- Hsieh, Diana. 2002b. "Hsieh on Searle on Reductionism." Available at http://www.dianahsieh.com/blog/2002_11_24_weekly.html#85731643.
- Kelley, David. 1986. "The Nature of Free Will." *The Foundations of Knowledge*. Poughkeepsie, NY: Principal Source.
- Montero, Barbara. 1999. "The Body Problem." *Nous*. Vol 33, No 3. 83-200. Also available at <http://barbara.antinomies.org/Publications/Chapter1>.
- Montero, Barbara. 2001. "Post-Physicalism." *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Vol 8, No 2. 61-80. Also available at <http://barbara.antinomies.org/Publications/PostforJCS.doc>.
- Mozes, Eyal. 1994. "Reality of Mind." *Objectivity*. Vol 2, No 1. 93-107.
- Peikoff, Leonard. 1991. *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. New York: Meridian.

- Rand, Ayn, 1963. "Aristotle by John Herman Randall." *The Objectivist Newsletter*. May 1963. Vol 2, No 5. 18-19.
- Rand, Ayn. 1990. *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Expanded 2nd Edition. New York: Meridian.
- Rand, Ayn. 1997. *Journals of Ayn Rand*. Edited by David Harriman. New York: Plume.
- Randall, John Herman Jr. 1960. *Aristotle*. New York: Columbia UP.
- Searle, John. 1992. *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.