

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM B: PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Searching for the Soul: Unit Two

(a) 'inside' and 'outside'

23. WHAT use is the soul? I am not being flippant when I ask this. It is all very well asking whether there is a soul, and, if so, where it is to be found and what its attributes might be. But such questions as these lack any kind of focus so long as they are not anchored in an account of the philosophical *interest* in conceiving the idea of a soul. As we saw last time, in our thought experiment concerning the curious Martians (unit 1/para. 12 = '1/12'), it is not enough simply to seek to reconstruct the religious or popular idea of a soul, conserving as many of our common beliefs about the soul as possible without falling into inconsistency. It is not just that such a project would fail to establish whether a significant number – or even any – of our beliefs about the soul are in fact true. Rather, we should still be in the dark about the point of undertaking such a project in the first place. In short, in searching for the soul, we are simply wasting our time if we ourselves 'do not feel gripped by the problems to which the notion of a soul is a response' (1/14).

24. The use of the soul lies in the abiding interest of the philosophical problems which point to the soul's existence; or at least the existence of something-or-other answering to some of the descriptions popularly associated with the idea of the soul. These problems arise in a process of reflection about our lives and our place in the universe which, to begin with, we may not even recognize as having anything to do with philosophy. I called such reflections 'temptations' (1/14) without meaning to imply that they are necessarily wrong or wholly misconceived. On closer examination, however, these sources of the impulse to believe in a soul, or engage in

speculation about its nature, may well present a very different aspect from the one they presented initially. Indeed, in our preliminary review, we saw that these sources of belief, far from harmonising with one another, give rise to conflicting theories. Simply to consider them together is already enough to make us begin to see them in a different, and more critical light.

25. This time, we are going to look in more detail at the first of these sources of the idea of a soul: the picture of mental or conscious states as the *inside* in relation to which the physical processes or movements associated with such states are conceived as the *outside*. It is to the outside, or objective aspect of an object that the perceptions of different persons converge, establishing a common subject matter for discussion. Whether we agree or disagree in our beliefs on whatever topic, arguably there has to be, at least ultimately, something concrete about which we agree or disagree, and by reference to whose attributes our argument can be resolved one way or the other. In this sense, the parts of objects that are initially concealed from view, or physically 'inside' are revealed when we probe more deeply: they are always capable of being brought to the outside. However far different individuals may initially diverge in their views, all that is needed to raise the prospect of agreement is to establish a common procedure of investigation (to take a pertinent example, agreement on how to interpret the intimate view of the structure of a piece of organic material, such as a brain, as seen through a microscope). The 'outsides' of objects, in this extended sense, are what populate our common, objective world, the world of our ordinary, common sense beliefs as well as the world of science.

26. By contrast, our inner conscious states seem to be essentially our own private property, incapable of being shared with anyone else, or 'brought to the outside'. We can certainly describe our state of mind, or our perceptions to others. But the information we give out in this way is indirect, second-hand. Even if I resort to poetry, no-one, for example, will ever see in their mind's eye just what I see when I see the way the blue of the sky appears to me, or taste how grapefruit tastes to me, or hear how the song of a blackbird sounds to me. Perhaps one day it will be possible to 'read' the contents of a person's thoughts by inserting a radio probe into the brain. Then, even if I wished to keep my thoughts to myself, it will be no secret to anyone who cares to tune into the broadcast when I am enjoying the thrill of looking up at

clear blue skies on a bright spring morning, or savouring the tang of a fresh grapefruit, or listening to the blackbird outside my window. But *that* very sight, *that* very taste, *that* very sound remain mine and mine alone – or so one is tempted to say. To others, the sheer subjective quality of my experiences, the mundane as much as the extraordinary, can only be a complete enigma. They are locked inside the confines of my own consciousness, and – or so it seems – must always remain so .

27. Let us take our thought experiment about the radio probe one step further. It is by no means logically impossible that human beings might one day evolve the capacity to communicate through telepathy. (We may leave aside the question whether such a capacity would be consistent with what physicists now take to be the basic laws of nature.) Then we shall undoubtedly live on a level of conscious intimacy which is far removed from present state of constant misunderstanding and failure to communicate. Yet on reflection it seems that such a wonderful, or terrifying, gift (depending on one's point of view) would still only be able to provide knowledge of another person's conscious states at one remove. Someone might by some mysterious process experience blue just when I experience blue; taste, hear, smell the particular tastes, sounds and smells that I taste, hear and smell just as, and when, I experience them. Yet it seems all my telepathic partner can ever experience will be the way my subjective experiences subjectively 'appear' to her, not the way those very experiences subjectively appear to me.

28. Subjective qualities such as these are what characterise the *inside* of a person's mind or consciousness. It is a show put on for the benefit of just one spectator alone. Each of us enjoys our own private show. And for all the levels on which we seem to communicate, or ways in which we are able to cooperate in finding out things about one world we all share, what is on the inside of the mind in this sense remains beyond all possible discussion. To be sure, amongst the things that are open to discussion are what each of us is feeling or thinking. Names for the things we experience are part of a common language. But it is as if each name necessarily acquires a double meaning: 'Blue' means whatever anyone who is not colour blind sees when they look up at a clear blue sky; it also means *this*, the subjective quality that now figures in my experience and which no-one else can ever share with me.

29. We shall eventually be led to question this account of subjectivity, but at the present stage such criticism is still some way off. Instead, our immediate task is to draw some of the consequences of this plausible and familiar way of thinking about the mind; some of them perhaps obvious, others less so. Here is one consequence that might have occurred to the reader already. If no-one can ever know what I really see when I see a blue sky, then it seems possible that although you and I use the same word for what we experience, the subjective quality of our experiences is different. Perhaps your blue is always a slightly deeper shade than mine. Or then again, for all we could ever know, perhaps your blue is the same colour as my red. (One can imagine one person's subjective spectrum being the precise *inversion* of another person's subjective spectrum.) – But why stop there? Who is to say that what I experience as colours, another individual does not experience as tastes, or sounds? Who is to say that there are not persons whose language and behaviour gives every indication of their having conscious experiences like mine or yours, yet whose 'insides' possess a subjective quality totally different from anything we have ever experienced?

30. And now arises what is perhaps the most disturbing prospect of all. As far as our ability to communicate is concerned, all that is needed in order for us to agree about the colour of the sky is that we should both be able to *tell by looking*. As we have seen, what actually occurs inside our minds when each of us looks up at the sky could, conceivably be vastly different. But what function does this subjective quality really play anyway? Take an individual whose 'language and behaviour gives every indication of their having conscious experiences like mine or yours': now simply imagine that in this particular case there is nothing 'inside'. All is darkness and silence, undisturbed even by the whisper of thoughts. What we have imagined, in short, is a zombie. Not the zombie of primitive myths or science fiction, an unfeeling alien with staring eyes and jerky limb movements, but an individual indistinguishable in its speech and countenance and in its actions from the rest of us.

31. What confidence have we that none of these possibilities is in fact realised? More to the point, what right do we have to any such confidence? – One might argue that members of the human race all share the same fundamental genetic structure: on a biological level, our brains and nervous

systems all work the same way. Therefore, one would expect the qualities that colour the insides of our minds to be the same also. For either the mind or soul is a by-product of the workings of the brain, in which case a similar cause would be expected to produce a similar effect; or else, if the soul is not a mere physical product, we still have every reason to believe that a benevolent Creator who has given us all basically the same external, biological frame has also provided us with the same insides also. Either way, we have good *inductive* or empirical grounds for believing that just as we are (more or less) the same on the outside, so we are the same on the inside.

32. It doesn't take much effort to see, however, that on either view about the relation between consciousness and physical processes – a question we shall be addressing in due course – the argument for believing that we are all the 'same inside' is pretty weak. To start with, it is a plain fact that human beings are by no means physically identical. So if this reasoning were sound, it would at best give us reason to believe that we were similar inside, but not exactly the same. My blue could still be a different shade from yours. But on deeper reflection, what are the limits of variation here? How are they to be fixed? The colour of human skin can vary enormously – admittedly a relatively trivial fact from a biological point of view for all its tragic historical and social consequences – yet if that is so then perhaps it is a similarly 'trivial' fact about the nature of consciousness that different races or even different individuals subjectively experience the same colours, sounds, tastes etc. in widely different ways. The point here is not to raise a sceptical possibility that one would have difficulty trying to resolve. Rather, any speculation about the variations in the subjective quality of consciousness is completely idle. We can think whatever we like on this question and never risk being proved wrong. In relation all the relevant evidence that could ever be made available, every possibility we can think of is, in effect, equally likely.

33. Taking this argument to its logical conclusion – as philosophers inevitably do – it would seem that my naive, pre-philosophical belief that other persons are like myself on the inside is completely unfounded. It is not logically necessary that the minds or consciousnesses of other individuals are comparable to mine, or indeed that they have minds at all. And there are no empirical or factual considerations that necessarily bear more in one direction than another. – Is that a real problem, though? Do the foregoing arguments

make me any less certain that I am communicating with a mind like my own? It seems that they do not. To seriously entertain the thought that behind the faces of the people I meet there is nothing at all, or else something utterly alien, is the first step towards madness. The speculative doubts of the philosopher are far removed from *real* doubt. In that case, what is the real significance of those sceptical arguments?

34. It might be said that this is a predicament that one comes across repeatedly in philosophy: certain beliefs are shown to be without rational foundation, beliefs which are so basic to our outlook upon the world that it is simply unthinkable that they should ever be questioned. Suppose a sceptic were to suggest that it was 'logically possible' that the universe came into existence just five minutes ago, and myself with all my *apparent* memories along with it. Nothing one could point to in the world would count for or against such a seemingly extravagant yet irrefutable hypothesis, for every piece of so-called evidence would have been equally thrown into question. Or suppose the sceptic pointed out the impossibility of proving that regularities that we perceive in the world are a guide to what will happen in the future. Perhaps from tomorrow, beliefs based on inductive inference will go increasingly awry, and that it will be a safer bet to assume that things will go on differently or in the opposite way from the way they have done in the past.

35. The reply to make here is that scepticism with regard to the nature and existence of other minds has a quite different significance when compared to other sceptical hypotheses, such as scepticism with regard to the past or scepticism about the validity of inductive reasoning. The sceptic who casts doubt on our knowledge of the past or on our grounds for making predictions does not mean to throw into doubt the *meaning* of statements about the past or about the future. We seem to grasp what difference it would make if the world had existed for only five minutes, or if processes were to cease to go on in a predictable way. In the first case, we picture a not-so-benevolent deity who has chosen to trick us into believing that the universe has existed for millions of years. (Soon after Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, one theologian came up with the idea that, although the world had been created around four thousand years ago in line with traditional Christian belief, God deliberately chose to create a world where the fossil

record was such as *would* have been produced by the evolution of species over millions of years.) In the second case, we picture a world going haywire, where from one day to the next we find that nothing can be counted on any more, and we are constantly taken by surprise. (Arguably, though, the emergence of irregularities could only take place against an unnoticed background of continued regularity: a world of total irregularity would be virtually indescribable.)

36. By contrast, the sceptic who casts doubt on the existence of other minds, or on the similarity of other conscious experiences to one's own thereby throws into question our grasp of *what difference it would make* if other minds did not exist or if the quality of other conscious experiences was not similar to one's own. Perhaps one starts by picturing the difference as an all-knowing deity would perceive it. In the same way that a being with god-like powers witnesses the process of a 'billion year old' universe instantaneously popping into existence, so the god-like being looks into my mind and into the mind of the person conversing with me and is thereby able to see whether what I have 'inside' the other person has also. But this idea of the contents of one's consciousness being available to be inspected by another individual – even an individual with god-like powers – blatantly contradicts what we have already recognised (by considering the science-fiction examples of brain probes and telepathy) as the essentially private, unshareable nature of the subjective quality of one's conscious experience. The god-like being could know everything that was 'on my mind', to the extent of being able to *predict* everything that I was going to say or do, yet still not know what blue looks like to me.

37. Note that one should be careful not to confuse what we have termed 'scepticism with regard to the nature and existence of other minds' with more homely and less extravagant doubts about what other persons really think and feel. Human beings have been known to carry deception to extraordinary lengths: however certain one may be of a person's state of mind on the basis of his speech and actions, it is always logically possible that one is being fooled. The man lying in the road writhing and screaming with pain just might be a film actor on location (and all the blood and gore expertly applied make-up). The ardent patriot turns out to be a master spy; the faithful husband and dutiful father an unprincipled lothario. What we have in all

these cases, in effect, is a form of inductive scepticism. We assume that a person's future speech and actions will be consistent with the way they have spoken and acted in the past, and the better we get to know that person the less we are aware that this is merely our assumption. Yet it is a sad fact about human relations that from one day to the next such certainties can be cruelly overturned. What is, by contrast, significant about the more extreme scepticism about other minds we have been considering is that speech and behaviour appear to be completely irrelevant to the question of what the inside of another person's mind or consciousness is 'like'.

38. The flip-side of such extreme scepticism is the idea of self-awareness as the most perfect form of knowledge. The qualities of my subjective experiences as they present themselves to me alone in the private theatre of my mind are such as to be incapable of being mistaken or misperceived. It is logically impossible for me to be wrong about the way the blue of the sky now looks to me. For it is as if my mind – or the knowing 'I' – lies in direct contact with its 'object'. In other forms of so-called knowledge this is clearly not the case. In making judgements about facts external to our minds we have to make an inductive leap; we take the best aim at the facts that we can, knowing all the while that we risk being wrong. It is always possible that our judgement will fall astray of its target. Since Descartes, philosophers have traditionally represented the problem of justifying belief in a world external to one's mind as a search for reasons that match the certainty of self-knowledge. – In due course, we shall see how this seductive picture of the ideal form of knowledge rests on a tissue of illusions, with significant consequences for the philosophical account of the relation between mind and the world.

(b) the 'I' and the theatre of consciousness

39. What, then, are the consequences of this picture for an account of the nature of the soul? The way we have been tempted to talk of the mind is essentially as a parade of subjective experiences witnessed by a solitary 'I' or subject: the spectator in the theatre of consciousness. Yet it is significant that the 'I' as such never appears when we inspect the contents of our own minds. By contrast with my seemingly certain knowledge of how the blue of this sky looks to me, my belief in the existence of the 'I' rests, not on direct experience but rather on an inference. Surely, one might argue, if there is something seen then there must be a subject doing the seeing? But is that deduction valid? Am I (as we shall see Descartes believed) justified in regarding my knowledge of my self or 'I' as every bit as certain as my knowledge, say, of the colour of my subjective impression of blue?

40. In trying to unravel this question, we find that we are inevitably led to deal in pictures or metaphors. The 'I' as the lonely spectator in the theatre of consciousness is one such metaphor. The guiding idea behind this appeal to the imagination is to present a picture of the facts which seems to be somehow inevitable, and therefore self-justifying. We seem to perceive 'clearly and distinctly', to use Descartes' formula, that there could not be any other arrangement or interpretation of the facts than the one which the picture presents to us. – Now it is difficult to argue with a picture. In the absence of clearly labelled steps of reasoning, the philosopher cannot go through the critical process of testing the truth of each premiss, and the validity of each inferential step. But there is another approach. It is quite sufficient, in order to refute a philosophical claim based on a seemingly irresistible picture or metaphor, to construct a *rival* picture. The alternative picture may seem initially quite unattractive and implausible; but that does not matter. For the philosophical question is not which of two or more rival accounts most attracts us or which we find most plausible. Rather, the question is whether any of the rival accounts can be shown to be *logically necessary*. The mere fact that an alternative picture of certain facts is *possible*, is sufficient to refute the claim of a given picture to represent the way things necessarily have to be.

41. That all sounds very abstract, but let us immediately make it concrete. We have been invited to accept a picture of the mind as a kind of ghostly theatre. A stream of subjective experiences parades across the stage, each one duly acknowledged by the 'I' or self seated alone in the centre front row stalls. Is that the only way to represent the actual facts of which we are immediately aware? Here is an alternative picture. There is no such thing as the self or soul. All that actually exists are the subjective experiences themselves. – How is it then, you might ask, that these experiences come to be *experienced*, if there is no self doing the experiencing? The answer is quite simple: by all means say that every time an experience occurs, there is an 'I' or self doing the experiencing, or whose experience it is. But there is no need for the subject enjoying the experience to be the *same* subject on any two occasions. Instead, in this rival picture, there is a continuous parade of spectator-subjects entering and departing from the theatre. Each time one spectator departs, it passes on the content of its *apparent* memories to the next. (This is essentially the line of criticism that the philosopher Kant developed of Descartes' soul theory.)

42. But is there not still, on this rival picture, the same mental theatre where all this constant activity happens? May one not call the theatre itself the 'soul' that we have been seeking? That suggests a picture of the soul not as the inner spectator of the contents of one's consciousness, but rather as their ghostly container. If that picture of the soul as a container begins to seem gripping, however, then one may at once resort to a third picture. Say that there is not one theatre of consciousness but a streetful of such theatres – unfortunately (or fortunately) all showing the same play. Instead of remaining in its place while the stream of subjective experiences parade by, the inner spectator hops from one theatre to the next like an over-worked drama critic, taking in first a bit of one version of the play, then another, then another. (Just to round off the point, we can of course combine the second and third pictures: let there be a series of spectators each visiting a different theatre. The first spectator emerges from the first theatre and tells the story-so-far to the second spectator entering the second theatre, and so on.)

43. However, the defender of the soul is not beaten yet. If the picture that seemed to justify the theory of a soul lies in pieces, all that shows is that we were mistaken in placing any reliance on such a flimsy support in the first

place. Is there a persuasive philosophical argument that can stand in place of the picture? Here is one simple argument that theorists of the soul have found attractive. When we perceive a certain quality, say, a colour, there is always an object to which one attributes the quality, or which may be taken to be its objective source. Objectively, it is the apple itself that is red. That is to say, the apple possesses the objective quality of redness, or, rather, having the power to produce the visual experience in us that we in our common language call 'red'. If it seems a little more difficult to locate an object 'sky' possessing the objective quality of blueness, that is only because one is construing the notion of an object too narrowly. There are other types of objects than the solid, physical kind. What is important, however, is that for every quality or collection of qualities there must be an object whose property they ultimately are, the logical or grammatical *subject* of which the common names of those qualities are the *predicates*. What then of the subjective counterparts of the red and the blue? Just as in the objective case, the private subjective qualities of redness or blueness need a subject which they may be said to be qualities of. – There is only one candidate for such a subject: the mind or soul.

44. Is that a good argument? Once again, one is faced with the challenge to find an *overlooked possibility*. When the picture of a private mental theatre was used to justify belief in a soul, the challenge was to find an alternative picture. Now, the challenge is to find an alternative logical or grammatical subject for the private, subjective impressions of the red of the apple or the blue of the sky to be predicates of. What could it be? In fact, there are two alternative possibilities. The first is to think of the experience of the red or the blue as *events* rather than *things*. The mental events of experiencing red or experiencing blue are themselves the subjects of which the subjective redness or blueness may be regarded as the predicates. Logic or grammar, after all, only dictates that there should be a grammatical subject, not what form that subject should take. (This interpretation corresponds nicely with the first of the two 'alternative pictures' of the theatre of consciousness suggested above.)

45. What of the second alternative candidate for the role of the logical subject for one's subjective impressions? – Wait a minute, did we not say 'one's'? Who is 'one', anyway? The answer, it seems, has been there all along, so obvious that we failed to notice it. I, the *physical* person writing these words,

am the subject of the subjective impressions that we have been trying to foist on a soul! (If one insists on precision, one might say instead that the real 'subject' is my brain.) After all, it was no-where stated that the subject had to be essentially mental. But surely, that is too easy a solution, isn't it? We shall have to see. Clearly, there will be no way forward for our investigation until we tackle a question which we have so far succeeded in avoiding: the precise nature of the interdependence (if that is indeed what it is) between the mental and the physical.