

## Freud at the theater: reviewing Cartesian dualism

*Is it true that we are always the best authority about our own mental states? What conclusions do you draw from your answer to that question regarding the distinction between the 'inner' and the 'outer'?*

*“The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water.”*

This famous quote by S. Freud gives us a pretty good picture of the complexity of the mind and its structure. Only a little part of the iceberg can actually see the sky, feel the air, while the rest remains underwater. If only just a tiny fragment of this iceberg-shaped complex, which is the mind, can float above the water, what are we missing down there? But what is the mind in the first place?

If, according to Cartesian dualism, we assume that the mind is that substance that allows us to experience reality, the blue of the sky, the red of an apple, or that complex system of lines that are the letters I'm writing right now on the screen of my very laptop, we can say that the mind is basically what, or who, we are.

This substance, that can be the soul, or just the bio-chemical signals in my brain, needs to communicate with the reality, with the material world. How can I be aware of my surroundings, and how can I feel what I feel? But most of all, how can I be really sure of what I'm experiencing?

Freud, in his structural model of the psyche (Freud, 1923), describes a place (tòpos) where the I (Ego) is always trying to find a balance between what we should do, know or feel (super-ego), and our intimate, deep, instinctual desires (Id). In its struggle to allow desire to come out, the I needs to deal with the laws of the super-ego, the laws of our culture.

Going back to Freud's quote, our mind is indeed an iceberg, and only the tip of the iceberg, the I, can experience the conscious, and in so doing, the reality, but it can because of all the other ice that remains underwater.

The I is what it is because its vision of the world, the way it communicates with the material substance is due to his internal struggle. If there's a struggle, there's movement, and if there's movements, there's change. The way the I sees the world is not only subjective, due to the inability of the humans to share their mental states, but also fluid.

This vision of the I, or mind, finds validation in another theory, the Multiple-Drafts model theory conceived by Dennett (Dennett, 1991), which is the idea that the consciousness is like a flow of drafts of text; always and constantly edited and re-edited.

Cartesian inner/outer dichotomy is in reality much more complex of what he himself believed. The question that arises is not only how the inner and the outer can actually

communicate, or where they do so, but are they, as Descartes realized in his book *Les passions de l'âme*, more bounded than we think?

If these two substances are so bounded, so mixed, and if we postulate a model of the I which is not static, we have to think that they, somehow, influence each other. Neurosciences give us the proof that our brain is not a static object. It is not just grey matter resting in our skull, but something alive, that changes itself during time and *experience*.

When we experience something, the paths of our neurons change and they create new paths, or change the old ones (Schwartz, 2004). In this sense, the I, who experiences the world, is actually changed by it. This phenomenon, called neuroplasticity, seems to prove that the two Cartesian substances not only communicate somewhere in our brain, but they share a profound bond when it comes to experiencing the reality.

Thanks to Freud and Dennett we saw the mind as something alive, that changes constantly and during time. On the other hand we have a brain that does the same thing. The scene of the theater with the mind as the only spectator immediately seems not only too simple, but even pernicious. We can't imagine the reality as a movie screen in a theater with our mind enjoying the show anymore. The complexity of the mind lies in its multiplicity. There can be many spectators, or no one at all. Maybe there's not even a theater. Or the spectator and the theater are the same thing.

Accepting the multiplicity of the reality, and in so doing, avoiding to grasp an homuncular theory that, just as a *deus ex machina*, sorts out everything, when in its infinite regression, it can't even justify itself, means that we are not an I, but maybe a We, and because of that, we can't be sure of everything that We are experiencing.

The question that bothered Descartes so much will be difficult to answer, if we don't re-think our concept of inner and outer world. What would happen if, instead of asking ourselves "where's the mind, and where it meets the world?", we ask "is there truly a border?"

### *Bibliography*

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