

## **Repairing J. J. Smart's identity theory: A response to Ronald Planer's *Max Black's Objection to the Identity Theory of Mind***

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I'd like to focus my response on the issue of mental irreducibility; it appears to be central to Max Black's objection.

Towards the end of Ronald Planer's paper, it is suggested that J.J. Smart needs to more firmly establish that sensations are not irreducibly mental. "Irreducibly mental," as Planer pointed out, simply means that sensations cannot be reduced to physical properties.<sup>1</sup> The worry is that if such sensations are mentally irreducible, then Smart is committed to mind/body dualism.

This is precisely the kind of view Smart should try to avoid; though Smart does not appear to recognize this, it seems that dualism is in fact incompatible with the identity theory of cognition. That's because Smart appears to hold neuronal states and mental states have the same referent but different senses. Senses are just meanings—meanings are not the sorts of things that are physical; they're just descriptive content. Referents, on the other hand, are on the dualist view either physical or non-physical. One thing cannot be both, though—that's logically impossible. It is not plausible that neuronal activity is actually non-physical; so, identity theory commits Smart to the view that both "sensations" and "neuronal activity" refer to physical states. Of course, that rules out dualism here; the dualist view is that sensations and neuronal activity have different referents—one non-physical, the other physical.

Smart's big problem, it seems, is one can never prove physicalism of mental states to a great deal of satisfaction. This has to do with the inherently personal—and hence incommunicable—nature of sensations. Consider a comparison to the oft-cited example of the morning and evening star. Both are reducible to the planet Venus and all its properties because Venus is an observable object. Sensations are, however, unobservable; we can only observe the effects of them, or the neuronal activity corresponding to them (which are, on Smart's view, identical with the sensations). The only way we actually have any access to others' sensations is actually through our own. That is, we assume others have similar physiology as ourselves, and so will have similar sensations when exposed to similar phenomena. These are all inferences, though, not real observations about sensations. This appears to be the epistemic gap which Black exploits.

Note, though, that it is an epistemic gap—not a metaphysical one. Black's criticism rested on metaphysical grounds—that is, he wished to imply Smart was committed to a dualist metaphysics. However, it does not follow from there being such a gap in our knowledge that there may be physically irreducible properties.

To illustrate this point, consider the tesseract. By this, I mean a cube extended into 4 spatial dimensions. By geometrical extrapolation, we know all the properties of the tesseract. It contains 16 corners, 24 squares, 32 edges and 6 cubes. It is, however, impossible for us to imagine what a tesseract looks like in 4-dimensional space. We have, then, two Fregean "senses": the appearance of a tesseract, and its geometry. The former is incommunicable (at least to us 3-dimensional beings), and the latter communicable. Yet if a traveler from the fourth dimension were to tell us about all the tesseracts in his world, we would not say he is making an anti-physicalist claim about the universe. Now, this is key: The limits

of our perspective (which entail epistemic limits) do not here imply limits on the physical world.

The case of the tesseract is analogous to sensations and the physical state of the brain—as Planer says, C-fibers firing.<sup>2</sup> True, we can never present our sensations physically to other people. This is an unfortunate limit on our perceptual abilities, and it is what makes the theory of mental irreducibility so tempting. But it is certainly conceivable that some physical things cannot be presented physically to us (e.g., a tesseract). Maybe minds are like tesseracts. Then again, maybe they're not.

The question is, therefore, who has the proper metaphysical theory of mind: Smart, who wishes mental states to be identical to physical ones, or Black, who wishes to demonstrate irreducibility of mental states? Planer presents Smart as dodging this question via “topic-neutral analysis.”<sup>3</sup> It is dubious whether such neutrality can be maintained, because as Black indicates and I explained earlier, dualism and identity theory appear to be incompatible. But topic-neutral analysis is unnecessary anyway—surely we can adequately rule out dualism? Consider: If dualism is false, mental activity is not irreducible to physical states; if mental activity is not irreducible to physical states, then it is simply an incommunicable physical occurrence and Smart's identity theory thoroughly resists Black's objection.

There is not enough time for me to adequately argue against dualism. I will content myself, therefore, to make a more modest burden of proof argument. That is, we should assume dualism is false unless very compelling evidence is presented to us to the contrary. Why can we do this? Well, all good evidence points to a physicalist view of mentality. So far, we have not found a mental process which is wholly independent of physical activity in the brain. As Planer puts it, “Were we to count all the brain events in the world, no mental event would be left uncounted (though not every brain event would be a mental event).”<sup>4</sup>

So, until someone finds a case where a mental event doesn't line up with a physical event, we should reject dualism as implausible. I suspect that Smart would agree with this sentiment; something like it would be a good motivator to come up with a coherent picture of how these incommunicable sensations can be identical with communicable brain-states. Arguably, this is begging the question; but sometimes it's okay to beg questions when so much ink has already been spilt and the question appears to have been resolved anyway.

In any event, Black needs to make a compelling argument for dualism for his criticism to get off the ground. Therefore, it is in my view Black, rather than Smart, who really needs to expand his argument. □

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Planer, “Max Black's Objection to the Identity Theory of Mind,” presented at the 2008 Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, p. 5.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 3