

## A Philosopher who Believes in the Soul

Graham Dunstan Martin

### THE TWO SIDES OF BEING: A REASSESSMENT OF PSYCHO-PHYSICAL DUALISM

Uwe Meixner

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I don't know how things are on the Continent, but in the English-speaking world it is hard to find a professional philosopher who will speak up loudly for such problematic entities as the 'Soul'. 'Speak up loudly, did I say? Who will even mention that embarrassing word! It is refreshing therefore to come across the present massive book, written in excellent English, offering a full-scale refutation of contemporary academic materialism / physicalism, and a full-scale defence of what philosophers term 'interactionist substance dualism'. Among others Meixner targets Daniel Dennett, and especially his *Consciousness Explained* (Penguin 1991) (of which Galen Strawson said it should be sued for false pretensions).

It is refreshing too that his exasperation with physicalist arguments often provokes him to polemical wit. Thus he reminds us how Yuri Gagarin, orbiting the Earth in his little spaceship, pronounced that God does not exist because he could not spy Him out of his porthole. Physicalists, he notes, go in for exactly this same argument. Thus Dennett, Susan Blackmore and others will say (quite rightly) that science cannot find a conscious inner self in the brain, and (quite wrongly) that therefore no such entity could possibly exist. As Meixner says, the physicalists' 'scientific' arguments against dualism all have this same form: they are 'Gagarin arguments'. In fact if consciousness isn't in the brain this is evidence not for its non-existence, but for its being non-material! (Physicalists take a very narrow view of science.)

Characteristically they also detest Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Though, needless to say, humans have believed in souls as well as bodies since well before the dawn of history, they charge Descartes with the sole responsibility for this belief, and take every opportunity they can to denigrate, even to misrepresent, him. Why this hatred (or is it in fact terror?) of Descartes? The answer, Meixner argues, is that Descartes showed, quite irrefutably, that one can doubt everything except one's own consciousness and its present contents. The physicalists by contrast wish to declare consciousness — the very source of all knowing - trivial or non-existent and turn it into a 'collection of cheap tricks', 'as Dennett is happy to express himself.' (p 97)

How do the physicalists treat dualists other than Descartes? With silence. Edmund Husserl for instance, who again and again pointed out that 'the physical world is for you in no other way than as a never completed sum-content of your consciousness' is handled like most other continental philosophers – i.e. he is ignored. Physicalists (says Meixner) see the world upside down. They have placed blind, dumb matter in the centre where consciousness should be; and banished consciousness to the periphery.

Yet if anything should be doubted, it is the reality of matter rather than of mind. For we never encounter material objects without the encounterer, i.e. without our own consciousness being present. 'Material objects are one pole in a complex that has two poles, the other pole being we.' (p 154) Thus, matter is in at least as much need of verification and explanation as is consciousness.

Meixner goes on to give us a wide overview of the current philosophical arguments. Thus he deals in convincing detail with Searle's Chinese Room, with the inverted spectrum argument (which he finds entirely valid), and with Jackson's 'knowledge' argument (in which 'Mary' has learnt all the scientific facts about the colour *red*, but has never experienced it). He deals with the claim that an immaterial mind cannot influence a material body because (allegedly) 'the physical world must be causally closed.' He raises the evolutionary issue, namely why, if consciousness is useless – a mere luxury addition – has it evolved to be universal among animals? He mentions George Cantor, the mathematician who made infinity respectable, and invented an extraordinary mathematics of the infinite. Can such notions be grasped by the

human mind, asks Meixner, if it is purely material?

Dennett, in *Consciousness Explained*, (p 71) writes: '[A theory of mental events] will have to be constructed from the third-person point of view, since *all* science is constructed from that perspective.' But, as Meixner points out, the third-person point of view *does not exist as such*, since it is created from the first-person point of view. That is to say, the objective is constructed from the subjective, the truths of science being simply those which properly qualified individual scientists – every one of them a subjectivity! — agree about. And their agreement is always provisional.

One never agrees with everything in other people's books. I have not yet grasped Meixner's theory of free will (or mental causation). And I am unhappy with his claim that anything I can fully and convincingly imagine 'must be possible'; and that since I can imagine being disembodied, this shows my inner self is non-material. As someone who has written fantasy fiction, I am perfectly happy imagining myself disembodied; but I would also judge that the imagination has few limitations, and cannot therefore be used to determine the limits of the possible.

Meixner's English is excellent, showing only occasional signs of its German origin. His book is designed for philosophers, is therefore sometimes technical, but those acquainted with these controversies will find it crystal clear.

I have not recently come across a philosophical work defending the reality of the soul, which covers the whole 'landscape' of these contemporary controversies, and which does so with such conviction. Meixner shows that many of the opposition's central arguments are quite tawdry and unfair – and that they are particularly fond of begging the question. This is, in my view, a work of major importance, and let us hope it is the first swallow of a long dualist summer.

***Graham Dunstan Martin's latest book is *Living on Purpose****

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