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ON BEING IN THE MIND by Roderick Firth

If I am to respond in a fruitful way to Professor Shaffer's paper I must limit myself to a few specific topics. In the space at my disposal even these few topics can be treated only in a sketchy way. But I should like to say at the outset that I am in general agreement with Shaffer's basic argument in favor of the dualist position that mental events (as Shaffer uses this term) are not identical with physical events in the brain. Brain events, he says, occur only in a particular spatial location inside the head, but it is "nonsensical to say that mental events occur in any particular location." This seems to me to be the basic reason, ultimately the only reason, for preferring a lawful parallelism to the Identity Theory *if* we decide that that is where the issue lies. The issue between these two positions is consequently not a very important one.

Philosophers who defend the Identity Theory often try to construe the mind-body problem in a way that allows them to avoid saying, in so many words, that mental events (e.g., a sudden thought or a feeling of *dizziness*) have a spatial location within the body. One way to do this is to construe mental events and certain physical events as states or properties of something called a "subject," a "person," an "organism," etc. A philosopher may maintain, for example, that to say that the organism (person, subject) Smith has a thought is to attribute to Smith the state or property called "having a thought." And to say that a certain correlated physical event *E* is occurring within Smith's brain is to attribute to the *same* organism a property to be called, perhaps, "having a brain within which *E* is occurring." Then the Identity Theory is formulated as the theory that these two properties are identical, or the theory that the event that consists in Smith's having the one property is identical with the event that consists in Smith's having the other. (Metaphysical decisions about the use of terms like 'event,' 'property,' 'state of affairs,' etc., can generate a variety of formulations.) As John Austin said in another context, however, the frog is still there smiling up at us from the bottom of the mug. For there are *some* events, like my having a thought, in which it is logically possible for me (so to speak) to *participate* whether or not any physical object exists. As Descartes argues, it would be logically consistent for me to believe that I have a thought while I believe that I have no body. And there are other events, like my having a particular brain state, in which it is not logically possible for me to participate unless at least one physical object exists. Thus we may ask: Is it meaningful to say that an event that can (logically) occur in the absence of all physical things (hence of physical space itself, on some accounts) is identical with an event that cannot (logically) occur in the absence of a physical object? Does our concept of contingent (empirical) identity permit us to say such a thing? Do our criteria of contingent identity extend to such a relationship? The answer, I think, is clearly No — though I confess that I would not know how to prove this to someone who

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disagreed after careful reflection. I could only urge him not to let the fact that an organism (person, subject) can have both mental and physical properties obscure the basic conceptual distinction between these two kinds of properties, and the corresponding distinction between the two kinds of events in which the organism may participate. If it is not meaningful to say "My thoughts are located within six inches of my nose," any alternative terminology, unless it is question-begging, will allow us to find the same frog at the bottom of the mug. We could of course learn to use the word 'identical' in a new way to express a different concept. But this is an irrelevant and uninteresting fact.

I think that Shaffer's second argument, "the argument from privileged access," cannot be construed as a completely independent argument against the Identity Theory. For if a philosopher is prepared to identify mental events with brain events on the ground that they are lawfully related in certain ways, he need not hesitate to admit that we have some kind of "privileged access" to mental events. It is this epistemic fact, he might even say, that makes it possible to *discover* the psycho-physical laws from which we can infer the contingent identity of mind and matter; for unless we had this privileged access to particular mental events we should have no evidence for the correlations that we need to establish the psycho-physical laws. Thus the crucial question is still the one discussed earlier: Do our criteria of contingent identity permit us to infer the identity of mental and physical events from the fact that they are lawfully related in certain ways? The argument from privileged access is relevant to the mind-body problem to the extent that it bears on this question. It is useful as a way of dramatizing the conceptual difference between mental events and physical events that makes it meaningless (as Shaffer and I maintain) to assert that mental events are located in space. I think that Shaffer's moral argument is useful for the same purpose.

I should like to suggest, however, that Shaffer has not identified the special epistemic status of mental events in the best possible way. If someone believes firmly, Shaffer says, that he himself has a mental event (e.g. a feeling of pain) then he cannot be mistaken in that belief. But is this so? Suppose, for example, that your dentist has told you to let him know as soon as you feel the slightest pain. You are strongly motivated to report the very first twinge of pain, but you do not want to sound a false alarm. As the drill buzzes its way deeper and deeper you are inclined at times to think that you feel pain. But each time you subsequently decide that you were mistaken. In this situation it might be quite natural to say to yourself at some point: "Now I *really* think I feel a slight pain but of course I may be mistaken." Although you believe that you are in pain you expressly concede, contrary to Shaffer's thesis, that you may be mistaken. Can Shaffer show that this concession is irrational? I do not think so.

Shaffer might perhaps object that I have not provided an example of someone believing *firmly* that he has a certain mental event. For under the circumstances, he might argue, anyone who concedes that he may be mistaken is thereby demonstrating that he does not believe firmly. But there is danger of circularity here. We must be careful not to *define* a firm belief about our own mental events as a belief that we think cannot be mistaken. For in that case we rule out by fiat every example that could be used to show that Shaffer's thesis is false. It is hard, furthermore, to

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accept the doctrine that the mere strength of a belief about one's own experience can in general insure that the belief is true. It suggests, in line with what Hamlet said about right and wrong, that thinking with firm conviction that we are in pain always makes it so. Perhaps thinking that one is in pain can *sometimes* make it so. This may explain certain psycho-somatic illnesses and the efficacy of certain forms of voodoo. But such an argument cannot be extended to yield a guarantee that all firm beliefs about our own mental events are similarly "self-fulfilling."

I think, therefore, that our "privileged access" to mental events consists not in a guarantee of true belief but in a guarantee of self-warranted belief. If I believe that I feel pain then I am to some extent justified in believing that I feel pain. My belief has some degree of warrant quite independently of any *reasons* or *evidence* that I might have for thinking that I am in pain. In fact I might have many good reasons for thinking that I should *not* be feeling pain at the moment; but if I nevertheless believe that I am feeling pain my belief may be warranted despite the contrary evidence. Beliefs about objects in physical space, on the other hand, are never self-warranted in this sense. At this moment, for example, I am justified in thinking that I see a sheet of white paper before me. But I can account fully for this justification by appealing to the shape and the texture of the object before me and to the various visual and tactual sense-experiences that I am now having. Thus the things to which we have a privileged epistemic access are precisely those mental events that can (logically) exist in the absence of objects in physical space.

In conclusion I shall comment very briefly on the issue between the Bundle Theory and the Mental Substance Theory as Shaffer uses those terms. The Bundle Theory is doomed, I think, by the fact that it is logically possible that there should be two people with exactly similar mental events throughout their existence. Somewhere in history, for all we know, there may actually have been two babies, each living very briefly, who experienced exactly similar feelings of hunger, warmth, and pain, and then died. Yet they were two babies with two minds, not two bodies with but a single mind. The advantage of the Mental Substance Theory over the Bundle Theory is that it allows us to recognize this possibility. It allows us to say that the difference between two such bundles of mental events, if they should exist, would lie in the fact that the experiences "belong to" two irreducibly different things — two minds or souls or egos or mental substances that are not in any way definable in terms of the experiences themselves. As a matter of fact this is the *only* advantage of the Mental Substance Theory. Mental substance is not needed, for example, as a *causal* agent, for the causation of mental events could surely be accounted for, if we knew enough, by appealing to causal laws that link mental events either with physical events or with other mental events.

To separate the Mental Substance Theory from superfluous historical associations, what we need, I think, is some easy and natural way of thinking and talking about "bundles" of mental events in a way that allows similar bundles to be differentiated. For this purpose I suggest that we take seriously the expression 'in the mind.' We say things like these: "It's hard to know what goes on in her mind." "I shall try to keep that in mind." "I've decided to put that thought out of mind until tomorrow." And so on. We use an analogous temporal idiom to locate objects and events in relation to the present. We say "Those unhappy events are all in the past,

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thank God!" "He is too old to adjust to what is happening in the present." "When things like this happen in the future we shall be better prepared for them." "Every event is either in the past, the present, or the future." And so on.

The two idioms raise similar problems and suggest similar philosophical positions. A philosopher of Humean temperament, for example, might propose a "bundle theory of tense" to explain the terms 'past,' 'present,' and 'future.' He might argue that none of these terms designates an empirical property that distinguishes each event of one kind (e.g., each past event) from events of the other two kinds. We can only define the past, the present, and the future in relation to one another, which gets us nowhere. Therefore, our new Hume might maintain, the past, the present, and the future can only be thought of as three bundles of events, distinguished only by the fact that there are different events in each bundle. But of course such a bundle theory of tense will not work. The contents of the bundles keep changing as future events become present events and present events become past events, and we are left with the question: What do the new past events have in common with the old?

After considering this analogy, it may still remain a mysterious fact, at least a wondrous fact, that *being in a particular mind* is enough to distinguish a bundle of mental events from a similar bundle in another mind. It is no less wondrous, however, that *being in the present* is enough, independently of reference to clocks and calendars, to distinguish a bundle of present events from a similar bundle that may have occurred in the past or that may occur in the future. In both cases the distinction is one of location within what might be called a "range of existence." If something has happened in the past it exists in a certain range of existence, namely, the past. If some feeling occurs in my mind it exists in a certain range of existence, namely, my mind. If a similar feeling occurs in your mind, it occurs in another range of existence, namely, your mind. It may be that to say this is not to *explain* anything. But philosophy begins in wonder, and sometimes we find a degree of contentment when we see that there are other things no less wondrous than the object of our wonder.