

Many –isms i.e.

Materialism, Mentalism, Behaviorism and Functionalism

Source: Kess (1992) and many web-urls

It is but human to ask a question when we see these many ‘-ism(s)’ as to why we want study about ‘them’!

A very simple and layman’s answer to the question will be that there are questions as given below and they have remained unanswered, and in order to seek some plausible answer, we want to study these ‘-ism(s).

So, let us see the questions that prepare the background of these ‘-ism(s)’:

What do we know when we know something?

How do we know when we know something?

Moreover, where does the ‘idea’ that might have helped us to know something come from?

One last question, is it the case that we have ‘mind’ and these ideas are very much in our mind?

These are the questions that we want to address as the part of our ‘understanding’ and a thoughtful response to the issues.

It is needless to say that the issues are very complex and the human history itself is an evidence that such questions can't be answered straight forward or at least has no ONE/FIXED answer such as $2+2=4$.

Thus, it might sound a bit odd but If we want to understand such serious things/issues, I am sure we need to be at least this complex and confusing that after sometime, we would realize that 'actually nothing is right or wrong but it is the state of mind that takes us either way.

However, a known fact that can be brought to discussion is that the **study of the nature and origin of knowledge** is a branch of philosophy that is known as 'Epistemology'.

Well, to tell you the truth, in Psycholinguistics too , we are interested in epistemological issues.

I said this is an epistemological issue because look at what we want to know after all!

We want to know:

- a. What is the nature of "the knowledge of language",
- b. How does it originate from mind and
- c. how is it acquired?

Mentalism VS. Materialism

A self-test for where do you belong to:

The mentalist-materialist Self-test (Mark 'yes' or 'no' to the Qs.

1. ***Do humans have bodies ?*** For example, some of the attributes of body are arms, legs, chest, and brain. (YES [] No [])

2. ***Do humans have minds ?*** For example, some of the attributes of mind are consciousness, feelings, belief, and ideas. (Yes [] No [])

3. ***Does the mind have some control over the body?*** For example, suppose you feel cold and you decide to put on a sweater, or , you see a friend on the street and you decide to call out to him/her. Does your mind control your body to do these things? (Yes [] No [])

4. ***Is it necessary to study mind in order to understand human beings and their behavior ?*** (Yes [] No [])

How to check the score:

'Yes' to all questions: you are a Mentalist. However, you may be an Empiricist or a Rationalist.

'No' to all questions, except a 'yes' to (1): you are a Materialist e.g. you may be a Behaviorist or a Functionalist

'No' to questions 3 & 4 and 'yes' to 1 & 2: you are a Materialist-Based Behaviorist. You may be a Behaviorist Epiphenomenalist or a Reductionist.

The essence of Materialism

Probably a 'No' to question 2 would have led Watson (1924) to say that mind and consciousness are religious superstitions and thus are irrelevant to the study of psychology.

There is, thus, only one kind of stuff in the universe, and that is 'material' or 'matter'.

The study of **physiology** is the study of psychology. This philosophy has its origins in the ancient Greek (Epicurus, the Stoics) and with Julien Offray de la Mettrie in eighteenth-century France.

There has been many off springs of this materialism in different forms and they have always emphasized the power of 'body' or 'matter' and denied the independent existence of 'mind' in different ways.

Despite their diversity in so called anti-mentalist theories, they held one fundamental point in common and that is they all argue for the study of the physical body and they opine that this contains the brain.

By doing this, they could relate bodily processes and functioning of the body to situations and events in the physical environment.

Since only the physical body existed for the materialists, the mind, according to their opinion, remains just a fiction contained in the body and thus they emphasized on the study of bodily matter.

Watson's criterion for determining whether something did or did not exist would depend on whether or not it was physically observable.

He would go to this extent to say ‘..no one has touched a soul [mind] or seen one in a test-tube, or has in any way come into relationship with it as s/he has with other objects in her/his daily observable experience of life... so to believe that it exists!’

It is for this reason that Psychology was regarded as something that can not be separated from physiology.

Epiphenomenalism: this is an offspring of materialism. The essence of this view is that although both mind and body exist, the mind simply reflects what is happening in the body.

Since, the mind has no causative powers, the proper study of psychology is still, as Watson would say, the body.

Skinner, Ryle, Quine were the supporters of this view.

It is interesting to note that Skinner allowed the mind to exist in this theory but gave it no power over behavior.

He rejects the explanation of human behavior in terms of feelings, states of mind, and mental processes, and ultimately seeks some alternatives in 'genetic and environmental histories.

Psychology, thus, remains the study of the physical matter even in this epoch.

In order to clarify his view point, Skinner gives a real-life example: Hillary and Tenzing, (in 1950s) having been the first to conquer the Everest, they said '....the battle really is with yourself...what you are tackling are the problems within yourself, your own internal fears and even your doubts, perhaps, about your ability to persist and to meet ...the problems and all the rest of it are within yourself'.

The epiphenomenal-ists would have us believe that what Hillary and Tenzing were talking about their conscious experiences and in that their state of mind was contributing nothing to their behavior but merely reflected what their body was already doing.

The epiphenomenal Behaviorist philosopher, Ryle similarly scoffed at what he terms Descartes' 'ghost in the machine' a concept, where Ryle uses 'ghost' pejoratively to signify 'mind' and 'mental events' and 'machine' to signify the body.

He and his followers would rather have us think and believe that it is more reasonable to consider the fact that machine can produce 'ghosts' but that these 'ghosts' can have any effect on our behavior is out of question. (TV serial: Replies...believe it or not!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

Reductionism: The great proponent of this theory in 17th century was the Dutch philosopher Spinoza.

For him and others who believed in this theory, mind as well as body is said to exist, but mind can be reduced to physical entity i.e. body.

Since, one can learn all that is there to know about mind by doing a thorough study of body, there is no need to study mind independently (Feigl 1958, Smart 1959 and Armstrong 1968).

Taking this dual-aspect position, mind can be studied entirely through body in relative metaphysical comfort.

Psychological proponents of this view Osgood (1980), Mowrer (1960) and Staats (1968,71) have posited that stimuli and responses occur in the body and brain.

The body and mind seems to mediate between an overt stimulus and an overt response for the process of cognition.

The term 'overt' here means the events that exist outside the body. For example:

Overt stimuli could be a flash of light or someone asking a question while overt responses could be the blinking of the eyelid or the uttering of speech in answer to a question.

And finally there could be a connection between overt stimuli and overt responses.

This helped the psychologist to theorize that behavior could be fully explained by internal stimulus and response processes that could be connected to the overt stimulus and response; and such internal processes can be nothing but ultimately of a physical in nature.

Mentalism: Interactionism and Idealism

As opposed to Materialists, the Mentalists hold that 'mind' is of different nature from matter.

According to this approach, there are QUALITATIVELY two kinds of substances in the universe, the material and mental.

This kind of adherence to the existence of 'mind' and 'body' goes back to the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle through Locke and Descartes, and Chomsky to Searle in modern times.

For most of the proponents of Mentalism, the issue to understand the mind and consciousness is essential to the understanding of the intellectual capacity of human beings, specially the LANGUAGE.

Most of the modern-day psycholinguists, psychologists and even linguists study the mind and the interaction of body and mind in order to understand the processes of language and its learning by the children.

Two sub-groups of Mentalist school of thought which have always been concerned to the study of mind and body and their relationships with respect to environmental stimuli and behavioral responses in the world are known as the Interactionists and the Idealists.

We may ask as to how the mind is different from matter. The interactionists would argue that it is because of the two basic types of 'stuff' in the universe, the mental and the material.

The sentences such as 'The idea of square is purple' and 'Happiness weighs 3 grams' are meaningless if taken literally.

It is also because in these sentences, physical attributes (weight and color) of the material world are attributed to non-physical mental entities (idea and mental state) of mental world.

Idealism (subjective idealism): Some mentalists such as Plato, Berkeley (18th Century) and Hegel (19th Century) took the radical position that *mind is the only stuff* in the universe.

According to this ***radical mentalist idealism***, the body and the rest of the physical world are mere construction of the mind.

The world exists only in the mind of a conscious individuals, with the only true substance being the mental.

For Plato, eternal ideas were the only reality and for Berkeley all minds were part of the mind of God.

In a sense, idealism is at the other extreme from radical Materialism, while for the Materialist only matter exists, for the Idealist, only the mind exists.

In modern times, there is little interest in Idealism. Rather, Interactionism is more preferred by social scientists and seems to be the principal doctrine of Mentalism that is being advocated in present time. (Searle 1997).

It is this notion of mentalism that we are concerned here with, especially as it is realized in the competing theories of Empiricism and Rationalism.

Empiricism: According to this Empiricist-mentalist approach, a person is regarded as having a mind.

This mind is related to the body but is not synonymous with it because a mind has consciousness and consciousness can USE mind to control behavior.

In order to understand a person's behavior, including speech, it is necessary to study what controls behavior.

And according to the mentalist, it happens to be the mind that controls behavior.

Thus, mentalism is characterized by a belief in mind, ideas, consciousness and the role of consciousness in behavior.

Empiricist view 1: *Intelligence is derived from experience:* While all Mentalists will agree on the existence of mind and that in their minds-humans have ideas, i.e. knowledge ('ideas' are often synonymous with 'knowledge in the tradition of philosophy).

However, what they don't agree upon unanimously is how those ideas got there into the mind.

The empiricists hold the view that ideas are derived entirely through experience (*enpeir* is Greek for 'experience').

The Empiricists will then argue with one another as to whether something more, such as intelligence, is innate.

Intelligence, thus, is not considered as knowledge but as a mere means to acquire the knowledge.

Philosophers like Locke and Piaget have argued that intelligence develops out of experience, and then it is with this intelligence that we can acquire knowledge, of course, through experience.

In Locke's radical view, the mind at the time of the birth is BLANK; experience then imprints ideas on it.

- **Empiricist view 2:** *intelligence or its basis is innate:*
- If we think carefully about Locke's point of view, we can naturally question how something (intelligence) can come from nothing (the blank mind).
- According to Putnam, a contemporary philosopher, humans are born with intelligence, an innate intelligence that has developed through evolution.
- Piaget seems to take a middle position between Locke and Putnam. He did not argue that there was nothing at the time of birth (as Locke did), nor he emphasized that intelligence was already in the mind at the time of birth (as Putnam did).
- He rather claims that 'innate-ness' is something that he would like to term as 'indifferentiated schemata' out of which intelligence would develop.
- He kept absolutely mum as to what these schemas are consisted of. However, it is inferred that he preferred to derive intelligence from action and experience (Piaget and Inhelder 1969).

What should we do in the webs of these philosophical wars!!!!

- OK, hold on, let us recollect and collate the best of these philosophical thoughts:
- It seems that we can formulate our own view out of these and say that children are born with the essence of propositions and the entities which they develop in course of time.
- They are also bestowed with the essence of the analytical powers of inductive and deductive logic.
- It is through the operations of these analytical logical procedures on the basis of which children acquire the 'knowledge' of the world and then the language with which they may deal with the world and the people in it.
- ***Rationalism***: The Rationalist view as proposed by Descartes is that the basic ideas (God or Gog, triangle or rectangular etc.) are already in the mind at the time of birth.
- To activate these ideas, one uses reason (*ratio* in Greek) in conjunction with experience.

- Chomsky in modern time can be called a proponent of Rationalist philosophy. He, however, has modified Descartes' original conception to a great extent.
- He takes the stand that the basic structures are already in the mind of the child at the time of birth.
- He further claims that there are some structures in the mind that are of a distinct nature i.e. language.
- He calls this as innate-language properties of human mind i.e. 'Universal Grammar' (formally he used the name LAD).
- Furthermore, Chomsky claims that a particular grammar develops through certain distinctive innate-language-processes of Universal Grammar.

- Such processes are said to be independent of reason, logic or intelligence.
- This is a radical departure from the classic Rationalism of Plato in 4th century BC or of Descartes in 18th Century.
- They had hypothesized that, along with experience, the operation of reason was necessary to make innate knowledge functional.
- Other Rationalists (such as Bever) do not separate language from other types of ideas.
- Rather, Bever says that innate ideas are of a general nature.
- Such general and basic ideas in this view serve to yield language as well as other types of knowledge such as mathematics etc.
- So, what is the punch line! Go ahead and believe in one the ‘-ism(s)’ that you find more convincing.

• That’s all 😊