

Guy Claxton

The Mind–Body Problem — *Who Cares?*

When I first open a new document on my computer, as I have just done, the relationship between my key presses and what happens on the screen is rather loose. I press Enter a few times to move the cursor down the page a bit (allowing some ready space to fill in the title later), and sometimes nothing happens for a while; or the cursor disappears for a few seconds before reappearing in its new position. After a minute or so, the machine seems to settle down, and then the correlation between taps on the keyboard and movements on the screen becomes much tighter and more consistent. Then, because taps and movements are tightly and predictably coupled, it hardly seems an inference (or imputation) at all to see the taps as the causes of the changes on the screen. While the computer is still ‘waking up’, I imagine that the taps are still the causes of the screen changes, but that the temporal relationship is lengthened and muddied by the fact that there is a lot else going on inside the machine while it is, so to speak, finishing dressing and cleaning its teeth. If, however, the machine was not just sleepy and preoccupied but seriously ill, then the relationship between taps and screen changes might become so bizarre and inconsistent that I would assume that causality had broken down. There may be causal connections inside still — the machine may still be operating in a completely deterministic fashion — but as I can no longer make sense of the relationship between input and output, I withdraw the imputation of causality.

Just so with myself. There is abundant evidence that I impute causal relationships between bits of my experience — my imagining a calm meadow and a physical feeling of relaxation; the thought ‘I’d better get up now’ and the act of getting out of bed — on the basis of a sufficient tightness of coupling between the events, and whether their conjunction makes sense in terms of the causal narratives through which I habitually interpret my experience. I ask myself, pre-consciously for the most part, a number of questions, and on the basis of the answers, I either do or do not make that causal attribution. Is A reliably followed by B? Do

Correspondence: Guy Claxton, University of Bristol School of Education, 35 Berkeley Square, Bristol BS8 1JA, UK..

the delays between A and B fall within a range that I can interpret causally, given the kinds of folk psychological stories with which my culture has equipped me? (Whether and how quickly I come to the conclusion that my computer is ‘broken’ — i.e. that the kinds of causality that make sense and on which I rely are no longer in place — depends on the folk technology that has emerged from my past experience and my very shaky grasp on what is actually going on inside the box.) And especially: what key aspects of those stories might be jeopardised if I were to withdraw the imputation that A is the cause of B?

The answer to the last question, for many people much of the time, is: ‘my sense of self’. The existence of a causal relationship between conscious states, especially thoughts and intentions, and physical states or actions — taking the cello out of its case and beginning to practise; refraining from taking the last piece of cake — is one of the axioms of the garden-variety self. If I acknowledge that this causal relationship does not obtain, or not enough, then I have to conclude that I am ‘broken’: mad, out of control, or the plaything of impersonal forces. While the axiom remains unchallenged, the mind–body causal relationship is not neutrally discovered; it is mandatorily imposed. I am obliged to find it whether it is there or not. I will rig the evidence if I have to, and shamelessly deny that I have done so. Any discussion of the causal status of conscious experience has to start, therefore, with the recognition that what appears to be a dispassionate enquiry is actually a question of life and death importance to which there is only one permissible answer (Claxton, 1999).

The fact is that the relationship between mind states and bodily or behavioural events, if observed accurately, is extremely loose. When I say to myself ‘I’m going to get up now’, the truth is I often don’t. Statistically, the lag between intention and act is highly variable: sometimes I do get up immediately; sometimes it takes an hour. Often, what I observe is that I experience the intention, no related act occurs, my mind drifts onto other things, and at some unpredictable time later I find myself in the bathroom half way through shaving. Mind and body are loosely correlated, not tightly coupled. And in such circumstances it is much more profitable — assuming one is free to do so — to look for a third entity, perhaps not directly visible itself, which can be seen as the causal progenitor of both the mind state and the body state.

Explorations in what is coming to be known as ‘embodied cognition’ suggest that the irreducible causal agent is a highly complex, momentary dynamic pattern that includes processes in brain, body and the wider contextual system of which the brain–body is part (Clark, 1997; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Varela *et al.*, 1991). Out of the energetic constellations of this Brain–Body–Context system — the BBC — emerge moment-to-moment conscious states and physical actions, some of which seem to be correlated and others of which do not. When sensible, reliable correlational stories cannot be constructed, one is simply obliged to admit that the underlying system is more complex than one had hoped, or thought (or ‘God moves in a mysterious way’, as some people choose to put it); not that there has been a catastrophic breakdown in sanity or identity. Because conscious experiences (including complex abstract trains of thought) are

intermittent products of the BBC, and not windows through which its workings can be directly observed, its attempts to explicate itself in conscious representations are to be marvelled at and enjoyed, not to be taken as serious candidates for the ‘truth’ about human nature or indeed the mind–body problem. And so I — that is, the BBC, as it is currently manifesting in this neck of the woods — would like to thank Max Velmans (2002) very kindly for his most entertaining philosophical turn.

Physicist David Bohm, in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980), has a nice image. Imagine a rectangular aquarium in which swims a solitary koi. Trained on two adjacent (and therefore orthogonal) sides of the tank are two video cameras, each attached to a TV monitor. The two monitors sit side by side on a table in an adjoining room. From a distance they look like a single oblong fish tank containing *two* koi — one sideways on, the other face (or tail) on. The apparent relationship between the ‘two fish’ can be manipulated by introducing delays or random elements in the transmission of the cameras to the screens. Add half a second delay to one camera and it will look as if the freely willed movements of one fish reliably cause a complementary movement in the second. Extend the delay to a few seconds and it will look as if the second fish, like a chess player, is carefully pondering her position before making her move. Randomise the delay and the fish seem entirely independent. Take out the delay and the two fish seem to be magically, telepathically, connected. If we do not understand the set-up, we can puzzle for a long time about what the fish know about each other and how they can influence each other. And we can make the puzzle seem all the more perplexing if we call one fish ‘Mind’ and the other ‘Body’. Perhaps, after all, it is simply Cod that move in a mysterious way.

I suppose what I am trying to say is that Velmans’ analysis, elegant though it is, is missing a wider framing of the vital question which his paper seeks to address — one which places the questioner within the picture, and which acknowledges, paradoxically, that the question is both more and less serious than Velmans’ story seems to suggest. One is reminded of the passionate and legendary Liverpool football manager Bill Shankly who, when asked jokingly whether he considered football to be a matter of life and death, replied earnestly ‘Oh no. It’s much more important than that.’

References

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