

## The mind–body problem

The mind–body problem is the problem of how mind and body are connected to one another. We know that they *are* connected of course: we know that when people’s brains are damaged their ability to think is transformed. We all know that when people take narcotic drugs, or drink too much alcohol, these bodily activities affect the brain, which in turn affects the thoughts they have. Our minds and the matter which makes up our bodies are clearly related – but how?

One reason this is a problem is because, on the one hand, it seems obvious that we *must* just be entirely made up of matter and, on the other hand, it seems obvious that we *cannot* just be made up of matter; we must be something more. We think we must just be matter, for example, because we believe that human beings have evolved from lower forms of life, which themselves were made entirely from matter – when minds first evolved, the raw material out of which they evolved was just complex matter. And it is plausible to believe that we are entirely made up of matter – for example, if all my matter were taken away, bit by bit, there would be nothing of me left.

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But it seems so hard to believe that we are, underneath it all, just matter – just a few dollars' worth of carbon, water and some minerals. It is easy for anyone who has experienced the slightest damage to their body to get the sense that it is just *incredible* that this fragile, messy matter constitutes their nature as thinking, conscious agents. Likewise, although people sometimes talk of the 'chemistry' that occurs between people who are in love, the usage is obviously metaphorical – the idea that love itself is literally 'nothing but a complex chemical reaction' seems just absurd.

I once heard a (probably apocryphal) story that illustrates this feeling.<sup>1</sup> According to the story, some medical researchers in the 1940s discovered that female cats who were deprived of magnesium in their diet stopped caring for their offspring. This was reported in a newspaper under the headline, 'Motherlove is magnesium'. Whether the story is true doesn't matter – what matters is why we find it funny. Thinking of our conscious mental lives as 'really' being complex physical interactions between chemicals seems to be as absurd as thinking of motherlove as 'really' being magnesium.

Or is it? Scientists are finding more and more detailed correlations between psychological disorders and specific chemicals in the brain.<sup>2</sup> Is there a limit to what they can find out about these correlations? It seems a desperate last resort to insist, from a position of almost total ignorance, that there *must* be a limit. For we just don't know. Perhaps the truth isn't as simple as 'motherlove is magnesium' – but may it not be too far away from that?

So we are dragged first one way, and then the other. Of course, we think to ourselves, we are just matter, organised in a complex way; but then, on reflection, it seems impossible that we are just matter, there must be more to us than this. This, in barest outline, is one way of expressing the mind-body problem. It has proved to be one of the most intractable problems of philosophy – so much so that some philosophers have thought that it is impossible to solve. The seventeenth-century English philosopher Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680) expressed this idea poignantly: 'How the purer spirit is united to this clod is a knot too hard for fallen humanity to untie.'

Others are more optimistic, and have offered solutions to this

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problem. Some – *materialists* or *physicalists* – think that, despite our feelings to the contrary, it is possible to demonstrate that the mind is just complex matter: the mind is just the matter of the brain organised in a certain complex way. Others think that mind cannot just be matter, but must be something else, some other kind of thing. Those who believe, for instance, that we have ‘immaterial’ souls, which survive the death of our bodies, must deny that our minds are the same things as our bodies. For, if our minds were the same as our bodies, how could they survive the annihilation of those bodies? These philosophers are *dualists*, as they think there are *two* main kinds of thing – the material and the mental. (A less common solution these days is to claim that everything is ultimately mental: this is *idealism*.)