Idealism, Narrative and the Mind-Brain Relation

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I

It is widely thought that although idealism effortlessly avoids the mind-body problem — in the sense that for idealists the issue simply does not arise — it suffers from the defect of being untrue. Neither of these claims is correct. It is not my aim in this paper to demonstrate the truth of idealism. I shall take that as given. But I do wish to explore how an idealist perspective should view the relationship between the mind and the body, or more precisely the relationship between the mind and the brain, for this is a puzzle with which idealists have as much reason to engage as anyone else.

The suggestion that idealism is untroubled by the mysteries that result from embodiment is sensible enough, and in one respect it makes a clearly sound point. If we are worried how mental states stand to that which is not any sort of mental state, then the idealist claim that there just is no realm of the extra-mental removes at one stroke all of our concerns.

The matter is rather more complex than this, however. What ceases to be a problem under one description may remain so under another, and with a little more thought it is easy to see that idealists still have to face up to the curious relationship between the mind and the brain. For, of course, the idealist is as aware as anyone else of both the remarkable difference between mind and brain and the equally remarkable correlations which link them. Hence the very same phenomena which a physicalist or a dualist needs to relate together, so too is the idealist called upon to connect. Reassigning the physical into the same ontological category as the mental may change the nature of that task but it does not make it go away.

Many contemporary thinkers would argue that the wholly undeniable correlations which obtain between mental life and brain states, in so far as they seem to show that the former depend on the latter, rule out any idealist understanding of their relationship and may be regarded as finally refuting this long-standing position. But in this paper I shall argue that idealists need not regard themselves as defeated in this fashion. Quite the reverse, in fact. I shall urge that, rather than folding before such puzzling facts, it is idealism that offers the greatest hope for making sense of them, while physicalism finds itself caught without prospects in an unyielding impasse.

II

How do idealists understand the mind-brain relation? The most important step towards answering this puzzle is to attain the correct descriptive perspective in which to raise it, for the idealist does not see the world as others do, and therefore needs must choose a very different idiom in which to pose the problem. As we saw above, to the idealist the relationship to be examined is not one between mental states and extra-mental facts. Rather, in the light of the thesis that mental experience alone is what is real, the question must re-framed as one regarding the relationship between different sorts of experiences.

But even with this orientation the correct expressive approach may elude us, for there are many factors in play that can cloud our thinking at the start. In particular there are two issues which often set us looking in the wrong direction – the contrast between first and third person perspectives and the degree of currently available knowledge – and in order to avoid these pitfalls I shall begin by describing an idealised case, which for the moment cuts out both of those complications. That is to say, I shall start by thinking only about the first person in a state of full knowledge.

We have a least a partial experience of our own *bodies*, but we do not generally perceive our *brains* at all. It is clear, however, that that is not impossible. It is merely contingent that we do not do so. The following science-fiction thought-experiment makes this plain enough. Suppose that in the future we found it advantageous (perhaps for security reasons) to take our brains out of our bodies, and keep them in a vat of nutrient fluid, connecting them to our body's nervous system by wi-fi. In such a case it would be possible for me to examine my own brain as it lay sitting before me on the desk. My own brain would become one more among the many other objects within my experience. I could see it, touch it, or smell it, as well as apply to it more sophisticated modes of perceptual extension, such as monitoring its blood flow levels or recording its electro-chemical activity. The results of contemporary neurophysiological science suggest to us that in such a scenario I would observe a whole set of correlations. Perhaps the sudden waves of fear that I periodically experience are associated with observed changes in my amygdala, or the planning and reasoning that I engage in is correlated with recorded increases in activity in my prefrontal cortex. Or again perhaps perceived disruption to the functioning of my hippocampus corresponds with episodes of impairment to my memory, or detected stimulations of my c-fibres parallel experiences of pain.

I would note, then, a set of correlations between the contents of some of my perceptions, specifically between what those perceptions are telling me about the state of my brain, and the occurrence of certain other mental experiences. Given the weight of evidence to hand, it is entirely

reasonable that I may decide to generalise from these results and — although this will certainly take me beyond anything that I can definitively *prove* — to infer that the correlations I have noted are but representative examples of a much more extensive pattern of linkages. More specifically there are two inferences that I may be tempted to make.

In the first place I may infer that it is not just *some* mental states but *the whole* of my mental life that may be correlated to neural functions. I might think that for every one of my conscious experiences it would be possible to have a correlating experience of my brain as in a certain state. Since, the proposed correlations are now to cover the whole of my mental life in all of its complexity, there must also be inferred a corresponding and very substantial increase in the knowledge I am imagined to have of the state of my own brain, but there is no principled reason why this increase should not occur.

At this point it is necessary to say a few words about idealism. Thinking about the precise *form* that such an increase in knowledge would take, it might be suggested that we should advance here to a conception of the material world, or more specifically that part of it which is our brain, as something which is just as much given in *interpreted perception* and *inference* as it is in actual observation. This suggestion will cause concern to only the crudest of idealism. In the modern Anglo-American tradition 'idealism' is widely taken as synonymous with 'Berkelianism', the view that reality extends no further than that which is *sensed*. But instead of such narrow sensualism, idealism is better understood as the broader view that reality is confined to what is *experienced*, where the extra compass indicated by that term comes from acknowledging the inescapably conceptual or interpretative element in all of our cognition. The world of our experience is every bit as much something we *think* as it is something we *sense* — interpretation is unavoidable — and our understanding as valid a way of grasping reality as our feeling. The idealist acknowledges only experiences, but to think something is present is no less an experience of it than to perceive it is present, and to privilege the later faculty over the former with respect to the representation of reality is to load the balance against idealism from the start. Not *everything* we think is true, of course, but then neither is *every* sensation we have accurate, and where the veracity of an experience is a function of its coherence, the line between appearance and reality will fall without favour or prejudice to either perception or conception. On this broad understanding we can allow that the increase in our understanding that is being hypothesised here would remain — in a generous sense of the term — a matter of experience.

Turning to the second possible inference, I may also conclude – although the requirement to do this is somewhat less pressing – that for each perceptual experience of my brain as in a certain state, there must occur in me some corresponding mental experience. There might seem to be less

guarantee in advance that we will always be able to report such correlated mental experiences, and so it could be suggested that these mental states are *unconscious*.[1] But perhaps such a step is unnecessary. We could just as easily say that not all experiences of the brain correlate to further mental experiences; that some are just experiences of bodily events, and no more correlated with any additional mental experience than would be, say, a perception of the blood flowing around one's body or an awareness of the digestive processes in one's stomach

III

With our story in place it now becomes possible to see how an idealist ought to describe the situation. According to this imagined scenario in which our extended experience includes a perfect grasp of the state of our own brain, that brain must be recognised as an *object* of experience. That is to say, some subset of our experiences are perceptual experiences *of* a brain as in various conditions. But, according to the hypothesis we are entertaining, there holds a perfect correlation between experience as a whole and the contents of that subset of experience. The sum of experiences that we have – one might even say, that *we are* – are supposed perfectly correlated with a selection of items figuring *in* those experiences; to be more precise, with a selection of the states in which we experience our brains to lie. We can say either that there obtains a correlation between the whole of our mental experience and one part of the abstracted content of one part of that experience, or drilling a little deeper and looking at the individual details we may speak of correlations between specific experiences and the contents of certain other experiences (say, between our fear and the state in which our amygdala is perceived to lie).

Looking to categorize more generally this relationship the connection between our mind and our brain is seen to be of the same basic type as that between a representation (or representational vehicle) and some representational content; either its own abstracted intentional content (if our focus is on the system as a whole) or the content of some other experience (if we are looking to more specific correlations).

Understanding the general form of the mind-brain relationship as one between an *experience* and the *content* of an experience, the idealist perspective distinguishes itself sharply from that of the physicalist, for it invokes a distinction to which physicalists from the very nature of their position tend to be blind. The physicalist concentrates on what is known and forgets all about the knowing of it. But the assumption that knowledge is transparent and adds nothing to the

[1] Far from being anti-idealist, it may be argued that the notion of unconscious mental states *originates* with idealism; with the 'petites perceptions' of Leibniz. (See *New Essays on Human Understanding*, P. Remnant & J. Bennett (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, Preface, 53-8)

known is a fundamental barrier to the correct identification of the mind-brain relation as it is here proposed that we understand it.

Nonetheless, it must be confessed that this relationship is a hard one to comprehend. The terminology of *vehicle* and *content* carries with it a certain potential for misunderstanding. We distinguish between a sentence and its meaning or between a picture and its content, but if we may consider the meaning or the content separately (another sentence might say the same thing, or there might be two copies of the same picture), there can be no consideration of the vehicle on its own without the content. A novel is not composed of the story *plus* the telling of it. Although there is more to a representation than its content, the content is not a *part* of the representation. The correct language in which to express this relationship is not easy to fix. The proposition or picture is certainly not some 'larger object' created by 'adding' something to the content, but neither can it simply be reduced to its content. But it is important to get clear about this, because the same situation holds with respect to the difference between what is experienced and its being experienced. Although the latter adds to the former, what more it adds can never be considered separately. And while contributing to the character of an experience, an abstracted content is never one of its parts. The brain is, of course, one part of the entire *content* of our experience – that is to say, we also experience many other things – but it is never any part of that *experience itself*.

Against our proposed descriptive framework it might be countered that the mind-brain relationship would be *better* described simply as an association between two mental states, or between the contents of two mental states, rather than (cutting across the two categories) as the relationship between a representational vehicle and its intentional content. But with further reflection, that challenge may be seen to be incorrect. (1) On the one side of the parallelism, taking those experiences *with which* we correlate the various neural conditions, our interest is in mental states *themselves,* not simply their content. The slightest difference in phenomenology or representational function would be enough to place before us an essentially different experience for which it would be appropriate to seek correlation with a different neural state. That is to say, if we believe in a perfect mind-brain correlation we will suppose that two different ways of thinking about the very same thing would be matched by a corresponding neural difference. (2) However, on the other side, looking to the experience of the brain, the correlation we make is not simply with that perceptual state itself, but more specifically with its representational content. If we imagine neurological science to be advanced to such a degree that two distinct observational techniques (say, the future descendants of EEG and FMRI imaging respectively) can in their different ways identify individual neural conditions which our scientific understanding tells us are in fact the very

same brain state then we would expect *both* of these differently detected conditions to correlate with one and the same mental experience.

Hence in formulating the parallelism between the mind and the brain, what matters in the first case is the state itself, while what matters in the second is the *content* of the experience – for it is our *awareness itself* that is being brought into correlation with *what* we are aware of. We marvel not simply that a given brain is correlated with thinking or feeling *X* rather than thinking or feeling *Y*, but that the brain should be correlated with thinking or feeling *at all.*

IV

Thus far we have found an idiom in which to describe the mind-brain relation from the idealist point of view, but that is all we have done and, attempting to move further, we must think more closely about the hypothesised correlation which has been thus described. It would be possible to say simply that our mental experiences systematically link to the states in which our brains are experienced to lie, such that a change in the one always corresponds with a change in the other. But brute parallelism is unsatisfying, and the intellect will never feel it has understood an association between two items unless an asymmetry is introduced and one made secondary to the other (or both made derivative of some third.)

Physicalism demands that any correlation must be explained in physical terms, and takes the parallelism result to show that changes in the state of the brain can result in mental changes. That is to say, the mind is construed as essentially epiphenomenal to the brain. Idealism will take a wholly different view. Rather than start from physical reality, the idealist will start from experience itself. That is the only indisputable reality; the grounding point for all explanation. Viewed in this way the physical universe must be understood to be a limited abstraction from felt experience as a whole, the abstracted content of merely one side of mental life – considered apart from the experiencing of it, and apart from the other experiences alongside which that experiencing occurs. To the idealist way of thinking, if we are to root explanation in given reality, the physicalist's explanatory programme needs to be completely reversed and, given the correlation between mental states and brain states, instead of saying that the former follow from the later, we must invert the relation and insist that the latter follow from the former. That is to say, brain states must be construed as essentially epiphenomenal to mental experiences. Idealists suppose that brain states echo mental states because primary reality is mental and the physical world but a derivative, or by-product, of it. Naturally the shapes and movements our brains correlate to those of our experience at large, but we should not confuse ourselves about the order of dependence here, for what is experienced as going on in the brain is just a silhouette or reflection of our wider mental

experiences. To the Idealist way of thinking, the physicalist is like someone in a shadow-theatre who misunderstands what she sees and supposes that the shadows are making the puppets move.

V

Given this programmatic difference between idealists and physicalists, it is clear that the primary question which needs to be settled concerns the *direction* of the mind-body relation. But if what has been said thus far is correct — if the mind-brain connection is indeed, as the idealist views it, a representation-content relationship — then two very important negative consequences follow which may begin to help us settle that dispute. We see that the way in which mind stands to brain cannot be understood either as a relationship of reductive identity or as one of causation.

Most physicalists wish to maintain that the mind *just is* the brain, or perhaps more strictly that it is the activity or functionality of the brain. But from the idealist perspective outlined, any such reductive suggestion is simply nonsense. Our total experience cannot be identical with the abstracted experiential content of some subset of its experiences. (Our consciousness as a whole cannot be identical with our experience of our brain.) Nor could any one of our experiences (for example, a pain) be identical with the abstracted content of some other experience (for example, a perception of the state of our c-fibres.) Experiences are individuated by their content, and unless they are experienced as the same they cannot be the same experience.

Reduction is not the only form of asymmetrical connection, of course, and an alternative strategy to account for the direction of the mind-body relation might be some such relation as causation or supervenience. Perhaps we cannot simply reduce mental states to physical ones, but nonetheless it might be supposed that they *result from* them; that they are produced by or emerge from out of them. However, as described in our idealist lexicon, the mind-brain connection cannot be understood as causation or anything like that. No content can affect its vehicle, or vehicle affect its content. They belong to wholly different categories and cannot interact causally. My picture on the wall cannot be burned by the fire which it depicts, any more than can its frame be regarded as some sort of safety device preventing the fire from spreading further. A character in a story cannot get into an argument with its narrator. Experiences cannot interact causally with what they are experiences of.[2]

[2] Holding that the brain is but one sensible idea within the broader compass of our experience, Berkeley finds himself in two minds as to whether it could make sense to think of this one idea as the *cause* of all the others. In his *Three Dialogues h*e complains that there is nothing more to our idea of the brain than "motion in the nerves" affording it no possible connection with sensations like sound and colour – no causal power to bring them about – which suggests that while he thinks it untrue, he nonetheless regards the question as sensible enough. However, he gets closer to the objection being advanced in this paragraph when he reflects upon our idea of the brain itself, and

VI

To defeat the view of one's opponent is not the same as to vindicate your own, and even if our preferred mode of description precludes any physicalist programme of explaining mental states by appeal to the brain states experienced to correlate with them, we may still be asked if there exist any positive reasons in favour of the opposite idealist strategy of explaining our various experiences of brain states by reference to the mental experiences correlated to them?

It might appear that, to the idealist – who declines to refer them both to any common external reality – the correlations which hold within our experience are strange and seemingly inexplicable. Why should part of the content of our perceptual experience correlate to the whole of experience itself? Or looking to the detail, why on earth should there occur a parallel between one of my mental states (say, a thought or feeling) and the content of another (my perception of my own brain as in a certain state)? On any bundle or conglomerate theory of mind in which mental states or faculties are kept separate, as they are lined up alongside each other, this situation must indeed look mysterious, but to a theory of mind which can appreciate the unity of experience, however, room opens up for an answer.

To approach closer to such an answer it is necessary to bring in the idea of a self-representing system. Josiah Royce, who takes the idea from Cantor and Dedekind, illustrates this notion using the example of a portion of the surface of England levelled and smoothed in order to create upon it a perfect map of England itself;[3] an exact map which copies every single point and detail, and therefore contains, as a part of itself, a representation of its own contour and contents. Since the map within the map, if it too is to be accurate, must also include a further map, it is clear enough that we are setting off here on an unending sequence.

Self-representation is of interest to philosophers of mind because it offers a very natural way to attempt to explain the notion of self-consciousness.[4] A self-conscious mind is one with a part that represents its whole, we may suppose, for in self-consciousness the mind turns round to look at

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notes that on the causal theory we would have to think of it as *caused by* the very same ideas of material reality that it was supposedly *causing,* "which is absurd." (*The Works of George Berkeley,* A. A. Luce & T. E. Jessop (eds.), London: Nelson 1947-58, II:209-210)

[3] Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, London: Macmillan Press, 1901, I:532-4

[4] It has been suggested that such views go back as far as Aristotle (see Victor Caston, 'Aristotle on Consciousness', Mind, 2002, 111:444, 751-815), although in more modern times – as well as to Royce – we might look to figures as diverse as Franz Brentano (*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, London: Routledge, 1973 , bk.II, ch.2, §8) and Nishido Kitara (John C. Maraldo, 'Self-Mirroring and Self-Awareness: Dedekind, Royce, and Nishida,' in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy: 1*, James W. Heisig (ed.), Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture, 2006, 143-163). The view is currently advanced by Thomas Metzinger. (*Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2003, 337)

itself and one element in our awareness takes in the whole to which it belongs — which includes, of course, itself.

The significance of raising these points is that the mind-brain relationship as we have come to describe it from our idealist perspective is precisely such a self-representing scheme. And if we add to that scheme the further premise that *we may think of correlation as representation*, then it becomes possible to understand our experience of the brain as a form of self-consciousness. As idealists there is nothing 'out there' for our ideas or perceptions to be *of*, but they may be representative of each other. And exploiting this possibility, our experience of the brain may be understood as the mind's reflexive awareness of itself, for it follows the contours of our mental life, in precisely the same way as in conscious self-awareness the content of what we are aware of thinking/feeling follows what we actually are thinking/feeling. To be sure, unlike the conscious case this self-awareness is not 'transparent' but symbolised or coded as materiality, but that is not enough to preclude us from thinking of it as a form of self-awareness. With this proposal, the mystery is tamed and the correlation between mind and experience of brain ceases to be so surprising, for if the latter is essentially a form of *introspection*, then *of course* it will show the brain as in a state correlated to the mind.

VII

The mind-brain problem as posed to physicalists is standardly presented as the puzzle of comprehending how mere physical reality might account for the properly mental. Be this phenomenal consciousness, selfhood, agency, or the business of meaning and understanding, there appears to be something *more* about mental life which is left seemingly unexplained by any known or conceivable operations of the physical realm. Our explanatory resources appear inadequate to our intended explanandum. It is as though we were trying to derive a colour image from a black and white picture. To the idealist the problem looks different. Indeed, it appears to be the exact reverse. Evidence suggests that the whole of our experience may be mapped on to the states in which we experience our brains to lie. But this seems hard to credit. How could the full detail and technicolour of our conscious life ever correlate to something so one-dimensional as the electro-chemical state of a brain? It is as though we were trying to distil an entire novel into a painting.

In attempting to see how the idealist may pass beyond this puzzle it is useful to return to the notion of a self-representing system that we introduced in the section above, and to draw out one highly paradoxical feature of such systems that was passed over in silence. Self-representing systems are worrying, for their implementation would involve an actual infinite. If a part represents the whole to which it belongs, that representation must include a representation of itself

representing that whole, which must in its turn include a representation of itself representing that whole, and so on without end. Are not such systems a metaphysical impossibility?

There is a model village at Bourton-on-the-Water in the Cotswolds which famously includes a model of itself. It avoids metaphysical impossibility because that second model within the principal model is far too rough and incomplete to extend the self-representation sequence any further. The case is of note here because it illustrates for us the similar fashion in which on the theory we have outlined our actual experience avoids the parallel absurdity that we have apparently attributed to it. We experience our brain as in isomorphic correlation with our experience as a whole, but we do so only as a limited and partial reflection which can never do full justice to its source; as a shadow corresponds to a real object.

The scientific vision, without rival in its proper role, must not seek to usurp the place of philosophy. More specifically, it must be recognised that we can never be scientifically proper objects to ourselves, for we are precisely that *to which* such objects are given. We know ourselves directly as subjects by actually living our lives, by enjoying the whole of our experience from the inside, but as the eye cannot see itself nor the hammer hit itself, we can never encounter ourselves as objects. Notwithstanding this fact, through the medium of that component of experience which is an awareness of our own brain, it appears that we do, in a roundabout sort of way, come to have a kind of experience which stands in for that impossibility. Through an isomorphic mapping of the whole of our mental life onto one part of itself, in a second-hand fashion, through a limited analogue of what we are, we may become quasi-visible to ourselves as objects of awareness.

The relevance of the point is that where physicalism struggles to understand how the phenomenal image can be richer than its explanatory ontological base, the idealist need show no great surprise that the abstracted analogue is poorer than its experiential parent. We should not expect the brain to perfectly express what goes on in the mind, any more than we would expect an examination of the road atlas to convey the full reality of driving from Oxford to Bristol, an economic model to reproduce all the details of a living economy, or the abstract at the head of a scholarly paper to express the full content of its argument. The image which the brain gives us of our own minds is good enough, but it is limited.

VIII

Any suggestion that the states in which brains are perceived to lie may be accounted for by appeal to the mental experiences with which they are correlated will no doubt be challenged, for it will be urged that as well as presenting to us correspondences of this type, our empirical researches also inform us of a whole host of connections between brain states themselves. Often raised against

dualists also, this problem is well-known and is essentially one of apparent over-determination. The state in which my brain is perceived to stand may be explained either by reference to the mental experience it reflects, or by reference to the brain state that was or would have been observed immediately antecedent to it; the neurophysiological regularities in question being as well-established as the those linking the mind and the brain. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that our experience of the brain, the only element within our experience that tracks our conscious life, itself sits within a world that is continuous with it – of one matter and falling under a unified system of regularities – but which lacks this double status. In short, my brain seems influenced from outside. Do not such facts of experience show that mind-brain correlations must be understood in the opposite direction to that which has been suggested?

While perhaps hard to justify further, the intuition that over-determination is impossible must be respected. But if there is room only for a single scheme of explanation, a choice must be made. Either our experience of the brain as in a certain condition is to be accounted for by the regularities we have noted within our wider experience of neurophysiology, which themselves align with the regularities we have observed within nature more widely, in which case we must deem our conscious experiences but a redundant epiphenomenalist shadow of whatever neurophysiology reveals to us. Alternatively we may suppose that the one thing we know to be real in this story is the succession of our own mental experiences, tracked in mysterious but undeniable fashion by the content of the experiences we have of our own brains, in which case we must regard the rest of our experience as a fiction or shadow that falls into line with that.

This is the idealist answer, and many no doubt will reject it out of hand, but although certainly astounding and counter-intuitive, I want to suggest that it is neither unreasonable nor incredible. To appreciate this we must keep fast in our mind the distinction between mental states themselves and their intentional objects. If as an idealist I hold that the only things which properly exist are mental events — actual experiences with all of their various different contents — then I must hold too that the only causality that properly takes place is that between mental events. Now, the precise nature of the 'causality' that accounts for mental history is contested; freedom, rationality, psychological association, instinct, or as yet unknown deterministic law might all be proposed as the principle which generates the succession of experiences that we enjoy. But, however I understand this mechanism, it is here alone that I find the actual explanation of actual sequence.

That there takes place throughout our mental biography a real 'causal' sequence seems a reasonable enough thing to say, but the claim that this is the *only* occurrence of causality is likely to be resisted for, turning from our experiences themselves to their contents, to the world that they

portray or represent to us, what is being asserted is that the world which we experience and typically regard as wholly permeated by causal connections is not so at all. The universal laws we extract from our perceptual experience of the world do not describe any real causal process at all. So long as you take yourself to be perceiving mind-independent objects, this suggestion will seem utterly insane, but once you adopt the idealist point of view that the proper objects of consideration here are intentional objects, the internal contents of experiences, the matter becomes clear and self-evident.

The point is a broad one. Whether it truly is so or not, we cannot help but regard our experience as made up of multiple different representations, but if we do so we must not forget that experienced relations between representations are themselves *representational.* Thus if I think of a cat on a mat, my representation of a cat is not literally *on* my representation of the mat, rather it is represented as being so; that is to say, the relation which I say holds between these relata is as much a representation of mine as they are.[5] What holds of perceived relations in general holds equally of causal relations; we experience the world *as* causally connected, but this is something represented not something actually taking place. Such causality belongs to the content not the substance of our experience. If I paint a picture of a man knocking over a cup of coffee, the painted man does not really upset the painted coffee, for the relationship between these two is as much a painted representation as they are. Likewise an observed match-striking does not really bring about an observed match-lighting, for you might turn your head away or suddenly go blind. No doubt it is possible to reflect upon what we experience, to note all of its patterns and then draw effective inferences about what we will or would experience in future, and the uniformities governing such inferences are what we all refer to as 'causal laws', but it must not be forgotten that to an idealist the things which we experience are no more causally connected than they are material. Causality is how they are *represented* as standing towards each other, not how they really do stand to each other. This is a point of vital significance. It was charged that brain states become over-determined once we admit their systematic relationship with antecedent brain states, but if these further relationships are not in fact causal at all then no issue of over-determination arises. The reason why Tintin had an adventure in Tibet (rather than say, Milton Keynes) is because that it where the author Hergé decided to place his hero, but it is not 'over-determined' by the fact that in the story Tintin went there to rescue his friend Tchang.

[5] This point was seen with great clarity by F.H.Bradley: "relations between the ideas are themselves ideal. They are not the psychical relations of mental facts. They do not exist between the symbols, but hold in the symbolized. They are part of the meaning and not of the existence" (*The Principles of Logic*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edn 1922, 11). The relations between our thoughts are not ancillary to our thoughts, but part of what we are thinking.

A realist (for example a representative realist) might accept these claims but nonetheless insist that perceived or representational causality corresponds to some real causality in the mind-independent world. But here again, of course, the idealist will disagree. To an idealist experience is original, for there is no fixed external order to which it must correspond; in substance, structure or sequence. This is not the same as to suppose it utterly arbitrary or unconstrained, and as we have already noted the state in which we experience our brains to lie – standing in a one:one correlation with our experiences themselves – is something anchored to reality itself. Whatever else we experience must fit in with that, but if we are idealists there is no obvious reason why that should not happen; why the rest of experience should not be constructed to fit in with its few fixed points. If there is no external world that experience *must* correspond to, if the explanation of what we experience lies wholly within the experiencing mind, why should the shape and form of that experience *not* be 'fabricated' or 'constructed' so as to be in line with certain key elements within it? We may suppose the case is somewhat analogous to that of a semi-autobiographical novelist who crafts an entire novel so as to fit in with just a handful of incidents which really did take place. To be sure, the whole plot is dictated by a few real-life episodes, but when the thing is intelligently done with a careful eye to the integrity of the whole, this fact is neither noticeable nor important. The problem of over-determinism is fundamentally a problem of coincidence. However, for an idealist the proper explanation of the course of our perceptual experience appeals not to some further external determining factor, but rather lies internal to the same mind whose experience it is a part of. And in this fashion the spectre of inexplicable coincidence is exorcised.

There is nothing in all this that one might object to on the grounds of *science*, for empirical science studiously avoids the metaphysics of causal dependence, and its correlations permit true counterfactuals to be produced in either direction. But at this point a new objection may be voiced. Given this sort of parallelism, even if we decline to speak in causal terms or to believe in the external material world, if we think that everything that occurs is predictable from the regularities which hold among the things we perceive to be material, how does our position really differ from that of materialism? Is this not (we might say) a pointless parallelism, in which the category of mind is in effect redundant?

Whether it is better to say that 'the regularities which govern the material world fall in line with those which govern the mind' or to say that 'the regularities which govern the mind fall in line with those which govern the material world' or whether indeed these two statements are really different depends on what we suppose those various laws *are*. In this sense the question before us is this: do we think that we might best understand the laws governing mind by acquiring a full understanding of the laws determining observed nature, or would the best way to understand the

processes of nature be to obtain a full understanding of our own thinking procedures. At first glance the laws in question are very different; *mental* laws are purposive, moral, aesthetic, rational, and appetitive while physical laws are wholly mechanical or mathematical, and so it would seem to matter a very great deal which we put in the driving seat. Idealism can be defined by its adoption of the second approach; a commitment to the principle that mind is the key to understanding nature.

In differentiating the two kinds of laws above I say very deliberately 'at first glance' for it must immediately be added that on reflection this initial picture becomes greatly more complicated. The following story might be told. At one time people thought that *natural* laws displayed the same sort of rationality and meaningfulness that we find in our own thinking, but we now know they are wholly mechanical, and we much suspect that mental laws are mechanical too.

This story captures something, but it is naïve. From the one side, the mechanistic reduction of experience remains a programme or aspiration rather than a fact. In truth, the laws that really govern mental life are not clearly understood to this day and while many would *like* to reduce them to mechanical or computational algorithms there is no independent reason to think this possible. From the other side, the fact that physical nature fails to display obvious marks of thinking may just indicate that our initial ideas about mental laws were hopeless over-simplifications, and if we think more subtly about mind it is far from clear that the laws governing physical nature are just mechanical conjunctions without intellectual content, for principles of rationality (simplicity, explanation, beauty, coherence, symmetry, harmony, etc.) are more evident in nature than might initially be supposed. We tend to think that natural laws are just universal causal conjunctions, but we might be wrong about this. Perhaps issues of meaning and intelligibility are as important in physical nature as they are in mind.

It is important to add a word about *freedom* and *individuality* here. In drawing a distinction between the principles that govern mind and the principles which govern nature, I should not be understood to be saying that mind somehow escapes from the laws governing nature, for example that it fundamentally unlawlike or unpredictable. In so far as our mental life is free or voluntary, if it is also to be rational and responsible, it must fall under some principle of explanation or other, as opposed to being merely random or contingent. Though much may depend upon the *kinds* of laws that obtain, the mere presence of rational laws in itself is a pre-requisite for rather than a hindrance to freedom. And if the claim that the world I perceive is aligned in accordance with my mental history (indirectly via the brain) seems an incredible one on the grounds that what I perceive is neither unique to me nor chosen by me, it must be remembered that the same holds of my mental history — not everything I experience is chosen by me, nor is it all to be explained by factors specific to *my* mind rather than mind *in general*.

IX

According to the characterization which has been proposed, the brain is one part of the content of our experience, but it stands in some form of connection or correlation to our experience as a whole. A useful analogy for understanding this is the phenomenon of 'self-reference' in literature, where someone or something *in* a literary work refers to the work itself. Such devices may be deployed with considerable sophistication and humour, for example, creating characters who are aware that they are characters in a story, or producing cartoon strips in which characters interact with the individual frames or speech bubbles. But often enough the device is quite simple, and one might just as easily think of the situation when a character in some drama speaks directly to the audience watching the play, or even refers to the play in which they are acting. In each case there is a link, direct or indirect, between some element *in* the story or drama and the literary work itself. One part of the 'abstracted content' refers to the 'whole from which it abstracted'.

This is a curious but also a significant phenomenon. From one way of looking it makes no sense. The two worlds should have nothing to do with each other. A story ought not to refer to itself; it ought not to let slip that it is only a story. But it is in precisely this oddness that the significance of the phenomena lies. When something *in* the novel refers to or correlates with *the novel itself*, we are startled. We sit up. For a moment we are thrown out of the story in which we had become so engrossed, and we are reminded that it is just a story. An actor who turns round and speaks to us wrenches themselves and everything else right out of the play and back into the real world. They become again an actor on a stage. With stories and representations it is natural to think as though there are *two worlds*; the world of the story and the world of the medium through which the story is told. They are utterly separate and cannot relate together. The enjoyment of literature consists in allowing the story to suck us in, in permitting ourselves to become so involved in it that it seems to be really taking place. We lose ourselves in the story itself and disregard the telling of it. But when we come up against some element whose double-role (in the narrative and also relating to the narrative itself) jolts us out of our forgetting, we are taken up short and reminded that in truth there is only *one world.* The novel or drama that refers to itself forces us to recall that it is *just a story* or *just a play*. The only reality that the story or drama actually has is as a representational device existing in this the real world.

From the fact that the brain she experiences correlates with, and hence refers to, her experience as a whole, the idealist will draw a parallel lesson. That is to say, it will reaffirm to her that the only real world is the world of experience, from which the physical world (and especially the brain) is but an abstracted content. Thus it may be seen that the significance of mind-brain

correlation for idealism is to reassert the *unity* of the universe, and to remind us of the merely figurative-status or content-status of material reality. The primary reality here is experience, not the content we abstract from it, and in this way we find confirmed for us the answer we previously gave as to the *direction* of the mind-brain relationship. Novelists sometimes speak of their characters coming to life and determining the story that they write, but such figures of speech are not to be taken literally. Stories do not exist in *rerum natura*. They do not dictate their telling. Rather they are directed by their narration. And in the same way what is experienced as happening in the brain is dictated by, rather than dictating of, experience itself as a whole. This conclusion is worth underlining. If we look at the matter through an idealist lens, then mind-brain correlation must be interpreted, not as a *challenge* to that idealism, but as a further *confirmation* of it.

X

So far we have kept our attention focused on a case involving one lone mind, but that was a simplification, and now at the end we must consider how things stand with respect to other minds. In case there is any doubt on this point, it is perhaps worth noting that there is no reason why an idealist should not accept that there exist other minds. Idealism is not solipsism. It is a stance quite compatible with a measure of metaphysical realism, so long as that which lies beyond the reach of our experience is no less ideal than that which falls within it. That is to say, the idealist may readily accept that there exist other minds with inner lives just like her own. Hopefully this point is uncontroversial, for to most people genuine disbelief in the existence of other minds will be an impossibility, and certainly the history of philosophy contains no idealists who have been solipsists. Nonetheless it is worth highlighting that for an idealist the sense in which such other minds are deemed real is fundamentally different to that in which perceived objects are said to exist; for the subjective consciousness of others can never be or become any sort of object of our experience.

To see how the existence of other minds may be accommodated into our scheme, once again it may be helpful to consider a more concrete story. We may take the case of an idealist neurosurgeon examining, not her own brain this time, but rather that of her patient. How should she describe her experience? She will say that among her many experiences are perceptions or representations of her patient's brain. She sees for example that the occipital lobe in that brain has been damaged, or that taking Prozac has caused the brain to display increased levels of serotonin. In addition to this, given that she is not a solipsist, we may suppose that our neurosurgeon accepts reports on the part of her patient to be enjoying certain inner experiences; mental events which would remain otherwise unknown to her. For example, the patient may be experiencing a certain diminution in visual capability or they may feel a certain lifting in their depression. Moreover,

empirical evidence strongly suggests that the neurosurgeon will be able to discover a number of constant correlations between representatives from these two sets of data, between her own experiences that the patient's brain is in a certain state and the occurrence of specific mental experiences in that same patient.

As before we are faced with a set of correlations between experiences and the contents of experiences, but there has been a significant shift in that the correspondences that interest us now are ones that hold between *other people's* experiences and the contents of certain of *our own* perceptual experiences. At first sight this seems puzzling. We may well wonder how it should be that there occurs a parallel or correlation between one person's mental state (say, yours) and the content of another's (my perception of your brain). *But we should note that this question is fundamentally the same as one we encountered earlier:* How is it that there occurs a parallel or correlation between one of my mental states (say, a thought or feeling) and the content of another (my perception of my own brain as in a certain state)?

This parallel suggests a way forward, for if we accept the account of the correlation given in the individual case, may we not extend it to the undeniable correlation that holds between the experiences of others and our experience of their brains? That is to say, may we not construct an argument by analogy? If so, the mind-brain correlations within an individual mind, which we explain as a mode of self-awareness, may be treated as source-analogues for the mind-brain correlations between different minds, which it is then suggested we view as parts of an even broader self-awareness. At root, then, our answer will be to refer to a fundamental unity between different people's experiences. As there is a correlation between my thoughts, feelings, etc. and my perception of the state of my brain because they both belong to one consciousness — mine, so likewise we might propose there is a correlation between your experiences and my perceptions of your brain because they both belong to one greater consciousness — the communal mind in which we all share.

No doubt this will be thought a very strange and implausible conclusion, even by the standards of this paper! It will be objected that (unlike those of an individual) these experiences are quite distinct and unable to connect. However, to that objection it may be countered that saying so begs the very point at question. Our argument, it must be remembered, is one from analogy. And returning to the individual case it must be asked whether our account of the correlation only goes through in so far as we can have prior assurance of an underlying mental unity, or whether the correlation is not *the grounds* for believing in the unity, or at least that these two claims stand on a par. Are experiences thought to be correlated because they fall within one mind, or are they thought to fall within one mind because they are correlated? (It is relevant to remember here Kant's

strong urging idea that our sense of the unity of the self is not fundamentally different from our sense of the unity that we find within our experience; the unity stemming from the connections that relate its various elements together.) If such thoughts hold water at the level of the individual, it seems plausible to me that they may be extended upwards to the inter-individual level. That is to say, the very correlations between our experiences may be viewed as a reason for thinking that they all really belong to one wider experience. Although we cannot explore that heritage here, we should just note that this suggestion falls squarely in line with the tradition of Absolute Idealism. It need not be denied that there have been individualist or personal idealists (for example, Leibniz, Berkeley, Andrew Pringle-Pattison, Edgar Sheffield Brightman), but equally there have been many others who have thought that all our experiences contribute to a wider whole (for example, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Bradley, Royce).