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# Should neuroscience be putting psychology out in the cold?

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THERE IS an enormous current preoccupation with the brain, and neuroscience seems to be more important than psychology these days, that's if the amount of funding that is going into neuroscience is anything to go by. Recent editorials in *Science* (Leshner, 2013) and *Nature* (Headstart, 2013) both highlight the monies being invested in neuroscience (for example, one billion Euros in the next 10 years for the European Commission's Human Brain Project).

Does this contemporary focus on neuroscience make sense? Certainly it seems undeniable that further research into the brain will be useful for many reasons, however, a fundamental assumption that neuroscientists (and the funders of neuroscience) work with, is that we are wholly physical entities.

Therefore, they explicitly or implicitly ascribe to the doctrine of physicalism (roughly, the view that all that exists is ultimately physical). They hold that our brains give rise to consciousness and to understand the brain will mean we will come to understand everything about behaviour, as it will be explicable in ultimately physical terms. But what if it is not true that we are wholly physical entities?

The mind-body substance dualism advocated by Descartes (1641) has long been subjected to scrutiny and is largely rejected by most present-day scientists and analytic philosophers of mind. Descartes' view was that the Mind was an immaterial thing and the Body a distinct material thing and it makes a mystery out of mind-body interaction: how can something that is wholly immaterial have an impact on something that is wholly material? This is the problem of mental causation. Many scholars have presented objections to the Cartesian view, and perhaps most famous is Gilbert Ryle's (1949/2009) when he proffered the now famous phrase the 'dogma of the Ghost in the Machine' (Ryle, 2009, p.5).

However, even though it seems reasonable to reject mind-body substance dualism, perhaps we need not reject substance dualism altogether. After all, we still are in need of an explanation for how it seems to be the case that we feel as if we engage in intentional action and for this it appears to us that our thinking can cause action. I want to suggest that we can invoke another theory of substance dualism, that offered by Lowe (Lowe, 1996, 2006, 2008). Lowe's theory of substance dualism is a self-body dualism. It is an ontological theory which provides a robust theoretical account of human beings, well equipped to deal with the problem of mental causation as I explain below.

Lowe's use of the term self is to refer to a substance that is distinct in its own right, from either the brain or body. This is a radically different use of the term self than is appealed to by neuroscientists such as Damasio (2010), Hood (2012) and Zeman

(2013) who offer neurological explanations for one's sense of self. Damasio considers the self as some kind of way of how we make sense of one's sense of self. He writes 'something like a sense of self was needed to make the signals that constitute the feeling of emotion known to the organism having the emotion' (Damasio, 2010, p.8). He distinguishes between three kinds of self: autobiographical, the core self and the proto self. Similarly, Zeman (2013) delineates the extended self, the core self and the proto self in a nested relationship. Both Damasio and Zeman postulate that complex neural firings determine our sense of self. Hood (2012) wants to claim further that this sense of self is an 'illusion'. Hood's arguments that our sense of self is an illusion seem to rest on the facts that our personalities change following significant brain damage and that 'there is no centre in the brain where the self is constructed' (Hood, 2012, p.x). But we should not be persuaded by these claims unless we subscribe to the physicalist view unreflexively. The neuroscientists theorise about the sense of self in terms of neurological basis, which is ultimately a physical basis. But to repeat the rhetorical question already posed, what if it is not true that we are wholly physical entities?

Certainly, Lowe does not deny this notion of a sense of self, but this is not what Lowe has in mind when he postulates the existence of a self. On Lowe's account, his concept of self is a distinct substance. He has a straight-forward argument for the truth of his Self-Body Substance Dualism account which is deductively valid (that is, if the premises are true then the conclusion must be true).

Premise 1: I am the subject of all and only my own mental states.

Premise 2: Neither my body as a whole nor any part of it (such as my brain) could be the subject of all and only my own mental states.

Conclusion: I am not identical with my body or any part of it. That is, I am an entity which is distinct from my body, which is another entity.

As Lowe (1996) states: 'The self is what it is, and not another thing' (Lowe, 1996, p.51). Simply put Lowe considers physicalism to be inadequate to provide us with a scientifically and philosophically acceptable account of human beings as 'subjects of experience' (Lowe, 1996). This is not to say that Lowe's notion of the self must be conceptualised as some kind of spiritual entity. His theory is not motivated by a religious ascription to an entity often referred to as the 'soul', though he does say we must remain agnostic as to what happens to the self following bodily death (Lowe, 2013, personal communication). Lowe is not the first philosopher of course to deny the adequacy of physicalism. Crane and Mellor (1990) in an influential paper entitled 'There is no question of physicalism' detail the serious issues that the view faces.

On Lowe's account then, we are **not** wholly physical entities. According to the conclusion of his argument above, selves and bodies are distinct entities as they do not have exactly the same properties.<sup>1</sup> Lowe's conception of self is as 'an enduring and irreducible entity, essentially a self-conscious subject of thought and experience and source of intentional action' (Lowe, 1996, p.ix). Lowe's notion of self is an entity which is a psychological substance which has both mental and physical properties. One's body, which has a brain as one of its parts, is a separate entity. Lowe's theory

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<sup>1</sup> For more background details on the defence of my view, see Bleau (2012, 2013).

postulates radically different causal profiles for each entity in accounting for mental causation: the mental decision and the bodily action, which involves neural and other physiological events. His account provides a parsimonious account of mental causation, not available to physicalists.

If Lowe's theory is right then perhaps it is premature of funders to invest so much money in neuroscience and leave psychology out in the cold. Research in psychology remains of crucial importance and what psychologists ought to be doing is spending more time thinking about what the appropriate methods of investigation for our science are. Further, if it is true that at the core of our discipline is an entity that is not to be made sense of in purely physical terms then perhaps we ought to take seriously our first-personal ontological commitments (Janssen-Lauret, 2013) so that we can to consider what the most appropriate ways are to construct relevant psychological theories and to engage in empirical testing of such theories.

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