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SIR WILLIAM MITCHELL AND THE 'NEW MYSTERIANISM'

W. Martin Davies

I. Biographical Sketch: Sir William Mitchell, Philosopher

William Mitchell was born in Invenon in far north Scotland in 1861, the son of a hill farmer. He was one of 6 children. Before he died in 1962 at the age of 101, he had distinguished himself both as Vice Chancellor (1916–1942) and later Chancellor (1942–48) at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. He held the Hughes Chair in English Language and Literature and Mental and Moral Philosophy, and was the first (and to date only) philosopher working within Australia to give the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen; this he did in 1924 and 1926. In 1927 he was knighted for his services to South Australia.

II. Philosophical Influences

Mitchell always considered himself to be, first and foremost, a philosopher.¹ He was, arguably, Australia's first significant philosopher. Yet, curiously, he is not remembered at all as such. In academic terms, he is today a largely forgotten figure. The last serious discussion known to appear in print on Mitchell's work was probably in Blanshard's *The Nature of Thought* in 1939; the last review of his books appeared in 1934;² the last postgraduate dissertation in 1984.³ No mention is made of Mitchell in contemporary philosophical writing. In Honderich's *Dictionary of Philosophy*, Mitchell's main work: *Structure and Growth of the Mind* is described as the last remaining example of Australian idealism which 'still survives'.⁴ If it survives at all, it is certainly doesn't survive by very much. In this paper I aim, at least in part, to remedy this. I shall begin this review of his work by outlining what I take to be his major influences.

Idealism

I think that it is wrong to describe Mitchell as an idealist, though he certainly came from the idealist tradition. As we shall see, some of his more shaky arguments even turn on idealist assumptions. This should not be surprising. Mitchell's views, after all, descend from the influence of the British idealists, T. H. Green, B. Bosanquet, F. H. Bradley, among others, who endeavoured to push the empiricist views of Locke and Hume closer

¹ J. J. C. Smart, *pers. com.* See also 'Sir William Mitchell K. C. M. G. (1861–1962)', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 40 (1962), pp. 259–263.

² J. W. Harvey and H. B. Acton wrote reviews of Mitchell's *The Place of Minds* in the same year.

³ Harry J. Allen, *Mitchell's Concept of Human Freedom*, Masters Dissertation: University of Adelaide, 1984.

⁴ Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford, NY: OUP, 1995), p. 67.

to the views of the German idealists. On the other hand, Mitchell was also impressed by the arguments of his compatriots T. Reid, D. Stewart, J. Beattie, W. Hamilton—the Scottish 'common sense' theorists, who attacked idealism and tried to outline a doctrine closer to what we would now call 'realism'. While it should be acknowledged that idealism is a broad church, and can encompass a wide variety of positions, on balance, I think Mitchell's views are best placed at the beginning of another tradition entirely.

Mitchell's views, I want to suggest, demonstrate cautious materialist and non-doctrinaire realist themes—themes which have more in common with contemporary philosophical work (for example, current work in cognitive science) than with the idealist tradition; views which are also indicative of the region of the world in which he worked. His writing, I think, is best described as marking a transition between the idealist tradition which arrived on Australian soil in the early part of the nineteenth century, and the more radical materialist views which followed (especially in Adelaide)⁵—but, strictly speaking, he belonged properly to neither tradition. There is no doubt that Mitchell wrote like an idealist—sometimes argued like one—but there is an ambiguity in his work which seems to indicate that he was attempting to stake out a position that, for the time, was genuinely original. That, at least, is what I am going to argue in this paper.

Realism and Materialism

There is a light-hearted reason why Mitchell should not be seen as an idealist: for were it so, it would stand as an anomalous case to the oft-quoted remark of Armstrong (and quoted by Devitt)⁶ that realism is born only of dry countries with harsh landscapes and strong sunlight, whereas anti-realisms are born of moist countries with misty air and green landscapes where the mind is allowed to wander (Devitt even claims that a bastion of idealism still survives in Victoria where the sun doesn't shine quite as much!). Since Mitchell spent most of his philosophical life in Australia—and in the very harsh climate of South Australia—it would be unfitting that, if he was an idealist, he would remain one for long. J. J. C. Smart remembers Mitchell regarding himself as a staunch realist. One recollection recalls Mitchell in conversation with a solipsist: 'You know, the trouble with you, is that you think only minds exist', and adding (under his breath) 'and *your* mind at that!'⁷ Not the kind of remark an idealist would make. And, it is certainly not like an anti-realist to make claims such as the following: 'No object is made mental, nor altered, by being felt, imagined, or known in any way'⁸ and: 'When your ideas quarrel with mine, and when they agree, it is because they . . . grasp the same object as mine, and to find it independent of our grasp.'⁹ Or, finally, his claim: 'The room is . . . not affected by my perceiving it'.¹⁰ If Mitchell is an idealist, he is an unusual one indeed. However, if he is a

⁵ I think of the birth of Australian Materialism under Place and Smart, but also B. H. Medlin's strong physicalist views. (Medlin was once heard to say: 'The mind is the brain, dammit: it's only a matter of figuring out the details!')

⁶ Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. vii.

⁷ J. J. C. Smart, *pers. com.*

⁸ William Mitchell, *The Place of Minds in the World* (London: Macmillan, 1933), p. 33; hereafter, PMW.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ William Mitchell, *Structure and Growth of the Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 60; hereafter, SGM.

realist, as Mitchell himself claimed, we may see his pronouncements to the contrary as mere epistemological lapses—perhaps even forgivable ones given the preoccupation of early Australian philosophers with the idealist curse.

Just as Mitchell was no idealist or anti-realist, it is also clear that he was no anti-materialist. There are a number of passages which indicate this. Here's one example (recall that it was written at the turn of the century):

When you try to picture the structure and the action of the mind, remember you are trying to picture the structure and action of the nervous system. In this way you will avoid the usual confusion of trying to picture a hybrid process consisting partly of visible movements and partly of invisible feelings.¹¹

I shall submit that Mitchell's work has been badly misrepresented in past discussions and should be reconsidered in the light of contemporary philosophical debates. Perhaps J. A. Passmore was only partly right when he described Mitchell's work as articulating 'an introduction to an Idealist philosophy for which the mind is the central ontological conception'.¹² While it is certainly true that, for Mitchell, the role of the mind is a pre-eminent consideration, this doesn't by itself make him an idealist. The common qualification for being an idealist is that what is real is in some way *confined* or at least related to the contents of our own minds.¹³ And I think the evidence for this in Mitchell's writing is somewhat less clear.

Psychology

Aside from the Scottish idealist and common sense traditions, there were other influences which complicate the picture further. These influences indicate that Mitchell was a more sophisticated philosopher than previously thought. These influences came from the discipline of psychology. Mitchell was a near contemporary of the Swiss psychologist Piaget, who argued for an epistemology which was both dynamic and materialist—setting the stage for a later cybernetic approach to epistemology.¹⁴ Mitchell articulated, I believe, a kind of early dynamic process philosophy of the structure and growth of the mind which anticipated some of Piaget's account later to receive wide acclaim in the philosophy of psychology. There are considerable differences here, of course. Whereas Piaget aimed at a strictly empirical developmental psychology underpinned by the influence of some Kantian and Hegelian philosophical conceptions (with empirical work predominating), Mitchell aimed at—in Passmore's words—'a psychology which is in turn an introduction to philosophy'.¹⁵ That is, a psychology which leads to a new kind of way of thinking philosophically about the mind. Indeed, for Mitchell, philosophy *was* a kind of psychology.¹⁶

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹² J. A. Passmore, 'Philosophy', from A. L. McLeod, ed., *The Pattern of Australian Culture* (Melbourne: MUP, 1963), p. 146.

¹³ Ted Honderich, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

¹⁴ Piaget published his first substantial works in 1923, some 16 years after Mitchell's SGM.

¹⁵ J. A. Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁶ J. J. C. Smart, *pers. com.*

While there are differences between the two thinkers, there are also similarities: unlike the focus of contemporary philosophy of mind (which deals centrally with ontological questions such as what the mind *is*—how a neural state can *be* a representational state, for instance), both Mitchell and Piaget seemed more interested in how the mind *grows* (how the mind of an infant is different from the mind of an adult; how a learned mind differs from one which exhibits 'invincible stupidity'; how the minds of lower animals differ from those of primates; and so on.) It was, in other words, an entirely different philosophical agenda. The issue of *what minds are* was, for Mitchell and his contemporaries, subordinated to the issue of *what minds do*.¹⁷ *Structure and Growth of the Mind* is, broadly speaking, an attempt to outline the precise processes undergone by minds during different stages of their growth, and under different conditions. It might be considered an *conceptual psychology*—or an *analytic phenomenology*—of the stages of mental growth. And, the central category of this 'psychology' was the category of experience. This way of looking at things is currently out of favour among philosophers of mind, though it does seem to be making a come-back (see for example, Karmiloff-Smith's amalgamation of Fodorian modularity theory and Piagetian themes).¹⁸

Other psychologists to influence Mitchell were Wundt, Helmholtz, and Stumpf. Other strong influences on his work come from ethology and related disciplines. For example, Mitchell approvingly cites Lubbock's work on the senses of insects and Preyer's and Münsterberg's views about the behaviour of lower animals. These influences seem to discredit the claim that Mitchell was an ontological idealist. He was more interested in a naturalist account of mind and content. And he was certainly more interested in evidence from emerging sciences than the inchoate ramblings of British and German idealists (there are no references to either in his books).

Neuroscience

There is also his interest in neuroscience to consider. Were Mitchell an anti-materialist of some conviction, we might expect rather less of this material to feature in his writings. Yet Mitchell devotes an entire chapter reviewing the (then) current work in neuroscience, and much of the rest of his work is sprinkled liberally with evidence from such sources (he looks at experiments involving prosthesis and brain bisection, conjectures about differently weighted neuronal paths in animals, and so on). He called this evidence the 'indirect' method of understanding mind—indirect because it relied on evidence from the brain, not 'direct' evidence from experience as it seems to us ('phenomenological content', as we might put it these days). Moreover, Mitchell seemed to be aware that any proper understanding of mind required an analysis in which evidence from both sources was required. He didn't think that one needed to be subordinated to the other. I think Passmore's description is right here when he claims that Mitchell 'saw in psychological and neurological inquiry alternative means of explanation—the philosophical being the

¹⁷ 'Of the mind, as of other things, there is no saying what it is in itself apart from all its connections, because the question is in error. We know it, as we know other things, by what it does'. SGM, p. 19. Quoted by Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

¹⁸ A. Karmiloff-Smith, *Beyond Modularity: A Developmental Perspective on Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT/Bradford, 1992).

more “direct”—rather than attempts to describe entities of a different ontological order’.¹⁹ This concludes what I take to be his major influences.

III. Contemporary Issues in the Philosophy of Mind

In contemporary cognitive science, philosophers refer to the ‘easy’ and the ‘hard’ problem of consciousness. The ‘easy’ problem consists in how brains might do things like represent perceptions in thought in a neural or computational form; the ‘hard’ problem consists in explaining how things seem to us in experience (the ‘what it is like?’ of consciousness).²⁰ A dawning realisation in contemporary cognitive science is that one can’t understand mind without an understanding the ‘hard’ problem, as this requires an understanding of ‘subjectivity’, or experience ‘from the inside’.

This distinction approximates Mitchell’s ‘indirect’ and ‘direct’ distinction to this extent: While the ‘indirect’ method offers a potentially complete understanding of ‘the immediate physical correlates’²¹ of experience, only the direct method offers an understanding of what experience is like ‘from the inside’. Both approaches, according to Mitchell, are essential. While Mitchell did not have the conceptual resources to understand features of mind that we have today (courtesy of the modern computer and its binary method of information storage), he did have enormous faith that the indirect method will yield considerable insights; hence his emphasis on neuroscience. However, while he thought this important, he also thought that this could only ever be a ‘correlate’ of mind as it is experienced by us. Thus, he argued, I believe, for a cautious, non-reductive physicalism and rejected materialist accounts which promised more. One certainly can’t understand mind without both the ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ methods according to him. Mitchell’s account of mind, to the extent that it makes a contribution to such views, is thus historically relevant to the debates in present day philosophy of mind.

It could even be argued that Mitchell anticipated the views of contemporary theorists such as Thomas Nagel, Colin McGinn, and David Chalmers—the ‘new mysterians’, as they are sometimes disparagingly called.²² These theorists argue, in very different ways, for the claims that: 1. the subjective quality of experience is essentially dissimilar from objective descriptions of brain states; and 2. the current brain sciences are limited in their application. They are united in their view that, while the evidence from the neurosciences are impressive, they don’t tell us anything about consciousness properly so-called, even though they might tell us a good deal about associated problems to do with mentality (how a propositional attitude can be a representational state, and so on). They are also united in their regard for the importance, and non-reducibility of *subjective experience*.

¹⁹ Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²⁰ See David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford, NY: OUP, 1996), *passim*.

²¹ SGM, p. 450.

²² The term ‘New Mysterian’ was originally used by Owen Flanagan, I believe, to mean those that hold that we are forever cognitively closed to the solution of the problem of how consciousness is linked to the brain. The term has come to mean, informally but incorrectly, those that are sympathetic to *sui generis* contentful qualia which cannot be fully captured by physicalist accounts; that is, those that think that consciousness is a mystery for physicalism. Strictly speaking, McGinn and Nagel (and perhaps Searle?) are New Mysterians while Chalmers is not. Chalmers tries to show on *a priori* grounds that there are fundamental, emergent, psychophysical laws.

None of the 'new mysterians', I take it, are dualists by fiat (although many of them openly espouse dualism); they are, rather, unconvinced that a materialist theory of mind *in its present form* will do the job. Materialism can't be said to be false—indeed, Nagel states this much explicitly.²³ Chalmers, likewise, exhibits a reluctance to say that materialism can't at present do the job required, and advocates a monism which is 'broader'.²⁴ So it seems that the new mysterians are not hostile to materialism—only unwilling to take it seriously as a *complete* theory of mind (this point is not often stressed in the literature). The theory of mind they argue for would have to offer an account of the subjective character of experience without attempting to eliminate, reduce or otherwise distort the 'what it is like' of phenomenal experience. To paraphrase Chalmers, the right theory of consciousness will have to 'feel the problem [of subjective experience] in its bones'. One can perhaps describe the new mysterians, in a liberal mood, as *very cautious* materialists (so cautious as to plump for dualism or panpsychism). And, in this sense, I shall claim that Mitchell was one too—though he doesn't reach such radical conclusions.

The other point that I hope to demonstrate is that Mitchell also anticipated the views of contemporary cognitive scientists, especially those theorists who are somewhat sympathetic to the claims of the new mysterians but who don't wish to be tarred with the same 'new mysterian' brush (see V. below).

What is the evidence that Mitchell anticipated such views? Briefly, though not conclusive evidence on its own, some of his remarks about mind do see him articulating a position which has similarities with some of these more recent views:

A mind and its experience are realities that are presentable to sense as the brain and its actions. In that respect the mind and experience are not parallel with nature, but part of it. And, on the other hand, the facts of nature, including the brain, whenever they are phenomena, are not parallel with mental phenomena, but part of them.²⁵

In one sense, it is easy to see why the American idealists of the 1930s embraced such comments.²⁶ On one reading they seem to suggest that Mitchell thought the brain might be a product of minds: whenever brain states are 'phenomenal' states, they are mental phenomena, he seems to say. But, given his outright rejection of idealism, other interpretations of such remarks seem called for. Another, more benign reading we might make is that Mitchell was arguing a similar line to that of Nagel's 'Dual Aspect' theory:

²³ 'It would be a mistake to conclude that physicalism is false. . . . It would be truer to say that physicalism is in a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception how it might be true.' *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, NY: CUP, 1979); pp. 175 and 176.

²⁴ See, for example: 'Materialism is a beautiful and compelling view of the world, but to account for consciousness we have to go beyond the resources it provides'. *The Conscious Mind*, p. xiv. Elsewhere he endorses a 'Russellian' —'odd sort of materialism'—which holds that: 'physical reality is all that there is—but it says that there is much more in physical reality than physical theory tells us about!' 'Moving Forward on the Problem of Consciousness' in *Explaining Consciousness: The Hard Problem*, ed. J. Shear (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Chalmers opts for a panpsychist solution as does Nagel (though Nagel doesn't commit himself to it).

²⁵ SGM, p. 23.

²⁶ See Passmore, *op. cit.*, p. 147. See also Blanshard's work: *The Nature of Thought* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939) for extensive references to Mitchell's writings.

According to Nagel's account, 'both the mental and the physical properties of a mental event are essential properties of it—properties which it could not lack'.²⁷ This too can be a way of interpreting Mitchell's assertion above. This reading makes no such commitment to idealist doctrines and seem to suggest that Mitchell was trying to outline a kind of non-reductive account in which mental and physical states both feature in a more inclusive account of mind—a 'fundamental' theory incorporating both. This too is the emphasis in the views of Chalmers, Nagel and McGinn.²⁸ Later I shall show how Mitchell's account is also somewhat similar to the views of some contemporary cognitive scientists.

The rest of this paper will briefly track: 1. Mitchell's arguments against materialism (most of which I think are weak, but where there is insight into his overall position); and 2. the positive account he offered for consideration.

IV. Mitchell's Philosophy of Mind

Mitchell begins his attacks on materialism, paradoxically, by outlining a number of points which materialists would have no trouble accepting, and Mitchell agrees with each of them: 1. that there is a specific brain change for every difference in experience ('Very likely there is a specific brain-change for every difference in experience');²⁹ 2. that these brain changes are fully explicable in physical terms ('every brain change has a full physical history and explanation');³⁰ and 3. that the mind is a function of, but not necessarily reducible to, these brain changes ('the mind is power of the brain to produce experience').³¹ That is, he is clearly sympathetic to: i) the neural dependence of cognitive phenomena—call this *the supervenience thesis*; ii) a neuro-historical account of cognition; iii) some kind of material *causal* account of mind, but not necessarily a type-identity of mind and brain. Mitchell clearly endorses each of these propositions in outlining his account of mind.

Yet Mitchell disagrees strongly with materialism in whatever form it may take. At least, he is against any *strong* form of materialism, calling the materialist program 'naive'. What does the strong form of materialism imply? In words anticipating Nagel's position much later, he claims that materialism misleads us into seeking 'a common denominator'—'The ideal of explaining everything by reduction to terms of a common denominator is so striking, that we are apt to take it for the only way of explaining.'³² His

²⁷ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (NY: OUP, 1986), p. 48.

²⁸ Chalmers is explicit that he is after a theory which somehow incorporates the mental and physical—his book is sub-titled 'In search of a fundamental theory'. Nagel too claims that the mental and the physical 'must be essential components of a more fundamental essence' (*ibid.*, p. 48). See also his claim: 'It seems to me . . . likely . . . that mental-physical relations will eventually be expressed in a theory whose fundamental terms cannot be placed in either category'. *Mortal Questions*, p. 179n. This doesn't, however, rule out a cautious form of materialism: '[D]ual aspect theory is committed to . . . the picture of appearances as part of [physical] reality . . . The mind is after all a biological product. When the cat hears the doorbell, there must be something going on, literally in his head, not just in its furry little mind'. *The View From Nowhere*, p. 31.

²⁹ SGM, p. 2.

³⁰ SGM, p. 3.

³¹ SGM, p. 2.

³² SGM, p. 36.

suggestion is that there is much more to explaining the mind than the materialist account allows.

He offers a cluster of arguments against the idea of a simple-minded materialism in which the mind and the brain are considered to be the same thing. I shall call these: i) *the inference objection*; ii) *the dissimilarity (or non-independence) objection*; iii) *the argument from the structure of experience*. There are some other minor arguments, but these will be discussed under the general heads listed.

1. *The inference objection*

To the extent that it can be understood clearly, Mitchell's first argument against materialism is an old and familiar one. It relies on the idea that the experience we have is not identical to the brain changes we undergo because we need to infer the existence of one but not the other:

Every physical event, because it is physical, is perceptible by an actual or a possible organ of sense; but we can never have sensation of another's experience; we have to infer it. . . . The brain change is a physical, a perceptible event; but of course it is not the experience that is coincident with it. Hence an experience does not happen to the brain in the sense that anything else happens to it, or to any material thing.³³

There are a number of things going on in this argument. At the very least, its point is not precise. It is, in part, a reworking of the old 'argument from introspection' attributed to Descartes. However, instead of trading on what can be introspected in terms of the clearness and distinctness of ideas, it trades on the notion of 'perceptibility'. However, even in this form the argument obviously won't stand up to scrutiny. It is clear, for example, that just because one kind of reality is not 'perceptible' and has to be inferred from experience, it does not follow that it is not physical. Analogously, just because the processes of oxidation chemistry are 'perceptible' and the processes of 'phlogiston' are not, doesn't mean that the one is not, in fact, the same thing as the other. The burden of many materialist accounts assume that experiences and the brain processes that give rise to them are identical—even though they may be 'perceived' differently. Following Armstrong, however, experiences might simply be internalised physical realisations of the various states of one's body, for example. If this is the point behind Mitchell's argument, it simply won't do.

However, in part the argument above also seems to be an early version of the 'argument from subjectivity' or the 'knowledge argument' which anticipates contemporary writing in the philosophy of mind.³⁴ The phrase: 'The brain change is a physical, a perceptible event; but of course it is not the experience that is coincident with it' seems to suggest this interpretation. Mitchell's implicit claim seems to be something similar to that of writers such as Nagel and Jackson, for whom the 'subjective' constitutes an ontological realm distinct from the 'objective' descriptions that the physical sciences provide. Bodily

³³ SGM, pp. 2–3.

³⁴ The 'knowledge argument' originally appeared in C. D. Broad's *The Mind and its Place in Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1925), p. 71.

sensations, or 'qualia', are available only to subjective awareness; whereas, the brain sciences only provide descriptions of the physical goings-on in one's head. (Compare Nagel's 'bat' and Jackson's case of Mary and her colourless room.) While it is sufficient to understand something of the nature of another person's brain by perceiving it, by having sensations, it is only by inference that one can understand the nature of another's experience—an understanding of experience requires that one have *first person* knowledge.

Whether this argument is what Mitchell intended is not clear. If it was, then he might have some contemporary support. However, he might be making a somewhat weaker claim. Another possible interpretation of his argument is given in (3) below.

2. *Subsidiary inference arguments*

Before leaving the inference objection there is a number of related arguments which Mitchell makes to roughly the same conclusion. One is what I shall call the *argument from grouping*; another the *intensity argument*. A third argument might be called the *argument from compounds*. These arguments are a species of the inference objection because they also assume, for a variety of reasons, that mental states cannot be inferred from physical states of the brain.

The *argument from grouping* goes as follows: 'The grouping [of experience] is everything, and there is nothing to account for it in terms of units or elements of experience . . . their very definiteness is due to the grouping'.³⁵ His argument here is the alphabet analogy: just we can't account for the limits of thought by relying on letters in the alphabet, so, we can't account for the limits of experience from the brain states which are their causal antecedents. (I will return to this.)

The *intensity argument* utilises a very contemporary strategy: it argues from the content of phenomenological experiences themselves to the implausibility of the point that experience can be derived from the terms of a materialist account of mind. The claim is that, while experience can be measured in terms of their respective physical intensities, their phenomenological content cannot. Hence, one cannot be reliably inferred from the other:

Of two sensations of heat, for example, we can say that one feels exactly like the other, or that one is hotter than the other, but we can never say that it is twice as hot. We cannot even if we use a physical measure. Though we know the temperature of one room to be twice that of another, it remains a matter of taste and temperament whether we say it feels twice or ten times as hot.³⁶

Interestingly, the same kind of argument has been raised to an entirely different conclusion. D. C. Dennett, for example, has recently argued that since interpersonal phenomenological features of content can't be reliably compared in any intelligible way (see his case of professional coffee tasters Mr Sanborne and Mr Chase), that there is no

³⁵ SGM, p. 217.

³⁶ SGM, p. 29.

good reason to admit such content exists. In Dennett's hands, instead of legitimising phenomenological experiences, the argument exhorts us to *quine* (i.e., get rid of) qualia instead.³⁷ P. M. Churchland has argued for the same conclusion using the case of experiences of heat and the famous 'bucket' experiment.³⁸ If Mitchell is using the intensity argument as a demonstration that features of mind can't be inferred from a materialist account, then clearly it is indecisive.

The *argument from compounds* also relies on phenomenological introspection. It argues as follows: If experiences were material then, like chemicals, they must be able to be compounded. But, there is nothing in experience which indicates that compounding is even remotely possible. If anything seems to be true about experience, it is that it is a diffuse, not a discrete, phenomenon; thus, it is impossible to mix, aggregate or store:

[If] we look at the elements of experience and their compounding, we find no likeness to chemical elements and their compounding . . . if it is hard to regard experience as an energy, it is impossible to regard it as a mass, for it is, at any rate, all a happening or process. There is no greater source of confusion than to forget so simple a fact. Even the notion of unconscious ideas, and of the mind or memory as their storehouse, depends on the confusion, since no one would imagine a store of events or processes.³⁹

Things have moved on since Mitchell wrote these words. Indeed, now it is hard to read them sympathetically; especially given the advances in computer science during the late twentieth century. It is now not only *imaginable* how phenomenologically diffuse cognitive processes might be stored and compounded, it is a fact that they can be—computers are living examples of aggregated information storage. The possibility of understanding cognitive processes as computations over representations makes it seem very likely that this argument is wrong-headed.

3. *The dissimilarity objection*

Mitchell's conclusion in the argument in (1) is that 'experience does not happen to the brain in the sense that anything else happens to it'. This might indicate that he thinks that 'subjective' knowledge is quite different from 'objective' knowledge gained from the study of the brain, and that this has ontological implications regarding our knowledge of the mind—the 'argument from subjectivity' mentioned earlier.

There is, however, another interpretation which deserves its own analysis, and which seems to indicate that Mitchell is not relying on the argument from subjectivity at all, but another argument which I will call 'the dissimilarity objection'. Curiously, Mitchell rejects the property dualist account as readily as he rejects materialism, indicating that he is not supporting his account of mind in the way that Nagel and Jackson later do—adding credence to the claim that he is arguing something quite different from the 'knowledge argument' given earlier. He says, for instance, that it is 'nearly as meaningless to speak of

³⁷ D. C. Dennett, 'Quining Qualia' in *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, ed. A. Marcel and E. Bisiach (Oxford, NY: OUP, 1988).

³⁸ P. M. Churchland, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

³⁹ SGM, pp. 29–30.

the mind as a power or other property of the brain, as it is to take it for a thing with physical dimensions.⁴⁰ And this is given as the conclusion to the claim that ‘experience does not happen to the brain in the sense that anything else happens to it’. The argument seems to be that because certain things can be said of the brain that cannot be said of the mind, and vice versa, that this justifies the claim of their essential dissimilarity. Talk about experiences can’t be said to belong to brains; talk about action potentials and other such brain descriptions can’t properly be said to belong to minds. Because materialism conflates the differences between mind and brain, and because the property dualist account says that one is a ‘power’ or ‘property’ of the other, both are in fundamental error. Both accounts confuse what can be said, and what can’t be said, of the mind and brain. In one his more memorable aphorisms, Mitchell notes the best way of pointing out the absurdity of the situation:

To clear the . . . confusion, it is enough to contrast the idea of a physical thing with the thing. Is the idea of a mile longer than the idea of an inch? ⁴¹

In view of developments in materialist accounts in the twentieth century this seems, on the face of it, a very weak argument indeed. Clearly, Mitchell’s argument here can be challenged by appeal to Ryle’s notion of ‘category mistakes’: in which mental state talk can be seen as seriously misleading—committing us unnecessarily to entities which do not exist. On this objection, nothing can be concluded about the mind from spurious mind ‘talk’. Exception can also be made to ‘the mind’ being taken seriously in any context at all—it might, instead, be seen as the eliminativists (such as the Churchlands) see it; namely, as a piece of outmoded theoretical shoptalk which has outlived its usefulness.⁴² Finally, Mitchell’s argument does not recognise the fundamental distinction between *contingent* versus *conceptual* identity—a point made clear by his successor’s successor at Adelaide, J. J. C. Smart, and others. Mitchell’s argument from dissimilarity clearly won’t work against the considerable arguments mustered by latter day materialists.

However, there are stronger reasons which lie behind Mitchell’s argument from dissimilarity. They concern his rejection of both monist and dualist accounts of mind. The argument from dissimilarity trades on the acceptability of these accounts and their *a priori* assumptions about the notion of a ‘thing’ which Mitchell aims to reject.

Mitchell questions the assumptions behind both monism and dualism. The first account, he says, assumes that experiences and brain processes belong to the same thing; the latter assumes that they belong to different things.⁴³ He claims that both positions are essentially versions of the same doctrine and can be rejected together. More particularly, both give an account of mind in terms what they assume to be true of what ‘things’ are.

⁴⁰ SGM, p. 3.

⁴¹ William Mitchell, *Lectures on Materialism*, Extension Lectures—Syllabus of Three (Adelaide: Thomas and Co., 1903), p. 5, hereafter LM.

⁴² Paul and Patricia Churchland are famous for presenting the theory of ‘Eliminative Materialism’. See, for example, *Scientific Realism and the Plasticity of Mind*, passim. A useful summary of Patricia Churchland’s views can be found in ‘Consciousness: The Transmutation of a Concept’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64 (1983), pp. 80–95.

⁴³ SGM, p. 4.

Monists generally assume that 'things' are all material and exhibit characteristics which are, 'like the convexity and concavity of a curve', different aspects of one and same reality—for example, the brain.⁴⁴ Dualists, contrariwise, assume that the action of the mind cannot be reduced to the capacities of a material mechanism—their concept of a 'thing' allows for no such identification. As dualists, Mitchell notes, we do not 'contract [the mind's] capacity to what we take to be possible for a material mechanism'.⁴⁵ For Mitchell, the central difference in two otherwise alike positions is that, in outlining their account, materialists assume that 'the brain be somehow like the mind', whereas dualists, by contrast, place no restrictions on the terms of the identification. They assume in starting out, for example, that 'there is no likeness between the sensation red and its correlate'.⁴⁶ Both positions assume, however, that there are two realities: 'mental' and 'physical'; they disagree only on the extent to which they are causally related. Other than this difference, Mitchell argues, the two positions are identical.⁴⁷

Strictly speaking, of course, Mitchell is wrong here. Modern day monism comes in a number of guises: one of which is an ontological *reductive* materialism. This monism does admit the 'reality' of the mental but only in so far as mental state descriptions are a part of day-to-day life—but, according to this view, these descriptions have no ontological import at all. (Eliminative Materialism, of course, rejects the need for these descriptions entirely.) The type-type identity theory espoused by Place, Smart, Armstrong and others, claims that mental states are identical with physical states—specifically states of the brain. This kind of monism is very different to the kind of monism which Mitchell directs his arguments against. Mitchell's arguments, by contrast, seem to be directed at a version of monism which is closer to that developed by Spinoza, where the mental and physical are considered to be two aspects of the same underlying reality. However, clearly this kind of monism is not the same as the monism of Smart and others, for whom there is one, and only one, 'reality'—namely, material reality.

With this point clarified, however, Mitchell's argument from dissimilarity finds somewhat stronger voice. His point seems to be that the initial acceptability of both monist and dualist accounts rests on assumptions which need not be accepted—namely, their respective assumptions of what a 'thing' is. Mitchell's point seems to be that, as these assumptions pre-empt the very positions they outline, they cannot legitimately be said to argue successfully for each position. For this reason, there is no need to regard either account of mind as adequate on these grounds alone. The notion of mind is thus, in Mitchell's view, essentially dissimilar in the requirements outlined by both monist and dualist accounts.

⁴⁴ This doesn't, of course, cover the case of monists who are idealists for whom the only reality is a spiritual reality (e.g., Hegel). Mitchell doesn't discuss such cases, presumably because of his commitment to the central materialist principles mentioned earlier: i.e., that the brain has, at least, something to do with the mind; that each mental state has a concomitant brain state, and so on.

⁴⁵ SGM, p. 5.

⁴⁶ SGM, p. 5.

⁴⁷ SGM, p. 5. 'There is really nothing more in the theory [of monism] but its name, which protests against the view that brain and mind interact. Were it not for this, the monism might equally well be called dualism; for it splits the whole world that we know into two, into a physical and a mental world. If dualism, which makes brain and mind two different things, admitted the assumption of monism there would be nothing to divide the two theories but the meaning of the word thing.' SGM, p. 8.

However, in ruling out both materialist and property dualist accounts on grounds of dissimilarity, what is Mitchell left with? The key, I think, to his account of mind is found in the following passage:

We do not contract [the mind's] capacity to what we take to be possible for a material mechanism. The temptation is, no doubt, to put such a limit, though that is really to invert the actual fact; it is as if we tried to gauge the limits of our thought by the number of letters in the alphabet and their possible combinations.

For the capacity of the brain has to be inferred from the capacity to experience. It is only after the meaning of the physical changes has been found, as we find the meaning of a language, that we can reverse the process and say, by examining the physical conditions, what sort of experience its owner may possess. . . . We have first to read the brain as a correlate of the mind, and only then can we read the mind as a correlate of the brain. Whatever is possible to the mind is possible to the brain; that is the assumption. It is very different from one that would limit the power of the mind by what we can assume to be the capacity of the brain.⁴⁸

What can be made of this? Mitchell's claim seems to be that the capacity of minds *cannot* (not just shouldn't) be inferred from the capacity of brains. *Prima facie* this claim seems to indicate that Mitchell was no materialist, or at least no *simple-minded* materialist, despite the fact that he seems to accept many points that materialists would agree on. The sticking point that he has with materialism, like the new mysterians, is that he doesn't think that the explanatory *emphasis* is correct: taking the mind as the correlate of the brain is, so to speak, to put the cart before the horse. Mitchell's claim is that the only way in which the problem of mind can be tackled is by reversing the order of investigation—by not limiting the investigation at the outset by what is assumed to be true of the brain. To limit the investigation is like falsely assuming that what can be thought is limited by the alphabet and its possible combinations. False assumptions at the outset of any inquiry into mind and brain should of course be avoided.

This reverse strategy he adopts, of course, does not preclude the possibility that the mind has physical antecedents—indeed, that there might be specific physical causes for mental events as Mitchell himself admits.⁴⁹ But admitting this is clearly not the same thing as saying at the outset that the mind is the same thing as the brain; a conclusion which Mitchell clearly thinks gets us nowhere on practical grounds:

The ideal of the physical explanation of the mind is unsatisfied as long as pain, or purpose, or any other experience, is included in the cause of our movements. The ideal [of materialism] being so attractive as well as so distant . . . it is easy to forget that, even if it were realised, we should only have completed a physical account. Because

⁴⁸ SGM, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁹ 'As there is nothing to limit the deepest thought in supposing that it can be spoken, so there is nothing derogatory to the mind in assuming that, for every difference in experience there is a physical difference.' SGM, p. 6.

we had rid it of mental factors they would not, of course, be explained away; there would be everything to help, and nothing to prevent, a mental explanation as well.⁵⁰

This kind of claim raises several points of historical interest as well as helps us to understand Mitchell's account of mind. It is clear from this passage, for instance, that Mitchell repudiates the possibility that mental states such as qualia and propositional attitudes might be replaced by physicalist descriptions *even in the long term*. As early as the turn of the century, it seems, Mitchell anticipated an eliminativist theory of mind and cautioned against it. Second, Mitchell notes that mental states can be *causal* states, and, in turn, are themselves caused. He thus outlined and supported the fundamentals of a causal theory of mind, even though he may have resisted the ultimate reductive analysis developed much later by Armstrong and others.⁵¹ Third, his remarks about mental explanations 'not being prevented' even in the event of elimination of mental states, seems to suggest that Mitchell was aware of the logical possibility of a position which was consistent with both a materialist ontology, yet which allowed mental events to be *bona fide explanatory* states. This possibility is suggestive of more recent materialist accounts. As Wilfrid Sellars and, much later, Donald Davidson were to recognise, the importance of mental states *qua* mental descriptions or 'manifest image', is not necessarily ruled out by a thorough-going materialism. It is possible to hold to a position whereby mental descriptions *qua* mental states retain a crucial place within a full explanatory theory of mind, even if they do not play a part in the strictly nomological causation of bodily actions. Davidson's theory of *anomalous monism*, for example, allows for non-lawlike mental states as causes, but not causes in the character of physical stimuli—this leading to an account which is both an ontological monism, yet an explanatory dualism.⁵² In a similar way, Sellars's account admits a manifest image of persons being distinct yet argues for the supremacy of the scientific image 'when the chips are all down'. From this perspective it begins to seem as though Mitchell could be seen as being a materialist of some contemporary relevance.

However, another point Mitchell makes seems to refute this interpretation. This is his claim that the capacity of minds cannot be inferred from the capacity of brains. This is where the alphabet argument is employed: Inferring the capacity of minds from the capacity of brains is like trying to gauge the kinds of thoughts which can be represented by the numbers of letters in the alphabet.

This is an *unfortunate analogy*. Recently, cognitive scientists and philosophers have used the same analogy *in support* of the idea that the capacity of mind can be gained from the evident capacity of brains. This argument turns on the point that mental states are

⁵⁰ SGM, p. 9.

⁵¹ The evidence for this is clear: 'Every sensation is preceded by a physical stimulus; we are mentally languid when physically done; and a young mind is incapable of any great thinking, for no reason but that the brain is not grown enough. Must we say then that experience depends on physical causes? . . . Yes in the sense that left depends on right, up on down, in the sense, namely, that one is not found without the other. Our assumption is that the physical cause becomes a continuous physical effect which is broken at no point to become or receive a mental influence.' SGM, p. 6.

⁵² For Davidson's view see: *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). For Sellars' views see: *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Humanities Press, 1963).

representational states over which computations are performed. In contemporary GOFAI accounts of mind,⁵³ for example, the representational states are understood as series of ‘pulses’ and ‘non-pulses’ (approximating that of the electronic binary units in modern computers) which are distributed throughout the cortex. On any conservative estimate, the cortex consists of 10^{11} neurones (each with connections to around 3,000 other neurones) giving rise to approximately 10^{14} possible synaptic connections in the brain. Allowing for a number of different ‘weights’ for each neuron at any given time, the number of possible neural configurations is anything from $10^{100,000,000,000,000}$.⁵⁴ Given this, it is argued that there is no problem getting enough potential pulses over which computations can be performed:

If you harbour any doubts about the representational capacity of variously sequenced strings of pulses and non-pulses . . . consider the representational capacity of the 26 letters of the alphabet!⁵⁵

Clearly, Mitchell’s ‘alphabet analogy’ establishes little to support his case without further argument. But even if the argument does not work there might be enough to support my claim that Mitchell was in the tradition of cautious materialists, or the ‘new mysterians’.

Having rejected materialist accounts, Mitchell sets out to present his own account, which he says combines the assumption of materialism with the conclusion of dualism.⁵⁶ This gives us an insight as to his overall interest: to reposition experience as the most important ontological category. And, curiously, as we shall see, this has much in common with contemporary approaches in cognitive science, as well as the views of the new mysterians.

His strategy is as follows: he aims to admit the supervenience thesis, and combine this with the view that the mind is, as he puts it, ‘over and above the physical process’.⁵⁷ The strategy has two elements: first, denying that materialism is the only possible solution to the problem (even though it may be the solution ‘to which common sense is so easily lead’),⁵⁸ and, second, showing that there is ‘nothing derogatory in assuming that, for every difference in experience . . . there is a physical difference.’⁵⁹ We have just seen how he attempts a rejection of materialism. What about the second element to his positive account?

⁵³ GOFAI is an acronym used by John Haugeland to stand for ‘Good old fashioned Artificial Intelligence’. This is an account of mind in which symbol manipulation is stressed as the primary mode of computational process. This is opposed to PDPAI or ‘Parallel Distributed Processing Artificial Intelligence’ (‘connectionist’) models in which symbol manipulation is confined to certain kinds of cognitive processing and not others. For a clear explanation of these accounts, see: Owen Flanagan, *The Science of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT, 1995), especially Chapter 6.

⁵⁴ P. M. Churchland, *A Neurocomputational Perspective: The Nature of Mind and the Structure of Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press), p. 132.

⁵⁵ Owen Flanagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 229–30.

⁵⁶ SGM, p. 8.

⁵⁷ SGM, p. 7.

⁵⁸ SGM, p. 3.

⁵⁹ SGM, p. 6.

For Mitchell, there is 'nothing derogatory' in admitting the supervenience thesis because supervenience itself can neither be proved nor disproved, and 'cannot cease to be the ground for investigation of the brain.'⁶⁰ It cannot be proved nor disproved without assuming materialism (which he rejects). It cannot cease to be a ground for investigation of the brain because we are physical creatures, and our brains do consist of physical events which can be independently studied—a point he is more than happy to accept.⁶¹ From the claim that materialism is not an option, therefore, it follows (Mitchell argues) that nothing can be inferred from the supervenience claim which can influence one's understanding of mind and experience.

His argument seems to trade on the possibility that an alternative account which is not *strongly* materialist—yet which allows for supervenience of mental events on brain events—is the position which will best account for experience. In our present century others, such as Nagel, have also taken the line of admitting supervenience yet arguing against strong materialism.⁶² But do his arguments rule out other kinds of materialism? Weaker materialist accounts, 'Type 2 physicalisms' as Chalmers calls them—for example, those of Davidson, Sellars, *et al.*—also admit that mental events require a special kind of explanatory autonomy, yet they are certainly materialist in spirit. Mitchell's argument so far does not rule out other materialist alternatives.

Mitchell's argument, however, goes further than this. He seems to be arguing that the supervenience thesis can be admitted with no implication that materialism is true. The crux of his analysis is thus that the supervenience thesis does not contradict the importance the claim that experience is the central ontological category (call this *the experiential thesis*). At this point, enter Mitchell's positive account.

V. Mitchell's Philosophy of Mind: The Positive Account

As we have seen, the way Mitchell argues that we look at the problem is by reversing the order of the inquiry. Instead of asking what brain states are responsible for which mental states (which already begs the question in favour of materialism in his view); he takes the unusual strategy of asking that we do the reverse—asking specifically what the conditions are *in experience* which bring about given specific neurological phenomena. For Mitchell, in other words, 'the capacity of the brain has to be inferred from the capacity to experience. . . . whatever is possible to the mind is possible to the brain; that is the assumption.'⁶³ Mitchell means that we take this 'assumption' quite literally: we should undertake to understand the mind first by 'direct' appeal to experience, and only then apply this understanding to what capacities are possible for the brain (the 'indirect' account).

⁶⁰ SGM, p. 7.

⁶¹ Indeed, he exhorts us to take this literally: 'The more frankly you take it the better, and especially if your studies are at an early stage, when brain and mind have a vague meaning to you. When you try to picture the structure and the action of the mind, remember that you are trying to picture the structure and action of the nervous system.' SGM, p. 7.

⁶² Nagel clearly accepts supervenience: '[M]ental properties would be at least supervenient on the physical—a particular type of physical process being a sufficient but not inevitably a necessary condition of a particular type of mental process.' Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 48.

⁶³ SGM, p. 5.

It is an odd assumption from the perspective of contemporary materialism; and, no doubt, neuroscience too. It is especially odd from the perspective of eliminativism, which regards 'the capacity to experience' as being a completely misleading and vacuous notion—in fact, no capacity at all! However, as we shall see Mitchell's approach puts arguments from contemporary accounts into some sort of perspective.

It is at this point that Mitchell advances a most curious argument. I shall call it, *the argument from the structure of experience*. It rests on the following assumption: accepting the point that mind is adequately explained neither by a monist nor by a dualist attitude, Mitchell advances an amalgam of the two which combines 'the assumption of the one with the conclusion of the other' (i.e., the 'supervenience' claim from monism and the 'separateness of mind' claim from dualism). The resulting account is what we might now describe as an argument for a form of non-epiphenomenal (i.e., causally interactive) property dualism. It is an account which rests well with the current views of the new mysterians.

The argument, as far as I can understand it, is this: take any mental state (say 'pain'). The supervenience thesis says that for every mental state there is a physical state and that a change in a physical state brings about a corresponding change in mental state. However, the arguments against materialism deny that a materialist account is sufficient for an explanation of experience, even if it is also admitted that the supervenience thesis should be taken seriously. Even taking supervenience seriously, however, experiences like 'pain' are 'merely on sufferance in the physical explanation of itself';⁶⁴ they are not—as we might put it these days—'fully captured by' the explanation in terms of supervenient physical states. However, even so, experiences like pain have an intrinsic structure—they seem to have discernible characteristics; they change in intensity; frequency, and so on.

This brings us to Mitchell's central point: given that mental states are 'merely on sufferance' as physical explanations; and, given they also have an intrinsic 'structure', they must, Mitchell concludes, be given 'a being of their own' (his words); that is, the means to understanding the experience is in terms of its own intrinsic structure. He argues as follows: '. . . and if an explanation is possible in mental terms, there is nothing outside to prevent it. From this, the given fact, we infer the structure of the mind, viz., its powers or faculties.'⁶⁵

This is the upshot of his 'reversal' strategy in understanding the mind. We assume nothing until we in a position to understand the processes and subtleties of mental occurrences as they actually occur to us in experience. Mitchell is clear that, by taking this strategy, we will best begin to understand mentality for what it is: namely, a means of functioning *persons*, not merely material objects. His argument here, in other words, is another expression of his *inference objection* given earlier, but with added emphasis:

The only piece of the real world that we know directly is our experience. From it we have to infer the rest of reality by discovering the conditions on which our experience depends. A great part of the task is to read the conditions in physical terms, i.e., to know nature. Hence, in explaining a particular part of nature—the nervous system—it is the aim to eliminate mental factors which at present occupy the greater part of the

⁶⁴ SGM, p. 9.

⁶⁵ SGM, p. 9.

explanation. But, of course, it is only because we have a direct account of experience that we are able to give meaning to whatever nervous, or other physical, process may be discovered to be the correlate of experience. The order of inference is never from what the brain can do to what the mind can do, but always it is: given what the mind can do, e.g., feel free, responsible, have any sort of experience, to find the coincident happenings in the brain. . . . The order of inference is from the structure of experience to the structure which has it. The mind as a person.⁶⁶

So, on his view, materialism of any variety begs the question because it relies on direct experience in order to give meaning to the physical processes which are supposedly their correlates. On his view *phenomenal experience already picks out what correlates are valuable*.

The suggested reversal strategy seems strangely circular in its approach: the order of explanation is from understanding what is 'directly' available to us in experience; from there we can 'give meaning' to the antecedent neurological correlates which gives rise to these experiences; and this, in turn, give rise to understanding how experiences *qua* experiences can be the product of the workings of a 'person's' mind. Many would dispute this self-justifying and somewhat question-begging approach. In the context of Mitchell's time, the strategy may have been acceptable as a psychological strategy; but it seems inadequate as a formative philosophical method today.

However, just recently what I have called the reversal strategy has received defenders from the most unexpected quarters: cognitive science. Contemporary theorists at the interface between neurology, artificial intelligence and philosophy of mind working on that most intractable of all problems—consciousness—have begun to see the wisdom in something very like Mitchell's approach. In a recent book, Owen Flanagan describes what he calls 'the natural method':

Tactically, what I have in mind is this. Start by treating three different lines of analysis with equal respect. Give phenomenology its due. Listen carefully to what individuals say about how things seem. Also let the psychologists and cognitive scientists have their say. Listen carefully to their descriptions about how mental life works and what job consciousness has, if any, in its overall economy. Finally, listen carefully to what the neuroscientists say about how conscious mental events of different sorts are realised, and examine the fit between their stories and the phenomenological and psychological stories.

The object of the natural method is to see whether and to what extent the three stories can be rendered coherent, meshed, and brought into reflective equilibrium. The only rule is to treat all three—the phenomenology, the psychological, and the neuroscience—with respect. Any *a priori* decision about which line of analysis 'gets things right' or 'has the last word' prejudices the question of whether different analyses might be compatible with each other, or at least capable of a peaceful coexistence. As the theory develops, analyses at each level are subject to refinement, revision, or rejection.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ LM, pp. 10–11.

⁶⁷ Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT, 1992), p. 11.

Now it is hard to disagree with this method. It makes sense not to prejudge the analysis of mind too soon; especially since the problem of consciousness is so difficult. It also seems sensible to solicit the insights from different areas of inquiry such as phenomenology. By this strategy, triangulation of one's experimental, philosophical, and psychological inquiries can be attempted, ensuring experimental accuracy. (If evidence from one's phenomenological experience can be rendered compatible with a plausible story from neuroscience, then it has to be better than a story at one level which is inconceivable from the perspective of another.) However, it is one thing to treat phenomenological experience 'with respect' (with possible refinement, revision, or rejection); it is quite another to claim, as Mitchell does, that the order of inference is always from what the mind does to what the brain can do; that is, to reverse the order of inquiry.

However, while clearly sympathetic to an account of mind in which is broadly materialist, Flanagan goes further than simply endorsing the natural method as a useful *modus operandi*; he also suggests that we take the phenomenology side of the method as describing actual *features* of mind which *inform other modes of explanation*. He, for instance, specifically endorses qualia as *real* and capable of enlightening the neurological dimension. Rejecting Dennett's famous exhortation to 'quine' (i.e., get rid of) qualia, he notes:

[Quining] qualia is a bad idea. Qualia are for real. Dennett himself says what they are before he starts quining. Sanelly he writes, 'Qualia' is an unfamiliar term for something that could not be more familiar to us: the ways things seem to us' (Dennett, 1988, p. 43). Surely things do seem in certain ways to us. Furthermore, characterising the multifarious ways in which things seem is an important component of the natural method. It pins down the phenomenological features of mind so that we can check for relations among the phenomenological, psychological, and the neurological levels.⁶⁸

So the natural method does more than simply provide a tactically useful strategy, it actually provides guidance at other levels. Both the fine and rough-grained descriptions from phenomenology enables a richer psychology or neurology to be possible. This claim is further supported by another contemporary philosopher Robert Van Gulick:

The more that we can articulate structure within the phenomenal realm, the greater the chances for physical explanation; without structure we have no place to attach our explanatory 'hooks'. There is indeed a residue that resists explanation, but the more that we can explain relationally about the phenomenal realm, the more the leftover residue shrinks towards zero. Though I admit that we are as yet a long way from that.⁶⁹

There may be a long way to go—but that is neither here nor there; Mitchell would certainly agree with the task being difficult. The point is, however, that there is some value in the reverse method that Mitchell describes. It enables us to recognise places on to

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶⁹ Robert Van Gulick, 'Understanding the Phenomenal Mind: Are we all just Armadillos?', in *Consciousness: Psychological and Philosophical Essays*, ed. M. Davies and G. W. Humphreys (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 145.

which our other explanations can 'hook'. Structure in the phenomenological realm is not something to be 'quined', but fostered. For it is the structure of the mind's operations which allow detailed accounts at other levels to develop. Mitchell too invites us to consider the structure of experience as means by which we can find 'coincident happenings in the brain'.

For another example of this kind of approach in the contemporary literature consider Gerald Edelman's neuro-physiological account of consciousness given in *The Remembered Present* (1989) and other papers. Edelman takes seriously that qualia might be genuinely descriptive of contents which may later be capable of non-reductive neurological analysis. He makes a number of points which make him sympathetic to a 'natural' method of the kind Mitchell had in mind, and also an account of qualia as real (i.e., *sui generis*) properties which are crucial in developing an adequate account of mind. In addition, however, he also argues that acknowledging qualia in individuals *other than ourselves* (i.e., other phenomenological existents) is important for developing a 'scientific' approach to mind. Contemporary accounts of mind, apparently, have moved on from the hollow perspectives of 1960s identity theory or 1970s eliminativism. The motto for contemporary accounts in cognitive science might be: don't quine qualia—*not even in other minds*:

As a basis for a theory of consciousness, it is sensible to assume that, just as in ourselves, qualia exist in other conscious beings, whether they are considered as scientific observers or as subjects. . . . We can then take human beings to be the best canonical referent for the study of consciousness. This is justified by the fact that human subjective reports (including those about qualia), actions and brain structures *can all be correlated*. After building a theory based on the assumption that qualia exist in human beings, we can then look anew at some of the properties of qualia based on these correlations. It is our ability to report and correlate while individually experiencing qualia that opens up the possibility of a scientific investigation of consciousness.⁷⁰

So not only do qualia exist (not just 'seem' to exist) they are also central to doing science of the mind. Of course, it is not difficult to see how this kind of strategy would receive sympathy from the new mysterians, for they have been arguing for the importance of qualia all along! It is interesting that increasing more cognitive scientists and philosophers seem to be taking Mitchell's strategy seriously.

VI. Conclusion

What can be concluded from this brief examination of the work of William Mitchell? First, we might be reminded of the point—familiar to philosophers—that 'the more things change the more things stay the same'. Some of the early Australian philosophers, it seems, were well aware of subtle issues concerning the question of mind and content—issues still very much discussed today. Second, we might note that some of the

⁷⁰ Gerald Edelman, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 115. Quoted in David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, p. 117.

early philosophers knew about the importance of the brain sciences for any adequate account of cognition; contrary to popular belief, they were not all vapid idealists.⁷¹ Third, it seems that a compelling case could be made that Mitchell pre-empted the position of the ‘new mysterians’ and presented an interesting case for why no simplistic materialist theory of the mind could possibly be true—without, at least, *taking consciousness seriously*. It could even be argued that he presented a very early case for the importance of the ‘direct’ study of the mind—the study of sensory qualia as a means of understanding the nature of mind—to the later emergence of what we now call cognitive science. Finally, it seems likely that, some weak arguments notwithstanding, a reassessment of the value of some of the early Australian philosophers might need to be made. It is often said that philosophy in Australia began with John Anderson in 1927. It is also said that ‘an unconventionality keeps showing up in Australian work from Anderson’s arrival onwards’.⁷² When the work of William Mitchell is taken into consideration, it seems that neither of these claims is quite right. There *was* philosophy being done in Australia prior to Anderson, and it seemed to be *very* unconventional.⁷³

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⁷¹ Another Australian, Samuel Alexander, apparently claimed in *Space, Time and Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1920) that every mental process is a neurological process. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer.

⁷² Ted Honderich, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁷³ I am indebted to comments from members of the audience at a recent AAHPSSS conference (Flinders University, July 1998) and an AAP Conference (Hamilton, New Zealand, November–December, 1998) and for the financial support of ArtsSA. Thanks also to J. J. C. Smart and James Franklin for comments on the manuscript in draft form, and two anonymous reviewers from the *AJP*.