1 Introduction: Conflicting Visions of the Mind

We have been considering questions of epistemology, that is, questions of knowledge (recall that the Greek word for ‘knowledge’ is ‘episteme’). The questions that we now turn to are questions in metaphysics, also known as ontology. Metaphysical/ontological questions are questions not about knowledge but about the nature of things, questions so general and so basic that it is difficult to find any way for simple “physics” (or any other science) to tackle them. Thus, metaphysical questions are questions beyond physics (‘meta’ means beyond). The metaphysical questions that we will take up concern (a) the nature of the mind and its relation to the brain (especially the part of the brain that is crucial for perception, thinking, consciousness, etc.), and (b) one of the mind’s most important abilities, the ability to make choices. (The first question will be addressed here and in chapter 5; the latter in chapter 6.)

A number of different terms are used for what we want to talk about in these chapters, including the following:

(1) a. Mind
   b. Cognitive system
   c. System of mental states and events
   d. Psyche
   e. Soul
   f. Ego

We don’t want to say that these terms all mean exactly the same thing. Indeed, the exact meaning of some of them is not very clear. To simplify our task, however, we will take there to be enough overlap in what they are all talking about for us to use the term ‘mind’ in place of all of
them. (We will have occasion to return to the term ‘cognitive system’, however.)

As we noted in chapter 1, there are two main positions on the nature of the mind and its relation to the brain. They are known as dualism and materialism. As we will soon see, each position comes in many different varieties but the general idea is this. For the dualist, the mind (or the mental) and the brain (or the neural) are two radically different things. They may be in the closest relationship with one another, but they are still two things, not one. For the materialist, by contrast, the mind simply is the brain (or some aspect of the brain or the brain plus something else—at any rate, nothing but processes of matter). There is no question of the mind being one thing, the brain another; the mind is simply processes of matter. Here is how to think of the difference.

Compare the statements ‘A causes B’ and ‘A is B’ (heat causes water to boil; water is H2O). In the first relationship, A causes B, A and B are different things (or different states and events), one of which causes the other. The dualist thinks that the mental and the nonmental are in this relationship (except that most dualists think that the causal connection runs both ways): two different things, each causally affecting the other. In the second relationship, there are not two things, just one—one thing described in two different ways. Though not always accepting that the mind exactly is the brain, as we will see, all materialists accept the idea that the mind is nothing more than a material system (the brain or the brain plus something more, like social institutions or the physical world). There may be a number of ways to describe this system (‘mind’ and ‘brain’ being the two most obvious), but there is only one thing.

Before we explain the two positions more fully, we should try to head off two potential problems with terminology. First, the term ‘materialist’ has a number of meanings. For example, Madonna sang about the “material girl.” Historians talk about a “materialist theory of history.” We say that someone who wants more and more goods is very materialistic. None of these uses of the term ‘materialist’ has much to do with the one that we are using here. Here ‘materialist’ simply means a person who believes that the mind is made out of matter.

Second, there is a huge and vitally important disagreement within the materialist camp about the material system that constitutes the mind. The older view is that the mind is nothing but the brain, though exactly how minds are “realized” in brains has been a matter of debate. More recently, some have come to think that brains get to be minds only if brains are
related to something else. Here there are two main candidates: a stable social setting and a physical world. We will discuss this newer view when we get to the doctrine called externalism in chapter 8. For the time being, it is enough to note that there are these two fundamentally different approaches within materialism to what material system is relevant. To mark the two sides of this debate, we will sometimes talk about brains and brains plus, where the ‘plus’ refers to whatever else besides a brain might be needed for a material system to constitute a mind.¹

To explain dualism and materialism further, let’s start with some analogies. Dualism can be compared to the relationship of the heart and the lungs. The heart and the lungs work in the closest association, yet they are still entirely different things: you can take one out and leave the other, for example. This is not a perfect analogy, as we will see, because the dualist wants to say that the mind is far more different from the brain than the heart is from the lungs. Let us define dualism as follows:

(2) **Dualism** The mind is something radically different from anything made out of matter.

Contrast materialism:

(3) **Materialism** The mind is complex processes of matter.

For the materialist, the mind and the brain are like water and the elements oxygen and hydrogen, (4), or like a calculator and the arithmetic we use it to do, (5):

(4) Water and H₂O

(5) Arithmetic and activity in a calculator

Water and arithmetic have many complicated and important characteristics (water can remove our thirst and cool us down, arithmetic can determine how big our tax refund should be). Nonetheless, (pure) water is now understood to be nothing other than a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, specifically, the combination described by the formula ‘H₂O’. Likewise, the arithmetic that the calculator does is not something different from the calculator. It is just the activity of the calculator (specifically, the opening and closing of various logic gates to shunt the flow of electrons in certain directions and not others). Indeed, doing arithmetic is not a “thing” at all; it is an activity (this distinction will become important in a moment). In short, water and H₂O are not two different things. And the activity of the calculator and the arithmetic thereby done are not two different things. In both cases we are dealing with only one thing, one