

Dr. MELLOR:

The power of mind over matter, and the ability of one mind to communicate with another, are perennial topics of speculation and experiment. Recently some fairly remarkable experiments in each topic have led to some even more remarkable speculations. In the one case Mr Uri Geller has been bending spoons; in the other, Mr Arthur Koestler has been speculating on Professor Alister Hardy's attempts at mass telepathy, with one group of people trying to communicate the content of drawings and slides to another group who were out of eye- and earshot.

Of course there is nothing intrinsically remarkable about bending spoons or about communicating with someone who is out of eye- and earshot. I have done the former in moments of exasperation, and the BBC regularly does the latter. What makes the reported cases remarkable is the means supposedly employed; or rather, the supposed lack of means employed. The point of Mr Geller's spoon bending is for it to be done by no known material means, and the point of extra-sensory perception and communication is for it to require none of the material media on which our normal human senses rely.

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These experiments have naturally aroused the usual controversy as to whether anything remarkable has been done at all, at least anything remarkable in the mental line. Some critics suspect trickery, conscious or otherwise, in the experiments. Others have qualms about the inferences drawn from the results ~~of the experiments~~; especially the statistical inferences required to interpret the results of experiments on ESP. And in each case, the sceptic's position seems to me very reasonable. It is always difficult to show that something inexplicable has occurred, just because inexplicability is a standard sign of hallucination. We do not, on waking, credit the reality of what we have been dreaming about - as opposed, of course, to the fact of having dreamed - nor do we credit the reality of mirages, precisely because we cannot explain how oases can come and go as readily as they do in mirages, nor how steamers from Harwich can change into four-wheelers as readily as they do in dreams. If an alleged happening is inexplicable, that counts as evidence against it. And so one needs more positive evidence to show that an inexplicable event has occurred than one would need to establish the occurrence of a well understood event. I should need to look quite hard to convince myself that I really was seeing a sealion in a Cambridge college, for example, while a single glance would serve for me to recognise a fellow philosopher there.....

It is not just that the sealion is the more interesting animal; it is also that much harder to explain its presence in a College, and so I demand more ocular proof before I will admit that I really have seen it. You may say that I am prejudiced against the inexplicable, and so I am. But so is everyone else in the ordinary business of everyday life; explicability is a test of truth, albeit not a conclusive one. Lack of motive, for example, is a good defence in a criminal trial, and so is a good alibi; just by making the alleged action of the defendant less easy to explain, they thereby serve to cast doubt on whether it happened at all.

Now with mind-bending and ESP the whole point of the alleged phenomena is that there is no explanation of them. To provide any explanation - whether in terms of sleight of hand, the picking up of slight visual cues, the use of gadgets such as radio and television - any of this would refute entirely what is being claimed for the phenomena. But by the same token a reasonable man takes a lot more convincing that such phenomena occur at all than he would take to be convinced that he was seeing, say, a conjuring trick or something on television, where he knows at least that there is an explanation even if he doesn't know what it is.

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However, it's not my main concern now to defend the plain blunt sceptic against charges of prejudice and bigotry. For the sake of argument let us suppose that the extra evidence we rightly require for these phenomena has been provided. Let us set aside stories of trickery and Mr Koestler's more interesting applications and misapplications of the concept of coincidence. Let us assume that in some cases at least a decision to bend a spoon causes it, in some way presently unknown to science, to bend. Let us likewise assume that in some cases at least one person's thought causes, in some way presently unknown to science, a related thought to occur to someone else. I think we undeniably have some evidence for these assumptions; if not enough to compel us to accept them, at least enough to generate an interest in some of their supposed consequences.

One of the supposed consequences that most interests me is the idea that such phenomena disprove, or at least discredit, the doctrine of materialism. Now by materialism I don't mean a general irreligious and selfish attachment to money and other of the grosser and less spiritual good things of this world at the expense, say, of a higher concern with values, the welfare of others or one's prospects in the next life.....

I mean the quite different, and much more specific, reputable and relevant doctrine that a man's mind is his brain. That is, the doctrine that there is <sup>not</sup> any special kind of mental stuff or mental process, of thought or feeling, which cannot be identified with some essentially material stuff or material process going on inside our heads.

There is nothing essentially irreligious about this doctrine of materialism; although a disembodied God with a merely material creation admittedly looks a little isolated - rather like a monarch without a peerage. But God is going to be rather a special case anyway, and there isn't any compelling reason why he shouldn't be supposed to be special also in this respect. Even more obviously, there is nothing in materialism which says that men must or should be selfish, materialistic in the vulgar sense, or in any other way have low moral or aesthetic standards. There is nothing which says even that men must or should be materialists. No doubt it is desirable to believe materialism if materialism is true; but the maxim being applied here, that one should believe only what is true, is not itself a maxim of materialism.

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I make these defensive remarks because materialism seems to me to have had on the whole an undeservedly bad press with the general public; and where it has had a good press that has usually been undeserved as well. Materialism has been variously found guilty by association not only with atheism, but more specifically with Marxism, with the theory of evolution, with classical pre-relativity and pre-quantum physics, with positivism and with the determinism of Laplace. So it's worth observing that, for better or worse, one can perfectly well be a materialist without being an atheist or a determinist or a Marxist or a positivist; and at the same time one could perfectly well jibe at the theory of evolution on the one hand or accept on the other the most recondite and insubstantial entities of modern physics. Now I cannot argue these points at length, of course, but perhaps I should at least make a persuasive gesture at some of them.

I have indicated already why a materialist is not thereby committed to atheism. Of the other non-consequences of materialism I have mentioned we may perhaps set aside Marxism and evolution as relatively uninteresting in this context. But it's worth remarking briefly why the materialist is not committed either to positivism or to determinism.....

In the philosophy of mind, the positivist maxim, that what can't be observed doesn't exist, naturally takes the form of behaviourism, which claims that what we are really talking about when we think we are talking about a person's mind is his observable behaviour. Now behaviour is not just material movement of a person's body, which could happen even if he were unconscious, or dead, or a robot. To be characterised as behaviour, movement needs also to be described in essentially psychological terms - as involving desires, intentions, perceptions - and these are not at all obviously reducible to terms that apply to inanimate matter. <sup>↳</sup> The materialist, on the other hand, need have no positivist qualms about referring to the unobservable; what he jibs at is referring to the irreducibly psychological. So he <sup>doesn't</sup> ~~sets~~ out to reduce ~~or replace~~ talk about the mind, ~~not~~ to talk about behaviour / but to talk about the brain, <sup>Now the</sup> ~~whose~~ relevant details <sup>of the brain</sup> may well be unobservable at present, but ~~they~~ <sup>they</sup> ~~which~~ are at least, as behaviour is not, evidently merely material. In other words, positivism, in the relevant guise of behaviourism, is so far from being a consequence of materialism as to be barely compatible with it.

Determinism is perhaps a less obvious non sequitur, since it <sup>is</sup> quite clearly compatible with materialism; and many materialists have also been determinists without always appreciating the logical independence of the two doctrines.....

Yet it's surely clear enough on reflection that irreducibly mental events could perfectly well be determined by other events, if only by other mental events; in the way, for example, that what you are hearing (is now) being determined by what I decide to say. So determinism could be true and materialism false. And conversely, modern physics shows us many cases of undetermined inanimate happenings, like the decay of radioactive atoms. But the random vagaries of radium are ~~pace Mr. Koestler~~ quite different in character from the vagaries of the human mind. And even if they were the same, that would be grist rather to the materialist than to any immaterialist mill. The more material indeterminacy there is, the less difficulty a materialist has in accommodating mental indeterminacy.

I hope then I have to some extent detached materialism from the most misleading of its specious and largely unflattering popular connotations. One cannot of course stop the term 'materialism' being used, or abused, as a barndoor epithet; but one can insist that it then fosters nothing but confusion. I at any rate shall continue to use it just to mean, as I ~~have~~ said, the doctrine that the mind is the brain, whatever the brain is.

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What I now want to ask is why mind-bending and extra-sensory perception and communication should be thought, if they really occur, to count against this doctrine. Of course, any incompatibility here ~~would be made to~~ cut both ways. It could as well be used to argue against ESP from materialist assumptions as against materialism from <sup>an</sup> assumed ESP. My point is that either way the inference would be misguided, since there is in fact nothing in either mind-bending or extra-sensory perception or communication that is incompatible with materialism. Now I must confess that I have <sup>not</sup> seen the argument I object to explicitly formulated and defended so much as I <sup>have</sup> felt it to be tacitly underlying a number of comments on these topics that I <sup>have</sup> recently heard and read. So perhaps I <sup>am</sup> attacking a straw man. I must say that I think not; but even if I am, it may do no harm to set light to him before he can come to life.

The idea seems to me to be that if minds were material they would need material means of communicating with each other and of affecting matter. But, mind-bending and telepathy, if they occur, show that material means are not always needed for one mind to affect matter or to communicate with another mind. Ergo, minds are not merely material - or of course, conversely, if minds are material then these alleged phenomena must be spurious.

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That, I suppose, is the argument. And what <sup>?</sup>is wrong with it can be most quickly seen in the case of mind-bending. It is, as I have already said, a commonplace for minds to affect matter. Mr. Geller and I can both bend spoons. I do it with my hands and much less publicity, but my decision to do it is no less mental than his. In either case matter moves as a result of a mental act. The difference is that I first move my body, which in turn moves something else, while he can apparently move other things directly. Suppose we grant, for the sake of the argument, that he can move other things directly. Still, my body is no less a material object than a spoon, so the difference lies not in whether the mind acts on matter, but merely in what matter it acts on. And in either case the materialist can challenge his opponent to say how matter can thus be affected by something totally different in character; whereas, if the mind is the brain the whole process is material; it <sup>'s</sup> ~~is~~ just that in the rare, and doubtful, case of Mr. Geller we do ~~not~~ yet know what the process is. But if the mind is not the brain, Mr. Geller's spoon-bending becomes no more - and no less - mysterious than my flexing such muscles as I have. And it seems hardly sensible to make a wanton mystery of the over-whelming mass of everyday human action merely in order to put it on an unintelligible par with a few genuinely mysterious cases.

What is surely more sensible is to look instead for a new sort of material link between the brain and the matter it affects, including other brains, revising if need be the existing physics that seems to proscribe such a link. In just the sort of way we might now require, Hertz's radio waves provided for a new sort of material link between a man and an object or other person that he can affect at previously unheard of distances, as I ~~am~~ now affecting your loudspeaker and, I hope, you. If such remote radio-effects had been observed, ~~but~~ rather rarely, before the theory of them had been developed, they would have seemed at least as mysterious to us as the mind-bending and ESP we are now asked to believe in.

It's quite illuminating, I think, to pursue the analogy with radio a little further. Suppose that radio was not a rather rare but a very common natural phenomenon in the days before we had any theory of it. Then I think we should not have thought of it as essentially mysterious - we should have thought of it as being obviously something for physicists to explain, not as something essentially beyond their scope. And I suggest that we would look on mind-bending and ESP in the same way if we could all do it: we would then await its scientific explanation with no more conceptual fuss than we now await scientific accounts of how it is that we are able to move our limbs and speak to people who are within earshot.

I am inclined to think, in short, that the rarity of those phenomena is in fact a prerequisite for the dubious inferences that are being drawn from their alleged occurrence.

Nowadays of course radio is not mysterious at all, not just because it's commonplace but also because we have a theory - the theory of electromagnetic radiation - which explains how radio works. And what's more, ingredients of that theory also crop up in modern accounts of the working of the brain, which relies on electrical impulses no less than does a radio transmitter. Now I suppose that that fact is no skin off a materialist's nose; if it were, materialism would have been flayed alive by now, without the opposition having to appeal to any paranormal phenomena. And if the evident need to revise physics, to account for my being able to communicate with you at a distance by radio, leaves materialism unscathed, materialists are not likely to blench at the much less evident need to revise physics to accommodate mind-bending and ESP. Indeed, as with the growth of indeterminism in modern physics, the materialist can surely claim that the odder physics shows the material world to be, in this case by the addition of radio waves to it, the less reason there is to suppose that human oddity must be something more than material.

You may by now be thinking that a materialism which can thus blandly accommodate almost any conceivable revision in physics is hardly worth either defending or attacking. It must sound rather like the sort of Christian theology that does <sup>n</sup>ot insist on the actual existence of God, and so manages to count among the faithful many people who had rather hoped they were atheists. In the good old days, you may well feel, materialism mattered, so to speak, because then matter really was matter: solid, Newtonian, deterministic, billiard-ball stuff. True materialism, as then was, said that we were made of that sort of stuff - none of these fancy fields, radiation, statistics and psi-functions, which are no more material, really, in the true sense, than minds are.

That thought, however, and however tempting, seems to me to miss the point of materialism, which is essentially to assert that whatever ingredients make up the inanimate world also suffice to make up the world of living things, including man. That's the real point of insisting that the mind is the brain, however our idea of the brain develops. The ingredients of brains are taken to be those of the inanimate world, which in turn are taken to be those that physics needs to postulate; just as traditional matter was composed of the ingredients of, say, Newtonian physics.....

And that is my justification for still calling the modern ingredients of the inanimate world 'material' in this context, however much they differ from those that Newton appealed to. The pertinent question remains what it would have been then: do the alleged phenomena of mind-bending and extra-sensory perception and communication show that any additional, peculiarly and irreducibly mental, ingredients need to be added to those of physics in order to complete our picture of the human world. And the answer to that question seems to me to be 'no'. Whether that answer counts more in favour of the alleged paranormal phenomena than it counts in favour of materialism is another question again.

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